

# Aníkúlápò - A Short Story

Salawu Olajide  
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OLONGO  
AFRICA





# Ìyá Àgbà

Every ẹsẹ of Odù, every word of ìwúre, every atom of àfòşẹ that would make this day had been wept for, sweated over and bled on by Ìyá Àgbà.

Patience had never been her thing, she wanted all her things done *now!* However, each time she found herself growing impatient, and remembered the price that had to be paid, her body would grow cold.

“... we die, so we can live,” she muttered to herself as she moved her body to a more comfortable position on the recliner. The recliner wobbled, she swore continuously underneath her breath as her bones screamed their vengeance for daring to shift position. Even her legs, which had gone dead earlier in the year, ached.

*Damn it! Fuck! Fuck! Shit! Shit! Hell!*

The stream of curses dried up as slowly as the pain receded. Ìyá Àgbà kept her eyes firmly shut, reminding herself resolutely that time was nothing. *Pain is nothing.*

“Hey! Ìyá Àgbà!” a child’s voice piped up beside her.

Ìyá Àgbà forced a smile to her lips as she opened her eyes.

Àmòpé placed her head, gently, carefully, on Ìyá Àgbà’s lap, a smile of happiness lighting up her face. “Good evening.”

Ìyá Àgbà placed her hand on Àmòpé’s sweaty forehead briefly, then moved to the wooly, yellow hair which contrasted with the blue-black of her skin. She could feel the energy of Odù pulsating like a wild thing through Àmòpé’s five-year-old body. Instinctively, her arthritic fingers tapped into some of that energy, and her gnarled digits began to straighten. She yanked her hand off Àmòpé’s hair.

Àmòpé gave an accusatory look. “Why did you stop? I want to take your pain away.”

“Not now Àmòpé,” Ìyá Àgbà whispered. “You will conserve your energy for more important things.”

“Okay.” Àmòpé sprang off her lap. “Now watch me play!” she commanded as she skipped off to join the crowd of children in the backyard.

Ìyá Àgbà smiled indulgently at her ability to switch moods and interests so quickly... *to be five years old again. And to think I had to wait over a hundred and twenty years for the child that would bring back Odù!*

But there was so much to be done; the guidance, the training... the child would need protection from the world that would judge her a freak, from the forces that worked to stamp out witchcraft. A flicker of doubt nudged her.

*What if my heart fails me? What if it doesn’t work?*

“You cannot back down now, Jókòtadé,” a voice whispered near her left ear. Ìyá Àgbà didn’t need to turn her head; she knew it was her grandmother, Ìyá Alájàpá, talking to her from the alternate. “You have been chosen, you made the pledge, you will make the sacrifice!”

As Ìyá Àgbà absorbed those words she was transported back in time, to the days when she had been Jókòtadé and not this dying bag of flesh and bones. Those days when she had the world at her feet, Ìyá Alájàpá, her grandmother and mentor, guiding her through the ways of the craft. It was her grandmother that had taken her to her first big coven meeting. She'd met witches from all over the world, at the foot of the fountain of tears located where the skies met the seas, agbede méjì ọrun àti ayé.

*Those days are gone now and whichever way this goes... I have no more use for this body.*

She turned her attention back to Àmòpé. One minute she'd be playing hopscotch, the next, she would be kicking a football, then she'd join the children skipping rope. Àmòpé was quicksilver with a nimbus of unruly hair flying around her head, trilling laughter in her chest. But it was that intense blue forcefield around the child that thrilled Ìyá Àgbà; that perfect combination of the terrible and the divine residing in her tiny body. The girl was a sponge, soaking up all the Odù in the air as naturally as she breathed. She wouldn't need a talisman or spells - Odù was encoded in her DNA.

It took all of Ìyá Àgbà's willpower not to slip into the alternate so she could see Àmòpé in her glorious darkness. All her own powers must be conserved for that final push.

"Ìyá, are you alright?" Túndé called from somewhere above her head, his eyes peering at her with a mixture of curiosity and concern.

Ìyá Àgbà turned her head in his direction. "Oh yes, Túndé, I'm perfectly okay."

Túndé snorted in disbelief and leaned over Ìyá Àgbà to adjust her pillow. He left her side briefly and returned with a blanket, which he draped over her legs. Then he pulled up a chair and started reading out of a book to her.

It didn't come as a surprise to Ìyá Àgbà that a man who loved so deeply, so selflessly, would have enough of that love in his loins to produce the Odù that was Àmòpé.

## **Àmòpé**

Àmòpé waited eagerly for the bell announcing break time to ring. She had finished her handwriting classwork shortly after the teacher gave them their workbooks, but she didn't hand it in. It wouldn't be fair to the others; her teacher might think her classmates were lazy. So she slipped into the alternate and told the teacher not to notice that she was no longer writing. Now each time he glanced around his class and his gaze reached her, his eyes would glaze over until he looked at somebody new.

A dragonfly flitted across the class window and Àmòpé called to it. The dragonfly fluttered down to her table. Àmòpé told him that her friend Aisha had never seen a dragonfly before and would he like to come and play with them later? The dragonfly flew off making whirring sounds with his wings.

Àmòpé took that as a yes.

After lunch, as Àmòpé and Aisha sat in their favorite corner of the playground, she showed her how to make blue flame by snapping her fingers. The girls were giggling quietly when Mr Dragonfly flew into the corner, doing his whirring wing thing. Àmòpé smiled in satisfaction as the dragonfly landed on Aisha's open palm; the look of amazement on her best friend's face thrilled Àmòpé. Aisha was still examining the dragonfly when the boys arrived.

Fola, Obioma and Timothy were always together and, during break times, they would walk around the playground pushing children off swings or making them the target of other mean tricks. Àmòpé had always felt sorry for them. Fola's daddy was mean, Obioma's mummy just died and Timothy had a reading disorder. Their alternate energies were red; a painful pulsating red.

"If it isn't stupid and stupider!" Timothy, the biggest of the trio said, his friends laughed as if he'd just told the funniest joke ever.

Àmòpé slid into the alternate, trying to figure out what she could do to ease their pain. That was when she saw something else: lurking just behind the alternate forms of the boys were the Ajogun. The Ajogun didn't joke around, and their presence meant danger for the whole school. They would use those boys; they would kill them if they felt there was a need to. Àmòpé trembled in fear.

"Is it not you that I'm talking to?" Timothy grabbed her. "Aren't you Miss Stupid?"

As she tried to shake him off, Fola and Obioma rushed towards her their faces widening and elongating, making room for a mouth full of giant canine teeth.

Àmòpé pulled Aisha into the blue of her alternate world and shielded her with her energy field.

"Your mentor is dying," The Ajogun that was occupying Timothy's body roared at her in many tongues. "Give up your powers to us! Save your loved ones from the pain that will be theirs once your protector dies!"

Àmòpé flung her answer back in the form of lightning, separating the Ajogun from the bodies of the boys. She wrapped grey energies up in the silken webs of àfòṣẹ, words stronger than steel. Still in her true form she jumped back into reality, grabbed the boys in her arms, in iṣẹ́jú àáyá she moved ten minutes back in time and sent a storm that would sweep the Ajogun into the past. Between the àfòṣẹ and the storm, they would have a hard time returning to the present before the school's closing time and that was enough... *for now.*

She stepped back into her five year old body and pushed the swing Aishat sat on, their giggles filled the air. She smiled at Timothy, Fola and Obioma as they walked past the swings. The red of their pain and anger was inking in with the dark blue of healing, they still had a long way to go, *but it's a start.* She waved at them. The three of them stared back with puzzlement.

## **Chioma**

As Chioma lifted up her hands in praise, the sleeves of her blouse slid down, revealing a swathe of flesh that would normally mortify her for its immodesty. But at that moment she couldn't be bothered. She was in that place, THAT space, suspended in the spirit.

*If I can just reach a little higher, I will touch the hem of His garment...*

*Holy Spirit move me now*

*Make my life whole again*

She still couldn't fathom how things had degenerated so quickly after she'd married Túndé. One day he had been a Manager, a Bright Young Thing, the Best in his Set. Next, he was earnestly discussing the merits of making jollof rice for dinner with Àmòpé, *a five-year-old!*

She groaned in the spirit.

Chioma's strong soprano came from the insides of her belly and filled up the church. The weight of the spirit was so heavy on her that she had to go down on her knees, her face, palms and torso lifted up to the heavens.

*Jesus! Lover of my soul!*

*Jesus! I'll never let you go!*

Her parents and in-laws had been careful, and pointed, in the way they had not blamed her for Tundé's gradual descent into housemaidhood. Squirring Ìyá Àgbà around, collecting rents, doing bank runs. She teared up at the thought of it all ... *a whole bank manager doing bank runs for an old lady!*

Nobody had mentioned the ill-luck following her around; nobody had blamed the abrupt ending of his promising career on her. But everyone knew, and no one *knows* more than Chioma, that it had been her fault. Or why was it that her husband lost his job barely two years into their marriage? Marriages were supposed to bring good luck; that was why men chose their wives carefully.

And she honestly believed that she and Tundé were made for each other. She had refused to party or take lovers, she had faced her studies and learnt the arts of cooking and keeping a house as her parents told her and she'd gotten her reward when Tundé proposed to her barely three months into their courtship.

*Spirit move, over me*

*Spirit move, over me*

She remembered the day she returned from her teaching job and found Tundé hand-washing some clothes in the backyard, his muscles flexing vigorously in the sun.

She had nearly died on the spot. She ran towards him, hoping to save both of them shame, and then she'd seen her work shirts, skirts, bed-sheets, bras and pants all fluttering merrily on the line where he'd hung them out to dry. She had looked around rapidly, hoping none of their neighbours had noticed. But they had; they were all sitting on their verandah's staring, pointing... laughing.

Tundé had washed her underwear. Chioma had never been so greatly or so publicly shamed in her entire life.

Her mother-in-law had come visiting the following day, bringing along with her a bag of rice and eyes that burned with hatred.

*...and there is nothing you can't do*

*Oh lord my eyes are on you...*

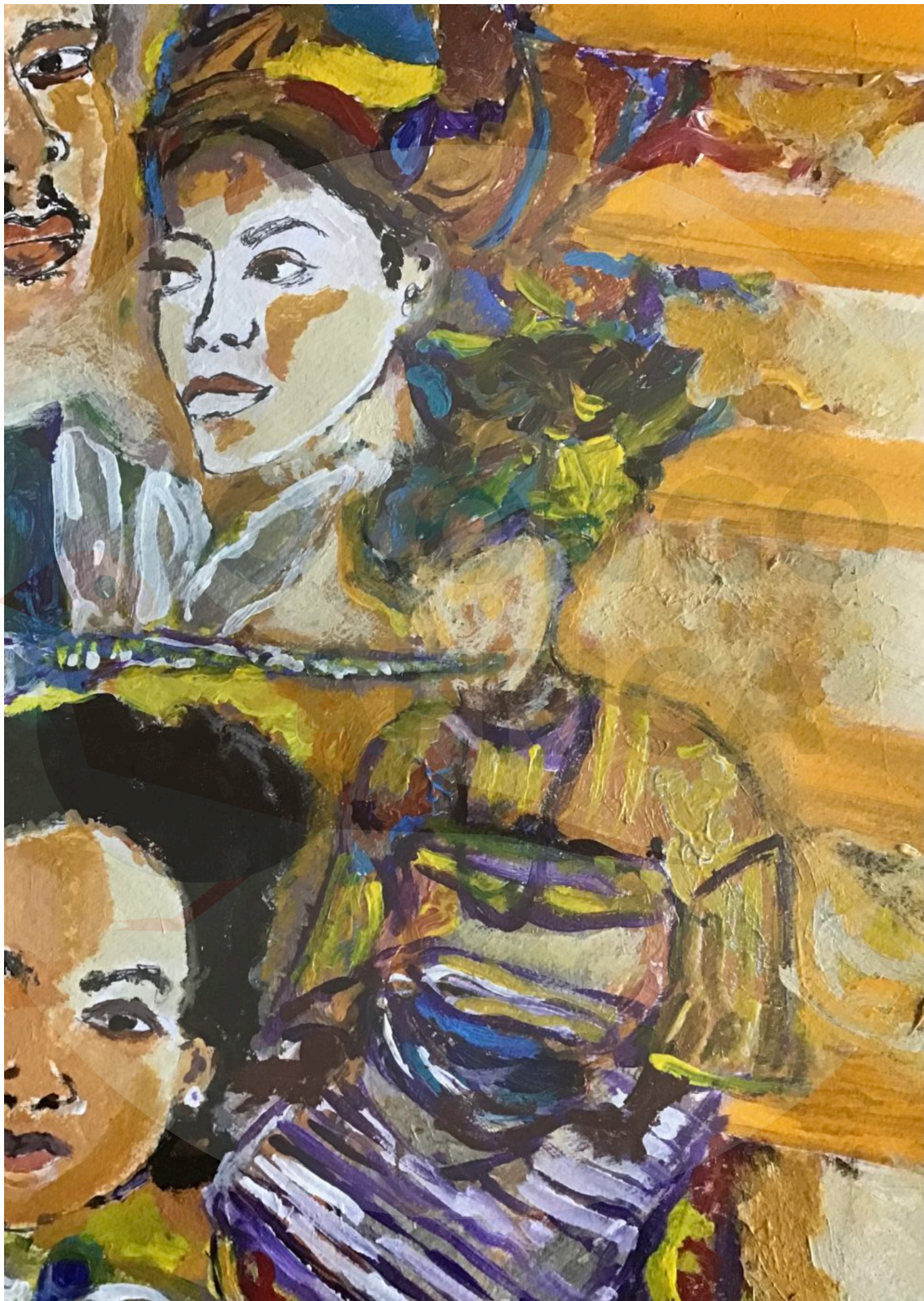
Suddenly someone was looming over her. Chioma looked up at the pastor, grabbed his legs and buried her face between his thighs. He placed a hand on her head and began to pray, loudly, fervently, calling down the heavens to listen to her fate. For the first time in a long while, a little ray of hope pierced through the darkness of depression she'd been battling all these years.

"And the Lord says He sees you," the pastor started. Chioma's ears pricked up. "He's heard your

cries. The Lord says to tell you that you're fighting household enemies, and today is your day of deliverance." The pastor looked at Chioma, his eyes were sad. "Oh, my child, you've suffered so much to keep your marriage. But there are witches after you. As I was praying for you, I heard these words clearly: 'the enemy lives in your backyard, those who are doing you, live inside your house.'"



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# Túndé

Túndé had woken up that morning from the dream he'd been having over and over again. He was with that girl he knew as Jókötadé. She had never told him her name, but he knew it, the way you simply *know* things when you dreamed them.

The dream usually takes place in a locale where the sky was too blue to be true. They would sit down beside a fountain and talk like old friends. They usually spoke about a variety of things that he never remembered when he woke up, but he always wakes up with the strong impression that he had to keep Àmòpé safe, that she was special and the world would try to harm her.

So when the pastor came home with Chioma, his heart plunged to his toes. He had stepped into their flat just behind Chioma, and his presence had filled up the whole apartment. It took a few seconds before Túndé registered that the man was not as big or as tall as he had appeared at first.

Jókötadé had told him about this pastor. Túndé nudged his memory trying to remember exactly what she'd said about him, he came up with nothing. But his dreams that he'd ascribed to anxiety suddenly became all too real.

*I'll be damned if I let this little git harm my daughter!*

He gritted his teeth and pasted a smile on his face. "Please sit down, sir," he said as the pastor stood, stock still, in the centre of the sitting room. The pastor ignored him and continued looking around the room, his nostrils flaring periodically as if he could smell something bad.

"Witchcraft!" he barked finally. He leveled an accusing gaze at Túndé. "This whole place reeks of witchcraft!" His whole body began to twitch and vibrate.

Fearing an onslaught of convulsions, Túndé rushed towards the pastor and tried to grab him before he slumped to the floor.

The pastor shoved him away with a strength belied by his frail looks. "Do not touch me with hands that have been sullied by witchcraft."

Túndé stepped back in confusion. The pastor kept twitching.

"Woman!" he barked at Chioma, who had just re-entered the room. "Bring me a bucket of water!"

A panicked Chioma dropped the bottles of soft drink she'd gone to fetch on the centre table and dashed out of the sitting room. Pastor Elijah pointed in Túndé's direction. "You have been living with witches; witches from the pits of hell!"

Túndé jumped out of the way as Pastor Elijah started spinning, speaking in tongues as he rotated. "To-to-to-to-to-bigolo! Paski-ski-ski-ski-ski-ripulu! Jumajumajuma-jasjasajasa!"

As he spun round and around Túndé hurriedly moved objects out of his way. The drinks first, then the centre table, then the small chair Àmòpé usually sat on whenever she was watching the TV... but the pastor was still spinning.

Chioma rushed back into the room, a bucket spilling water in hand. Pastor Elijah stopped spinning and stooped over the bucket, still shouting prayers in a hoarse voice. Túndé didn't know what to make of all the drama, but he stood to one side, and watched as his wife joined the pastor in prayers.

The two of them were soon holding hands, Chioma screeching, the pastor bellowing.

Túndé started muttering prayers too, trying not to count the number of times he'd tried to tell Chioma that it was not her fault. That losing his job was probably the best thing that had ever happened to him. He loved his life; he enjoyed cooking and taking care of Ìyá Àgbà, their landlady. He wanted to tell her about his own dream of going to culinary school and running a restaurant, but Chioma would never understand. So he'd gone along with her to different churches, hoping she would find comfort in worship. He looked at the man that was still frothing at the mouth and wondered what the fuck Chioma had gotten them into.

"Pinpinpinrindirimirindadadada..."

Àmòpé, school uniform awry, her school bag strapped to her back, stepped into the room. She took a look at the pastor and burst into laughter.

Túndé knew what would happen next. "Oh, fuck!"

As he hurried towards his daughter to save her from her laughter, the pastor and Chioma kept quiet.

"Who is this child?" Pastor Elijah asked.

Túndé pulled Àmòpé closer. "This is our daughter, Àmòpé." He said cheerfully. "Go to your room and take off your school uniform," he whispered to her.

"Bring that child to me." Pastor Elijah's voice was a whiplash.

Túndé knew all about pastors and their tendency to call every child they saw a witch. It would happen to Àmòpé over his dead body. "I don't think that's necessary," Túndé ground out.

"Jezebel!" The pastor uttered that one word with such force that Túndé took a step backwards.

"She's not Jezebel, sir," Chioma finally spoke up.

"Yes she is! She's the leader of a coven, an old witch in a child's body," Pastor Elijah insisted.

"Daddy, I don't like this man." Àmòpé said with the certainty of a child. She turned towards Pastor Elijah. "You're a very silly man." With that, she made to leave.

"I command you to stop in Jesus' name!" Pastor Elijah yelled at her.

Àmòpé kept walking towards her room. Chioma looked at Túndé, a pleading look in her eyes.

Túndé hated that Chioma knew how much he loved her. He hated the way she manipulated him to do her will.

"Àmòpé," Túndé called out. "I think the pastor wants you to stay here."

"No, Daddy," Àmòpé said seriously. "I have to eat and then do my homework and then go and greet Ìyá Àgbà and then go and play."

She glanced at the pastor. "I think you should continue doing what you were doing before I came inside."

The pastor's eyes widened, his jaw came unhinged, and before he could recover, Àmòpé had left the

sitting room.

Túndé sighed in relief.

## Àmòpé

Àmòpé was already in bed when the prayer warriors arrived. In fact she had been fast asleep, but her eyes snapped open as they stepped into their apartment. Ìyá Àgbà had told her what would happen tonight. They had walked through it together, and Àmòpé was well prepared.

She shut her outer eyes, opened her inner eyes and watched them through the wall separating her bedroom and the sitting room. She didn't step completely into the alternate, instead she hovered above the invincible line that separated her present reality and the alternate, using the method Ìyá Àgbà had taught her. The energies of the prayer warriors looked the same; all tepid browns. But then, lurking beneath their lack of true power were the Ajogun in their washed-out, grey forms.

The incident at the school had made her more alert to their presence. Ìyá Àgbà said they would be there trying to muck things up. The trick was to allow them to win without them realizing they had lost. The pastor was at the head of the group. In his alternate form, his brown shone a little brighter than the others, just like his Ajogun was stronger than theirs. He led the walk around the apartment, sprinkling 'holy water' on every surface. Her parents trailed behind the prayer warriors like a pair of lost children.

Then they started the prayers.

*These people are so noisy.*

When they got to her room the pastor prayed extra loud, commanding all evil spirits to leave her room before telling the spirit of witchcraft to "set her loose in the mighty name of Jesus!" As the pastor started spinning, his brown became thinner and the washed-out grey of the Ajogun stronger. She turned over and groaned, because she knew her parents would worry if she didn't make any sound. The pastor took that as an invitation to yank her out of bed.

Àmòpé cried out as her alternate form joined with her real form. A painful thing, when you weren't prepared. Her daddy and mummy pushed through the crowd that had gathered round the pastor. Her daddy gently, but firmly, took her from the pastor, hugged her till her whimpers of pain and surprise had subsided and then placed her on the ground.

Waves of anger came off her dad's body even as he did all these caring. Àmòpé didn't know her dad could get that angry.

"Do not ever touch my child again!" he growled as her mummy picked her up.

The prayer warriors were still praying, but the pastor had stopped spinning. He stepped away from her daddy, as though afraid of him. Àmòpé was glad for that fear; she nodded her head and glared fiercely at the pastor. She loved it when her daddy increased his power, because usually he was such a gentle guy, *anger is a good emotion too...* and there was nothing the Ajogun feared more than the pure white flame of righteous anger.

She rested her head on her mummy's shoulder and wrapped her legs around her waist. She loved the way her mummy and daddy loved her. She suddenly felt sorry for the pastor because his parents did not love him as much. They were always punishing him, telling him he was not good enough.

"In Jesus' name we have prayed!" The pastor shouted even louder than before. A thunderous "amen!" shook the room.

"I can see that the forces of darkness are really intense." The pastor's voice was soft. "The Holy Spirit told me that we should go downstairs and pray; that there's where our victory lies."

"Excuse me, sir." Her daddy tapped the man on his shoulder. "My landlady lives downstairs and she's very old and sick. She needs her sleep."

The pastor ignored her daddy, and turned towards her mummy. "Chioma, we came here because of you. If you want us to stop please let me know."

"Pastor, don't mind this mumu man o," her mummy said. "They have used his head to do jazz."

Sometimes Àmòpé wanted to tell her mummy to stop talking to her daddy like that, but that was how she claimed her own power. *Adults are so complicated.* She placed Àmòpé gently on the bed. "Today na today. It's either we get our deliverance or we get a quit notice!"

The pastor started jumping up and down and praying. The prayer warriors copied him. He stopped suddenly and pointed at the doorway. "Let us now go forth brethren. We shall place a siege on darkness today, and the walls of hell shall not prevail!"

"Amen!"

One of the women started singing.

*Send down faya!*

*Holy ghost faya!*

*Send down faya again!*

*Holy ghost faya!*

The others picked up the song and started singing and stomping their feet and jumping and dancing as they left her room.

Mummy turned towards daddy. "You stay here with Àmòpé," she said with that terrible voice that Àmòpé and her daddy didn't like because it was unkind, it demeaned.

Daddy was really angry now; she could see his confusion and hurt. Àmòpé touched his arm and sent him calming waves.

"Sit down, Daddy. You will be fine. Everything will be alright."

Àmòpé knew when they got downstairs, because after she made her daddy fall asleep on the chair in her bedroom she made her shadow follow the prayer warriors and her mummy and the Pastor Elijah. Àmòpé entered Ìyá Àgbà's flat, still suspended between reality and the alternate. Ìyá Àgbà was waiting for her in the sitting room, she turned towards Àmòpé and smiled a sad smile.

*Send down faya!*

*Holy ghost faya!*

*Send down faya again!*

*Holy ghost faya!*

The singing of the prayer warriors increased in volume even as they prayed. Ìyá Àgbà shook her head, "I wish they really know what they are doing," she sighed.

Àmòpé didn't say anything. In her shadow form her voice would come out as a thousand thunders and it wouldn't do to alert the Ajogun.

She touched Ìyá Àgbà, sending waves of calmness to her, something that did not require her to use any power. Empathy, Ìyá Àgbà had called this human thing.

"I guess we are ready," Ìyá Àgbà said after a while.

Àmòpé nodded.

Ìyá Àgbà began to turn, a very painful thing. Àmòpé threw a wall of silence around the flat as Ìyá Àgbà screamed, as her spine became rounded. She panted and roared as her arms and legs shortened, as her feet and hands turned into hooves.

Àmòpé held her through the pain, the bright picture of laughter, world travel and coven meetings Ìyá Àgbà had painted for her was woven into a soft kíkípà which she draped over the body going through a painful metamorphosis.

"Meeee!" Ìyá Àgbà bleated as she gave the final push and her face elongated into a goat's. She sprung a pair of horns.

The goat that Ìyá Àgbà turned into was very pretty. It was brown all over and had patches of white on her forehead and stomach. Àmòpé helped it to open the door of Ìyá Àgbà's apartment. Ìyá Àgbà had told her not to be afraid, and that she was not to watch but was to wait in her apartment until it was all over. But Àmòpé knew she would watch. As the goat ran into the midst of the prayer warriors, everywhere went quiet. The silence sounded surprised, as if the prayer warriors couldn't believe that their prayers had actually worked. If she could, Àmòpé would have laughed.

"And where did this beast come from?" The pastor howled into the graveyard silence.

The goat bleated and ran towards the pastor like a long-lost friend.

Someone pointed mutely towards Ìyá Àgbà's flat.

"Aaaah! The Lord is the God of War! The all-conquering Jesus Christ! The fierce and silent Holy Spirit!" The pastor was all roars. He slapped the back of one of the prayer warriors, snapping her into action.

*Winner ooo, winner!*

The woman started.

*Winner ooo, winner!*

The others joined their voices to hers.

*Jesus you don win ooo winner!*

*Patapata you go win forever winner!*

For the next few minutes the backyard was full of roaring voices, dancing feet and dust.

“Praise the Loooord!” The pastor shouted. “Halleluyah!” Came the response.

“The Lord has given us victory over our enemies,” The pastor said. The goat bleated in agreement. “And in Exodus 22:18 the Lord said ‘thou shall not suffer a witch to live!’”

“Amen pastor!” the prayer warriors shouted.

“What we are doing tonight is cleansing the life of our sister Chioma of all evil.” He looked directly at Mummy.

As if he’d sent her a silent message, Mummy ran inside to fetch kerosene and matches.

The neighbours came out of their apartments. They were all shouting that the prayer warriors were disturbing them. But Àmòpé was more interested in Mr Oloibiri, the man who lived on the third floor. He was dialing his phone, she slid through the walls until she merged with his shadow, sending him a lot of courage and a little panic.

“Is that Olomi Central Police Station?” He listened for a while. “My names are Peter Chidinma Oloibiri. We have a situation here sir!” He paused, “Yessir!” He went quiet again, listening to whatever the man on the other side of the phone was saying. “They have been shouting for over five hours, now they are trying to roast a goat in the middle of our backyard!”

A loud bang went off as the pastor threw a match into the fire.

“Oh my god officer! Please come now, now, now! They have set fire to the goat! They are going to burn down the whole place!”

Mr. Oloibiri ran down the staircase, nearly leaving Àmòpé behind. She quickly latched onto his shadow, careful to cause him as little discomfort as possible.

“You’re on your way now!” he was still on the call. “Thank you, Thank you sir!”

Àmòpé left her host and moved closer to the fire.

The goat was bleating in pain. Àmòpé knew that her body was crying on the bed but her shadow, as much as it wanted to cry too, didn’t know how to. Daddy ran downstairs shouting, his voice barely heard above the noise.

“You guys are truly mad! Chioma, see what you have caused!”

Suddenly the goat went quiet, so did the pastor and the neighbours, most of whom were now downstairs. The goat was changing, her blackened head elongating and her legs changing to human limbs. Soon, there was no goat in the fire but the human form of Ìyá Àgbà.

The prayer warriors roared in victory.

Ìyá Àgbà’s pain reached out to Àmòpé; it went into the core of her being and caused her to jerk all over her bed. But her alternate form was still. Ìyá Àgbà’s flesh was being burnt off her bones, even her bones were melting from the inside... the pain!

Daddy shouted in a voice that was full of more pain than the one Ìyá Àgbà was using to cry. He ran inside the house and came back with two buckets of water. He threw the water on the fire. But it was as if he added more petrol to it because it blew up! Everybody jumped back from the flames that appeared to be going out of control, a fire so hot nobody else, except Àmòpé, could see Ìyá Àgbà's still body in the flames.

The compound was suddenly full of people; people throwing buckets of water at the fire. People who were shouting, people fighting with the pastor and the prayer warriors, people trying to rescue the pastor and the prayer warriors from the people fighting them.

Everybody had gone mad. Daddy came back with more water and threw it on the flame. Àmòpé told the fire to go away; that it was done. She did not need to look at the smoking area to see Ìyá Àgbà lying in a puddle of water. She was black, like burnt wood.

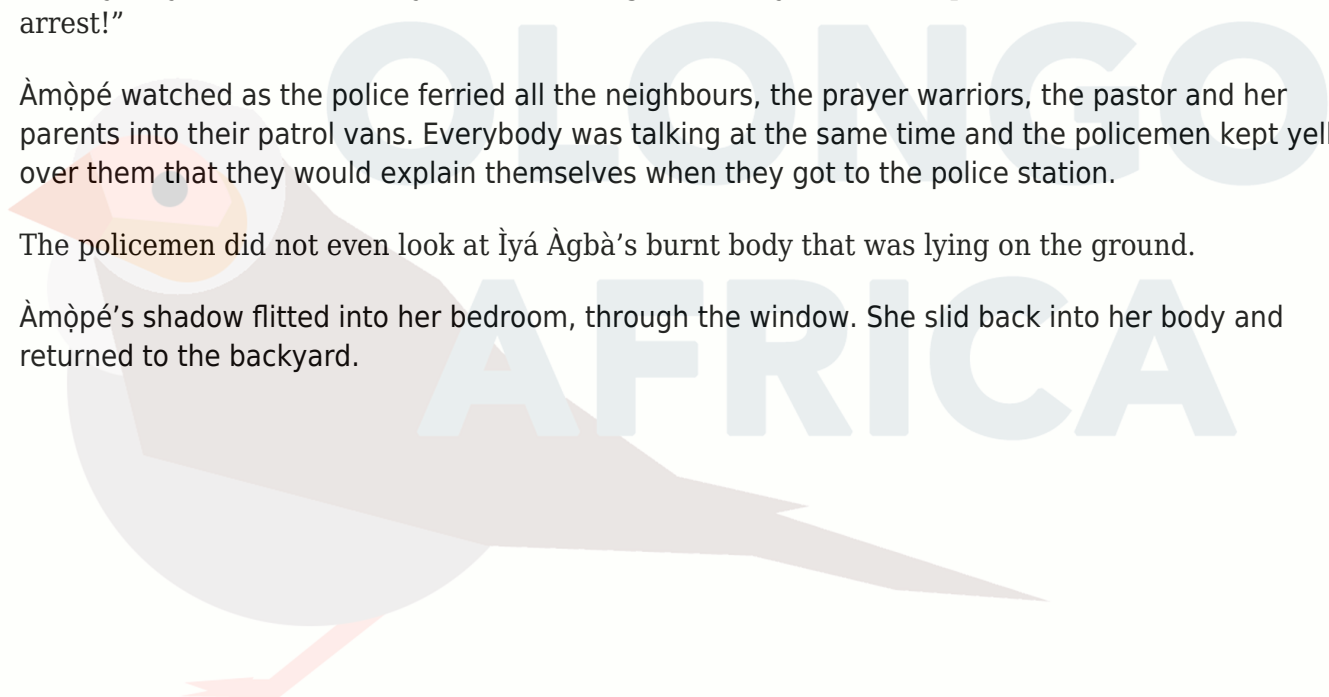
Suddenly the compound was lit up by the headlamps of three police vans nobody had noticed driving in.

"Everybody freeze!" A voice yelled from the gate. "Put your hands up in the air! You're all under arrest!"

Àmòpé watched as the police ferried all the neighbours, the prayer warriors, the pastor and her parents into their patrol vans. Everybody was talking at the same time and the policemen kept yelling over them that they would explain themselves when they got to the police station.

The policemen did not even look at Ìyá Àgbà's burnt body that was lying on the ground.

Àmòpé's shadow flitted into her bedroom, through the window. She slid back into her body and returned to the backyard.





## **Ìyá Àgbà**

The pinpoint of yellow light pulsated within Ìyá Àgbà's still smoking body. It could only wait... and hope. Its agitation increased as it sensed the child nearby. It darted to and fro within the space it was confined in. This was the beginning it had been waiting for.

"Follow me," Àmòpé said to the yellow light.

The light didn't wonder how it was supposed to do that, trapped as it were inside a body that was already going through rigor mortis.

It gave a little burst of Odù, lifted the body off the ground and made it float across the courtyard after Àmòpé and into Ìyá Àgbà's sitting room. Navigating the space between a really large chair and the bedroom was a bit awkward because the body was supine. But with a little ingenuity and another spurt of power, it was finally able to maneuver the body into Ìyá Àgbà's bedroom and then onto her bed.

"Well done," Àmòpé said as she placed her hand, shining an intense blue, on Ìyá Àgbà's forehead.

The yellow light absorbed all the Odù that Àmòpé was passing to it. At some point it felt full, even a little bloated... power drunk. It had to make more room for the Odù so it wouldn't burst. It expanded, it multiplied, an intense pain washed over it, something was pushing it, and suddenly it was sliding along a tunnel, borne on mucus-like substance. It felt firm hands pulling it through, fingers of sunlight



on its eyelids... it had been born.

“It’s a girl!” someone shouted before smacking her naked bottom.

She screamed.

She expanded some more, her cells multiplied. Her stubby legs ran after the chickens. She liked the sounds the thin beads on her waist made as she ran.

“Jókötadé, leave that hen alone!” A pair of arms grabbed her, and she giggled as she was thrown into the air. She grabbed the woman’s headscarf as she descended and was wrapped in a warm embrace.

Jókötadé’s cells multiplied, they expanded.

There she was with a bunch of children, some her age, some older, who were heading for the river that ran past the village. She had a small calabash on her head, walking beside was her best friend, Adétutù, chatting excitedly. This was their first time at the stream. She was about to dip the calabash into the water when she was pushed inside with a big splash. Adetutu was right beside her, and the girls giggled as they surfaced.

“You’re going to learn how to swim today,” one of the bigger children shouted.

Her arms and legs had grown stronger from running and swimming every day, her fingers reached her ears. Màarí was taking her to the missionary school. Jókötadé had heard a lot about the missionaries, but she’d never seen any of them before. She’d been told that they were as white as ẹfun, the tasty chalk mother sometimes brought home from the market.

She was frightened and excited at the same time. She’d heard so much about these people; how they spoke in a strange tongue that they expected her to learn. She was more excited that she would be wearing clothes. Her first: a yellow cotton gown, hand-sewn by mother.

That midnight, she had been with her age-grade at the grove of plantain trees and she was told all about school and that she should learn everything she could as quickly as possible. She would be the first of her age-grade to go to school and they were all so proud of her; she’d given them bragging rights over other covens. They gave her gifts of a quick mind, and a quick tongue. Adetutu gave her the gift of writing.

Jókötadé could feel her brain filling out its cranium as she and Ìyá Alájàpá walked deeper into the bush.

Ìyá Alájàpá was her grandmother, a healer who used her craft to keep the world in balance as she worked with all kinds of physical, spiritual and mental health issues. She was the one people ran to with their convulsing children, their pleas for love potions, and their schemes for poisoning their enemies. They went to her when the world became overwhelming and everything seemed to be caving in on them.

Ìyá Alájàpá was pointing out leaves and bark, mushrooms and grass. Jókötadé picked them, one after the other, calling out their names softly, *ewé iyeye, ewé gbéjé, ewé akòko...*

“Your role will be expanded, Jókötadé,” Ìyá Àgbà was saying to her as they walked the narrow path that led to the night market. “So you need to learn as much as possible in order to keep things working. There is no end to learning.”

Jókötadé had finished grade school and she had learnt everything they could teach her; she wasn't interested in travelling to Scotland on the scholarship she had earned. She would go to Scotland and other lands, but not now. Now she needed to be here.

She listened to Ìyá Alájàpá as she spoke about the fact that their kind were dying out; that the Ajogun had triumphed and had scattered the coven. They were determined to kill Odù.

She spoke about how they misunderstood the role of Odù, particularly of witchcraft, in keeping the world in balance. At some point everything became confusing. No longer was she on the path to the night market with Ìyá Alájàpá. Instead, the two of them seemed to be walking on air, their destination a pinpoint of yellow light in the distance.

Jókötadé listened intently to all the things she was saying; about keeping the craft alive, how she would have to wait patiently for the person that would become her apprentice, about pain, death and resurrection. She talked about the eagle, and how it had to reinvent itself each time it was near death. How it goes into isolation at a mountain-top and strips off all its feathers until it was nothing but a pile of vulnerabilities. It rests, rebuilding strength in its bones, regrowing new feathers and afterwards, afterwards, soars into the skies.

She spoke of Aníkúlápó, the one who folds death in her pocket, of death as rebirth.

"We are witches, Jókötadé; owners of darkness. We are the ones who would tie a hundred wrappers, in flight. We keep the balance; without us, the world would spin into chaos. We are the good in evil, the evil in everything good..."

The more Jókötadé listened to Ìyá Alájàpá, the closer they drew to the light. "I am you, Jókötadé, you are me. We are our ancestors; women who have gone before us, women watching over us from the alternate..."

Jókötadé stepped into the light. Through it... and opened her eyes in her flat, on the ground floor of a twin six-storey house she'd built in the eighties. A bee buzzed in from the garden, flew above her head inquisitively, and returned to the garden to inform the others that she was back.

Jókötadé sat up in bed. "It worked!"

## ***Túndé***

He was still in the same state of bewilderment he'd been since the previous day.

*What madness! What the fuck happened?*

His confusion was compounded by the way the police had handled the whole matter. Refusing to listen to his own side of the story, or anybody else's, they had paid attention to only Mr Oloibiri, *because he's the one that called us, you see.*

The man had lapped up the attention, making wild exaggerations about what had happened the previous evening. The statement he'd given sounded like gibberish to Túndé, but the policemen had loved it, laughing uproariously all through the night.

One would think they were at the police station to make friends, not to report a murder.

Nobody had listened to him when he told them that his wife and pastor had killed their landlady.

He remembered the days that followed the loss of his job. The old woman was the only one that listened, truly listened to him, about how he had been set up to take the fall for a shady deal some of his colleagues had been involved in. How he'd foiled their plans and resigned. She'd been the one that reassured him that cooking and cleaning did not make him less of a man. She'd encouraged him to be himself; *live an authentic life, child, everybody else's is taken.*

After a year and he still couldn't find a job, he had sought solace from her. She'd made him her personal assistant, paying him more than what he earned as a banker. It was weird the way Chioma was going on about jobs and going to an office. She'd never asked him how he paid their house rents, how they were able to afford the fancy school Àmòpé attended, how there was always food on their table, clothes on their backs, how he managed to change their car from an old Corona to a spanking new Lexus truck. All she cared about was appearances; the fact that he didn't go out to work *like other men.*

He knew how superficial Chioma was from the day he'd met her, how she was invested in gender binaries, and roles and other such nonsense. But he loved her. *The heart wants what it wants.* And then they had made the most beautiful child together.

*Àmòpé! Shit! We left her all by herself!* Túndé could have slapped himself.

Still ignoring Chioma, who was seated shamefacedly beside him, he ran towards the counter.

"Officer please, I need to make a call, my daughter is at home all by herself!"

"Calm down young man, there's no need to panic, the DPO said we should release all of you."

Túndé felt Chioma's hand crawl into his, reminding him of all the things that happened the previous evening. He turned fully towards her, shook his head, and went to stand by the door.

## **Chioma**

She still could not figure out what had happened between the time the prayer warriors had arrived at their apartment the previous evening and their eventual release from the police station.

She remembered what happened: she could name them in their proper sequence, the prayers, the burning of the goat that turned out to be Ìyá Àgbà, the arrest... but it had all been a lie. Mass hallucination, the policeman had called it, probably because he didn't want to call it 'mass hysteria', as if either term made it sound like they had not gone insane. Yes, there had been prayers; *loud enough to wake the dead*, according to Mr. Oloibiri. And, yes, there had been a fire, but nothing was in the fire; not a goat, and *certainly not Ìyá Àgbà!*, according to her great-granddaughter, because lying in her bedroom, without a mark on her body, was Ìyá Àgbà.

Yes, she was dead, but she didn't die from being burnt.

"She died of old age, Chioma. I think that your pastor must have put something inside that water he was sprinkling around the house," Túndé had grumbled angrily.

Ìyá Àgbà's great-granddaughter, Jókòtadé, was the most beautiful woman Chioma had ever seen. She was tall and straight, with jet black skin. She wore her natural hair, thick, uncombed, wildly defying gravity.

Chioma touched her weaves guiltily. Suddenly, she felt resentment and jealousy. How dare she?

How dare she turn up now? Where had she been all the while her Túndé had been running around, squiring the old woman everywhere, running errands for her? And now she'd turned up after all the hard work had been done! But then she remembered how she'd narrowly escaped going to prison for murder, and she shoved that voice aside and made the appropriate noises.

Jókötadé was telling Túndé about the Will; that Ìyá Àgbà had left him something, but Chioma wasn't listening. She was watching her husband. He had that puppy dog look on his face. That same look he had when he'd first met her...

*Hell no! I'm not praying against some strange woman!*

"Túndé, darling," she called to her husband in her sultriest voice, "I need you to help me fix some stew in the kitchen. You know you've spoilt me rotten... I'm sure aunty Jókötadé won't mind babysitting Àmòpé for a while."

Túndé's eyes widened, but he didn't protest as she dragged him out of Ìyá Àgbà's apartment.

## Àmòpé

As soon as her parents left the apartment Àmòpé and Jókötadé danced around the sitting room. Àmòpé was relieved that everything had worked out just as Ìyá Àgbà had promised.

"We fooled them Ìyá Àgbà!" She slumped on a chair, all sweaty from dancing around the apartment. "We fooled the Ajogun!"

Jókötadé slumped into the chair next to hers. "I'm no longer Ìyá Àgbà, I'm now Jókötadé. I told you child."

"It's not that I forgot; I never forget anything. It's just that last night was so real..." Àmòpé trailed off as the image of Ìyá Àgbà burning in the flames rose before her eyes.

Jókötadé left her chair and stooped in front of the now silent Àmòpé. "Now you understand why I told you not to watch me burn." Àmòpé nodded mutely. Jókötadé rose off her haunches and stretched out her hand to Àmòpé. "Come with me."

The two girls entered the bedroom. Lying on the bed was Ìyá Àgbà's body. "This is how I want you to remember me."

Jókötadé stepped into the alternate and changed into her original form of blazing yellow. They stepped back into reality.

"By the way, how did you make that Ìyá Àgbà," Àmòpé pointed at the bed, "since you're here with me?"

"It's about the mind child," Jókötadé responded in many voices. "People see what they want to see. Look carefully at the bed again."

Àmòpé saw it then, there was no Ìyá Àgbà on the bed, just a pile of pillows and bedclothes.

*Aníwùrà* (2022), *Lakiriboto Chronicles: A Brief History of Badly Behaved Women* (2018), *Eno's Story* (2010). Her speculative stories and creative non-fiction are housed in many literary journals. She is a researcher, who has written papers about African Feminisms and queerness in pre-colonial Yorùbá history. She runs an online Feminist and Queer ezine, *9jafeminista*. She writes queer bodies into traditional Yorùbá families pre-colonialism and during neo-colonialism.

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*Original paintings by Yémisí Aríbisálà*

