

John Nkemngong **NKENGASONG**

Excerpts from the novel

Across the Mongolo

(Spectrum:Ibadan, 2004)

CHAPTER ONE

The story was told across the eighteen hills of Attah that a terrible thing that tongues could not tell had happened to M'menyika, child of Ege'ntonga. It was said that her son, Ngwe, had who passed through the big schools like Afuka'a passes through the bushes of our hills and valleys, had lost his head. Ngwe was the gem of the clan who travelled across the Great River to that big city where Babajoro who owned the country lived. Ngwe, who went to Besaadi many years ago to *learn book* in that big, big school *where book ends*, had lost his head.

Men, women, and children wondered. Where would they keep M'menyika? Who would carry M'menyika up and down the hills, along their rushing treacherous paths? Who would take her across the stony, perilous streams to bring back her son? *Lebin sob'bo M'menyika mbo'oh!*

In the farms, in the streams, on the road to the market, around the fireside after the evening meals the village folk sighed and talked about Ngwe. They heard he no longer slept under a roof; that he slept at the roadside; that he picked things from the rubbish heap to eat, like the dog that owns no master. That he wore rags and he was wretched like the dog that sends thunder; dirty like the pig that bathes in mud.

Some people said it was *ndoh*, the punishment heaped on his head by his father's ancestors. Some said it was by the mother's. Some said Ngwe had bought medicine to know more book, because book was very difficult in that big school where he was. There, some said, they learned book in a strange language that made many mad. Others stood firm that his father, Ndi Nkemasah, died without completing the bride price of his second wife and Mbe Tankap, the woman's mother's father, was showing signs of anger. Others whispered that Mbe Benu, the greatest enemy of his father might have cast a spell on the child. After all, was his hand not in the death of Ndi Nkemasah?

Day after day, women and men visited the compound of Ndi Nkemasah to wipe the tears of M'menyika, the mother of many and the bearer of few.

The Fon, the Royal Father of the land, Atemangwat, Achiabieuh, the Descendant of the Lion, the one who shot the leopard and only he slaughtered, man beyond man, was most grieved. He sounded his gong and summoned his *trob-ndii* - the executive council of the land, the "nine," and told them:

"Ngwe is no small child of the land. He is the descendant of great warriors who rescued the land from the savage invasion of the warriors of Anambat. Ngwe cannot be allowed to eat rot and dirt and sleep on the roadside in a strange country. Send two youths to that far country to bring him back here. If the gods of the land are angry with him we shall give them salt, palm oil and goats. If anyone has bewitched him, Ku'ngang will fetch and punish the traitor. If it was Lebialem's wish to sacrifice him and he were to die, let him die on the soil of his ancestors. Tell the youths to go and bring Ngwe back to this land like Alaling that raided the Germans and rescued the ancient Fon. Do that before the eye of the day darkens."

The "nine" stooped and clapped. "M'moh! Achiabieuh! Descendant of the Lion! We have heard. We shall do just what His Royal Lips have spoken." And they left.

Before Anzoah, the next market day, Ngwe was brought back to the land of his ancestors as the royal lips of the Lion had spoken. What sighs? What pity? Ngwe looked different from the proud brown earth of the land from which he rose. Ngwe, child of M'menyika, looked wearily at

his kinsmen, saying nothing, dazed and dumb to the world, deaf to the world, blind to the world, absent from the world which looked at him with sorrow in the grief of the moment. The women went and greeted. The men went and greeted. "Ngwe, some one has dealt with you. Child of M'menyika, who has done this wicked thing to your mother?" They said.

Through the eight days of the week. Anzoah, Alena, Amina, Afaah, Angong, Aseih, Alung and even Ankoah which was the spiritual day of the land when Lefem, the sacred copse was appeased and households worshipped their ancestors, Alabi, a diviner worked on Ngwe and there was no change. Alabi went to the great ponds of Lebialem and to the thorny locks of Fuandem and brought back magical leaves and squeezed into Ngwe's eyes and nostrils, and robbed him with the milk from the viper's fangs. But the illness did not show any hopeful face.

Alabi said that he did not doubt that he was a strong medicine man. However, he had to surrender. He said Ngwe's illness was above him. He said only one man in the land, Aloh-Mbong who was their master, a chief witch-hunter and diviner who combined the strength of his ancestors with the hand of Fuandem to the best. He was the paramount priest of Fuandem who treated the most grievous illnesses as one would pick a louse off his skin. Aloh-Mbong knew all the leaves and herbs in the bush, all the holes and cracks on the body of the earth. He knew the past, the present and the future like a god. Indeed, he was god.

The Royal Voice gave orders and Ngwe was taken to Ngong, to the shrine of Aloh-Mbong. M'menyika wept to accompany her son but she was comforted to stay at home. Ngong was far away. It was the farthest village in the interior of Attah. Many, many days journey across awe-inspiring hills, across rough frightful ponds and streams with antic boulders, across roaring dark forests. Five young men and an elder commissioned by the Descendant of the Lion took Ngwe before the first cockcrow, before the partridge had turned itself in sleep, and set forth to the shrine of Aloh-Mbong at Ngong.

Aloh-Mbong was not in the shrine when the people arrived. The Prince of Concealed Secrets was hard to find. He was a wanderer in the caves and all the concealed regions of the earth. The commission waited with Ngwe for two days at the shrine and no sign of the diviner could be found. On the morning of the third day, he appeared from the bushes, furious and frightened like one who was chased by leopards. He went into the shrine, in an obscure place and took out an old dane gun and said: "Those wizards want to kill me. I shall show them that I came out of a man's womb." He told his visitors to wait for him and for two days, Aloh-Mbong disappeared again from the shrine, engaged in the complicated ritual - *ajia* - to deflect his enemies' evil. He wandered in the great ponds of Lebialem, entered the caves of Mbruhngwi and Schwart, combed the hills and valleys and every crack on the body earth, and challenged the evil spirits and wizards from the underworld to a combat. No one dared to challenge and Aloh-Mbong returned to shrine to meet his visitors.

For one week, the Prince of Concealed Secrets could only make Ngwe eat and sleep and his feet were no longer hungry to wander. He was still lost to the world. Aloh-Mbong turned Ngwe this way and that way but he did not trace any *ndoh*, charm, or witchcraft. He made a strong concoction of leaves, roots, and barks of trees never known to the eye of man and anointed it with alligator pepper. He then told the members of the commission that he, Aloh-Mbong, was going to do the last and most complicated of his divinations which was to take a few days. They were to be patient, listen to the testimony of Ngwe, child of M'menyika, and return to the land, to Attah, and spread what their own eyes had seen and ears had heard from Ngwe's lips. And if his herbs did not work then Ngwe was a special sacrificial goat that Fuandem had selected for the feast of the gods, he told them.

Early the following morning, at the time that hens left the huts in search of food in the heath in the womb of the earth, the diviner woke up the elder and his followers and started the divination. Aloh-Mbong blew air into Ngwe's nostrils, and in his ears. He squeezed the concoction into his eyes and nostrils. Then he took a gourd, an ancient gourd that had lived from the beginning of time and shook it saying: "Ngwe, son of the hills, son of the valleys. Purge out the awful things

that men have done to you and those that you have done to men so that I can make you sleep in peace, so that I can clear those shadows that men have trapped your inside with.” He blew again into Ngwe's eyes, chewed old barks of trees mixed with alligator pepper spat the paste in his palms then rubbed it on Ngwe's face. Ngwe sneezed like one who kept bees in his nostrils, stretched out himself, and rubbed his eyes like one struggling to see a vision. Aloh-Mbong told him: “Speak my son. Send out the bad vapour from your belly. With the power of Fuandem clear the rust of time that had eaten into your mind so that you can sleep. Speak my son.” Ngwe heaved a terrible sigh as if he heard a sharp pain inside him, like one dazzled in a trance, like one in a perpetual dream. He licked his lips spat on the floor and narrated the story of his life.

CHAPTER TWO

"I have never done anyone any harm. Even Monsieur Abeso. I am a University student, Constitutional Law. No, History. Hold on. I feel dizzy. Oh, gods of my ancestors! Oh, Shirila! Darling Shirila! What else did you want? What is the meaning of this world? Have they no consciences, Babajoro and his acolytes? He cannot live long. That man cannot live long. Why did he dread the Young Anglophone Movement? I tell you, Babajoro cannot live long. I will tell the world everything. Everything, from the day I peeped through my mother's womb and saw the world. Wait a while. I am very weak, tired. I will tell you just how I travelled to that far away land, to Besaadi, to the University of Besaadi where I went to read Law to become Babajoro of Kamangola.....

[...]

CHAPTER SEVEN

“The university campus was situated on a slope, a really broad slope descending into a stretch of marshy lakes. We were guided by our host to pass through some shut-cuts that meandered near the lakes to the campus. The lakes with their green morbid carpeting spread out at intervals round the bottom of the widest side of the huge slope that ascended onto the university campus. The particular lake we passed by seemed to have been the receptacle for all tribes of filth since the country had its independence. Apart from the stench that choked one gnawingly, there was a visible summit of the mountain of remains of human indignity that rose out of the lake and part spread on the road we trod through. The dark damp road squealed with rotting mess spilling out of plastic bags and old clothes in watery quantity as we trod through the filth-paved road. Towards the end of the lake a rowdy croaking of frogs seemed to announce the presence of some persons alien to the environment. Yet the croaking went wild with one group after the other took over the croaking in swift succession far into the wide expanse of the lake, croaking rowdier than ever as we crossed at the edge of the lake and climbed up the road to the university.

“At the university, the stone-walled buildings of the Faculties slanted into the armpits of the slope in disorder. Wild bushes surrounded the halls and the amphitheatres. Some vegetation found shelter on most verandas or leaned on the windows of the halls. Grass coiled or crept on the banisters of the staircases and pillars. Where the vegetation was scarce, old rubbish heaps with assorted ordure rose indiscriminately in varied sizes, filled with waste papers and diverse objects that had been left in the rains for months until they had become mouldy green. Multitudes of young men and women moved about businesslike or sat or stood idly on the pavements in clusters conversing in French. The boys' dirt-greased jeans trousers and worn-out shirts, torn, mud-stained canvas shoes were very adaptable to the environment. Their fluency in French as I thought, quite

contrasted with their outlook. Some of them might have gone for months without bathing. The contours of sweat under the armpits of the shirts, and the dirt on their tattered wears, their brown dusty legs forced into chopped slippers or battered shoes, their heels cracked into deep furrows, their toes pregnant as if they were once the womb for jiggers. Their odd manners and battered footwear and dresses gave them a very repulsive look. And most offensive, if any of them opened his mouth a little close to your nose, the smell hit you frontally. The smell hit your senses like a hammer. The stench spanked your nostrils like the mouth of a pit latrine. The thickness of leftover food particles clung to the root of their teeth like the stale brown discharge of the gum tree. The girls, some in jeans trousers too, looked free and flirtish, chewing and rubbing their wet nostrils with the backs of the hands. Some sat and flung their legs apart. In most cases, the dignity of womanhood seemed to have deserted them. In this great network of disarray, it was difficult to know what was to be done and how to get about it. It seemed my eyes were tied with black cloth and I was thrown into a different world that I knew nothing about or knew not how to find my way. The impression the 'Fac guys' had given us while we were in the College of Art was still to be discerned in its concrete reality.

"I decided to register in the Faculty of Law following the recommendations of Teacher Marewe. By the end of the day I only succeeded in getting the list of documents required for registration into that Faculty. I also noticed that the world in which I found myself was too complicated and divergent than I had thought. I was billions of miles away from my dream of youth. This is because there were many more people who registered and who had passed through that university. I wasn't the only one. However, I thought at the end of the day that a sound university degree could place one comfortably within the ranks of big men in the society. It could make one feel the pulse of life in the society. The pride of having a first degree was the greatest ambition of any young man and woman. And they were more respected in the society than Babajoro whom people hardly saw. I was even told that Babajoro never went to school and that if the letter 'A' were as big as his palace he wasn't going to recognise it. I was told that he ruled by tyranny, that he locked people in the underground prisons and killed them as one would kill flies that pestered a wound. His name was mentioned only in whispers and not in public places. His spies were all over and if one said anything about him he was taken underground and prepared for slaughter. It was said he was worse than the marquis. And that was why the marquis fought against him. I now came to a compromise with myself never to give up hope in the quest for what my future held for me.

"By the end of our first week in Besaadi, all my documents were not yet ready to enable me register in the Faculty of Law. Nwolefeck and I went to the 'Préfeture' on daily basis for almost two weeks to certify documents. These were documents which we had never been familiar with. We were never used to those kinds of documents in our side of the country. Documents like « attestation de présentation de pièces d'originaux », « attestation de domicile », « attestation de lieu de naissance », « certificat de date de naissance ». I doubted what all these stood for. Were they simply forged to raise the sales of fiscal stamps and swell the treasury of the state? Else, how could one procure a medical certificate of fitness signed by a government medical practitioner that shows that you are quite healthy and free from germs and was apt to pursue university education, when no medical examination was conducted? Even after you provided the documents for certification you were asked to bring what they called 'certificat d'authenticité' to prove that your certifications were genuine. Because of that we were made to go to the Préfeture everyday for almost two weeks.

"At the Préfeture it was a ceremony of idleness and *laisser-faire*. No sense of seriousness or consideration for fellow human beings. You go there very early in the morning, knowing that that day your documents must be signed because they have been lying at the Préfeture for too long. You step into the secretariat and ask for it. A bad-tempered woman who, from a distance you would think is a gentle lady, hisses like the short viper – *'Ne m'annonille pas! Je suis pas la pour les Anglo.'* And she is definite. Nothing would make her say anything more. You turn round to interrupt a rowdy fellow, a very rowdy fellow, always talking about himself and how much he knew about life

in Paris! He gives the impression that he is of some important status because he is putting on an outer jacket that seemed to have been formerly a coat. But the collar, even that of the shirt was grimy with the dirt of unwashed bodies, or of dust that sweat has consumed. Even then, the collars had been chopped like pieces of bad yam and the jacket itself might never have touched water or seen a pressing iron since it was picked from the bail of second hand articles from France or from some backyard vendor. The rowdy fellow turns and tells you nonchalantly – “*Il faut repasser, monsieur. Enn!*” And then he continues chattering without pause. You want to ask him when you should return as he had ordered. Today or tomorrow; and at what specific time. But the fellow has no more time for you, now that he has diverted to talking about ‘le vin de Paris’. And you can stand there for the whole day. If you care you can listen to his story and praise him for being civilised.

“Before long a fellow comes along smoking and belching sonorously, the smoke of the cigarette filtering through his rustic moustache into the air, his mouth spanned wide like the mouth of a bullfrog, and the smell of old wine and tomatoes sauce parades his immediate vicinage. His coat is also twisted with one or two holes on the sleeve made possibly by rats or cockroaches. The chest buttons of the shirt have cut off and a wild undergrowth of hairs stands on his chest. The talking fellow announces his arrival so honourably saying, ‘Bonjour Monsieur le Préfet.’ Monsieur le Préfet does not quite answer but shakes his head with some casual dignity, crosses the secretariat into the inner rooms, possibly to his office. You are made to understand that ‘Monsieur le Préfet’ is supposed to have the status of the D.O., the Divisional Officer on the other side of the Great River where Anglo-Saxons traditions are planted and cultivated. And while you think that Monsieur le Préfet could use his high office and good will to serve the desperate humanity, at least sign the documents that made the people go to his office everyday for the same purpose, the talking fellow comes out with one or two documents still telling his colleagues, ‘*Je te dis la vérité. Vraiment! Le vin de Paris!*’ He stops briefly, calls out the three names, hands their documents to them and announces that Monsieur le Préfet has a ‘scéance de travail’ and was soon going for ‘midi’. ‘Repasser demain.’ And then he continues with his story. Monsieur le Préfet comes out, gives one or two instructions, gets into his car, and wheels into the city. You stand there staring into the wilderness of civilised men in the streets of Besaadi, the capital of the Federated United Republic of Kamangola. You stared, bewildered till some inner voice tells you that you just have to go home and return the next day. That is how you spend two weeks of your very short life achieving nothing. Thank God, the Dean of the Faculty extended the date of registration because it was rumoured that he was going for a weekend in France with his third-year law-student girl friend.

“The day I went to register, I found a long line of students with the same purpose in front of the admissions office of the Faculty. They talked excitedly in French. There was commotion when the admission officers arrived at the secretariat. The men made to open the door of the secretariat, and when the scrambling and fighting intensified they went away again. Many of us spent the whole day there hoping they would return. Not even their shadows showed up. I understood later that they were asking for money from students and treating their documents in the night. It was evident from the state of affairs that I could go there for the next one month and would never get registered. The older students said it could not work without giving a bribe. Where was I to have the money? I had spent the money Nwolefeck had borrowed me to fulfil the registration requirements. Besides Nwolefeck had exhausted all his resources and was still struggling to complete his own documents. Even if I had the money, how was I going to give money openly? What if he refused and sent me to prison for corrupting a university officer. A university worker who should be honest, pious and knowledgeable above every other person. And I was thinking of corrupting him? I was terribly frightened at the thought of that idea. On our own side of the Great River I was told that a man was jailed for twenty years for stealing a bunch of plantains that consisted of twenty fingers. These older students were possibly looking for a way of putting freshmen into trouble.

“It was only through my perseverance at the door of the *Scolarité* for two weeks that I became liberated. When at last I entered the office, the man at the first table collected my

documents looked through them with a sour expression on his face.

“*Relevez de notes, monsieur!*” He barked. I stared at him blankly, fidgeting in my mind and trying to understand what he meant.

“What, sir?” I asked. He sighed and flung the documents at me. The papers in the file rustled and fluttered plaintively in different directions. Hot urine hurried to the tip of my penis. I held it back and gathered the papers. I went on my knees and pleaded.

“*Les Anglois aiment toujours les annouilles. Sort, monsieur. Suivant?*” He beckoned another student in. I held his leg and pleaded. The excited students at the door jeered at me. *Pauvre Anglo!* ‘Anglo for Kromba. *Tu ne pouvez pas rester chez vous a Kromba, Anglo?*’ They mocked at me. The more I pleaded with the man to accept my documents the more he became offended. He pulled away his leg violently, made a move to kick me, and then waved me out of the office.

“One of the young men at the far end of the office, laughing at the mounting misery in me, called for me. I rose and went to him, uncertain about what he was going to do. He took my file, looked through the documents, pulled out my transcript and brandished it to the man I first met at the door.

“*Ancien, l’Anglo a quand même son relever de notes,*” he said. *Voilà ça. C’est en anglais.* He held out my transcript to his colleague then fitted it back in the file.

“*Les Anglois sont des idiot,*” muttered the man at the door. *Le type n’a pas bien arranger ses affaires,* he went on. The man who had my documents ticked the items on a list.

“*Que-ce que tu as amémé de chez vous, Anglo?*” said the man. I started a long story in English concerning the difficulties I faced on the road travelling from Attah, through Mbuerra and Lewola to Besaadi. I told him how my money was stolen in the train.

“*Parle en française, mon type. Je comprend pas ton parêtre partois là,*” he said getting innerved. At least I understood the first statement. That was my trap. I was mute for a moment. Then I murmured a few things in spite of my self not knowing whether they were words or not.

“*Que-ce que tu dit?*” the man said aloud. I started shivering visibly. My lips trembled as I spoke.

“*Je suis dit que...*” I struggled to say, stammering. The man in front of me reacted in a most repudiating manner.

“*Non, non, non. Continuez en Anglais. Non, non! Ne dit plus riens, Anglo,*” he said. The whole office burst into a mocking, choking laughter. Even the students who had crammed at the door laughed out their lungs. I was miserable, confounded. I was only relieved when the man placed my file on a pile of other files, signed a document and gave me to depart. He called it *Attestation de depot.* Every piece of paper seems to be *attestation de whatever-thing-you-may-call.* As I passed through the crowd of students crammed at the door, they shouted, *Anglo! Anglo!* and fanned me with their file jackets. My feet shivered on the ground as I went past them, my head seeming to grow out of its size. At a distance past them, I felt relieved after all, that I was registered in the Faculty of Law to do just what I had travelled round the globe to Besaadi to do even though I faced the humiliation of those that gave the impression that we were compatriots.

“The Faculty of law was the most populous in the whole University. The first course I attended made me have the impression that it was a market square. Vivid images of the Mbuerra Market scenery visited my mind at almost all the moments. Sometimes, the lecture halls and amphitheatres were made up of people who were not part of that establishment, loafers who found the university lecture halls a convenient abode from the hustle and tumble of that world of the city. There was also an aberration of raggedly dressed children, abandoned to their fate in the streets and who found the lecture halls a perfect environment for amusement which eased them from the tragedy of wretchedness. There were vendors of newspapers, groundnuts, cigarettes, bread, *kwirikwiri*, *bobolo*, and all sorts of things which were sold freely in the lecture halls by children, old mothers and men. They carried the wares on their heads and went round announcing *kwirikwiri*, *bobolo*.... There were students who were forever jeering at pretty young girls that came in or walked out, cat-calling, shouting at every odd distraction, girls and boys sitting on each other’s laps

or leaning on each other in erotic excitement. Sometimes, lunatics were part of the intellectual fair. They danced about maniacally or mimicked the lecturers, exchanged jokes with the excited students and their reward was cigarettes from students smoking. Of course, the lecturers were the chairmen of the disorder. They quarrelled with students and the students insulted them openly. One thing however, was understood. The students knew that their Waterloo was the examinations in which lecturers failed the students at will. It was said that the more students failed the more decorum the lecturer established for himself. Yet they kept talking in the tumultuous lecture halls. The days ended. The slanting amphitheatres themselves initially gave the impression that they were built for some major objective. But the thick layers of dust intermixed with all sorts of dirt – waste papers, groundnut shells, plastic sacks, cigarette filters, goats' droppings and other assorted ordure which had not been swept for months lay avid against the atmosphere and background of the putrid manners of young undergraduates who were being groomed to be the future leaders of the nation.

"I spent a good part of the year translating notes from French to English. Some of the translations were already established from the notes of older students. All my lecturers were Francophones except Dr Amboh who in spite of his rich intellectual background in legal matters was never given a main course, and so he could never have been of any influence on the Francophones. At times, he gathered a few of us Anglophones to discuss with us and most often regretted that the country did not use him effectively because he was English speaking. He told us that since it was government policy to eliminate the Anglophone culture in the country using the university as one of its weapons, we had no choice but to give in to complete assimilation into the Francophone culture. I became more used to Dr Amboh because he was the only lecturer who expressed some willingness to listen to my academic problems and therefore I was very frequent in his office. Sometimes he sent for me or invited me for short walks round the campus or out of the campus. He had a plethora of things to tell me about himself, and how the system was frustrating him. He told me he preferred to resign than to teach in French, what was expected of him before he could be given a main course to teach. On the other hand, none of the Francophone lecturers seemed to have an idea in English. They stressed that all answers had to be in French and not English. I even feared asking questions in class because I did not know French. On one occasion I gathered courage to ask to be explained a notion in Constitutional Law I did not understand. Soon as I started the first words in English, the lecture hall broke into a tremor of booing and jeering '*Anglo!*' '*Anglofou!*' '*Anglobête!*' Cat-calls, and screaming come out from all directions. Twisted papers and assorted objects flew from every direction and landed on me. I stood transfixed, bemused, dumbfounded, as though the ritual of disorder had hypnotised me and transformed me into a worthless object. For the rest of the two-hour lecture, I thought deeply over the humiliation I faced from my countrymen. I asked myself where the intellectual dictum and decorum that I had heard of universities had been kept. I questioned myself if I had no right to express myself in one of the two official languages in a bilingual country. I deeply regretted the uproar I had caused. I decided to go into my shell, to avoid speaking English in public places, during lectures or on campus. I did not want to be recognised all the time as a second-class citizen, who in pursuit of academic standing, was in the process of assimilation in the factories of the university. I was the Anglo, the pariah, the slave that had no voice in the high and decent life across the Great River. At all cost I had to learn the language of my masters and talk to them and write my examination in the language. In short, I had to appear and speak like them at all cost. Why had I to ask a question in English when my masters, my assimilationists masters, forced me to speak in their own language? I could be the tortoise, wise diligent and prudent. But I had to cast off my shell to look like a frog. I was not going to contaminate my masters with the language of low birth, with the nauseating vapours from the mouth of a wretch who had travelled hundreds of miles across the Great River to be assimilated. And so the mouth that fed on rot should be permanently shut in public for the convenience of the decent society in which I found myself....

[...]

CHAPTER TWELVE

“I started the new academic year with a lot of enthusiasm, remembering my vow to work harder. I was very frequent in Dr Amboh’s office especially, to ask for assistance and explanations. He noticed my growing concern about the Anglophone plight in the university and befriended me. In frank discussions with me, Dr Amboh told me about the stress he was still going through in the university. He could not be given main courses to teach or get promoted because the administration did not understand the nature of the degrees obtained in British universities. What made him grieve most was the ministerial order requesting all those who had done the PhD program abroad to enrol for and defend the *Doctorat d’Etat* before they were considered for promotion.

“‘Why did it have to happen that way?’ Dr Amboh lamented. ‘Why did it happen that two states with two distinctly contrasting colonial heritages and antithetical cultures were brought together, a minority state subdued under a loud majority? Was it the design of the colonial masters to put the viper and the porcupine in one cage for their amusement, or to see whether they could deliver the crocodile?’ He kept questioning. I was beginning to understand that my ordeal was not a personal one. It was universal. Even those I could consider as accomplished men grieved equally. I sympathised with Dr Amboh in spite of my own grief. He was one of the most intelligent, knowledgeable, well organised, hardworking, and inspiring persons I ever met in my life, yet he was so humble that one would hardly believe that he studied in Britain. He was a direct contrast to the academic disarray of the University of Besaadi.

“After some frank discussions one afternoon, Dr Amboh invited me to a reception at the residence of Minister Wankili, one Anglophone who had been appointed to the post of Minister in Charge of Special Duties at the Presidency of the Republic. I had been told that it was customary for new appointees to ‘*arouseé*,’ as they say in French. That is, they made a feast, popped champagne, drank, ate, danced, and sent motions of support to Their Excellencies. That was going to be the first time I came closer to the society of power, the administration, those who gave life and took it again at will.

“Nwolefeck accepted to go with me to the reception. We were dressed in suits because we knew we were going to meet with high society. We were not going to look like beggars in the midst of affluence. At exactly 5 p.m., Nwolefeck and I were at the Carrefour Carcas where Dr Amboh was to pick us up. He came an hour later full of apologies. I introduced Nwolefeck to him and he was pleased to have him go with us. We entered his car and as he drove off, he questioned Nwolefeck closely about his studies. He took the opportunity to inform Nwolefeck about a scholarship grant by the British government for science students willing to study Medicine in Britain. Nwolefeck promised to meet him in his office to get details.

“‘Please come as soon as you can. I have every good intension for any serious Anglophone,’ said Dr Amboh. ‘In the face of such debasement and humiliation as we are facing from the Francophone government, the Anglophone must love and assist one another. This is just the kind of assistance I had given to the gentleman we are going to his residence. It is only through love and assistance that we can have the strength to resist, to survive, to protect our prestigious heritage. Without this we shall be completely drowned in the Francophone system.’

“‘Do you know him personally, I mean the Minister.’ I asked, curious to know the kind of man he was to be appointed to that high post. In addition, the way Dr Amboh talked about him didn’t give that great decorum one would normally associate with cabinet ministers.

“‘Of course, I know him very personally,’ said Dr Amboh. We both studied in Britain. He lived in my apartment for two years while he was doing a Masters degree, without settling a single bill. I was doing a PhD program at the time and encouraged him to do same as soon as he finished with the Masters program. He never even finished with the Master’s program. His greatest ambition was to get into politics. That’s why you find him where he is today.’

“I think he has succeeded,’ I said.

“Succeeded in what way?” Dr Amboh asked curiously.

“I mean succeeded in the sense that he has risen to the rank of a minister,’ I told him. Dr Amboh laughed an unusual kind of laughter.

“Well, if that is what you mean by success then I should rather confer my doctoral title to a rat catcher and go to the village and till the soil. Young man, you don’t understand a lot of things yet. You still have to understand many things.’ Dr Amboh said contemplatively as he drove past the Municipal Lake up into an ostentatious residential area at Sotsab.

“After a short drive into the area, I saw a multitude of cars packed outside a gate. I could tell that that was the residence of Minister Wankili. Several compounds with the similar architectural excellence stood on the slope. Dr Amboh slowed down as he approached the gate, stopped, contemplated, and drove into the yard. The gate boy who seemed familiar with Dr Amboh quickly directed him to park in an open space in the yard. We came out of the car and greeted people, some who were already standing in small groups in the yard. We then moved towards the sitting room where there were already a number of dignified gentlemen and ladies talking and laughing generously. Dr Amboh showed Nwolefeck and I seats at the veranda then went into the sitting room and continued greeting other guests. The veranda was quite spacious flanked on the outer side by rows of magnificent balusters and in the inner side by flamboyant walls and large glass windows which made it possible for us to see almost every part of the sitting room.

“Minister Wankili’s compound was a big one. Flowerbeds interspersed with concrete pavements and lit lampposts pitted occasionally on the yard while big balls of light glared at the top of the walls surrounding the compound. Outdoors, Minister Wankili went about greeting his guests, chatting with some, hugging some very intimately, and casual handshake to others. His attire was quite simple, his shirt flying out and his very relaxed mood was evident. His wife was elegantly dressed. She looked quite stately, full of smiles, dashed in and out occasionally to assist her husband in the welcoming of guests.

“One of the guests arrived and drew the attention of everyone. The very relaxed atmosphere changed to an anxious, yet, formal one. ‘The Director of Civil Cabinet’ someone whispered. Minister Wankili hurried towards him, and greeting him stooped so low that his forehead almost touched his knees. He was a nice-looking man with the airs of one who belonged to the supreme race. The attention given him on his arrival seemed to make him satisfied that his status was indeed recognised. Minister Wankili conducted him into the sitting room speaking French with him and occasionally answering him “*Oui Monsieur! Oui monsieur!*” Indoors, Minister Wankili ushered his guest to a seat in a section that looked like a high table, then rushed out of the scene and returned with his wife. His wife performed a most significant spectacle of loyalty that made the man more assured of his dignified status. Antic chandeliers sank gorgeously from the ceiling and emitted lights of gold colour that created a luxuriously radiant atmosphere. A radiant atmosphere indeed, of sovereign airs, pomp, decorum, elegance, and unlimited splendour: the splendour which was graced by the fragrance of young ladies who at the moment thronged in and out of some inner room with serviettes and snacks which they went round serving to the guests. Of course, the Director of Civil Cabinet was served with the most special concern, with Minister Wankili’s wife exalting in her privilege to direct the services.

“My heart throbbed when I saw the semblance of Shirila amongst the girls serving. Of course, she was the one. She showed some excitement when she saw me. She rushed quickly to greet us then opted to serve us even before some other guests who were in the sitting room. She brought us beer and peanuts.

“Ngwe, how did you get here?’ she asked.

“Dr Amboh invited us,’ I told her. ‘And you? Is the minister your relation?’ I asked.

“No,’ she said. ‘A friend’s uncle. He invited us here to serve.’ Shirila rushed away to serve other guests. I noticed that most of the girls were students I knew at the university. Shirila! The least opportunity she had she was with us, asking us to take more drinks and snacks, asking us

questions about our lives and bookwork. Ah, Shirila! Was ever beauty so clearly defined? Or was it an illusion I was having? Why had I not accepted this young woman into my life? I quarrelled at length with myself at the reception. She had shown a lot of concern for me since I first met her but I have always kept her away from me. I found it difficult to acknowledge my own cruelty to one who showed a lot of love and concern for me. She sat with us briefly held my hand and sent blood rioting in my veins. She was soon away again to continue serving guests, leaving me in ruins, utter ruins.

“Not long after, the MC called the attention of all, greeted in a very formal manner, yet declared that it was not a formal occasion but just an opportunity to share a drink in honour of ‘His Righteous Excellency Minister Wankili, one of us who has recently been recognised and promoted to high office.’ He added that since we were seated there in a family of goodwill for the His Excellency the Minister it was necessary to know each other, what he or she did as a profession. He then called for self-introduction. Minister Wankili took the floor not to introduce himself but to introduce the man he called his ‘guest of honour’ and his ‘godfather,’ Mr Abeso Louis le Vin who was the Director of Civil Cabinet at the Presidency. After that every other person introduced himself or herself. It took quite sometime to get through with the introduction which was often accompanied by a variety of jokes and interjections. Chief Dr so so and so, assistant delegate of so so and so. Honourable Chief this and that, Assistant Deputy Vice President of the National Assembly; His Excellency X or Y, Second Vice Minister Delegate at the Prime Minister’s Office. Nwolefeck started giggling near me. I could guess the reason. We were the only odd persons at the reception. I was worried how I had to introduce myself. Every person there was a big man. I felt that I should just tell them that I was an assistant student or a deputy vice Kamangolan studying Law at the University of Besaadi. Dr Amboh saved us from the embarrassment when it came to his turn to introduce himself. He said he was Dr Amboh Gerard, an assistant lecturer in the Faculty of Law in the University of Besaadi. Minister Wankili immediately took the floor to announce that Amboh and he were both friends in Britain where they studied and that they lived in the same apartment for two years. When the Minister finished, Dr Amboh took the floor again to announce that he came with two gentlemen sitting outside who did not need to introduce themselves at the moment but whose credentials were to be known during ‘Item Eleven.’ It was such a humorous intervention.

“Minister Wankili, accompanied by his wife then made an introductory speech. He thanked everyone who had honoured his invitation for the dinner. To him, he said, the appointment to the high office was a dream come true and he could not realise his dream without inviting his friends to share with the reality. He said he was using the opportunity to thank His Excellency, the President of the Republic President Babajoro for the exacting task and confidence bestowed on him. He promised to do his best in his new capacity in the service of His Excellency. He expressed the joy that the Director of Cabinet, Mr Abeso Louis le Vin, was present and wished him God’s blessings and long life. He warned that his office was not a gossip house for Anglophone complaints or a place where he would solve Anglophone problems. His duty was to serve His Excellency President Babajoro and not discontent political factions. When he finished his speech, people seemed to clap for the sake of it. I could see clear disappointment on some faces.

“The wife of the Minister then made a brief speech welcoming the guests. She said she had the honour to invite the guests to the table for Item Eleven. The food was unveiled. The tables on which the food stood occupied a big portion of the parlour and we were told that guests were free to go to the table as many times as possible. Soon as we finished eating, the tables were cleared and carried off, and the MC announced that it was the moment for anyone to show his or her dancing skills. He announced that the bar was inexhaustible and everyone was free to ask for whatever he or she wanted. He announced further that there was a multitude of young charming girls and anyone was free to dance with them but that monopoly however was not allowed.

“There was a variety of music, Makossa, Bikutsi, Highlife and Slows that kept everyone elated. Those who were not dancing stood outside in pairs or groups discussing and sipping their

drinks. Two people were shaded by a flower near where we were sitting. They had been there since dancing started, conversing very intimately. Shirila invited me to dance with her twice. The last time I danced with her, she asked me when I was going to pay her a visit in her room at the *Cité Universitaire*. I told her I would let her know but not on that day. Immediately after, she took Nwolefeck to dance with her. I felt exhausted. I was already drinking too much. A mixture of wine, beer, and whisky made me feel tipsy. What kept me alive while Nwolefeck and Shirila were dancing was the conversation of the two men behind the flower.

“‘Doctor’ said one of the two men. ‘Understand me very well. We are partly responsible for this problem. We are the problem. How can anyone say openly that he is not there to solve Anglophone problems but to serve the President and not even the state?’

“‘You see, Chief,’ said the other. ‘I have often said that our Anglophone brothers lobby for political posts simply to enrich their wives’ pots of soup. Do you hear what a minister would invite people to his house and tell them?’

“‘It’s a shame, Doctor. We can’t really get out of this muddle with this mentality. This is clear evidence that the Francophone government uses our Anglophone brothers to destroy us, to ruin our heritage, to assimilate us, to clearly wipe out Anglophone traditions from the face of this country. Understand me well, Doc.,’ said the other.

“‘Sheer rubbish,’ said Doctor. ‘And what is in the ministerial post? Minister in Charge of Special Duties. What are the special duties apart from acting as a spy against Anglophone patriotism, monitoring Anglophone quest for self-government, to slander their leaders to his Francophone masters, to destroy the Anglophone heritage planted by the British colonial masters for so many years? What is his portfolio as minister? Has he any voice in the Presidency apart from selling out Anglophones, apart from auctioning Anglophones to maintain his post of Special Duties? And where will he be when he is dumped, when his post of Special Duties comes to an end? Will he not be the first person to come to us to complain that Anglophones are marginalized by the regime? Will he not be the first to incite us to protest?’

“‘Is it not the same case with our premier His Excellency, Achiangu Ncha? Is he not responsible for the mess today so-called unitary state? Wasn’t it his greed and his treachery? Or, as he claims he was tricked at the Fombala Congress? History shall judge those people. Their guilt shall be their curse,’ concluded the other.

“‘How do we ever make our identity felt in this country when those you consider to be the rightful saviours are those that auction a people to fill their wives’ pots of soup?’ The other said. ‘In a cabinet of forty members there is no single Anglophone with a ministerial post with commendable portfolio? Those that tried to question were killed underground. So how can we survive in this system? How much have we suffered from this business of colonisation? It was first the Germans, then the English, followed by the Awaras, then the French, now the most humiliating kind from our Francophone brothers who are themselves a French colony. In other words, a colony colonising another colony. Which means we have been reduced to real pariahs, to sub-humans, without any real identity because of the excesses of colonisation,’ the other lamented.

“‘We have failed our children. They shall never forgive us when they shall come to know that because of greed we auctioned them to another colony as second grade citizens. Our children shall never forgive us,’ said the other.

“‘Except the younger generation takes up the challenge themselves. Having failed.... In fact, we are celebrating our failure this evening as the gentleman’s speech implied,’ said the other.

“‘You are right there. Our role now is to tell the story and spur the younger generation to act. We have to accept our guilt and continue to preach the doctrine to our children. The challenge is theirs. We must accept our guilt and give them the chance,’ the other cut in.

“Nwolefeck returned too soon. The Chief and the Doctor lowered their voices as he sat down and chatted with me. I wished he had delayed a little longer so that I could follow the conversation between the Chief and the Doctor. That was the truth. The younger generation had to do something. It is not because an old man has lost his teeth that the young men will not eat the

bones. Something had to be done. It was clearly the place of the younger generation to raise their voices and ask for their rights. Their future had been auctioned and it was they to fight hard to retrieve it. Their elders were limping to their graves with their guilt. However, how was that to save the situation? It was clearly the place of those whose future had been auctioned to act, those whose destiny had been auctioned in exchange for inconsequential political posts to act.

“Shortly after, Dr Amboh announced that we had to go. It was not possible for me to steal a goodbye from Shirila because she was dancing with some assistant somebody. I stood and peeped into the hall. She was not dancing with an assistant somebody as I had thought. She was dancing with Monsieur Abeso Louis le Vin. He had pulled her into himself and they danced slowly. I had to go. I had no right whatsoever in this universe to disturb dignity in order to tell Shirila bye. I had to leave Shirila alone. She was the balm of my nightmares. But I had to leave her alone and contemplate on what now stood on my way. I had to go. There was need to go. Go where? Where else can one go? How far? How soon? Who are the real ministers? Shirila, I love you. I feel it in the nerves of my heart, in the wounds of my soul but I cannot stay. There is a problem. The younger generation must join hands. I have to go and ‘jarr’ to become a man. I would not be caught in the trap of buffoonery. Caught in the trap of self-interest, of flattery of treachery of sycophancy, of obsequiousness. I had to go, Shirila. I had to go and finish my tasks and love you later. Genuine love comes at the beginning of hope and ends at the end of life. I shall rally the crowd and tell of them of the need, of the need. To be independent in the real sense of the word is the need. I would not be caught in the trap of Babajoro the king, the giver and taker of life, the proprietor of underground prisons where men marry darkness and befriend sorrow, befriend despair. Except Dr Ambo comes to rescue us from the rip of dandified gentlemen cum politicians or sycophants married to their wives’ pots of soup in which falsehood is cooked and served at receptions in ministers’ residences with succulent young women hired from the nunnery of the university to grease their loins at champagne parties and reception bouquets and renounce the real thing in the quest of temporary plastic dignity. But there must be a way out a way o-u-t o-f the st-u-por. A way o-u-t o-f the gan-gre-ning.”

[...]

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Months after Minister Wankili’s reception, I took upon myself to organise the Young Anglophone Movement at the University. I was either going to be a man, a full man or never, a full citizen and not an assistant citizen. The movement was the only available means by which the young Anglophones could fight for their rights and merits, without which my quest for knowledge was going to be in vain. Without this, I was never going to get to the position of my dream, I was never going to attain my childhood ambition, and all my education would have been naught. It was evident in the conversation between the Chief and the Doctor that no matter how educated an Anglophone was he was never going to benefit his full rights and merits of citizenship put side by side his Francophone master.

“I started by talking to a few Anglophone students like Andas who had often expressed some revolutionary tendencies with regards to the Anglophone problem. They were quite impressed with the idea and before long, the Young Anglophone Movement now fondly referred to as ‘The YAM’ took root. We had our first meeting in the obscurity of an abandoned hall in the Ghetto Mini Cité with a multitude of Anglophone students in attendance. I addressed the little crowd of anxious students, presenting the principles of YAM, its objectives and demands. I told them that we, Anglophones of the state of Kama were undergoing the fifth colonisation, the first colonisation being the Germans, the second by the British the third by the Awaras, the fourth by

the French and the fifth by the Francophones of the Republic of Kamangola. I told them that the fifth colonisation we were undergoing was the most humiliating and excruciating kind. A French colony colonising a British colony! I told them that our elders betrayed us, sold us to slavery because of their greed but we were not going to fold our arms and watch our fate twisted by people who by every standard were dreadfully inferior if merit were to be the guiding principle. There was need to fight back, to restore our prestigious Anglo-Saxon heritage which the British had inculcated in us. There was need to wrench our colonial heritage out of the machinery that had been placed on the task of gradual assimilation. We were gradually and forcefully being assimilated into Francophones. We had the right to be full citizens and not second-class citizens, to be full Ministers and Directors and not second-class Ministers and Directors. We needed Anglo-Saxon Universities. We had to return to the federal structure as instituted by the United Nations whereby by the Republic of Kamangola was considered an independent bilingual nation with two independent states, one English and the other French. Anything short of these values, we were going to adopt the zero option and that was cessation. Every word I spoke was greeted with applause. A protest march to the Prime Minister's office was programmed in two weeks. If no impact was created from the protest march, we were going to disrupt the mid year exams that had been scheduled for the end of that month. Andas took over the floor to elaborate on the program of activities, stressing on the need for everyone to demonstrate the spirit of patriotism.

"The planned march could not take place. The plan had leaked on the evening before the programmed protest march. It was that evening that I had summoned the main leaders of YAM to review the final strategies that Babajoro's security agents went wild hunting for the members of YAM. Spies were planted all over the university campus and any Anglophone who was least suspected was arrested, tortured, and detained. Francophone students used the opportunity to settle personal conflicts with Anglophones. They directed the spies to cause the arrest of innocent Anglophones, and of course, the obvious thing was ruthless torture and detention.

"I escaped the grip of the slaughterers by miracle. An Anglophone student we had always suspected to be a spy had hinted his girlfriend on the evening before the arrest what calamity was to befall YAM and its leaders. His idea was to convince his girlfriend to stay away from campus before the raid started. The girlfriend told Shirila and early that morning Shirila came to my room horrified. She urged me to leave the campus immediately. I tried to resist. If I escaped, who was going to guide the suffering lot? Why was I to start a battle and escape? Besides, where was I escaping to? From doom to hell? I thought I should remain and die for a glorious cause. Was I of any value when my brothers on this side of the Great River had reduced me to naught? What then was the reason to escape death? Where else does a man lying on the ground fall apart from his grave? I asked myself these questions but seeing the honesty and the grief in Shirila's eyes, I could determine what trouble was in store for me.

"Please, Ngwe, for my sake run away with your life. You will be killed. Remember how you suffered in detention the other time,' she said weeping. I had to react. I looked for Nwolefeck and told him the ordeal. He had been awarded the British scholarship and he had to leave for Britain in a matter of days. Since he was involved with his departure formalities and was not very concerned with the YAM he advised strongly that I should withdraw into hiding in town. He met me a few days after and informed me that I was the prime subject of the search and it was unsafe for me to stay in Besaadi. He said Anglophone students who were arrested were undergoing the terrifying ordeal in detention. He advised me to escape to the village and stay there until things were calm.

"And what about the exams?' I asked him.

"You have to choose between your life and your exams, man,' he said. I contemplated over the issue. My not writing the exams meant that I had to repeat the second year. And repeating the second year meant that I had to lose the scholarship. My father was sick and there was no hope that he could sustain me for the rest of my stay in that university. Besides, Nwolefeck who was very helpful to me was going to Britain. While I was still contemplating, Andas, a close ally on the YAM

front sneaked in and hinted that it was hot out there and that it was necessary for me to escape. He told me some of the students arrested had been severely tortured and forced to reveal that I conceived the idea and had rallied students and indoctrinated them to revolt. It was clear that Babajoro's men wanted my head at all cost. I had to leave for the village that same day before I was fished out and slaughtered....
