

FROGS

AT

NOON

An Ibibio Play

EFFIONG JOHNSON



What should a leader do in the event of apparent mischief which paints the city in bad light? Be indifferent to it as if it is one of those things? Set up a panel to investigate the case whose report gets buried along with the case, while those directly affected are nursing painful wounds? Even when the wounds seemingly get healed, what of the ever-reminding scars? But the leadership in **Frogs At Noon**, in the face of an embarrassing ordeal, orchestrated by a citizen of Rebem, handles the matter with the fiat and weight it deserves.

Frogs At Noon therefore leaves a critical comment, albeit a challenge to modern day leadership.

Dr. Effiong Johnson, a multi-talented writer, director, actor, poet, critic and scholar is a theatre and media teacher of Seventeen Years at the Universities of Cross River State, Uyo, Abuja and Delta State (Lagos Campus). He studied Theatre and Communications at the Universities of Calabar and Ibadan respectively. With Ph.D in performance Theory and Practice that relates Grotowski's aesthetics to the Nigerian Stage, Dr. Johnson is thus an experimentalist in the mould of the likes of Brook, Schechner, Chiakin and Papp.



He served as PRO, Society of Nigerian Theatre Artists (SONTA) and member of the Editorial Board of SONTA Journal. His published plays include: **Generous Donors - A Dramatic Expose on AIDS, Not Without Bones, The Stolen Manuscripts, Son Of The Land and The Fight Has Just Begun**. His text books include **Playwriting: The Fundamentals and Play Production Processes**. Dr. Johnson is widely travelled to Europe and America from where he draws challenges for the African Theatre-Type.

He is married to Pretty Dr. Ofonime, and they are blessed with John-Ani, Victor Eti, Elizabeth-Ofon and Emmanuel-Disu.

COURAGE PRINTS CONCEPTS

Courage Prints Concepts
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Effiong Johnson 1984
© First Published 2001

ISBN 978-35655-0-8

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DEDICATION

Ofonime and Ofonama.
The Queen and Princess
in my home.

CHARACTERS

AYARA	(45)	-	Chief of Rebem
EKIKO	(57)	}	- Elders representing the three families that comprise the village of Rebem.
OKUKIM	(60)		
OKPO	(65)		
ENANG	(42)	-	An ex-wrestler, now the king's personal body guard.
ETUBOM	(30)	-	The leader of Mkparawa.
IDEM	(27)	}	- Twin brothers.
IKPONG			
UKPEME	(28)	-	Chief protocol for Mkparawa.
INYENE	(27)	-	The monster in the bush of Rebem.
UYAI	(21)	-	The Princess of Rebem.
CHIEF'S WIFE (40)			
VILLAGERS/DRUMMERS - Young men between 25 and 30			
WOMEN			

COMMENT

We live in a society which is fast overrun by vices. In certain cases even when the animal is known, the authorities do nothing about it. But in this play, an abnormality is fought with the vigour that it deserves. The criminal is capitally punished for all the heinous crimes he committed. The rest of the world shudder at the thought of criminality.

Frogs At Noon also demonstrates that change is the only constant thing. Many times people hold on to traditions sacredly even when common sense dictates otherwise. Worse still, is the discovery that some horrible people actually hide behind tradition to perpetrate evil. And for as long as the cloak of tradition continues to cover them, they remain persistent in their horrendous deeds. But when change is encourage, uncanny conducts are exposed. The challenge in this play is for all to aspire to greatness, defy the apparent odds which tend to threaten their dreams and forge ahead regardless. Then of course those people who exceptionally distinguish themselves in their feats, are the only ones who deserve laurels. Our young men must be re-orientated to accept the fact that money is not everything.

Rebem is an imaginary village in Ibibio land, several years before the advent of colonialism. The characters are all imaginary; and the story is my first attempt at writing absolutely from the rich resource and recess of the soul. This is not one of those stories my grandmother told me. It is not an experience someone shared with me, either. I only decided to occupy my time judiciously after the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) experience.

Frogs At Noon is then one of the first works I wrote in 1984.

Effiong Johnson (Ph.D)

MOVEMENT ONE

It is about 5 O'clock in the morning of the Obo market day. In the near distance, a cock crows, piercing its voice through the distorted voices of crickets. A bird cries and then, the Obodom sounds rather thunderously in its very special, and communicating rhythm. In the midst of it, anxious villagers peep out to listen to the Obodom message.

1ST VILLAGER: *(Whispers)*

It is the gathering of the people, yes, the summoning of the village.

2ND VILLAGER:

No, it cannot be. Listen with your mind not with your ears alone. The summoning of the village does not use that drum. You listen to it properly. Besides, that doesn't play with this rhythm.

3RD VILLAGER:

What is it then? Today is the Obo market day and the clouds had better hold its rains because this is the harvesting season.

2ND VILLAGER:

You people do not understand the massage of the drum. Listen, can't you hear the Obodom calling the elders? Don't you understand the beat that invites them to the chief's palace? Eh-eh, that's it, eh-eh. 'Today' the Obodom keeps crying. 'Today at the chief's palace'. By God, something has happened in Rebem; that drum sounds on special occasions.

1ST VILLAGER:

What could it be? It cannot be about the New Yam Festival, that is coming up next month. What could it be? Obo market must be allowed to sell today.

3RD VILLAGER: *(Meditatively)*

The summoning of the elders! Then why should everyone be disturbed? Rebem has only three major families, Ukpabang, Essien and Ntafiong, each of these has an elder and these are the only men to join heads with our chief. Tell me the reason why all of us should be cut off from our sleep.

2ND VILLAGER:

You are bitter because it was only recently you took a wife. It's a pity, but don't forget that this is an emergency. Something must be wrong with either our Chief or Rebem. We shall hear from our elders. Let's get back to bed.

1ST VILLAGER:

How can my ears stop listening after now? My eyes cannot close again in sleep. My heart is beating hard. Oh-oh, no wonder I had that terrible dream...

2ND VILLAGER:

Eh-eh, eh-eh, don't go into your dreams now. Didn't you have mugs of soured palm wine yesterday night?

3RD VILLAGER:

Don't mind him. Let us go, whatever has happened we are not too far away from knowing it. *(They all move back into the darkness.)*

BLACKOUT.

MOVEMENT TWO

It is the Chief's courtyard. His throne is somewhere in UC. Two benches are placed midway between CR and DR, CL and DL respectively. Seated on one of them are Ekiko and Okpo while Okukim is just making his entrance.

OKUKIM:

Da Ekiko and Okpo, tell me, what is the matter? Why are we untimely summoned? It was only a few days ago we met. Why was the emergency drum sounded? The cock that crows at odd hours should be instructed in the soup pot.

OKPO:

We are equally baffled. We are waiting for our chief to come out and explain this riddle that he alone knows. Reeds never grow where there is no water. There must be a swamp for reeds to grow; oh yes,. Sit yourself down, the man that works under the sun should be given cold water to quench his thirst. Rest yourself, our chief will soon be here.

EKIKO:

Sit yourself down, Okukim. I would have come to your house to call you on my way to the palace but Udo Abasi invited me to his house for some good palm wine. I am amazed to find the bush shaking when there is no one in it.

OKUKIM:

Pray, let it not come from the bush a creature that would cause all of us to run for dear lives.

OKPO:

Hm, you should be thankful to the gods you still have the bones to run with. Some of us cannot run with three legs. So we wish no monstrous creature would be seen at all. *(Removes his snuff box from his waist; strikes and opens to take in some amount Ahr..r..r (He groans.)* Asukwo Ntefiok, you are a good man indeed!

EKIKO:

Is that his snuff?

OKPO:

(Gutterally) It couldn't have been any other's.

EKIKO:

Then please, don't shut the door behind a beggar, his good words are better than gifts.

OKPO:

(Gives Ekiko the box) There is no other better snuff in the land. Inim Ukana used to try, but now it seems his craft has gone away from him.

EKIKO:

(Hits the box with hand and elbow and opens it carefully; takes some amount into his nostrils and coughs.) You were very correct, Da Okpo. It is well seasoned. Certainly, he is not a new hand on the grinding stone.

OKUKIM:

Because the child has not cried for food doesn't mean he is not hungry. Give him his food before hunger drives him into theft.

OKPO:

The child should tell his mother that he is hungry, Ukot Okukim. Stealing is never a good thing. Pass on the box Da Ekiko, I knew that the name Asukwo Ntefiok will not but rouse your appetites.

OKUKIM:

(Collects the box and takes a good quantity into his nostrils. Sneezes and sneezes again.)

OKPO:

Eh-eh, that's a good one! Wot Okpo! wot Okpo! Da Okukim, don't give your son-in-law soured wine as the ugly appearance on his face can force you to reconsider giving him your daughter. Don't scare us with your novice games.

EKIKO:

Okukim is an old customer of soured wine. What he is not used to is a good brand of snuff.

OKUKIM:

(Cleans his face with the hem of his wrapper.) It is true da Ekiko, I normally go to where the price is cheap. I rob myself of good things and good experience. Thank you Okpo. Your presence in this meeting is undoubtedly rewarding. *(The main entrance to the courtyard opens gently and Enang, the king's personal body guard emerges majestically and stands at the door surveying the courtyard to make sure it is safe for the chief. He advances stoutly to take his position behind the chief's*

throne.) Enang Iden, the one that broke the limb of Ikwot like a child playing with broom sticks...

OKPO:

Enang, the elephant's feet that never complains of the hugeness of its body.

EKIKO:

Enang, the proud man of Rebem, the cat whose back never knows there is dust on the ground.

ENANG:

I am the one, our elders; the he-goat's odour can never be mistaken. The lion is always dreaded by its subordinates. You are welcome elders of Rebem. Your chief will soon be with you. But, a terrible thing has happened in Rebem. Prepare yourselves, the chiefs fury can swallow the wind. *(The chief enters frowning, looks at nobody in particular but moves straight to his throne. The elders all stand and bow before him.)*

AYARA:

(Indifferently) You may sit down elders of Rebem. If the squirrel falls down from the palm tree then its nature should be doubted. It is good you all came and sat down before my arrival. This thing that has happened, is the work of all of you here. Your blindness, insensitivity and bad counsel has resulted in the mockery of Rebem before her envious neighbours...

OKPO:

Our chief, may you live long! A man does not hit his only he-goat's head with his wife's pestle. It will maim it. A stubborn son should not be cursed and sold away in annoyance, he is still a son. Do not spit at the grey hair of your people, even if they have made a little mistake. What of other times when their advice was rewarding? Tell us Chief Ayara what the matter is in Rebem. I'm sure her glory will ever remain a thing of envy to her neighbours.

AYARA:

(Attacking) It was you Okpo, I remember very well, with your sharp mouth, who claimed to have a serene knowledge of the family background of Akpan Iboto, our unfortunate son-in-law...

ELDERS:

(Alarmed.) Unfortunate?

AYARA:

Yes, our unfortunate son-in-law. Now it is you, Okpo again, who have not allowed me to finish what I wanted to say before you began to defend your 'little' mistakes. You have not discovered that a little mistake of allowing fire to get near the eaves of the house can burn the whole house. You may decide to keep quite and listen with your ears, not with your mouth. I am disappointed in you and the whole Ukpabang family which you represent.

OKPO:

What talk is this, Chief Ayara? When a man cooks for the village, they eat up everything. But if the village cooks for one man...

AYARA:

What food can the Ukpabang family cook? What can their men do when all their streams have gone dry? Your women were thirsty. They went to the stream only to meet the stream beds bare and dry. *(Okpo is shocked, he cannot understand nor believe what he is told. He gradually lowers himself back to his seat.)*

OKUKIM:

Long live the chief: The woman with a broken tooth does not smile when you tease her. But you can be sure she is not annoyed with you. Okpo, calm yourself. Our chief is annoyed. We all know what the Ukpabang men can do. But our chief, what is the matter with our son-in-law? We did not expect the rain now, after all, it is not yet its season. Did you say the streams are dry...

AYARA:

Not yet its season? Did I hear you right? This is exactly how you all reasoned, *(Worked up)* shallow reasoning, and blindly encouraged me to give my daughter to another woman. Tell me Okukim, what serious damage can the little she-goat do on top of her mother? Our son-in-law is not better than a woman. You Okpo in particular was stressing the fact of Ukpabang's masculinity. You were full of pride in the final

council meeting we held before this regrettable marriage was contracted between your ill-fated Akpan Iboto and my treasured daughter. Now what do you have to say to defend yourself when Uyai is crying in her mother's chamber because Akpan Iboto turned his back on her all these nights for six months? Is that not a disgrace to Ukpabang and this village in general? Why should this mockery and tragedy of Rebem occur in our time? And you talked of the season not being ripe for the rains Okukim, tell me, is six months not enough for the moon to emerge from the womb of the sky? Look here elders of Rebem, when the hen begins to crow like the cock, wise men know that it is a serious matter.

EKIKO:

(Shakes his head) I am gripped by cold, Chief Ayara. I am gripped by a terrible cold. This is a shame, the most awful thing Rebem has ever seen. Oh, why should this happen in our time, Why must it be our daughter, the emblem of beauty, that is dying of thirst?

OKUKIM:

Why must it be Uyai the Princess and beloved daughter of the land when there are many less valued others?

OKPO:

I cannot believe it, that early in the morning the lizard complains of too much heat on the backyard wall. I cannot believe it.

EKIKO:

It's terrifying, dreadful: This must be a curse!

OKUKIM:

Certainly, this is too strange to be ordinary.

OKPO:

I cannot believe it. Ukpabang may be poor in many other things but their women have never boasted...

AYARA:

(Gets up annoyed) Shut your mouths all of you. You mean after hearing a thing as absurd and sickening as this all you can do is sulk in self pity and mourning? Who are you mourning for? Definitely it cannot be for Uyai my daughter. Look here Okukim, Ekiko and Okpo, if you have become impotent in thoughts like some men have become, tell me, so that you can be replaced now when everything has not become up side down. Or, think and speak out ways to tackle this problem. We can't leave our daughter for too long here. I am not going to marry her. Provide immediate solutions to this nauseating misfortune caused by your lack of knowledge or I order Enang to throw all of you out of my court! *(Enang adjust himself in readiness for the chief's command should he give one.)*

OKUKIM:

We will go home gently, Edidem Ayara. This type of news has completely unnerved me. When a drowning man firmly grabs the floating weed on the river for help, don't blame

him,. it is because his head is off and he is confused. Give us a night to think about this.

AYARA:

Do all the thinking now or never. A defeated coward always complains that he didn't have enough food the day he was beaten.

EKIKO:

Our chief, it is unfortunate that the elephant grass has competed with our corn in the farm and grew taller than it, but we don't need to weed off everything in disappointment.

AYARA:

No, we don't. Let's uproot the worthless weeds to give more room for the corn to grow.

OKPO:

The man that challenges an opponent twice but remains beaten should not make a third trial to avoid being carried home by his relatives on a bamboo bed. Fellow elders, our chief is not irresolute. Let us stay and search our minds on what we can do about this horrible situation.

AYARA:

Well then, since the cocks in the house have refused to tell us the time of the day we shall listen to the chuck of the hen to know when it's daybreak: There shall be no more marriages based on wealth. Wealth is not strength.

OKUKIM:

No, Chief Ayara, you cannot say that! It is against the practice. Our customs must not be thrown away out of anger.

Our forefathers did not leave behind such practices. We must not shun the tradition we grew up to see.

OKUKIM:

Yes, otherwise the gods will be angry with us.

AYARA:

Why all this talk about gods, tradition and ancestors? I think you have interpreted my words amiss. Our fathers were wise and prudent. These attributes guarded them from making expensive mistakes. In their time no dead man posed as a living suitor undetected. If you must talk about the gods, let it be that you have failed them woefully in your responsibilities. Imagine marrying a princess to a sick man. Anyway, there is only one good thing that can still save our faces. My daughter has not been touched. She is still intact like a side drum. I still maintain that her next husband has to be tested in physical strength andwhat I mean is, if such a fellow can throw Enang and pass the subsequent test by the women then he is qualified to marry the princess.

OKPO:

That is impossible, our Chief. You are indirectly seeking the maiming or the death of many more young men in Rebem.

OKUKIM:

Very true, Edidem, very true. The dog should not be tried with iron simply because he eats bones.

EKIKO:

I support our Chief, a serious disease needs a serious treatment. Let the young men of Rebem remove the shame

and mockery from their faces by convincing us of their strength. Let them restore to Rebem her glory and recreate fears in the minds of her envious neighbours. Let the women scamper back screaming during their test because the "man" has lifted its head in annoyance like a black cobra at its prey.

AYARA:

(Content) I am glad because there are still good heads in Rebem! All is not lost. Infact our glory is not gone. What do you now say Okukim and Okpo on this?

OKUKIM:

Well, er... let the young men demonstrate their youthful exuberance before us, not again in money and wealth. Let those who felt unprivileged and cheated by nature, now have a fair chance of competing for Rebem's only princess.

AYARA:

I am convinced that Rebem is still Rebem!

OKPO:

Rebem shall forever remain Rebem. A name amongst names. I remember the last wrestling contest between this village and Kambu, the young men who represented us, especially Idem, made us very proud. It was such a feat that saw Enang to his exalted position in the king's palace, after all. Let them defend their faces and make us proud once more. If the coconut swore that the dry season was unfavourable for her to mature, we don't have to cut it off, the rainy season has now come.

ENANG:

(Bows to the chief) Long live the chief of Rebem. Okpo and all of you representatives of the people of our land, I have been standing still like a tree untroubled by the wind. Then I began to follow you when our king said someone will have to throw me to marry Uyai. *(Bursts out laughing. All watch in dismay)* I have followed you through the winding and clumsy walk and it seems you have now headed for the straight path. *(Steps out to face the elders directly.)* Since you have agreed that the chief's words must remain unrepealed, take back this message to your sons as well. Warn them from ever attempting any foolish games with Enang. He will show no mercy and hear no begging when he penetrates his fingers into their young skins. Tell them the Chief's daughter is not the only beautiful lady in Rebem, for them to stake their lives. *(All turn to look seriously at Enang but he continues)* If any of them becomes so drunk with the ambition of marrying the princess and inheriting the throne of Rebem, that he challenges Enang, the feet of the elephant, the cat whose back has never known there is dust on the ground, the only person in Rebem to defeat Ikwot, the most powerful hero of Kambu; then, let that fellow come up. I will be waiting for him. *(Goes back to his position.)* But if any young man of Rebem throws me down, then I will humbly withdraw my service as the chief's personal body guard. Let someone else take over, because it would mean that I'm not competent to protect our chief. But our elders,

isn't that like dreaming in the day time when the sun light is still striking hard on the eyes? That's my message, our elders.

OKPO:

We will tell them everything.

OKUKIM:

They have been waiting for us.

EKIKO:

When the palm wine tapper remains too long on top of the palm tree, his wife sends his son to go and look for him in case danger had overtaken him. I think it's time we go back with all the messages to the people of Rebem.

OKUKIM:

The stranger normally returns home someday. You will see us again, our chief.

OKPO:

A hunter's wife does not sleep when her husband has not returned from the bush to touch her waist. You will hear from our young men.

AYARA:

Go and tell the people of Rebem that I, their chief, in agreement with the elders of the land, have now made the bride price for the king's daughter a thing that all men can afford. It is no longer a business for only the rich. It's now a matter of strength. Tell them that this had to be so because lately, we noticed some frogs jumping at noon. So we decided to comb the bushes and hunt down the monstrous creature that apparently, harasses them at odd hours. If the

young men feel they are fearless and powerful, let them carry their weapons and enter the bushes now. *(The chief leaves followed by Enang, then the elders disperse.)*

(Light fades to total darkness.)

MOVEMENT THREE

(The scene takes place at the Council Hall of the village where Esop Mkparawa is taking place. There is a table and a chair for the leader, while on the floor are benches. The villagers with other participants are making noises uncontrollably.)

1ST VILLAGER:

It cannot be. Such things are only heard of in distant lands. Rebem has no record of similar events.

2ND VILLAGER:

Did they find out themselves?

3RD VILLAGER:

They shouldn't believe Uyai without enough proofs.

UKPEME:

What are you all talking about? This is not a matter for the mouth to wag. It must have taken some time of bearing. Uyai would not have risked making such ugly statements if she hadn't proved it over and over again.

2ND VILLAGER:

Did our chief find it out himself? Did our elders even care to examine Akpan Iboto themselves after they heard this terrible news? This is not the first time our women have found shocking and horrible excuses to leave their husbands.

1ST VILLAGER:

The other time it was theft, and Adiaha Abasi left Okon Asibong. Yet the white yams he was said to have stolen were never found in his possession.

UKPEME:

He had eaten them all before they began their search! Okon Asibong refused to clear himself before Ukarakpa, the famous medicine man brought from Kambu. So it proved beyond doubt that he stole the yams. Do not speak like you are new in Rebem. I believe there is some truth in this...

3RD VILLAGER:

That is Etubom our leader with some Mkparawa. We shall hear what they have to say on this. Strike the gong for the meeting to start. *(Ukpeme strikes the gong as Etubom goes to the table while Inyene, Idem, Sit with the others.*

UKPEME:

Order! No more noise from any of you. Our leader, Etubom is here. He shall tell Mkparawa what they have to do about this disheartening news. Wise men always shake their heads in protest when things go bad in their kingdom, or become doomed by the insanity of fools. Etubom, Mkparawa are ready for you.

ETUBOM:

Mkparawa Isongo! *(To one direction.)*

CROWD:

Iyaah!

ETUBOM:

Isongo! *(To another direction.)*

CROWD:

Iyaah!

ETUBOM:

Mkparawa Ide! *(Both hands extended to them.)*

CROWD:

Ide!

ETUBOM:

Mkparawa Odudu!

CROWD:

Odudu!

ETUBOM:

Odudu!

CROWD:

Odudu!

ETUBOM:

Iya inyimme?

CROWD:

Inyimmeke! *(The crowd bursts out in excitement. So many people are talking at the same time, tempers begin to rise.)*

UKPEME:

(Strikes the gong in the midst of the excitement.) Order! Give Etubom some quietness, Mkparawa are waiting for him. Etubom, if the mother stays too long in the farm, she might come back home to meet a dead hungry child at her door step. Break the coconut and share for us to eat.

ETUBOM:

Thank you Ukpeme. You are a true citizen of Rebem. You see people, ears are not like the eyes though both of them

are planted on the same face. One has covers whereas the other hasn't. Ukpeme, you are wiser than most men of your age. Rebem today is drunk. Drunk with soured wine, and the wind has carried the nauseating odour of her vomit all over the land. Even our neighbours have begun to squint their noses in disgust. Our pride is gone, our ladies do not want us to look at their faces. Our elders look at us with contempt. We are in trouble Mkparawa...

3RD VILLAGER:

We cannot continue like this we must stand up and fight and remove this heavy load from our backs.

2ND VILLAGER:

We must fight, we must prove ourselves strong. We must remove this mockery from our faces. The shame is too much. We cannot bear it.

1ST VILLAGER:

We must get up...

INYENE:

What are you all talking about? How do you mean fight? Get up? Certainly, we don't need any of that. All that is to be done is for some other rich son of Rebem to marry Uyai.

UKPEME:

(Strikes the gong loudly.) Quiet all of you! Don't talk like women in the market place. Don't you remember the chief's message? As you can see, Akpan Iboto is not here with us. If he was present, we would have first of all examined him to prove whether this news is true about him...

1ST VILLAGER:

Yei, Akpan Iboto is not here!

2ND VILLAGER:

(Stands up.) Let's go and bring him here. He must show us himself!

3RD VILLAGER:

(Up too) Yes, let's go and drag him here!

ETUBOM:

(Calls them back to order) Mkpawawa Isongo!

CROWD:

Iyaah!

ETUBOM:

Isongo!

CROWD:

Iyaah!

ETUBOM:

The woman that gives birth to the hunchback does not dump him into the latrine like shit. He did not come out from her anus. Akpan Iboto is still one of us in spite of this curse that seeks to destroy him. He is not here because some elders of the land have already taken him out to a far away land to find out why such akparawa cannot perform...

INYENE:

They are wasting their time. They should ask *ME* and I will tell them what is wrong with him.

CROWD:

What is wrong with him?

Ah, you did not know, eh? He swam in many waters and exhausted his strength before he married Uyai.

1ST VILLAGER:

No, no, not Akpan Iboto.

2ND VILLAGER:

He wasn't like some of us who behave like dogs, running from one end of Rebem to another.

3RD VILLAGER:

He worked hard to get what he wanted. He was always very selective. He was different, that's why he married Uyai. Inyene, you are discrediting Iboto, and that isn't fair.

IDEM:

Inyene Asukwo, I have been watching you closely for a long while. Why is your tongue different from others? Look, this thing that has happened should affect us equally, why do you talk like this about Iboto? You know there are very few of us like him in Rebem...

INYENE:

Oh yes! There has to be very few sick men in a village otherwise it becomes a disaster, an epidemic. Tell me Idem and all of you men of knowledge, when our former chief, died, didn't we have another one to succeed him? Akpan Iboto has not been able to... to... you know these things, that's why Uyai is crying in her mother's chamber. And that isn't our fault. Another person with wealth and life in him should take up the challenge.

2ND VILLAGER:

The challenge? You mean to fight Enang? You cannot mean that. Who among us here can face Enang? Enang who defeated Ikwo and broke his limbs? Who wants to die?

UKPEME:

(Strikes the gong) Quiet you there! Don't speak like a coward. Listen to me all of you, where is your strength? Who is Enang by the way?

2ND VILLAGER:

Yei! oh Ukpeme, this is more than striking the gong...

1ST VILLAGER:

Believe me, it's more than giving orders in Esop Mkpawara, I tell you.

3RD VILLAGER:

Don't mind him, he doesn't know what he is talking about. Why don't you take up the challenge? Yes, you, Ukpeme.

1ST VILLAGER:

Yes, represent us, Ukpeme.

2ND VILLAGER:

Yes, come on...

UKPEME:

(Hurt but remains indifferent) You all do not know what you are saying. You've forgotten that I am already married and one woman is enough trouble. Go and fight Enang whether by so doing you would now get married, old wifeless men.

2ND VILLAGER:

We are not old...

1ST VILLAGER:

We are not cowards.

2ND VILLAGER:

We are of strong veins...

UKPEME:

(Strikes the gong) Silence all of you! Our leader is up. We will hear his mind on this. *(They reluctantly obey the order).*

ETUBOM:

Mkpawara Isongo!

CROWD:

Iyaah!

ETUBOM:

Isongo!

CROWD:

Iyaah!

ETUBOM:

Iya Inyimme?

CROWD:

Inyimmeke!

ETUBOM:

Our elders say that the lizard that falls down from the coconut tree lives to climb it carefully another day. Something strange has happened in Rehem, my brothers. The chief and his elders thought and thought deep, before coming out with this challenge as the only soap that can wash our shame away. Do we agree with them?

2ND VILLAGER:

Yes, we do (*Looks around*) I do.

3RD VILLAGER:

We do, let's continue, Etubom.

ETUBOM:

We have accepted their challenge; therefore we shall fight Enang. We have been given a short time. If we don't act fast, the challenge will be extended to our neighbours and you know what that means; that Rebem has no strong man apart from Enang whom everyone worships...

INYENE:

(*Stands up furious*) We cannot accept this, what is wrong with all of you? Etubom, I'm surprised at you. Look here people, we will do what our forefathers had left behind as examples for us. It is always the rich that marries the queen. Rebem's elders and their chief need to be put back in the right direction otherwise we will be blindly led to profane the gods and desecrate our traditions. And that will be sacrilege, sacrilege, you hear me?

3RD VILLAGER:

Yei, that is true - o

1ST VILLAGER:

Very true, our forefathers were right.

UKPEME:

(*Strikes the gong*) Quiet all of you! Wavering streams!

ETUBOM:

We had accepted the challenge. A big sore needs hot balm to soothe it. We know that this new thing is far from the traditions of our fathers. But you see, Inyene Asukwo, because the snail crawled across the river beneath the bridge doesn't mean the oyster should attempt it. Must strength be sacrificed for custom? Must mockery and shame persist because of tradition? The tradition of the fathers? After all, we in our time are going the ways of our elders. Did they not agree to the test? We must rescue ourselves from the embarrassment of the people and warm the thighs of our princess from this contrived coldness. We must make our women look at us again with respect. Mkpawawa are you with me?

CROWD:

Solidly!

ETUBOM:

Therefore let me see the akparawa, who will represent us and fight Enang... A man ought to seal his roof when it is only leaking in a few places.

INYENE:

(*Shouts*) Collaboration, collaboration, bribery, sacrilege. Etubom, you have been bought. This is not the you I know. And you (*turns to the crowd*) Enang will destroy many of you. Please brothers you mustn't do it. Please!

IDEM:

(Emerges from the crowd) Stop your ranting and control yourself! I know you have money, Inyene. But money cannot be accepted for Uyai any longer. See reason with us and stop accusing our leaders falsely. I, Idem, have represented this village before when it all looked terribly threatening and risky... I will do it again! I will rescue the drowning image of mkparawa. I will fight Enang! *(The crowd is mad with applause. In the midst of that, Ukpeme strikes the gong.)*

INYENE:

You will not fight Enang, Idem. Not when I live. No, we don't want to lose you. We should not accept the decision of the elders and our leader...

IDEM:

I say I will fight Enang. We were all witnesses though younger then to that feat that lifted Enang to his exalted position in the chief's palace. He threw Ikwot, the strong man from Kambu. Another time, some other man came up, and I guess stronger. His name was Ukong, and he stood out taller than all of us. Mkparawa feared just as they are fearing now. Even Enang couldn't opt to defend his village then; though it was agreed that the chief didn't want to risk his only body guard. It was I, Idem, who rescued the village from that impending shame. Yes, I, Idem, single handedly, stood up like a mighty rock and fell on Ukong and crushed him. He came walking tall but he went back a heavy load for his people. I will do it again...

CROWD:

Yei! yei! yei!

2ND VILLAGER:

Idem shall stand for us...

3RD VILLAGER:

Idem shall fight Enang.

1ST VILLAGER:

Idem is our man. Let Enang defend himself.

IDEM:

There is nothing to fear my brothers. It was our fathers who said that when you hide something in the house, you become exceptionally suspicious of your visitors. Idem has nothing in this world except his twin brother who couldn't be here because of sickness. If Idem should die defending the cause of Mkparawa, fighting to save their names, prestige and position in Rebem, all will remember him as a hero...

CROWD:

(Carry Idem high up) Idem is our hero, Idem is our hero, yei, yei, yei, Idem, Idem, Idem... *(Fills the air.)*

ETUBOM:

When the hen escapes from the snare of a preying viper, she goes home to tell her heroic tales to her friends. We shall now go home. I, Etubom Mkparawa, will later take Idem and some of our elders to the chief's palace to tell him, we are set to move into the bush to chase that troublesome, ugly devil out. Mkparawa Isongo!

CROWD:

Iyaah!

ETUBOM:

Isongo!

CROWD:

Iyaah! *(Lights begin to fade while the crowd disperses. Etubom and Idem join hands back, leaving Inyene Asukwo behind.)*

INYENE:

The fools, big fools, they think they have succeeded. They shall see. I, Inyene, will do it again too, and we shall see who lives to see Enang thereafter.

BLACKOUT

MOVEMENT FOUR

The Chief's palace. Idem, Etubom, Ikpong, Okukim, Okpo are all seated before the light dawns on them.

OKPO:

The tortoise's shell may look broken and patched but if you knock it, you'll surely have a fractured knuckle. Our decision looked tough, we couldn't easily agree to it but when we did, we found out that Rebem was still inhabited by men.

OKUKIM:

I have been waiting for the day when the beak of the mother hen will pluck off the eye of the hawk. Why should it always hover above the roof tops? Why should it be Enang alone that is reckoned to be the strongest man in Rebem when Rebem is full of strong and valiant men?

ETUBOM:

When the stream ceaselessly flows you do not see all that make their abode under her waters. It is when it dries up that the eyes become shocked at the horror of water tenants. Well, it is time the latrine tells us what horrors it sees doing business on top of it.

IKPONG:

My brother Idem, nature knew better that day to keep me away from Esop Mkpawawa because I wouldn't have agreed with you for this cause. However, I do not really blame the circumstance that has pushed you into this terrible risk. Enang

is a very strong man, nobody doubts that fact. So are you. But I'm wondering what normally happens when the elephant engages the hippopotamus in a territorial battle.

IDEM:

You don't have to worry, Ikpong. Did Enang not throw Ikwot? And did I not throw Ukong? Yes I did, with these hands I held him till he begged in submission to my stranglehold. You were a witness my brother to that great event. I am not afraid of Enang. *(Enang comes out of the palace)* We are both strong as you rightly said. He might be the eldest in this art but certainly not the most terrible. I will fight him and if death comes as the ultimate, I shall lie in peace in my grave having died defending Mkparawa. But Enang surely cannot live long after that, either.

IKPONG:

Well, fight on brother. I'm ever in support of you. All the support of Mkparawa is yours...

IDEM:

Well except Inyene Asukwo who was behaving rather strangely in the meeting, giving many people seeming cause to suspect and hate him.

IKPONG:

What did he do?

IDEM:

Well, leave that for now till we get home.

ENANG:

(Bursts out in derisive laughter) Idem, I implore you, do not attempt at swimming in the ocean, it will drown you. You are one of those young men for whom I wish long life, because you once made our village proud. Do not, even with that, walk into the fire with open eyes...

IDEM:

Enang, today is not the day of the contest. When that day comes, we shall see what kind of flame your fire can kindle. We came with a message for our chief. Where is he?

ENANG:

Wait a minute, you mean your blood does not ripple at the sight of a coiled up python ready for its prey?

IDEM:

In all the world I fear just one person and if he were my opponent in the contest, I would have had every reason to fear. I'm talking about my brother. We shared the same womb at the same time. We have never suffered any defeat from one another in any matter. If I were fighting him, I would tremble because the outcome would be very, very unpredictable. But Idem cannot be frightened by any other person's empty threats and light intimidations.

ENANG:

(Laughs again) You may have shared the womb but you may not share the tomb. Listen to me *(In a more serious note)* the calabash that spouts out sweet wine also contains

soured ones sometimes. Enang is a craftsman who has mastered his tools so well, even in the night...

IKPONG:

That's all right. We came to see the chief, could you please go and call him for us?

ENANG:

(Hurt) Am I your messenger?

IKPONG:

No, the chiefs. Do your job.

ENANG:

If I had an occasion to handle you, you would be whimpering like a smitten cat. Even then, all of you, especially *you* unpopular loud mouth, will be duly repaid "with my own coins".

OKUKIM:

Call us the chief so that we can go back. My shadow is gradually coming under my legs.

OKPO:

(Teasing) Enang Iden, reserve your anger, you can vent it when the time comes. No one goes to ask the lion how strong it is.

ETUBOM:

Exactly!

IKPONG:

Call us our chief. You alone are qualified to do this... Don't look at me like that!

ENANG:

I will not forgive your gruesome insults.

IKPONG:

Go inside the palace, man, if Ikpong has a chance with you, you would live to respect him afterwards. Don't forget, we are of the stock of fighters, a family stalk that has an unbeaten record in Rebem. My father was a great man when he was alive and if my brother here doesn't prove to you enough what stuff we are made, I will do it.. Oh, here comes the chief. *(And all stand to pay homage to the chief.)*

OKUKIM:

Long live the Chief. Your people have been waiting for you. Our chief, the woman that cooks tasty meals will keep on cooking same when she remembers the praises of her husband. I have not forgotten your proud words 'Rebem is still Rebem'.

OKPO:

Rebem is Rebem indeed, ever standing erect like a mighty tower. Everybody gossiped the event, Edidem Ayara. Mkparawa who were the hardest hit couldn't bear the scorn of their women. So here they are; and you know, the feet of a young mother are normally faster from the farm. So, Mkparawa of Rebem are here to tell you they are ready.

AYARA:

Are they? You mean someone is here in Rebem who is ready to fight Enang?

ALL:

Yes, Chief.

AYARA:

Then, he is strong. Ah, I would like to see him. If he is that strong for his courage, then he is a very strong man.

ETUBOM:

We have never failed Rebem. We have never ran away like cowards when Rebem needed our services. We have always stood and fought. Today in your presence oh Chief of Rebem, I, Etubom Mkparawa, with pride, present Idem, our hero, who is ready for any challenge of any manner with Enang. He is also not afraid to be subjected to whatever test the chief so desires by his women.

AYARA:

Rebem is indeed a big anvil on which strong men are created. I, Ayara, who has never failed to fulfil my words, will certainly, definitely, give my valued daughter, Rebem's only princess, to only the man who is man enough in and out. But first, when are you ready for this duel young man?

IDEM:

Long live the Chief! It was my father who used to say when he was alive that the mouth that eats pepper can attempt to eat fire. Many weapons have wounded me in many places. Our women, our neighbours and Enang... If only our drummers were here and the curious eyes of our women, I would have said to Enang, stand out there and let us exhibit the mastery of this great craft you boast to know too well.

ENANG:

Enang does not boast in emptiness. He is not like the coward cock that withdraws from the pursuit of the hen when he sees a better challenger. He stands to face him. My most noble chief, I have guarded you for these past years without a scratch. You have been my witness to all the feats I have performed in your honour. In *NONE* of them did you regret having me behind you. If Enang must now die, he must die with his pride of name. Fix the day my chief, for my blood grows hot inside me. I am ready for this fight and if Idem can, let him maim me, rack me and torture me. If I on the other hand prove the better and stronger, I will do to him what I've never done to any of my numerous challengers.

AYARA:

(Excited) I am happy for you Rebem that in my time you have bred men of valour. Maybe Akpan Iboto is not a disgrace and an embarrassment after all, for out of a dead stream, springs have been reborn. I will not talk again so that you can go back with this fire in your bones. But I know that Ayara shall be a happier man when he shall give his daughter, Uyai, to a man he knows is indeed a man. Go, and tonight, the royal drum shall be sounded, summoning the people to this palace, this time, for the marriage of the princess in a fashion never seen in the land of Rebem.

(All rise. Idem goes to Enang, takes a thorough look at him from head to toe, walks around him, then extends his hand. Enang, with contempt, but reluctantly shakes

*Idem. Both pugilists hold their hands firmly. All cheer.
Then the light dims gently to total darkness.*

MOVEMENT FIVE

The scene opens in Idem's hut. They are reflecting on the last wrestling contest when Idem threw Ukong, another strong man from Kambu.

IDEM:

(Sitting on a stool and resting his back on the wall) I remember that day. A man always remembers the day he was born and not the day he dies, the saying goes.

IKPONG:

(Sitting adjacent to Idem on another stool.) The memory is so fresh.

IDEM:

I didn't sleep the whole night. I was thinking of my chances with the great Ukong. I schemed up many tactics. I had heard Ukong was the strongest man Kambu ever produced and he was bent on snatching back the honour Ikwot had cheaply sold to Enang.

IKPONG:

I begged you to sleep because I knew you would have the day; you had determined to make Mkpawara proud, and I knew you would do just that.

IDEM:

(Sits up). I knew I would win Ukong but I didn't know how. The sun had just begun to set. The thunderous echoes of the drummings came bustling into this house and I sprang up from my seat. *(Gets up).* All the hairs on my body stood

erect like the tail of an angry dog. My nerves adjusted themselves in my skin becoming manifest like the creeping roots on a stem. I heard my heart beat tom, tom, tom, almost as loud as the drummings outside in the village square. I dashed out to the arena. There, the roar of the people made my blood rush and gush, streaming all over me. I stood out like a tombstone, a living tombstone-representing the Mkpawara of Rebem, carrying all their fears and hopes at the same time.

IKPONG:

I will never forget it, brother. Ukong advanced, danced to the roaring rhythm of the drummings. The hysterical shouts maddened the air. The women clapped their hands, then he paused in a stoic poise. The drummings heightened their beats and you came together. He wagged you about but you remained wrapped on him. Muscles swelled out like they were going to burst and bones creaked and cracked. Ukong slipped and exposed himself to your advantage and in a flash, he was slammed on the ground with a loud bang! The shout was deafening. Ukong was numb. He lay still. The drummings stopped abruptly and Mkpawara carried you shoulder high, the hero of Rebem.

IDEM:

(Paces about convincingly) I shall do it again.

IKPONG:

I know you will but this time, rest yourself. It's been a very busy day for all of us. Rest, though early, the task ahead is big.

I will sleep, a long and deep sleep. Give me your hand, brother. Tomorrow, we shall no longer be two! *(They shake hands and disperse each to his own room). Light fades slowly and gently into darkness... The door DL opens gradually without a sound and Inyene Asukwo tip toes in. He is dressed in shorts and a very tight fitting shirt. From his pocket he picks out a dagger, goes towards Ikpong's door and remembers. He moves faster away from there and heads towards Idem's room, looks around the place again and moves into the bed room. There is a struggle and then a shout, another shout for help. Ikpong rushes out of his room just in time to see Inyene Asukwo trying to escape. They meet face to face. Ikpong blocks the exit door and Inyene brings out the dagger again. Ikpong watches carefully, watches the knife and holds his hand. They fight, a fierce one, but Ikpong over-powers him, collects the dagger and forces him onto the ground face down. Ikpong looks around and sees a rope at the corner, he drags Inyene there and ties his hands and legs. At that instance Idem appears from his room. On his chest, his shirt is bloodily stained and his neck too. When Ikpong sees him, he jumps up to him and holds him.*

IKPONG:

Idem... Idem... Idem...

IDEM:

You-will-not-disappoint-me-brother-eh? You-will-fight-Enang-for-me-. I-trust-you-tr-tr-tr-r (*Collapses on Ikpong and dies*).

IKPONG:

(*Gradually lowers his brother down then moves in annoyance to Inyene Asukwo and carries him up. Shakes him violently.*) What did he do to you? Tell me, what did Idem do to you? Talk now or never!

INYENE:

I..., I..., please Ikpong...

IKPONG:

(*Blows him on the face and he falls.*)

BLACKOUT

MOVEMENT SIX

It is early morning. The day of the contest. A cock crows and birds cries in the nearby bush. A drum sounds joyfully and some villagers creep out from sleep to listen.

1ST VILLAGER:

It is the gathering of the people. Today is going to be a great day. It is when the rains beat the back that the fattest buttocks are recognized. It is going to be a great fall today.

2ND VILLAGER:

The whole village coughs it. Some said Idem shouldn't have accepted to challenge Enang because he is too young. Others agreed that he was the only one who could prevent this shame from totally covering Mkpawawa. But who do you think will carry the day, Idem or Enang? And what sort of test will the women subject the champion to, can you tell?

1ST VILLAGER:

How can I answer both, together; with two mouths? The two of them are Rebem's strongest men. After today, we shall know who is the stronger of the strongest. The python stings with the tail while the puff-adder leaps. Which is the most dangerous?

2ND VILLAGER:

Both are snakes and I don't like them. I can't stand even the smallest ones. Don't talk about them...

1ST VILLAGER:

(Deceives him) Look at one there!

2ND VILLAGER:

(Jumps away to the direction of 1st villager) Oh-oh...

1ST VILLAGER:

(Bursts out in derisive laughter) Coward that you are!
(Back to the major subject) But I will like to see what test the women will give to the champion as you said.

2ND VILLAGER:

If he is a champion, then he will pass the test and Uyai will be crying in her chamber this time, not her mother's. *(Laughs)*
Our elders are great, they sure know what our women want.

1ST VILLAGER:

Our women, you can never really understand them. May be Akpan Iboto wasn't really eh-.eh-.. I mean that bad, but our women being talkatives as they are, claimed....

2ND VILLAGER:

Enough! Don't speak like you are new in Rebem. Our elders told us that Uyai is still well sealed like a new drum. When Akpan Iboto was examined by our elders, his thing dropped its ugly head like a dead chicken, *(Whispers)* But I heard, the medium consulted kept saying that it is someone in this village; someone who had been planning to marry Uyai, who bewitched Akpan Iboto.

1ST VILLAGER:

(Shouts) What, someone in this village?

2ND VILLAGER:

Sh! sh!

1ST VILLAGER:

(Whispers) I can't believe it. Who could be that wicked?

2ND VILLAGER:

I don't know oh. Well, may be we will hear from others at the contest.

1ST VILLAGER:

Such a creature should be killed or banished from the village.

2ND VILLAGER:

Yes, exactly, but let's go and prepare for the ceremony.

1ST VILLAGER:

Let us go.

(They go out, Light fades out.)

MOVEMENT SEVEN

At the chief's court Enang is preparing the place for the arrival of the people of Rebem. He brings out the chief's throne before arranging the benches. All this time he is talking to himself.

ENANG:

The child that prays for wounds will unfailingly have sores. True, the monkey likes the top of the tree but not when the branches are dead. People are greedy, stupidly ambitious and thoughtless. *(He dusts the chief's throne)*. Tell me, what's the difference between one woman and another? And they are very many women nowadays. Not only that, it is safer that way. Why should people be this mad? *(He brings in more benches into the palace)* I am sure if the chief and his elders had said that to marry Uyai, that fellow has to jump into the fire to prove his smartness, some idiots would still attempt it without reasoning that it would burn them. Oh, Enang, you have seen foolishness in your time. *(Stands up straight)* I have lived my life fighting, not for women, though I have one. Why should I risk my life for a woman when many of them are struggling to rub themselves on Enang like greedy cats? Enang will fight for one thing - his pride, and get away with it. *(Ekiko and Okpo enter the court)* Oh, elders of Rebem, you are here already..... I guess you think this is your big day, eh? Well, I'm not surprised. When a

woman has a request to make of her husband, she bribes his heart by giving him his most delicious meal. But Enang is wiser than that; he can always detect the feet of the chameleon when it crawls across the sand.

EKIKO:

The chameleon is a crafty creature, you may not find it when you are searching for it though you may be standing with it.

OKPO:

Da Ekiko, hold your tongue. There's more in Enang's lonely speeches than you tend to know. Enang, what is in your mind?

ENANG:

If a man returns home from the sea to find strange faces with his wife more than once, he should begin to travel with his wife...

EKIKO:

What does that mean Enang? Suspicion knows very well that the elders of Rebem are too good for it.

ENANG:

Hm, why not? *(With disdain)* Too good, tell me, conniving elders of Rebem, is this the way you should reward me after these five years of successfully defending of your chief? Well, may be you thought Enang had grown too bold and proud and should be shamed, tamed, ridiculed and his legs cut off. But your nimble senses couldn't allow you choose the worst means. Let me tell you, Enang to you, may have nothing else in this life. But be warned, he has his pride and he will rather

die than live to witness these treasured part of him become strangled in broad day light. *(Walks out)*.

OKPO:

Abasi Ibom, a mother that cursed her child 'God punish you, disgraceful thing' shouldn't weep when the boy is caught stealing someone else's goat the next day and dragged naked to the market square.

EKIKO:

True, very true, Da Okpo. The child that says his mother shouldn't live, he will be the first to die. Enang is wrong in thinking that we wanted to disgrace him. Even if it were so Enang should rather turn the disgrace on us by beating his opponent.

OKPO:

We are not his opponents today. Let him vent his anger on his opponent. We came to celebrate today not to quarrel...

EKIKO:

Eh-eh, you have said it all, Da Okpo. Let's sit down. Da Okpo my nose is wet. The tapper cannot forget his calabash. Bring that Asukwo Ntefiok snuff.

OKPO:

Da Ekiko, from your house and mine to Asukwo Ntefiok's house, which is nearer?

EKIKO:

I don't know, give me the snuff first. Give the beggar his due before you warn him not to come again... I can hear drummings. Da Okpo, Mkpawara Rebem are here.

(Mkpawara of Rebem enter jubilating... All of them are present except Idem, Ikpong, Iboto and Inyene. In their midst too, are women and following from the rear is Okukim: They play and dance around the court. Okpo and Ekiko join in the dance and in the excitement the chief, his wife and her daughter enter followed by Enang dressed up for the contest. The Chief dances a few steps and there is a hysterical applause before he signals the crowd to be quiet. The music subsides to a halt.

WARA:

Mbong Rebem Isongo!

ELDERS:

Iyaah!

WARA:

Mkpawara Rebem Isongo!

MKPARAWA:

Iyaah!

WARA:

Iban Rebem Isongo!

WOMEN:

Iyaah!

WARA:

Rebem Isongo!

CROWD:

Iyaah!

WARA:

Mme emedi inno mbang oh-oh-oh-oh!

CROWD:

Oh-oh-oh-oh-oh!

AYARA:

You are all welcome my people. Take your places. All of you know why we are here today. My people, it is the strange disease that gives respect to the little weed. Isn't it my people?

CROWD:

It is so, it is so!

AYARA:

Something happened in Rebem, in our time. Our fathers never knew a thing like that in their time. Frogs jumped in the day time... My people, it was a terrible thing. I, Ayara, your Chief, called my elders and we agreed that this creature that chased the *frogs at noon*, out of their habitation, should be combed out of the bush so that we could live in peace. It was a difficult task my people, but our gallant young men accepted the challenge and today we are here to bid your only princess farewell to her new home. A safe home, a lively home, where no monster lurks within unnoticed. The man that digs the pit alone must stop where he can come out himself. I spoke some words, hard words my people. I do not regret it because those words have made us gather here today and we shall give our daughter to only the man that wins our confidence. A man who is strong in all fronts. I will stop here and allow my elders to speak briefly because I was not alone in this matter before I call upon Etubom Mkparawa to present his strong man. *(The crowd turns*

one to another looking for Idem and Ikpong and whispering in wonder why they have not yet reported.)

OKPO:

(Gets up) Rebem Isongo!

CROWD:

Iyaah!

OKPO:

Isongo!

CROWD:

Iyaah!

OKPO:

People of Rebem, if the rain does not fall, you do not know that the sky is mourning. We would not have known that there were strong men in Rebem if Uyai did not run from Akpan Iboto crying of loneliness. Today, we are going to be witnesses of Rebem's great strength. The person that wished that Rebem should be mocked at, today they will be spat upon, on the face. We, had given our words and we are ready to fulfil them if Enang, the cat of Rebem can be thrown. You are welcome people of Rebem. *(The applause is maddening.)*

OKUKIM:

(Gets up and shouts amidst the crowd) Rebem Isongo!

CROWD:

Iyaah!

OKUKIM:

Isongo!

CROWD:

Iyaah!

OKUKIM:

People of Idung, young and old, our chief and Okpo have already said my mind but it was our fathers who said that as long as there is breath, there is life. So, as far as Okukim still possesses his mouth, he will talk. Some of us here grumbled at our decision saying that we had gone against ancient rites and the traditions of our fathers. But I ask you, who are the fathers of our time? If the bush rat did not create a hole on the wall of our fathers, would there have been a trap hung on their walls? Our women had already began singing us in their songs. Our neighbours opted to come and soothe our crying women. These we couldn't bear. We had to remove this shame by proving that Rebem is still Rebem. *(He is excitedly applauded).*

EKIKO:

Rebem is indeed Rebem, ever standing erect and warm. Uyai was caught by cold for six months when the warmth suddenly vanished. We must thank her for bearing that long. How many of you women here can hold it for one week? Today, we the people of Rebem have gathered to give to our daughter a new blanket that will cover and comfort her always. This time we are not assuming anything, because not all blankets are warm enough during the harmattan. So we are going to test its ability to remain warm. Our chief will choose able women of Rebem who will carry their hero to

the inner chamber for this crucial second bout. If our hero successfully overcomes his opponents there too, then our daughter Uyai is his, with our blessings. A good farmer deserves the fattest of the yields. People of Rebem, I can see the length of my shadow. I know it is time for the evening market. Let us go so that we don't get there late.

(He sits down while the crowd shouts and cheers. In the midst of it Ikpong enters dragging Inyene Asukwo. Inyene's face is covered with a black cloth. His hands are tied together behind. Ikpong is in shorts. He holds a bloody dagger in his left hand. When the crowd notices them, they shrink away automatically. Okpo and other elders stand up involuntarily, scared. The Chief gets up gently and gazes intensely at Ikpong and his victim. There is silence for some moments before the chief bursts out distortedly.)

WARA:

Speak! Ikpong owo, what game is this?

IKPONG:

I will my chief.... People of Rebem, this is the enemy of Rebem. This is the monster that lately caused great trouble in your midst. I, Ikpong owo, have single handedly combed the bush to uncover him from his curious habitation.

WARA:

I do not understand. I say speak! By all the powers given to me as chief in this land and in the names of all the gods of Rebem, I swear, if any soul here thinks he can spoil this great

eventful day of Rebem without grave consequences, something is troubling his head.

IKPONG:

I will my chief and I have been doing so. *(He unties Inyene's face)* Edidem and people of Rebem, I believe you all can recognize the owner of this face... If you don't, well, it belongs to Inyene Asukwo. He is the fellow who bewitched Akpan Iboto, and sucked him dry because he, Inyene Asukwo, felt that Iboto had taken what was rightfully his.

AYARA:

Ikpong, be careful of what comes out of your month...

IKPONG:

My Chief, if I am proved wrong in anything I utter now, let me be taken to the shrine of Akpakpaufreke and nailed to death. I decided to spare Inyene's life so that if I lie against him, if I am not saying what I squeezed out of his mouth when I threatened to kill him in our hut, he can defend himself. This devil here charmed Akpan Iboto on the day he took Uyai as wife. They shook hands and Iboto's thing died off instantly. Is that not what you told me? *(He asked Inyene Asukwo who merely looks away.)* He had lived his life hoping to marry Uyai. And yesterday, *(his tone changes)* this same creature, having known that my brother Idem had accepted to wrestle with Enang to savage the image of Mkpawara, crept into our hut and killed my brother with this dagger. *(He drops the dagger and those near it shudder away. The crowd jerks in amazement, sighs in shock and moans in great grief.)*

AYARA:

Enough people, enough! This is unheard of! Inyene Asukwo. *(He remains mute)* Inyene Asukwo, will you answer me before I curse you in the name of Okukubarakpa and ask my men to burn you alive? *(He doesn't answer still)* Is it true that you did these and set Rebem ablaze? *(He tries to run but Ayara orders Mkpawara to hold him and bring him back)* I see, I see... People of Rebem, you can all go back home. The ceremony is over...

IKPONG:

(Cuts him) No, no, no, they can't. They musn't! Rebem must give her princess away today as announced. My brother shall not be buried until that is done. He was the only thing I had in my whole life. The gods knew best when I was named Ikpong. We were born the same day with equal valour and pride. If we must die, we must go the same day. I am going to take over what my brother would have done had this creature *(slaps him)* allowed him to see this day... I will fight Enang! If he can break my limbs the way he did Ikwot from Kambu, people of Rebem, bury me beside my brother, gladly. But I am going to fight, to make the dead proud. To prove I did not love my life when *his* was taken away, I must fight, even with the strength of the dead, and if I die, I die.

UYAI:

(Shouts and runs to Ikpong) No, no, no! You must not, please Ikpong, you musn't. Father, people of Rebem, please don't let him. Shall their memory be allowed to disappear

completely in a single day? No, please Ikpong, don't fight Enang... *(She holds him).*

IKPONG:

(Looks at her) I am going to fight Enang, no one can stop me not even you, Uyai. If anybody try to stop me, I will kill myself. This is the only honour I can give to my murdered brother, and I had better be allowed it. *(She goes back shyly.)*

AYARA:

Enang, tie this creature on both legs. He must watch and see everything he had wanted to prevent as they come to pass before his very odd eyes. Then we shall deal with him as custom demands. *(Everybody watches as that is executed then Enang goes back to his former position.)*

IKPONG:

Let me have some music, the type you played when my brother threw Ukong and made Mkparawa proud. Enang, do you remember me? That day we brought news of the readiness of Mkparawa to our chief? You once boasted your strength and promised me woes when you felt insulted. Come out, I challenge you, I challenge you in the words of Idem, "Come out and prove the mastery of this great craft you boast to know too well".

ENANG:

I shall not fight you, Ikpong. I want to spare your life. I do not want the earth to receive both of you into her bosom on the same day. No, go and live and get yourself a wife. Live for posterity...

IKPONG:

Enang, you must not cover your cowardice with pleasantries. Ikpong cares about nothing. Memory, posterity, life, nothing. I do not fear to die, and I do not want to live if I don't fight you today, now. Enang, come out, *do not fear*, come and defend your strength.

ENANG:

My chief and people of Rebem, it amazes me how you stand in silence and watch a victim of desperation strangle himself to death. Enang takes insults but not the type that shit is cast on his face. It is a pity that you have allowed this young man, well I should say, an aspiring future hero of Rebem, to die prematurely. Let the music play! Enang is a proud man and he will die defending his pride. *(The drums roar madly and Enang dances proudly around the space provided by the crowd. He motions to them and they cheer him loudly. Ikpong carefully pulls himself together and moves cautiously into the space. He doesn't dance but fixes his gaze at Enang. Then the drums heighten their beats and Enang steadies and advances craftily towards Ikpong who doesn't move. After a few shake ups by the opponents, they separate and there is a hysterical shout. The drums beat as though they were going to burst. The wrestlers log in again. Enang holds Ikpong in an advantageous position, shakes him and wags him about but he is not thrown. Just then, Enang slips and Ikpong frees himself from the dangerous hold. Ikpong moves in*

at an alarmingly fast speed and holds Enang by the leg. The crowd storms, Enang struggles to free himself but to no avail. He holds Ikpong by the neck but Ikpong frees himself and lifts Enang high up before slamming him on the floor. He reaches down and carries him up again but some Mkparawa tear in to collect Enang from Ikpong. The crowd storms and Ikpong is carried shoulder high. The roar is deafening. The drums beat madly then stop. Uyai is seen struggling out of crowd to have a touch of Ikpong. The chief gets up.)

AYARA:

Rebem Isongo!

CROWD:

Iyaah!

AYARA:

Isongo!

CROWD:

Iyaah!

AYARA:

People of Rebem, you are witnesses today as to who is the strongest man in Rebem. As we had decided, our test is not over yet. Even though it seems our daughter is already in love with the young gallant, we must warn her that the days of assumptions are gone in Rebem. If the hero fails in the next test, it will be very unfortunate and we won't help it. Our daughter will have to wait for the ideal man. (He steps out and calls out from the crowd.) Adiaha Okon, you too

over there, Ima Udobong and you next to Etubom, er... er... Arit Asibong; come out here and follow my wife into her chamber. What she tells you to do, do it, and don't hide the result from us. Da Akparawa, (Signalling to Ikpong) join them and may the gods that saw your hands through, now strengthen your waist. Good luck! (They all leave and the crowd cheers loudly, the drummers resume, then Ayara stops them.) Enang Iden, how are you, (The crowd laugh) The hyena thought himself great until the lion appeared. Get up, can't you? (Enang struggles but remains on the ground).

ENANG:

(Painfully) Oh Chief Ayara, I have served you faithfully these past years. As my reward, please ask some men of Rebem to carry me with whatever I have in the palace, back to my grandfather's house in Ukpabang. Let them dump me there for him. If I am lucky, the old man will still remember how to treat a broken waisted sick man. (Screams.) Oh, my spine! (Just then Arit Asibong and Ima Udobong scream back stage and scamper out followed by Adiaha Okon and then the chief's wife.)

EKIKO:

Eh-eh, wot Okpo, wot Okpo! We said it, we knew it. That is a man, a lively man!

AYARA:

What happened my dear?

CHIEF'S WIFE:

What do you expect? The sleeping dog suddenly threw its head up with its tail erect and started barking violently at the

strangers. They had no option but to run for their dear lives. *(Ikpong reappears buttoning his shorts, the crowd goes wild and Etubom rushes to him and carries him shoulder high. The drums resound and Mkparawa dance in victory parade.)*

AYARA:

Rebem Isongo!

CROWD:

Iyaah!

AYARA:

Isongo!

CROWD:

Iyaah!

AYARA:

That is a man. That is a true son of Rebem. Rebem is honoured today by him. My people, true citizens who fight for the peace and development of their nation, their names should be engraved in all the squares of their nation for a memorial. But enemies of progress, in whatever capacity, their stomach should be slashed open, emptying their shame for vultures to feed on. *(To Ikpong)* Da Akparawa, take my hand, you are a man. They shake hands. Take today Uyai, I give her to you with all my blessings, in agreement with the people of Rebem. Take the princess for your wife. You shall not go back to your hut any more. After now, Mkparawa will go there and bury your brother like a hero. Rebem shall mourn him for one week. They will bring back all your belongings. This is my surprise to you and all the people of Rebem - I hereby give you the keys *(Gives him the keys)*

to the house that hitherto housed the chief's visitors. It is now yours. Live there, with your wife. Live there near me and watch what I do so that you will become a better ruler when I would have danced the steps to join my ancestors. As for Inyene Asukwo, after this ceremony the priests of Akpakpaufreke shall take him to their shrine and nail him to death. That will act as a deterrence to all villains and wickedness in Rebem.

Rebem Isongo! *(The crowd responds)* Iyaah! Isongo! *(The crowd answers)* Iyaah! Inno Mbang-o! *(The crowd roars.)* Oh-oh-oh!. *(Ikpong goes to Enang, extends his hands to him. He shamefacedly responds. Ikpong lifts him up, takes him to Ayara and puts his hands into Ayara's.*

Ikpong looks at Uyai, looks at the keys in his hand, looks at Uyai again and goes to her. They embrace and gradually kneel down. The drums beat excitedly and Chief Ayara puts his right hand on their heads for his blessings. All the elders of Rebem dance around them, blessing them too. Everyone dances and cheers.

AYARA:

Rebem, Rebem, Rebem, Isongo!

CROWD:

Iyaah! *(Blackout.)*

THE END

