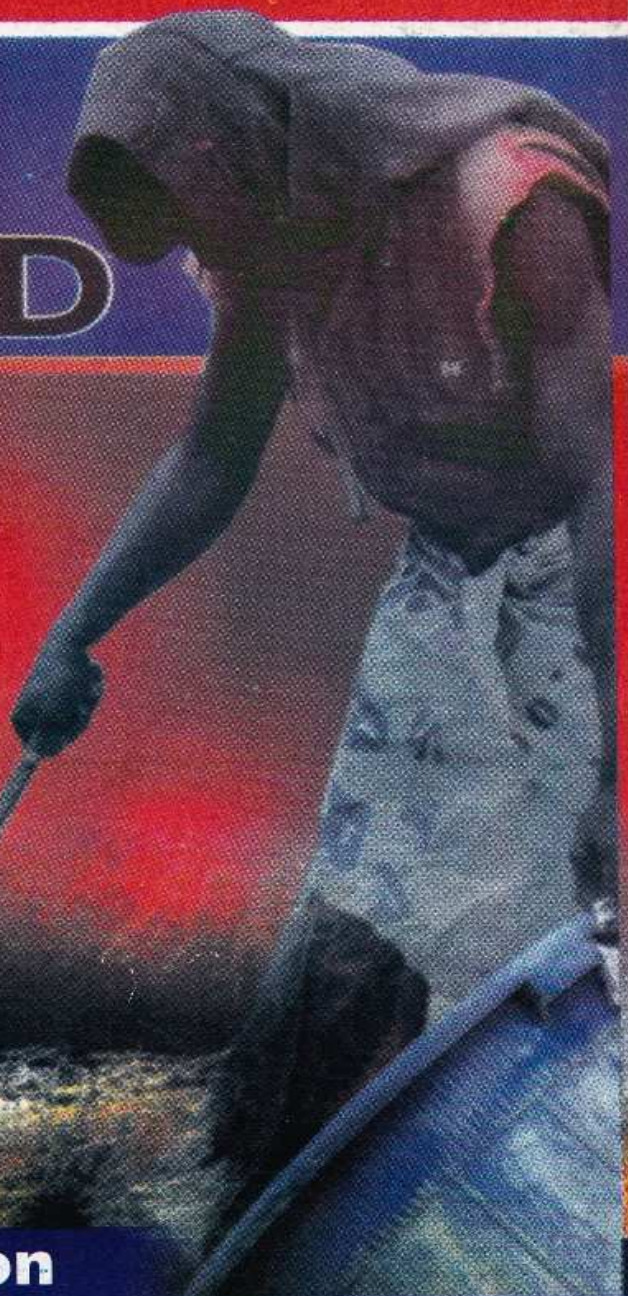


Son OF THE LAND



Effiong Johnson

SON

OF

THE LAND

EFFIONG JOHNSON



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DEDICATED
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and his work is a tribute to the land
and the people who live on it.
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DEDICATION

“Even a mad man has a friend.”

This is an Ibibio adage. How true this proved to be when our eyes met, mine and his on March 1985.

This work is dedicated to Peter, the reject, who has but become accepted by the land, and other Sons Of The Land.

Son of the land was first produced in 1986 by Theatre Volunteers, University of Cross River State, Uyo. Uwemedimo Atakpo was the privileged Director of the premiere production. Quite unfortunately, the cast list of the precious people who first played in that production was missing in the archives as at the time of going to press with this publication. Alphonsus Udoh's 2005 Directing Practical in the Little Play House, Theatre Arts Department, University of Uyo, has however lent the list of players as the latest cast to have played in *Son of the Land*.

Cast:

Ekpema	-	Ogechukwu Ebuchiem
Usua	-	Ese-Amadasun Efosa
Nneka	-	Nenaya Igwe
Arit	-	Ekaete Ekpo
Ima	-	Nse Robert
Udo	-	Victor Ekieno
Obong	-	Hope Ekiko
Ibom	-	Moses Abraham
Obot	-	Mary Obabori
Koko	-	Akan Johnson
Director	-	Alphonsus Udoh

Crew:

Stage Manager	-	Uduak Udom
Costume Designer	-	Ekaete Ibuot
Lighting/Sound Designer	-	Lilian Mba
Set Designer/Construction	-	Hope Ekiko/David Dem
Box Office Manager	-	Suzan Batubo

INTRODUCTION

Monday in January 1965, was a remarkable day in my life. It was my first day in school. St. Peter's African Church Mission School, Mbierebe Obio, was a big and popular school. It even had semi-boarding facilities for pupils who either came from distant villages, or those nearby whose parents preferred them to live in the compound. The air was full of expectations as it was uncertain to me. Then a bell rang, and pupils from all directions ran to stand on lines according to their classes. The headmaster, one Mr. Edet, was busy trying to arrange those of us who were finding the whole thing rather strange. Drums beat, "The day is bright it's bright and fair, oh happy day, the-day of joy..." rend the air. Everyone marched to the rhythm of the school band to the assembly hall where hymns were sung from "The Church Hymnary", then prayers, and announcements, before all went to their respective classes.

My class teacher, one Mr. Asukwo Ekong was very friendly. He just had to be to calm our nerves which at this time were visibly obvious. I was given a bench and a desk on the front row. We were three on a bench. My closest neighbour, who became my friend later that day was Peter.

Monday, March 1985, approximately twenty years after, an event in Uyo Circus (Now Ibom Connection), brought back in a splashing flash, the memory of the 1965 first day at school experience. On my way to work in the then University of Cross River State, I came face to face with a thoroughly mad man, Peter. That same Peter whom I shared the school bench with. The one who was my first friend in school. This was the mad man in Uyo circus causing a stir that Monday morning in March 1985. I drew near to the scene to catch a glimpse of what exactly was going on, behold a mad man with striking features! As we made contact with

our eyes, I immediately recognized him. He too instinctively recognized me in the crowd, despite his state. For a few minutes, the crowd which was watching the theatrics of his antics looked at both of us wondering what was going on.

I had not known before then that Peter had become mad. I could not have imagined Peter mad in my wildest dreams, either. I was shocked. My day was now gloomy and ruined. Life seemed cruel and absolutely clouded with unprecedented mystery. I just couldn't understand. I almost wept aloud.

Finally, I stroll-staggered to my office. My face wore an apparent unusualness which was outlandishly obvious for anyone who had known me to know that something was amiss. Dexter Lyndersay, the Arts Director for the Arts Theatre, my boss, was the first to ask me what the matter was. I narrated my shocking experience to him. His response was "Johnson, if you feel that much about it, write a play about it!" The Arts Theatre not really having much activity then, allowed me time to write a lot. In fact, right on my table there, was the manuscript of "A Jewel in the Flames". I was still working on it. But Dexter was insistent, "Write about him". I accepted the challenge and began my investigations that day. These are the results before your very eyes.

Son of the Land is therefore a true story. One that really touched my heart. It has been put in the drama genre for the experience to be played so that it could truly impact on those who watch it. The names of the characters are fictitious. But they are allegorical. This is deliberate such that, (especially to an Ibibio audience), it might conjure the dramatic essence on the spot, (even before the actual drama rolls on), for psychological immediacy.

Let me thank Dexter Lyndersay for the challenge and motivation

he gave me. I cannot forget Uwem Atakpo, the first person to direct the premiere production of *Son Of The Land* on the living stage Unicross Theatre, 1987. Let me heartily thank members of Theatre Volunteers, the team who were always ready for the service of humanity through theatre communication. Lastly, I most profoundly acknowledge all those I interviewed indirectly in my investigative bid to get to the roots of Peter's insanity. Thank you so much. May the tragic experience which Peter had be the very last in our generation.

Effiong Johnson
(June 1984)

EKPEMA:

(Opens the door DL gently and peeps) Please father, I will do it. I will go to the bush in the evening. I will give he goats their food. The sun is too hot now...

USUA:

(Advances furiously to the door) The sun is not too hot for you to eat a basin of garri. *(Ekpema bangs the door again. Usua grips the door handle and opens the door)*. Keep running, your hear? Child of doom. The greedy dog is normally cautioned by flies all around its ears. Run fast. My troubles with you will soon come to an end. The season of caring for somebody else's male dog is over. You better know that *(closes the door)*. Tell a boy early in the morning to enter the bush and fetch some herbs, just a little bundle will be enough for the goats. He wouldn't do it. Someone you are feeding many times a day. Someone you are clothing. But he wouldn't do what you asked him to do, yet he eats his own, any time he so wishes, while nobody hears a thing here because of the bleating of hungry goats. *(The daughters appear from the USL and Usua turns to them)*. And you wouldn't cover the soup pot, would you? You couldn't lock that kitchen door, either. You would rather leave everything for that son of the oil bean tree to do as he likes, eat as he likes. Listen to me, girls, everything here is bought with money. Maybe you don't give a thought to that, if anyone must eat, he should be justified to eat. If any man must remain a man in this world, he must work hard for it. Don't allow that accursed child to kick all of you about, having his way. I have been warning you, that wandering creature doesn't want to appreciate anything I have done for him and I'm not ready to keep wasting my salt any more on the porcupine's intestines. Never!

ARIT:

(Placating) It was his first food for the day, papa. He didn't even eat in the morning...

USUA:

Because he didn't eat in the morning he had to eat a basin of garri in the afternoon? Look at the size of garri I met him with. Which one is more economical, to have eaten a human quantity in the morning or an elephant's size in the afternoon...?

TMA:

He had just started eating when you came in, papa....

USUA:

That's what I'm saying. By the way, why should he eat at all when he hadn't done what I sent him to do? Why should he have the comfort of food in the midst of crying goats?

ARIT:

He said he would go to the bush in the evening.....

USUA:

Oh-oh, because those ones are animals, they can afford to stay without food even for days? What difference is there between my goats and him? After all, I started the flock with just two. A male and a female, and now they have tripled. Which should be more cared for?

ARIT:

Papa, a son is a son. Nothing should be compared with a son. No animal can possibly take the place of a son. Never!

IMA:

Exactly, papa, its very true. Calm yourself. You have just returned from the market and you have not even eaten any food yet. Ekpema is your son, and he is still your child.

USUA:

He is not my son.....

ARIT:

You are very angry, papa, don't speak again (takes his bag) We will bring your food. Don't trouble yourself about Ekpema. He will give the goats their food in the evening, he has been doing so all these days.

USUA:

He is not my son, and the sooner he realizes that, the better for all of us. No true son of mine can be widening my mouth to this extent every blessed day. Look at Uko, your brother, till he grew up here before he left for Lagos to work, he never gave me this kind of trouble. Or Iniobong; though still very young and now staying with my sister, there are no signs that he will ever be stubborn. Why should my life be cut short everyday by reason of Ekpema? I have not had any peace since he was born. It seems to me that our faces shouldn't have contact because they evoke horrors to one another. Well, I shall to out again but... *(Begins to go to the door DSL)*.

ARIT:

That's all right, papa, you can eat, then, when you come back. *(Light fades out)*.

(Light returns and the door DSL opens. Ekpema comes in thinking aloud.)

EKPEMA:

I am not his son, he said I am not his son. Then whose son am I? I have never known my mother. Who was she? Who was my mother? She would know my father. This man is fond of making this kind of statement, whenever there is trouble between us. Minor troubles for that matter and he would say these terrible things. Can it be true that I am not his son? But I grew up to know him as my father! He took me to school and registered me

as Ekpeme Usua Okon. God... I can't understand. If I had not been running away when he gets annoyed with me, by now, I'm sure, I would either have been killed by him or at least maimed. Is this how all fathers treat their sons? *(There is a knock, Ekpema is startled and confused. After a second thought he opens the door and Koko his friend comes in.)* Koko, my friend, welcome.

KOKO:

(Notices Ekpema's depressed and frustrated look): Why are you looking like this, Ekpema? *(Goes to him)*. Is everything all right with you?

EKPEMA:

"Everything", you ask, Koko? Sit down first, you have come at a good time. We have been friends from childhood and have shared many mixed moments together. The things that are happening to me are not mere food, water and shelter problems. They go far beyond that. They shake me from the roots, sometimes I sit down and wonder why I live at all.....

KOKO:

(Alarmed, gets up and goes to Ekpema): Don't speak like this, Ekpema. What problems are there without solutions? Let's join heads to together and tackle these problems, whatever they may be...

EKPEMA:

(Gets up and paces about): It is not that easy, Koko. Not every problem in this life has solutions. Some solutions can never be found for certain problems. And I think mine is one of such solution defying...

KOKO:

Don't speak of it, Ekpema, what has suddenly happened to you that has completely changed your outlook on life? We have been

friends for many years now. Good and trusted friends, I have never seen you in a depressed mood of this sort. What is the matter with you?

EKPEMA:

The matter with me is that I want to know who I am. Does that make sense to you, Koko? What I mean, Koko, is: whose child am I? Who is my father?

KOKO:

What are you talking about, Ekpema? Are you all right? Tell me, where are you now? I mean whose house are you right inside now? What is your name?

EKPEMA:

Not enough, Koko, just not enough, the answer to your questions wouldn't explain the much I desire to know. I am sure you would have felt the same way if the man you regarded as father aimed at killing you everyday when a little mistake on your part got him offended. And anybody can offend another person. None is the better for it, I'm sure you would wonder whether you were really his son if he always cursed you and called you "child of doom", "son of the oil bean tree" and other horrible names. I am convinced that if he said more than twice, that you were not his son, you would have started looking for where you came from.

KOKO:

(Surprised): Does your father do all these things, say all these things to you?

EKPEMA:

My father? Hm... if he were my father would he have been saying things as...as...as... accursed as these about me, knowing what consequences these things could bring to me? You see Koko, I have borne these things for many years now. I feel

that the time has come for me to begin to help myself.

KOKO:

(Shrugs): It is very strange. You know, Ekpema, I always suspected that you were not in good terms with your father.... There is such a big visible gap between you and him. Your father...

EKPEMA:

Please don't make me sad, Koko what is a father? When you say that somebody is a father, it should mean that he has children who enjoy him. Children whom the father caters for; cares for them, have their needs in his mind, helps and watches them grow up to become adults. But when a man always attempts to kill and to destroy some other person, who probably, accidentally, happens to live with him, when he is not interested at all in your well being and doesn't even care about your going to school, then he is not a father.

KOKO:

Is it because your father doesn't want you to go to school that you concluded that he is not interested in you? There are many fathers who don't happen to see many prospects in their children going to school. They tend to see that as a time-wasting effort and rather prefer them to learn some trade. Your father may be one of such parents.

EKPEMA:

You are wrong, Koko. Very wrong, the man I live with doesn't have any consideration for me at all. He doesn't plan anything for me except, maybe, death. We were in the same class, Koko. I was not so terribly bad at school, I never repeated any class throughout the six years in the primary school. And in the First School Leaving Certificate Examinations I Passed well. I told my father... Well, so I thought then... that I wanted to go to the

secondary school but he wouldn't even give me money for the entrance examination.

KOKO:

But you took the examination. You wrote the examination with us...

EKPEMA:

Yes I took the examination. I will tell you how I managed to do that. I stole some money from the house. I thought he would be encouraged to ask me to go to school if I passed that entrance examination even though he never knew where I got the money for it. When the results came out, I passed, and I was given a good school not very far away from home. I even preferred to be a day student just to win some favour from him, but he would never spend his kobo on me because I am a male dog according to him. And now look at you, Koko, we were mates before, but not I can't say that again because you are doing your final year in the secondary school.

KOKO:

I can't really understand, Ekpema. What does he want you to do? Stay at home as a slave?

EKPEMA:

Maybe so. What difference is there between me and a slave?

KOKO:

Forgive me for the choice of that word. Don't build on it, Ekpema.

EKPEMA:

No! let's face it, Koko, I am more of a slave here than a child. All the difficult tasks in the house are given to me. All the dirty things are packed to me to clean up. You can see a big difference between his true children and myself in everything. The clothes

they wear, the love they receive from him and so on. But not so with me. Sometimes I wonder whether it is because I had a different mother...

KOKO:

That is the question I have always wanted to ask you. What happened to your mother?

EKPEMA:

No one agreed to tell me what happen to her here. It was my uncle... Well, forgive me. I'm really confused... The uncle I mean here is the junior brother to the man I have been living with. He said that my mother died just after she gave birth to me. (He sobs).

KOKO:

Oh! No, Ekpema, don't cry, of what use are your tears now?

EKPEMA:

That was a long time ago. But I wish I had seen her even once before she died. Many times I have concluded that if she were alive I wouldn't be suffering like this. At least, I would have known who exactly my father is, or was. Oh, if mother were alive, I might have had an anchor...

KOKO:

That's all right, Ekpema. Wipe your tears, you can still become something in the world inspite of all these disappointments. You can come and stay with me.

EKPEMA:

(Moves away) No, Koko, I won't. I'm tired of staying in a place that is not my own. I'm tired of this world. You do not understand, Koko, I must know the truth about myself, my origin, whatever it takes. I cannot continue roaming like this without any real identity. If it was another man that caused my mother to bear me, if that man

is still alive, then I must discover him, otherwise I shall kill myself so that I can be free from all these troubles. If I stay with you now, what will happen when the school resumes and you go back to the boarding house? Shall I then come back here, or look for another home?

KOKO:

It must be very hard for you. Where do you start the search from?

EKPEMA:

I have made up my mind to leave this house but not before I have asked the man for the last time to tell me the truth about my birth. I am convinced that he knows about it. I will then leave the house before he kills me.

KOKO:

Be sure first about something before you leave the house. I'm thinking of how you will keep up; where you will eat and sleep during this searching period.

EKPEMA:

If I must find out who my father is, or even was, then I musn't remain here. I am determined. I started to be very stubborn only recently. I was forced into that. I had to become strong-headed as a last resort to force his mouth open for me to know the truth. But it doesn't seem to work. Instead it has almost resulted in attempts at taking my very life...

(The door DL opens and Usua enters, Ekpema gets up and attempts to escape through the door USL. Even Koko is frightened. Usua pursues Ekpema inside. There is commotion. Things are thrown at random and someone screams. Ekpema runs in, followed by usua with a machet. Koko is so frightened that he cannot move. Ekpema runs out of the house and shouts). You will tell me first who my father is before you kill me.

USUA:

(Goes to Koko menacingly): Tell that creature, if you know what he is that he should not step into this house again! A woman does not have two husbands. This is my house. Since both of us have now become equal, he should leave my house before one of us kills the other. *(Koko is terribly frightened)*. When the chicken grows up it goes feeding alone. I have done what I could for him these years. I did that because of his mother... Tell him to leave my house and find one for himself or go to his father. I am not ready to receive his troubles again. Tell him, if he values his life, he should avoid me and this house like a plague, because I will not hesitate in using this machet any time he misses his way to this place. Bastard thing! *(Usua begins to move away)*.

KOKO:

Please, Ete, forgive him. Do not drive him away from the house. Where do you want him to go to?

USUA:

His father. My contract with him is over, finished. When the plantain is ripe enough for eating, the stem is usually cut down to reach the plantain.

KOKO:

But who else is his father, Ete? We've always known him to be your son. He bears your name.

USUA:

So, what is there in a name? Of what significance is a name such as his? Ekpeme... even mad men have names. Does a name stop someone from being rich or poor, fathered or unfathered? Can a name prevent him from being the bastard that he is?

KOKO:

Ete, please! Was it his fault? Did he make himself a bastard? He was not there when the seed was planted.

USUA:

He is a bat. The animals have rejected him because he flies in the air. He can appeal to the birds maybe they can take pity on him. When an angry man brings out the water pot of his wife and breaks it outside, it means their affair as husband and wife is over. You wait... *(Goes inside and he is heard scattering things. He comes out again with an old broken box. In one hand he holds some clothes that belong to Ekpema. He drops the box hard on the floor and flings the clothes about).* Take these rags to him. They are his only belongings here. *(He kicks the box).* And this bird nest. *(A cockroach runs out when he kicks the box. He chases after it and finally crushes it).* These are the sort of creatures he shares his life with. *(Koko begins to pack the clothes into the box, as he carries the box to the door, the light fades out).*

SITUATION TWO

Light comes up gently on Usua, hurriedly eating. He coughs. Takes some water and coughs again. He calls on Ima.

USUA:

Ima Usua! *(Ima answers from the room)* Come our here! *(Ima appears)* Bring me some more water. Call your sister for me. *(Keeps on eating till Ima reappears with a cup of water, followed by Arit).* Sit down there *(He points to the bench).*

ARIT:

Papa, have you noticed that Ekpema did not sleep in this house yesterday?

USUA:

He could sleep wherever he wanted. Never mind that wandering soul. That's why I called you out. You had not returned from the stream yesterday when he almost fought me here demanding to know who his father is. *(He washes his hand, Ima begins to clear the table).*

IMA:

Fought you, papa?

ARIT:

You mean Ekpema...

USUA:

Is it strange to you? There is nothing that creature wouldn't do. It was not surprising to me. You can appreciate why I told him to leave my house...

IMA:

You did, papa? Oh no, papa...

USUA:

Why not! Why shouldn't I do it? I told him to leave my house. I threw out all his rags with that cockroach box of his. Haven't you really been inside his room today? You would have seen the place swept clean. We could not continue to live together else one of us would have killed the other. Of course you, Ima, wouldn't want me to die now having not given you out to your proposed husband. That's why I called you out to instruct you before I leave for the Traders Meeting.

IMA:

But papa, we have lived together with him as sisters since we were born. He has been like our only brother, protecting and helping us, especially since Uko went to work in Lagos. How are we going to live without him?

USUA:

Shut up your mouth, Ima! He is not a brother to you. He might have helped you sometimes but that is something any other male servant would have done. He is another man's child and there is no reason why I should continue to keep him and care for him when his father is there, alive and healthy.

IMA:

Who is his father, papa?

ARIT:

Shut up your mouth, Ima! Papa has already told you to shut up your mouth...

IMA:

But papa has not told us before who Ekpema's father is...

USUA:

You will know soon, maybe. But right now I am handing over this

house to the two of you. I will return late in the evening. If that son of perdition comes here, don't let him step into my house, not to talk of giving him my food. Do you hear me? I do not see why the two of you cannot defeat him if he starts any trouble with you. Well, if the worst happens, you can alert the neighbours. Arit, get me my bag from the room. Ima, you clear this table the way you were about doing, and stop looking like that. I've told you that Ekpema is not your brother. He doesn't even come from this village... (*Arit returns with the bag*).

IMA:

If he is not, why did he stay with us for all these years? By what relationship did he live with us for such a long time? I am sure he wasn't treated like a servant till just two years ago when you said we should be giving him all our dirty clothes to wash for us. I was thinking you were preparing him for the hard life every man faces... I'm sorry, papa, but I cannot really understand it. If he is not my brother how come he is bearing the name Ekpema Usua, after your name?

USUA:

Ima, pack these things out of here in case somebody walks in. Make sure you do exactly what I told you to do if that wanderer staggers back here. (*He goes furiously to collect his bag from Arit, making his way to the exit door*). And don't forget to keep this door closed. (*He exits*).

ARIT:

Can't you keep this your sharp mouth closed sometimes? Can't you be satisfied with a simple explanation without demanding for detailed analysis?

IMA:

Why shouldn't a thing of this sort be carefully explained for my

understanding? Somebody you grew up with? Somebody everyone knows as your brother because you share the same father in the school register? Suddenly you are made to believe that he is some other person's son? Some other person in another village?... It sounds like a dream to me. I can't believe it.

ARIT:

Well, you better believe it, because it is true. There is no other explanation. Ekpema is not our brother. His mother....

IMA:

Who was his mother?

ARIT:

She died. Our father's wife. She died the very same day Ekpema was born. You were very young then. His mother carried his pregnancy into our father's house.

IMA:

And he accepted her?

ARIT:

He loved her. But there was trouble all the same. According to him the issue was decided by the Chiefs in the Village Council. He was proved to be responsible for the pregnancy.

IMA:

How?

ARIT:

Well the wife said he was, and not the other man.

IMA:

Who?

ARIT:

I don't know. Papa wouldn't say it. Maybe he mentioned it to Udo. He tells him everything. You see, that other man that he had trouble with is the person papa believes to be Ekpema's father, even though the village council proved the case against that man.

IMA:

I do not understand. Arit. Papa accepted the pregnant woman. Accepted the pregnancy as being his but believes the other man, whoever he is, is Ekpema's father? There is no sense in that at all.

ARIT:

Well, maybe papa sees a lot of sense in it, otherwise he wouldn't have started any trouble with Ekpema. No one will refuse a child. No one will deny that his own son is his. It can be unbearable to bring up somebody you are very sure is not your direct blood. That explains the reason papa has thrown Ekpema out.

IMA:

But how is he sure? What proof is there? There is no sense in all this, Arit, maybe papa is mad....

ARIT:

What are you saying about your father, Ima? Mad? May God forgive you. Does he look like one whose head is off?

IMA:

Doesn't he? Doesn't papa behave just like one big mad bull all around this house?

ARIT:

Shut up your mouth? Who gave you definite instructions on what to do just a little while ago before he went to the Traders Meeting? Did he sound like someone who is mad? Did he not wear his clothes properly?

IMA:

Maybe you can explain this to me. How could papa accept being responsible for Ekpema's mother's pregnancy then, and now wouldn't accept Ekpema as his child? If he was not sure he was the man who did it, why didn't he reject and deny it then?

ARIT:

He loved the woman. He just liked her. She was a very fair woman, tall and beautiful. And papa didn't fully recover from the shock of our mother's death when this other woman, Ekpema's mother appeared. If he did not accept the pregnancy, he would have missed the woman. Has that answered your question? She was a good woman, though, very good to us. In fact, I still remember very well how she used to care for you.

IMA:

(Shocked): For me?

ARIT:

Yes, you. Our mother left you when you were only one year old. She became a mother to us, especially to you. I remember her very well but she died when Ekpema was born. Poor woman.

IMA:

(Touched, very passionately): Poor woman! How I wish she lived to see us now. *(The goats start to bleat)* There they are again. They have finished the herbs I gave them yesterday. Today those greedy throats of theirs will dry up and crack because I am not going to the bush again.

ARIT:

I will do it today so that we all can sleep peacefully. In fact let me go now so that I can return in time to go to the market. Take care of the house. Don't forget what papa said.

IMA:

I won't *(Arit leaves for the inner room. In a moment, she is back with a matchet)*. Don't be too long. Soon the market will be full and good things are normally rushed. The late-goer doesn't return from the market with presentable items in the basket. *(Arit Leaves)*..... God knows I cannot understand.... *(Goes to close the door)* what is the matter with some men? I think men are the cause of all the trouble in this world. Imagine my father, being so... so... blinded by... love, that, he married a pregnant woman. But Arit said the woman agreed that papa was the one who made her pregnant, and papa even accepted it in the Village Council. Now Ekpema is no more a son because his mother, whom papa so loved, is dead. I cannot understand it. *(She hears some movement within the outer room)* what is that? Has one of the goats come out from their pen? Wait a minute. *(She goes to check up. As she gently opens the door USL she becomes shocked at seeing Ekpema.)* Ekpema, what are you doing here? How did you get in here? *(Ekpema sneaks into the acting area. Gestures to Ima to be quiet)* How did you get in here? You can talk, I'm the only one at home. Papa has gone to the Trader's meeting and Arit has just gone to find food for the goats.

EKPEMA:

Ima, you and I have been friends since our childhood. We have helped one another before. I have helped you. Don't you remember the many times your father sent me to bring money, clothes and even food to you when you were in the High School? I didn't refuse it even though we were classmates and you were sent to school while I wasn't... Please give me some food. I have not eaten since yesterday. *(Ima looks at him with compassion and begins to cry)*. Ima, what have I done to you? I only begged for some food. If the kitchen wasn't locked, I would have stolen some and sneaked back into the bush without anyone seeing me...

IMA:

It's not that, Ekpema.

EKPEMA:

What is it then, Ima?

IMA:

(Wipes her eyes): I will get you food. *(Rushes out of the room. Meanwhile, Ekpema paces with fright about the room. He is alarmed by every little sound he hears. Ima returns with food for Ekpema).* Take and eat. If you want more, I will bring it for you. Eat. You are safe. No one will see you here. But how did you come in here?

EKPEMA:

(Starting to eat): Through the bush path behind the house. I crossed the little bit of bush behind there to get to the house. Arit sometimes uses that bush path.

IMA:

I am sorry, Ekpema, that you are suffering like this. I don't know how I can help you.

EKPEMA:

Don't be sorry for me, Ima, you did not drive me out of the house, did you? Or, was it because of you I was sent away? Don't be sorry for me. The man said I am not his son. And I believe I'm not.

IMA:

You believe?

EKPEMA:

Yes, I do. If I were a son, I wouldn't have been treated like this. Even slaves, I'm sure, are not treated the way I have been treated here. You know it yourself, Ima. I believe that I am not his son. If I were, I would have been sent to school. Or I would have been asked to learn a trade; any trade. I have decided to look for my

father. If he is alive the way I have been made to know...

IMA:

You have? By whom?

EKPEMA:

Your father, of course. He suggested that to Koko yesterday.

IMA:

Koko? When?

EKPEMA:

Yes, Koko yesterday. He was here when I was thrown out. If my father is alive, I will certainly discover him. I think I am making some progress already. *(Coughs badly. Ima rushes out for water for him.)* Thank you, Ima. You have been so kind. Thank you for the food. I must rush out of here quickly before your father or even Arit returns to see me. *(Ima holds out a key).*

IMA:

I promise to be helping you. Take one of the keys to the kitchen. Go in there whenever you are hungry.

EKPEMA:

No, Ima, I won't. Thank you. Keep the key...

IMA:

Please Ekpema, I want to help. Have the key. Where else will you eat from? You don't have any money... That reminds me. Wait for me. *(She rushes into USL and comes out quickly with some money)* Have this little amount for groundnut. It is my money; part of what is left of my pocket money. Take the key. *(Ekpema collects it at last).* Come in here anytime and take some food. I will make sure there is always a remnant in the pot. Come in anytime you are hungry be it in the middle of the night.

EKPEMA:

When I leave here, I shall go to your uncle. I must tell him what your father has done to me. By the way, when do you think your father is coming back?

IMA:

He said late in the evening. Why?

EKPEMA:

In case your uncle desires to see him.

IMA:

Please Ekpema, be careful with yourself. I don't seem to have any better thing to say...

EKPEMA:

(Feigns a smile): No, don't worry. You have tried so much for me. Don't you worry, this is my fate and I must face it alone. *(Just then the goats bleat hungrily and a voice speaks to them. Ekpema is startled and confused. He doesn't seem to know where to escape to. But immediately Ima points him to the door DL. He rushes there, opens it and jumps out).*

IMA:

Arit... Arit... Is that you, Arit? *(Begins to pack the plates.)*

ARIT:

(Outside) Yes, I'm the one, I came back early so that I wouldn't be too late for the market.

IMA:

I see. But where did you come in from?

ARIT:

(Outside) The bush path. From the bush path behind the house.

(She appears).

IMA:

Welcome, I was eating out here...

ARIT:

Eating?

IMA:

Why not? I was hungry so I took some food *(She packs the plates and makes like she wants to leave for the kitchen)*

ARIT:

(Holding a basket in hand) I do not feel comfortable at all. The grasses that touched my skin in the bush are making me itch all over. I should have had a bath but I suppose I would have been very late for the market...

IMA:

When you come back then. Should I warm water and keep for you?

ARIT:

Very good, Ima Obong. Thank you. I shan't be long in the market. I must return in time for us to start preparing food before papa comes back from his meeting.

IMA:

I will get the firewood ready and the cooking pots. Don't forget to take the knives today for sharpening. They had all become blunt, remember? *(Arits goes for the knives and re-appears).*

ARIT:

They are in the basket.

(She leaves while Ima goes inside).

SITUATION THREE

Evening. Usua returns from the meeting. He looks tired and hungry. Knocks and knocks again before Ima comes out from the door USL to open it for him.

IMA:
Welcome, Papa, what kind of meeting kept you out for so long? We had thought you would come back before this time.

USUA:
Take my bag in. *(She collects it)* Heat water for me. I'm so tired...

IMA:
Oh, papa... *(Begins to go)*

USUA:
It was a hectic meeting. *(Ima turns)* Ima Obong forget about the water. Get me some food first. By the way, where is your sister?

IMA:
In the kitchen, Papa.

USUA:
Drop the bag and look close to the edge of my bed, you will see a bottle of "akai-kai" bring it for me. The feeling is just proper for it. Find your sister and get me something to eat. I'm dying, since morning.. eh....

IMA:
Yes, Papa, *(Goes in hurriedly)*.

USUA:
(Impatiently sits down on the bamboo chair and yawns with

exhaustion): Ima, can't you find the "akai-kai" near my bed?

IMA:
(Rushes out with the bottle): Here it is, papa. I went in to inform Arit that you were back.

USUA:
And the food?

IMA:
She is bringing it.

USUA:
What happened when I was away.

IMA:
Nothing, papa.

USUA:
Nobody came to look for me?

IMA:
None, papa. Or... None...

USUA:
None? Are you sure?

IMA:
Quite sure, papa. Nobody came here when you were out.

USUA:
(Suspiciously): You haven't seen Ekpema today?

IMA:
No, papa. Nobody seems to have any idea of his whereabouts.

USUA:

Did you go around asking people for his whereabouts, Ima? That shouldn't be your concern. He can go anywhere...

IMA:

I will see what Arit is doing... *(She leaves. Usua opens the bottle and looks out for his daughters in expectation of food but sees neither of them. He speaks loudly so that they should hear).*

USUA:

It seems you women do not realize how hungry I am. *(He pours himself a quantity of "akai-kai")* Imagine the Treasurer of the Traders' Union claiming that the boat he traveled with was capsized with the Union's money on his way to Calabar. Fifty thousand five hundred naira, given to him for some items for the Union's Co-operative Store, emptied into Oron River... We cannot accept that. I, Usua Okon Ita, cannot accept such a cheap trick. Why did he take the engine-boat when there were other safer vessels? Or, if he was actually drowned, why didn't he die along with the money?... *(Arit and Ima appear with food and water in a small basin).*

ARIT:

Papa... welcome. Don't quarrel please, your food is ready. It's "abak" soup, your favourite.

USUA:

It's not food I'm quarrelling about, Arit Mma. It's our long meeting of today.

ARIT:

That's all right, papa. You are back home now *(He goes to eat)*

IMA:

What happened at the meeting, papa?

USUA:

(Still eating) The Treasurer, my dear. Couldn't account for the Union's Fifty thousand five hundred naira *(Picks up a piece of meat to eat).*

IMA:

That is serious, papa.

USUA:

Very serious, my daughter. And we have ordered him to bring the money in two weeks or we shall hand him over to the police. We are not children to believe such story...

Oh, Arit mma, this soup testes good; brings back the memory of my old grandmother. *(A goat screams)* Go and see what's the matter with the goat. *(Ima rushes out of the door USL)* Didn't you find some food for them?

ARIT:

I did that before I went to the market. *(Offstage, Ima uses a stick to beat the stubborn goat. They are heard screaming more wildly),* Ima, what is the matter with the goat?

IMA:

(Re-appearing): That stubborn he-goat. Wouldn't let other eat with it.

ARIT:

And you beat it...

IMA:

Why not? The stubborn, greedy thing.

USUA:

Any day one of you kills one of my goats, you will pay me the complete worth of it, or a goat for a goat.

IMA:

And what happens if one of them kills another? How much will it pay?

USUA:

The mother hen's foot, no matter how heavy, cannot kill her

chicken... Is my water ready now?

IMA:
Which water?

USUA:
For my bath...

IMA:
But you told me to forget about it, papa...

USUA:
How can I sleep tonight without washing myself?

IMA:
All right, papa. I will heat water for you. But you really told me to forget about it *(She goes to heat water)*.

USUA:
This your sister... She is a difficult woman. You don't joke with her. I pity the man who is going to marry her...

ARIT:
There is no fear. The man is equal to the task. He is a strong man himself. *(Someone knocks at the door DSL. Usua washes his hand, then Arit immediately clears everything and leaves, while Usua goes to open the door)*.

USUA:
Ah, Udo, my brother. What is the matter at this hour of the day?

UDO:
It is the best time to get you in the house, isn't it? You attended the Traders' meeting, didn't you? And you have probably just come back...

USUA:
I attended the meeting, but how did you know about all these?

UDO:
Never mind about that. I have come for something more serious...

USUA:
What is it? Sit down.

UDO:
I won't... How could you do this, Usua?

USUA:
What?

UDO:
You don't know? You can't remember the terrible thing you have just done?

USUA:
What are you talking about, Udo? Don't get me frightened this night. Come out clearly and tell me this "terrible thing".

UDO:
(Looks at him for a while): All right. *(Calls outside)* Ekpema! Ekpema, come inside and stop fearing anybody. No one can kill you while I am here. *(Turns to Usua)*. Do you now understand what I was talking about?

USUA:
Is that why you are here? *(Arit and Ima emerge from the door USL)*

UDO:
Why not? Who has ever heard of a thing as wicked as this?

USUA:

Haven't you? Are you really living in this village? What of Etukudo Effiong, just a few weeks ago, who left the home of his birth for a new home in this same village because he discovered that he was in the wrong place? That Effiong was not his father? Where were you when Etukudo's mother accepted the choice of her son's father as a fact and the Chief of this village officially sent his messenger to announce Etukudo's change of home? Where were you?

UDO:

Is that why you have done this wicked thing to your son? What is the matter with you, Usua? How can you possibly drive your son away from the house with such... such... stupid claims?

USUA:

He is not my son. That's all

UDO:

He is not your son? Don't say it again, lest the whole village, the living and the dead, declare you mad. Who is not your son?

USUA:

Ekpema. Ekpema is not my son. Take it from me.

UDO:

Take what from you? This terrible madness? Listen to me, my brother. A man in his correct head does not burn his own house. And I think this is exactly what you are trying to do. How can you be tempted this far by a little anger?

USUA:

I have borne it these many years.

UDO:

Borne what? Is this not the same child during his mother's

pregnancy you wrestled with Ibom? Is this not that child whose mother, before her death, had mentioned you, Usua, as being responsible for her pregnancy? And you accepted it, didn't you? Before the Chief of this village and many others. If Ekpema is now not your son, how can you explain all those actions you took, with me as your supporter, before his birth. My brother, do not punish this motherless child again. He has already suffered enough in his little life. Don't make the dead frown at you...

USUA:

I don't care how much they frown. I am not afraid, because I know that I am doing the right thing. Children are gifts from God. That I know. I will not continue in this pain...

UDO:

What pain, Usua? Does this boy cost you half of what your other children have cost you? Does he eat more than all of them? Even if he ate more than others in the house, doesn't he do the bulk of the work in this house? I have seen what this boy does in this house the few times I have come in here. He is the one that goes to the market, the farm; feeds the goats, washes all the dirty clothes in the house and does all the cooking. Even your daughters there, do practically nothing in this house. They're always busy plaiting their hair, changing clothes as they like because they have got a free "washman" in the house. Tell me, what pain has this boy caused you that is so unbearable to the extent that you disowned him and threw him out of the house?

USUA:

(Getting very annoyed): The pain of rearing somebody else's son. Isn't that an unpleasant experience for twenty years.?

UDO:

Don't say it again! Somebody else's son? Doesn't this child

reasonably resemble you in height and complexion? How can you prove that he is not your son? I know that it is only the child's mother who can really say who a child's father is. Our women here know this to be true. Are you mocking at his motherless state? I am sure his mother would have said it again and again that you, Usua, are his father, like she had said it once in the Village Council with many witnesses, including *myself*. Take your son, my brother. Who else do you want him to choose as father now? How do you want him to go about searching for one without a mother's guidance? I know he is your son. I can swear that...

USUA:

Don't swear for me. You do not know me. Do not swear for anybody in this world. People are dangerous. Very difficult to understand. Do not swear even for your wife. Only the ceiling of the house and the sky can swear for her because they see her always, inside and outside. Udo, my brother, I know that you love me. Our parents had just the two of us and death has been merciful to us for many years now... Take what I am telling you. Millions of people are crying daily for just one son, and do you think a man who had been generously given one by God can out of mere anger throw him out of his house? Ekpema is not mine...

EKPEMA:

Who is my father? Please help me to get to him.

UDO:

Ekpema, shut up your mouth, you have no other father apart from that man standing there. It is only your mother who can say who your father is, and she had said that before she died. And I heard her declare so before she died.

USUA:

She had said that to me before she died? No.

UDO:

You lie, my brother. Do not disgrace yourself with this cheap behaviour before your children.

USUA:

She confessed the truth to me, about Ekpema.

UDO:

No. I will not accept it. I was a witness to her confessional. I heard, and still remember, what confessions she made.

USUA:

You do not know, my brother. I loved that woman and she loved me too. We wanted ourselves. And you know our traditions well. Whoever had the pregnancy would have the woman. And we wanted ourselves, so we... we...

UDO:

You did what?

USUA:

What crime is too big for love to hide? What secret can love not keep? Udo, my brother, do people not prepare themselves, at least the words they would utter, before they go to the court? If you must have a good thing in this world, do you not work hard for it? That was the situation, my brother. We did it together. We planned the whole story she told at the Village Council, because she wanted me and I wanted her badly. Can't you believe me? Ekpema is another man's child.

UDO:

I can't... because it seems to me that these are after thoughts and well planned stories to cover your present infamous action. How can another man be the father to Ekpema?

and Udo take their places to replay the scene at the Village Council, twenty years ago. Others leave the stage. The light meets Nneka standing and answering questions from the Chief).

OBONG:

When did this happen?

NNEKA:

(Slightly embarrassed): Six months ago.

OBONG:

Eh-eh... How many times did he... love you?

NNEKA:

Please, my Chief...

IBOM:

(Gets up desperately): Three times! Three good times within that same week...

OBONG:

Be quiet, stranger! We have heard from you. And Usua, how many times did he meet you, woman?

NNEKA:

Two times, my Chief

USUA:

Two times only? We have met many times, Nneka

NNEKA:

No., we are not talking about those times. I mean, six months ago...

OBONG:

Which? Were there other times he loved you?

NNEKA:

Yes, my Chief. But that was after I hadn't seen my flower.

OBONG:

All right. Now tell us, woman, which of these two men who loved you, is the owner of the seed inside your womb?

NNEKA:

(Points to Usua): That one there! Usua Okon Ita!

IBOM:

Impossible. It is not true. When I met you, you told me that you hadn't known any other man before me.

NNEKA:

(Turns to Ibom with contempt): And you believe me? Ha ha: Well, how did you see me then? Like someone who never met any other man before you? Well Ibom, women always say such things to men...

OBONG:

That one there, you mean? How? Why is he the one? How do you know?

NNEKA:

It is always easy to know who the man is, in these things, my Chief. Even when there are many people a woman meets before she becomes pregnant, she can always know who the father of her child is. We can always count the days to know who is the man.

OBONG:

How do you know that Usua Okon Ita is that man and not Ibom?

NNEKA:

They met me at different times, Obong. One before the other. Ibom

met me during the time of my flower and our women here know that a woman cannot have any child formed in her womb at such times.

IBOM:

No. Chief, our elders, this woman is not telling the truth.

USUA:

Why do you say that? She is mine. And that child mine also.

IBOM:

She didn't tell me so on those times. I met her three times. Three times I said and there was no sign that she was er... er...

NNEKA:

You met me three times, I admit. They all happened one after the other, on the three days I was weeding in my father's farm. Wasn't it so? On the last day we met I saw my flower for that month. It was after that Usua met me and I did not see my flower again till now. Who do you think should be the father of the child inside here? (*Touches her fat tommy*). Well, I am his wife already.

OBONG:

You have spoken well, woman. A man who sees his shadow in the day does not ask whether the sun is shining. My duty is to be sure, when I see the proof, that truth is done in any case I handle. Ibom, what this woman has said today has removed all the doubts surrounding the parenthood of the child in her womb. As you might have been told before this case came up, Usua has done everything a man normally does, to marry the woman there, including paying her dowry to her parents. If the affairs you had with her were done after she had been customarily given to Usua you would have been sued for adultery, and asked to pay some huge fine for it. As it is, you would not be required to do that. However, some fees in keeping with the tradition of our Council

will be collected from you as the loser of the case brought to the traditional council.

IBOM:

Obong, Ibom is a man of ancient wisdom. He is one who cannot weep for a man like himself. I know the truth about this matter. Even though your decision does not favour me, I will pay the charges your Council normally takes from unfortunate people like us. But it shall not be long, we shall all know that she lied in this Council so that she could go to the place she feels money and food abound. She will regret it like every other person who has ever been mischievous with Ibom. What is my fee?

OBONG:

Ibom, he warned that the tail of the dog will stand up erect when angered. This Council does not prefer wrong when right is clearly seen. Be careful with your words and threats. The scorpion does not sting the air, but the careless foot that rests on it.

IBOM:

What is my fee?

OBONG:

A cock. A good healthy cock, a calabash of palm wine, a bottle of "akai-kai", five tubers of yam and one thousand naira.

IBOM:

I did not come with them. Let me go home and look for your demands, then I'll return with them.

OBONG:

A hunter does not leave behind his gun when going to the bush.

IBOM:

I will come back, please. A hunter keeps his gun behind when

visiting his in-laws.

OBONG:

Everything finishes here, today. What can money not buy? If you didn't come with the items, bring out the money equivalent for their worth.

IBOM:

How much?

OBONG:

Our Council accepts five thousand naira.

IBOM:

(Puts his hand into his pocket in annoyance, and pulls out some money, counts five thousand naira and slams it on the table). Take your fee. I will go back empty handed. But the seed is mine and it will look for me someday; though we shall not all be alive to see that time, maybe. Come Obot, let us go away. I shall return here, some other time, to take what is mine. *(Obot gets up, shakes his head and follows him. The Chief and Councillors exit and the extra bench is removed. The scene returns to the one before the flashback).* That was what happened, son. She knew you were mine but she chose to enjoy life with that man there so that she would eat a lot of stockfish. Greedy woman. Let us go, son. The night might be pregnant with evils, but your father is not barren of the weapons to ward off evil spirits. *(Takes Ekpema's hand and they begin to move to the door.)*

UDO:

Ekpema! Ekpema, don't follow him. He is not... Usua my brother, what have you done? Ekpema! Ekpema! *(Light fades reluctantly out.)*

(It is early in the morning. A dog barks angrily in the distance, then a cock crows... There is an angry knock at the door DSL but

nobody seems to have heard it. Knocking is repeated violently and, from the door USR., Usua appears, rubs his eyes, yawns and staggers to the door. Just then, the knocking is hammered again).

USUA:

I can refuse to open this door for whoever that is. No one assisted me in building this house after all... *(There is another knock which is accompanied by a command from Obong).*

OBONG:

Usua Okon Ita, open this door before I smash it up for you!

USUA:

And what are you that cannot realize that you are in somebody's house, and early in the morning for that matter?

OBONG:

I will pardon you for your loose mouth because you do not know the face behind the mask. Open this door for Obong...

USUA:

Ah, Obong... *(He opens the door hurriedly)* I did not know, my Chief... Please, I did not know it was you.

OBONG:

(Enters with "akpin" or palm shoot): It is a shame Usua Okon that you should behave like a goat when it was the leopard that bore you. I am surprised at you. How can you sleep like a woman...? I have come because of what your brother has just told me. I don't know why he is not here now. Your son, Ekpema, is a true son of the land. No one has any right to sell him out to another land. *(Udo enters).* Good, you are here when I've only just begun. I said that Ekpema is not a slave and should not be sold to another land.

USUA:

He is not a slave, agreed, but he is not my son all the same. Why

can't you understand this, Udo, even when you heard everything...

UDO:

Everything...?

OBONG:

What is everything, when the parenthood of Ekpema has long been known before his birth. When even in the highest Council we have, you admitted your shame and accepted that woman and her unborn child as yours? Don't you realize that God, recognizes and approves the decision taken in that Council as final? I have come when this matter is still very, very hot. Planting is always done before the first rain by every good farmer. We want our son back!

USUA:

He is not my son. I will say it anywhere that he is not...

OBONG:

Shut up your mouth before I curse you in the name of "Akpasima".

USUA:

You can do what you like, Obong, but I am telling the truth.

OBONG:

There is only one truth. One truth in every case; and you had told it twenty years ago before the very shrine of Akpasima with all of us as witnesses...

USUA:

I lied, Obong. It wasn't true... what she said...

OBONG:

You lie now because what she said in the Council was the truth.

And don't forget that the dead closes the eyes and not the ears.

USUA:

It is true, I lied. I did everything to have her as my wife. We planned it, Obong. Can't you really understand, my brother? We planned it...

OBONG:

And you succeeded, didn't you? You must live with what you got, no matter the ways you adopted in getting it... Udo, you will take this "akpin" to Ibom. He is this time summoned to answer why he should disregard the decision of our Council. You cannot uncover the face of the masquerade in public and go unpunished. Tell him that the sooner he appears in our Council with our son, the better for him. The distance to his house in the next village is not far, but take your bicycle so that you can come back and meet me here. *(Udo collects the "akpin" from Obong and leaves.)*

USUA:

All this is not necessary, Obong. His mother knew he was not mine and told me so.

OBONG:

You cannot say whose face a child resembles at birth until he grows up... *(sits)*.

USUA:

Ekpema can never look like me because he is not mine.

OBONG:

He is ours. A son is not a child to his parents alone. If it were so, you wouldn't have called us twenty years ago to fight for his parenthood. He is our son. He belongs to the village. The land as a whole owns him. You may not see his worth now because he is till a child. But soon a son will prove his worth, bringing in more people to add to our number, our pride and heritage.

USUA:

(Frustrated): I have said everything, done everything; but you will not believe me. I think I will swear in the shrine of Akpasima...

OBONG:

(Gets up): You will not. No man plays with the tail of the python without getting stung. We will not allow you. Change this discussion... And give your Chief something to wet his throat. Anger has robbed you of your known kindness. Do not continue in it. Go into the room. *(Usua stares at Obong confusedly. Moves to the door USR, turns back, then moves on a second thought, to the room. He tarries there for some time).* Usua Okon Ita! Do you have kolanuts in this house? *(Removes his snuff box strikes it and opens. Take some into his nostrils and moans.)* Arrh! Akpan Udosen Ekpa, the old hand that has mastered the stone, I will always give you my five because talents are not bought in the market but gifted by the Creator. This one has the stuff for old men... Arrh! Usua Okon! Usua Okon Ita!... If you do not have drinks in the house, come out. A woman does not kill herself when food is finished in her pots, she goes to the market for some. *(Just then Arit comes out with a bottle of "akai-kai and a small glass).*

ARIT:

Welcome to our house, our Chief. Here is your drink *(she places the drink and the glass on the table in front of Obong).* Papa said his kola-nuts finished yesterday.

OBONG:

Where is he?

ARIT:

He went to the latrine. Complained of belly-ache during the

night.

OBONG:

Belly-ache? What did he eat? *(The goats start to bleat).*

ARIT:

There, they have started again. And the whole night they didn't allow us to sleep in peace. Yet, I gave them their food, a big bundle of herbs which is still there for them...

OBONG:

(Takes the bottle and pours himself a glass full of "akai-kai"). Still there for them, er?

ARIT:

Yes. They haven't gone half way through with it yet.

OBONG:

(Drinks): Then that is not their problem.

ARIT:

What, Chief?

OBONG:

Food. Food is not their problem. They need a male. A strong male which will keep them quiet.

ARIT:

But we have a bearded be-goat there; very stubborn.

OBONG:

How many females?

ARIT:

Five. *(The goats bleat again.)*

OBONG:

And only one male, isn't it? Is that fair? That is why you won't sleep at night. Give them two more males to assist the bearded one. Perhaps the bearded one is already too old to comfort them. That is what they need. *(Drinks again.)* It is like us, my daughter. The time comes when a man must be a man. Know who he is and start his life. Or like the woman when she needs a man. You know that food doesn't satisfy her then...

ARIT:

(Embarrassed): I understand Chief, Papa will look for the males for them... *(The door DSL opens, Udo enters with torn clothes)* What is that, Uncle?

OBONG:

(Gets up in amazement): Udo Okon Ita, what happened to you? *(Usua reappears from the door USR).*

UDO:

Ibom. I don't know what he sprayed on me... Something like powder. I got very confused and I think I lost my senses. That was when he descended on me, collected the palm shoot from me and thrashed me with it... many times. Oh, look at me...

OBONG:

And you couldn't run?

UDO:

I couldn't see my way. I was almost blinded. They beat me

OBONG:

They?

UDO:

Yes. More than one hand beat me and tore my clothes. When they had fully beaten me, they dragged me and my bicycle to the road. That was when I knew myself.

OBONG:

You mean Ibom and Ekpema beat you up?

UDO:

I saw Ibom because I spoke with him before he sprayed the charm on me. I don't know whether Ekpema joined him in beating me. I wouldn't think so. But I was beaten my many hands.

OBONG:

But why?

UDO:

He said we should leave him and his son alone. I told him he had no son, it was then he charmed me and beat me up. He said that was what I needed.

OBONG:

He called Ekpema his son? That wicked thing that every intelligent woman refuses to marry, called our son his and beat you up? He shall pay for all his insults.

UDO:

He has vowed to deal with anybody who wouldn't mind his own business from now on...

USUA:

Let's leave Ibom alone. He is a man of the night.

OBONG:

(Very annoyed): Shut up your mouth, coward. Who is afraid of him? He might be a man of the night, I don't care. Some of us are

rather afraid of the day, the burning sun. And if he doesn't give us our son, we shall deal with him during the day. And Ekpema, you said he teamed up with Ibom to beat you?

UDO:

I do not know. But many hands descended on me.

OBONG:

He must be. That wicked thing has no other one to help him. No wife, no son, it must be Ekpema. He has become proud of a day light father... Ah, the God above shall surely punish him. He was created for this village. For him to prefer another place for himself now, he will face the wrath of God. He stood with Ibom to beat you? Don't worry, the child that curses his father, his lamp will be put out in the darkness. Rest yourself, Udo Okon. Let Ibom and his new found son sing now. They have forgotten that sorrow are visitors that come without invitation...

USUA:

Don't go to any other place for this matter. Let this whole thing end here before anyone is dead. It shouldn't be too hard to believe the truth from the mouth which is unfamiliar with deceit...

OBONG:

We are not talking about you, because no one knows what has become of you. Keep nursing your belly-ache, we shall fight for what is ours. *(He walks away in annoyance, looking at Usua intensely and sucking his teeth.)*

USUA:

(Goes to the door DSL to close it): Stupid people! *(Arit and Usua burst out in derisive laughter.)*

SITUATION FOUR

The scene changes here to Ibom's house. The bamboo seats are replaced by wooden seats. The curtain at the window is also replaced. The window remains closed throughout and a raffia bag hangs there. It contains various things that are best known to Ibom. There is a door at CR near the window. Major entrance to Ibom's room. It is evening. Ekpema stands near the window watching Ibom as he makes some incantations. Ibom is sitting with a bottle of schnapps in his left hand and a glass in the right. Before he begins his speech, he pours some drops on the ground.

IBOM:

Drink that, my ancestors. I am a true son of the land; from "Ibesikpo Nsim Ayara Enang". Only the mad will hold the tail of a horse. Akpasima, I have not failed to honour you since I was born. I have remained patient when you have not asked to strike down my enemies. I always run back to my house when the outside is full of danger. But I shall not fail to bite the hand I find in my hole. Drink it *(Pours again)*. I am the puff-adder. My shortness is not a sign of weakness, but my nature, so that I can jump and hit the chest of my enemies. The hunter of antelopes must know how to run, or he will be wasting his time going to the bush. I have done it and I have no regrets. That is what they needed to stay out of my hole. *(He drinks what had remained in the glass and pours himself more. He drinks some and gives some to Ekpema.)* Come, take, and drink. It seems to me that I have lived all my life fighting. You may not understand. Don't try to. It is too late for you. But tell me whatever you want to do. *(Ekpema collects the glass from Ibom and swallows the drink which chokes him).*

EKPEMA:

Too hot father...

IBOM:

I should have warned you. Do you want more?

EKPEMA:

(Shakes his head). No, not again. *(Ekpe ma gives him back the glass).*

IBOM:

The choice is yours. I am ready. Anything you want to do.

EKPEMA:

I have decided already.

IBOM:

What is it?

EKPEMA:

I cannot go to school now. All my mates have gone far ahead of me. I will like to trade.

IBOM:

Eh-eh? What trade?

EKPEMA:

Stockfish.

IBOM:

No! Choose another thing to sell.

EKPEMA:

I want to sell stockfish...

IBOM:

I said choose another thing! Forget about stockfish. I hardly ever buy it in this house. Not because I don't like it but because the smell of it reminds me of him. And of her too.

EKPEMA:

Who?

IBOM:

Don't worry...

EKPEMA:

No, tell me the man and the woman father.

IBOM:

The man you lived with. He sells stockfish, doesn't he? And that was why your greedy mother lied in the Council so that she could live where she could eat stockfish everyday. You may not understand. But it was the only chance I could ever have had to be married. Our tradition allows it. The owner of the child can marry the mother. And he stole her from me because he sells stockfish. Because your mother preferred stockfish to anything else. That hurt me, and she paid for it.

EKPEMA:

But father, that is the only thing I would like to sell because I am quite knowledgeable in it already.

IBOM:

You will not sell that. You can't in my house. Don't touch my money if it is for stockfish. If I had thought about it, I wouldn't have told you where I kept it. Take the bottle inside. You can drink more or it if you want to. I shall go to my friend, Obot. *(He gets up and moves out through the door DSL.)*

EKPEMA:

(Watches him go): Forget about stockfish...? *(He pours himself another half glass of schnapps then takes it to the room CR. Immediately he reappears.)* Of course, I cannot understand. He said so. But why can't somebody be allowed to do what he likes to do? Well, this is not the former place I lived where nothing was

mine actually. Here and now I am in my father's house and I can do what I like. *(Points at the bag on the window.)* That is where he said he keeps all the treasures of his life. *(Goes to the window and picks up the raffia bag. When he looks inside to see the contents, he is so frightened that he drops the bag and runs away from it.)* What is this? What does this man do with these terrible things? *(He is frightened).* Can it be true what they said? *(He dares to go back to the bag, picks it up and, though very scared, begins to remove the items, one by one.)* A human skull... *(He trembles and drops it and certain things shake inside it.)* What could be inside here? *(He examines it and there is no hole where the thing could have gone in.)* No hole... but how did they get in here? *(He drops it, frightened)* And this horn. For what? *(He drops it).* And what could this be? *(He removes a small black sag made of cloth. The edge is securely tied with a string. He feels it).* Soft like foo-foo. What could be inside here? *(He attempts loosening it but then gives up.)* Yes. *(He notices the bundles of notes.)* This is what I'm looking for. *(He picks out five bundles of naira notes and begins counting one bundle, before he finishes it, there is a tapping at the door. He immediately gets up, confused. On a second thought, begins to pack the items back into the bag, but he puts two bundles of naira notes into his pockets. When he takes the skull, it drops and splits into two. He packs the pieces and dumps them into the bag. He rushes to place it back on the wall at the window. The tapping is repeated gently.)*

KOKO:

(Outside): Anybody in, please?

EKPEMA:

Who could that be?

KOKO:

Is there anybody here?... Please I'm looking for Ekpema...

EKPEMA:

Who knows my name here? Well... *(He goes to open the door)* Koko, so it's you...

KOKO:

I have been looking for you.

EKPEMA:

I am sorry. This is where I now live... with my father. Sit down.

KOKO:

Father...? What are you...? I'm sorry...

EKPEMA:

No. Don't worry. Maybe I know what you wanted to say. Really, I'm now staying with the man who is my father. He looked for me also and we found ourselves. So he took me back here. There was no time, no opportunity for me to see you before I came here. We left in the dark of the night.

KOKO:

Where is he?

EKPEMA:

He went to see his friend. I will get you some drink. *(He goes to bring it.)*

KOKO:

No, thanks.

(Looks around the room suspiciously. He looks at the raffia bag on the wall.)

EKPEMA:

Take it, try and be free here; like we've always been together. It is

now my new home.

KOKO:

I know. But I don't want to drink. I just wanted to know where you are before I go back to school tomorrow. I went to your uncle... *(Ekpema looks angrily at him.)* Sorry... I mean the ... *(He finds it difficult to word it...)* brother to the man you lived with. I went to him to ask after you. He told me what happened to him here. I was scared but I still had to come.

EKPEMA:

Don't mind him. He came and started abusing my father, so... I mean he fought with my father... Well, Koko, forget about that...

KOKO:

I saw Ima, your sister... Sorry. She sent this to you. *(Koko gives Ekpema a small parcel.)*

EKPEMA:

What is this? *(He tears it open.)* A shirt!

KOKO:

Yes, a shirt. She said she remembered that you never really had good clothes...

EKPEMA:

I never did, because her father didn't give me any. Koko, it is good to have a father who is your own. I have only been here for... how many days, and my father gave me some money for new clothes.

KOKO:

He did? Oh that's very kind of him... Lest I forget, Ima said you

should use the key anytime you were hungry... What did she mean by that?

EKPEMA:

Never mind, I understand.

KOKO:

It sounded like magic to me. Will the key bring out food for you?

EKPEMA:

Exactly. But don't try to understand beyond that.

KOKO:

All right; but I thought we were friends...

EKPEMA:

We are, of course.

KOKO:

I shall be going back. I don't want your father to come back and see me...

Ekpema:

Why, Koko? My father wouldn't hurt you. He is not like Usua.

KOKO:

He may not, but I don't want him to see me here. Maybe some other time, after you would have stayed for long here... I want to go to the market to buy some new school uniforms.

EKPEMA:

I will follow you then, so that I can buy some new clothes too. Wait for me. *(He removes the shirt he was wearing and puts on the new shirt Ima sent to him.)*

KOKO:
It fits you well.

EKPEMA:
So I see. Thank her for me. I may never see her again.

KOKO:
What are you talking about, Ekpema? Your sister?

EKPEMA:
She is not my sister. And my father has warned me never to go there again. *(He touches his pockets and feels the money in them.)* Let us go. I don't want my father to come back and meet us.

KOKO:
Why?

EKPEMA:
He might not permit me to go out today. *(The leave.)*

(Light fades out... Light gently comes on the scene again. The door DSL opens. Ibom enters, hits his right toe on the ground and immediately looks at the bag on the window. He moves to the door CR but changes his mind and removes the bag from the window gently. He examines the contents.)

IBOM:
I used them two nights ago... Did I leave these things like this? *(He puts his hand into the bag, but he immediately removes it, shocked.)* Uko Abasi! What is this? What happened? *(He drops the bag and folds himself in shock)* Chei! It has happened as he said it would, forty years ago. Doom! Doom! My ancient skull broken into two...? *(Removes the pieces of the skull)* The man

died ten years ago. But the power was still there. Two pieces, he said, was madness, and from three, death... Chei! What is going to happen to me? *(He searches the bag, frantically removes all the contents and scatters them on the floor, looking for the possibility of the third piece).* I am sure three pieces meant death... but two meant madness. What happened...? Didn't I keep it back gently...? Chei! *(Something strikes him and he begins to pull out the bundles of money)* Only three? I took out two recently, from seven. Five ought to remain. Where are two gone to? *(He rushes inside to his room and returns almost immediately)* Where is Ekpema? Ekpema!... Ekpema!... *(He gives up calling).* Could he have tampered with this sacred bag? Oh no... Could it be that he broke the ancient head? That would lead to his... *(He takes the two pieces in his palms and speaks very solemnly)* A split head. Only a split head, not death. O Ekpema, why? If you needed money why didn't you tell me? *(He packs the items back into the raffia bag sluggishly and goes to hang it.)* Pity. *(He shakes his head.)* What a pity! *(Ekpema enters and notices Ibom.)*

EKPEMA:
Fa..

IBOM:
Where did you go to? Answer me speedily. Where did you go to?

EKPEMA:
Market... I followed Koko to the market

IBOM:
(Goes to examine the packages in Ekpema's hand.) Koko?... Who is Koko?

EKPEMA:
(Uneasy): My friend. My only friend... He brought me these

clothes... (He shows Ibom his shirt and the empty package).

IBOM:

Clothes? If you needed more clothes why didn't you tell me?...
And your friend, Kokoy, what does he do?

EKPEMA:

Em... he is a... a... student, but his father is a very wealthy man.

IBOM:

All right. Tell me, have you touched that bag there since you came here?

EKPEMA:

That bag, Father? No, I only saw it shaking when I came back just now...

IBOM:

(More serious): Tell me the truth...

EKPEMA:

I have, Father. Why?

IBOM:

You have touched the bag... I know you took out some money from it. But that's not important...

EKPEMA:

No, Father, I didn't. Kokoy brought me...

IBOM:

Quiet. You did.

EKPEMA:

No, I didn't

IBOM:

You did, and almost stole your breath away. You split the ancient head. The ancient head that I have revered and kept safe for over forty years.

EKPEMA:

No, Father. I don't know what you are talking about.

IBOM:

You know. Quiet and hear me. I know that you know. You stole two bundles of my notes. Two bundles of naira notes. But you also split the ancient head and took a curse upon yourself, an eternal curse without a cure because its conjurer died ten years ago. Ekpema, why did you?

EKPEMA:

I did nothing, father. I swear I didn't. If I did, may God punish me...

IBOM:

The ugly toad cried to God for rain, not minding that it would fall heavily upon it. Say no more, son. Don't bring God into this. Your punishment is already too big for you. (Ibom moves away shaking his head, Ekpema begins to sob.)

EKPEMA:

I do not understand, Father. Death is better than my life. Why can't someone believe and love me for once. For twenty years in a strange place I was hated; and now you, who claims to be my father cannot even believe me about a broken skull.

IBOM:

A broken skull...? Oh Ekpema, so you did it? I now know you did.

it. **And you stole my money** too, another curse in itself, because, **no one steals my things** and goes unpunished.

EKPEMA:

I can kill myself for all these accusations...

IBOM:

Death is not the penalty... You have fallen into a pit dug generations before you. *(Moves away from him)*. You have roamed into a very hazardous trap. And there is no escape for you in either of the things...

EKPEMA:

(Kneels down begging, almost honestly): Please, Father, please, believe me. I did not break the skull, I didn't steal your money...

IBOM:

I have lived here all my life, alone. Nothing has ever missed from that sacred bag until you came. Well, I shall give you three days; only three days to return the money. *(He changes tone)* Even though the chicken whisked off by the hawk has but a short time to wail. *(Light fades out.)*

Light comes on again. It is the third day since Ekpema was asked to return the stolen money. Ibom has been out since that night. Obot confronts Ekpema on the issue.

OBOT:

I have come as he requested me to do. Your father is a man of great mysterious knowledge. One cannot fool him. Do as he asked. I'm sure he will forgive you.

EKPEMA:

I cannot do anything... Plead with him for me. I cannot...

OBOT:

You can. You have a chance to save your life.

EKPEMA:

He said it is an eternal curse, whereas I did not steal his money.

OBOT:

Your father is a master in his craft. He can make no mistakes. He is sure you did it. But he can forgive, if only you...

EKPEMA:

There is no escape for me, he said... He had already concluded it.

OBOT:

Are you afraid? You wouldn't fear the curse if you hadn't stolen his money.

EKPEMA:

Er... Etc... er... Please believe me...

OBOT:

You are afraid. Then, return the money.

EKPEMA:

I haven't stolen any money, Etc. Why is it so hard to believe me?

OBOT:

A hunter does not mistake a leopard for a cat. Return the money. You can do that one even though the skull remains broken... *(Immediately the word skull is mentioned, Ekpema suddenly becomes wild, rushes to Obot and holds him by the neck)*. No. Ekpema, please... please!

EKPEMA:

(With his voice changing to that of a wild and angry man): You are

one of them. You must be. Come to take me to your coven...

OBOT:

No, Ekpema... *(He struggles to free himself.)* What is wrong with you, Ekpema?

EKPEMA:

You think I don't recognize you? I will not follow you. Ah-ha, and you can't take me away. No, not to that place. Never.

OBOT:

Oh child, you speak in a strange way. What place are you talking about and who are those taking you to...?

EKPEMA:

(Pointing to the door DSL.) You cannot see all of them... Look! *(He struggles furiously with an imaginary person)* You cannot take me. Leave me, leave me. *(He falls on the ground and rolls behind the wooden seat, grabs it to protect himself with it. Obot watches him in confusion. He looks everywhere in the room but sees nothing. He becomes frightened and moves backwards toward the door DSL. Just then Ibom enters and Obot screams in fear. He turns around and sees that it is Ibom. Ekpema waves the stool about.)* I will break your head if you don't leave me. I said I did not do it. *(He staggers back as if he is dazed.)* Don't hit me again. I did nothing, I did not break it... *(Ibom is confused but he suddenly reaches for his raffia bag and pulls out some powdery substance. He goes to Ekpema and sprays around. But as if pushed by a very strong hand; Ibom screams and falls on top of the other wooden chair before crashing onto the floor. Ekpema appears to be dragged to the door DSL. He screams.)* No! No! No! *(He holds his face whenever the imaginary blows hit him. Please! Please! (He is out of the door DSL. Obot watches him. Stunned).*

OBOT:

(Suddenly recovering from the shock): I cannot understand.

IBOM:

You cannot. I have not. For forty years now. Great is the mystery surrounding the skull. And he did not return the money...

OBOT:

He still denied taking it. He said no one has ever believed him.

IBOM:

It's unfortunate, because none can ever believe him again. *(Light is abruptly cut off.)*

**SITUATION FIVE
(SIX MONTHS LATER)**

Ibom stands near the window looking outside. Obot sits in one of the chairs with a glass of akai-kai. They have been talking about Ekpema before the light comes on them.

IBOM:
I have told you, I can't...

OBOT:
He is your only child. The only thing you can leave behind in your wretched life.

IBOM:
(Turns sharply at Obot): Let posterity be damned if I must leave behind such a horrible memory. I'm satisfied with my "wretched life". I have lived comfortably all my life. Eaten what I wanted to eat, dealt with whoever found trouble with me. If I die now, I shall be glad without leaving behind a thief to prolong my name.

OBOT:
Only few people have been born thieves in this world. The majority of others have been forced to become thieves...

IBOM:
Forced?

OBOT:
Why not? When a child has been denied everything he ever wanted. When a man has no opportunity to have his needs met or when the world refuses to give love to the lonely hearted, stealing provides one source of comfort and survival. Look for your son. It is six months now since he was dragged out of this

house.

IBOM:
Who dragged him?

OBOT:
How do I know? You were as good as myself in helping him. You tumbled and crashed to the ground by the force of the mystery power on him...

IBOM:
Don't compare yourself again with me. I have eyes that see through the thick cloud. Eyes which see clearly even in the darkest night. Ekpema was taken out by the custodians of my sacred property. His theft doomed him.

OBOT:
Ibom, my friend, I know he lied. I saw fear in his eyes when I talked with him. That's how I knew. But your son needs love and comfort. He has never been given these all his life. He is a stranger everywhere he goes.

IBOM:
And he will die a stranger because I am not going to accept him again. I don't even have all the power to help him even if I wanted to. Listen to me, Obot. Great is the consequence of my craft already. The world hates me because I am a mysterious man. A man of the night, they call me. Women run away from me and mothers' stop their crying children by telling them, "Look at Ibom." These are too heavy for me already. I shall not add to my name another load of theft.

OBOT:
He is your son. A son is a son.

IBOM:

The blood of thieves does not run in my veins. He is *not* mine. If he were mine, he wouldn't have stolen my money. I desire to die known only as a mysterious man, not being identified with thieves. I say these things to your hearing now that I am still alive so that when I dance my last steps, the mouths that wag against the dead will be cautioned when they hear that Ibom had refused to be identified with thieves and had disowned the one he thought was his son, because he stole. *(Just then the door DSL is kicked open and Udo and Obong rush into the house. Udo goes straight to the window while Obong brings out a little board on which is drawn the sign of the sun.)*

OBONG:

Get the ancient bag. There dwells all his strength. *(Udo reaches for the bag, but struggles with Ibom for it)* Get behind me so that you will be safe! He is a man of the night but I have not known of anyone who has withstood the damning heat of the burning mid-day sun. I will consume you with the heat of the sun. unless you restore to our son his correct head, you too will die. *(Points the board at Ibom who staggers and struggles to escape. But Obong makes sure he blocks all Ibom's routes).* You are naked now because you have seen the sun. you know you are. Speak now. Tell us the remedy for our son.

IBOM:

Give me back my bag! *(Obot is at the corner, very scared)*

UDO:

(Still behind Obong). You will never have this wicked bag of yours again.

IBOM:

Give it to me, it will destroy you. It is what destroyed Ekpema.

OBONG:

It won't destroy him because he will not touch the contaminated things there. He won't even look at them. We know the secrets of your craft, Ibom. We know them completely. There are many wise men in the world. Only a foolish wise man thinks that he is the only wise one. *(Ibom chases after Udo again, bumps into Obot and crashes onto the floor. He gets up and continues the chase; meanwhile Udo keeps behind Obong who continues to monitor him with the piece of board).* Tell us the remedy for our son, Ekpema.

IBOM:

Your son? If he is your son, he shall have no remedy whatsoever. Ibom does not free the children of his enemies out of his trap *(Obong looks at Udo in a glance then nods his head).*

OBONG:

All right, Ibom, he is your son. Restore his...

IBOM:

I have no blood of thieves running in my veins. He is not my son. If he were, he wouldn't have stolen my money and have a curse hanging over his head. And he split the ancient head which can never be joined together.

OBONG:

The ancient head?

IBOM:

The great mysterious symbol of my art. A symbol dreaded and revered for over forty years. But he split it and took an eternal curse upon himself. There is no remedy in that, not even with your keeping of my sacred bag. *(Koko runs in. He is still in his uniform; a pair of white trousers and a white shirt.)*

KOKO:

(Almost in tears). What happened? (To Ibom) What have you done to my friend? He was shouting your name aloud on the road, why have you done this to him?

UDO:

That's why we are here, Koko. A group of women found him in their church this morning when they went for prayers. He was violent. So violent that the priest fled and left the church for him.

OBONG:

Where has he not been found? The other day, a group of children searching for firewood found him eating rotten things in a burial shrine in the bush.

UDO:

And he lived in one of the broken stalls in the market the whole of last week, naked and feeding from the refuse heap there. He even ate flies.

KOKO:

Oh Ekpema, what a horrible life! Death is better than this sort of life. *(Turns to Ibom and accuses him)* You are the cause of all this...

IBOM:

He split the ancient head, my sacred means of power.

KOKO:

And you charmed him, didn't you? He was shouting your name on the streets, as the man who cursed him.

OBOT:

Everywhere...

UDO:

Whenever he talks

IBOM:

He shouts my name?

OBONG:

And why not? That is why we ask you to free him

IBOM:

(Infuriated): He shall not be freed. He cannot. (To Udo, in a rage) Give me my bag! (They run around, just then Ekpema enters, dressed in tattered clothes, holding a matchet in one hand and an empty can of Ovaltine in the other. There is commotion as everyone, on seeing Ekpema with the matchet, tries to escape from the room. Udo falls over the wooden chair and empties the contents of the bag on the floor. Ibom attempts at escaping through the window but gives up, frustrated. Obot jumps into the room. Koko drifts to the wall still more sympathetic than scared. Obong steps backwards till he gets to the wall, points the board bearing the picture of the rising sun at Ekpema, but it doesn't seem to have any effect on him. Ekpema, on noticing the pieces of the "ancient head" on the floor, drops the matchet. All are startled. Obong drops the board. Ibom crashes on the floor. Udo cowers behind the stool. Ekpema picks up the "ancient head" in admiration, fondles it again and again, then indifferently exclaims).

EKPEMA:

The ancient head, the split, ancient head *(He grins and, rather gently, drops it back. He picks up the can of Ovaltine, digs out a dirty piece of bread from it and begins to chew it hungrily. Ibom, having assured himself that Ekpema is not dangerous, gets up gradually and watches him sympathetically. The rest rise up suspiciously, still confused. Ekpema reaches down towards them. They unwittingly group themselves together thoroughly scared.*

Ekpema raises the matchet up. The men scream for help. Then he bursts out laughing derisively and turns to the audience and asks them: Who am I?

Light fades gently to total darkness.

THE END.