

Chapter 4

The sun slid behind the cloud. A bright red glow filled the Western horizon. It seemed to Ekoyata that time was rushing too fast with just a few hours ahead of him for the day. Right inside the house, he could hear the sounds of domestic animals returning to their pens and nocturnal beasts taking over in the bushes near the house. This evening would have been so different from what he had known, but Baneke stood tall before him, draped in confusion. And time went along quite hurriedly. He had not thought of what he would do before it was suddenly evening.

Depression weighed heavily on Ekoyata. But he was aware of the pale evening light that filled the room and the thought that always wanted to form that also dissolved each time, before he could form any image of his consciousness.

He rested his back and found his nerves so frail from the effort to think. Too many things hung around his mind at once every moment. They all seemed unrelated to each other. He was only a few hours away from cry. The world of his mad old aunt, the terrible house his father kept in his hometown, the allegation of witchcraft against Obehi, the fact that his own people drank pond water and the knowledge about Samson's disownment of his mother all crowded his mind and cast a strange spell on him. Then, from somewhere deep in him, he started to wake up again to the reality of his surroundings. That was when he started to hear voices around the house. The sound and the images around him didn't affect his mind. The room got colder. He felt that the way he was sitting in the chair was awkward and found that he was sitting too far inside the chair. He adjusted to the edge and looked outside of the parlour window. Obehi and a few people were talking softly. None of what they said and their dim images made a deep impression on his mind too. They simply existed as some dumb sensations to his body. But he felt them bound him like a powerful and simple force. He hoped that in some way, another powerful force should deal this confusion one final blow and give reality and meaning to the surrounding.

Ekoyata continued to look outside from the window. He saw some more people coming towards their mud house, one by one. He didn't know them. His consciousness got sharper. Ekoyata thought that for sure, the people he was looking at were his own people and native of Baneke. He knew that for centuries, the celebrated Baneke River had offered them a home in Ubiaja on its rainforest belt lap.

Ekoyata watched some of them moving closer to the house. Then suddenly, he was frightened by a call from behind him. He glance about and saw a woman coming from the door. He didn't even know that someone was ahead of the others into the house. The surprise turned his legs to water as he tried to get up and show some courtesy.

'Welcome our son,' the woman said. She had a wrapper over her breasts.

'Good evening ma,' Ekoyata responded. 'Happy to see you.'

The woman shook her head as she tried to choose a seat. So, Ekoyata waited until she was sitting in one of the old cushions.

'You came this morning?' she asked.

'Yes ma.'

'Your aunt told us. Like here?'

'Yes.'

'Like visitors too?'

'I don't know, ma.'

'You should know. I am Obehi's neighbour at the next compound.'

'Welcome, ma.'

'You will have a plenty visitors.'

'Okay, ma.'

'We are all yours and you are our son. So, be yourself and welcome everybody.'

'Okay, ma.'

Ekoyata saw the curtain drifted behind the woman and it took his attention from her. In answer to the woman's foreboding prediction, people began to storm the room which immediately galvanized into hot actions. The visitors! Ekoyata thought. He noticed wild excitement on their faces as they all headed straight towards him. They hugged him; they shook hands with him; and they patted his body with their callous palms.

Ekoyata thought that he could stretch out his hand and blot them out like a duster wiping chalk from a board. He hated what they were doing. They were bringing him too close to themselves, so close that he was beginning to have strange feelings. This type of closeness as he felt it, didn't allow people to have any way of their own. The people were sound adult men and women. With them, he also saw their strong hardy lads, chocolaty cheeked daughters and chubby children with large placid eyes. How did their babies get so big? Ekoyata wondered. Eating local grubs?

Somewhere inside him, Ekoyata started to feel a kind of terrifying pride watching the people. Their smiles were large and so it seemed their hearts. So sunny and warm were the smiles he was looking at that he forgot the current problems of Baneke that let him cry earlier in the day.

The visitors didn't go away after greeting him. That was until the small parlour was filled and spilled over to the passage. Then, some began to wander off from him and from the room. But Ekoyata was still hearing them lingering and talking in soft voices outside around the house.

The woman who came first, who said that he was their neighbor at the next house, was reluctant to leave with the rest of the people. When she finally did, Ekoyata went to the window to look at the activities outside. The people were still around in a small conference under the mango tree. Darkness was descending fast and the sky was close to the roofs. He saw a boy carrying a bench to the place. What now? Icy harmattan wind was blowing in from the window, blasting his face. And stars had started to show up in the sky.

Obehi and some people were rushing in and out of the house. That was the strangest of it all so far. Ekoyata saw other young people coming in with more benches into the compound and were arranging them. Some other people were bringing in firewood. And soon, he saw fire burning at several places.

After trying by himself to turn up a clue about the meaning of the evening, his life in the old house and the people that gathered, he finally lay off and watched instead, with muted adulation.

Obehi came back to him in the parlour.

'They said that they want to throw a party for your homecoming,' she informed Ekoyata.

Her information made Ekoyata feel a little more at ease. But he didn't want any party. He began to hate this adoration Obehi was showing him.

'We are not prepared for a party,' Ekoyata complained. 'Why should they do that without first telling us about it. Is that how they do things in this place?'

'Let's see. You don't have to worry. Only a few things are needed.'

'But they are here already.'

'They think you need a welcome. Its only just the beginning. Stay back and watch.'

The guests were not invited by him, so, he didn't go out to join them. He stood there by the window and watched. More people were coming.

An old man sat first. His dressing was grandiose, embroidered with threads of rich colours, depicting the old Bini justice symbol of two curved and crossed machetes. The afterglow of the sun and the burning fire wove bright orange, fiery red, gold and deep blue in the garment. This is not an ordinary man, Ekoyata thought. Without touching, he could feel the weight of the cloth wrapped around his body, whose end was thrown on a shoulder. And a horsetail hung from the other shoulder.

Unexpectedly, one of the young men came inside to Ekoyata to call him from the house. He followed him to the scene and was introduced to the chief. Then, Ekoyata learned that he was the chieftain of the community. He lowered his head in front of the eightyish large man in greeting. Then, he knelt down before him and received a blessing.

'Sit here,' the old man told Ekoyata indicating a position close to him.

Ekoyata did.

'You came at the right time,' the chief said. 'February is a nice time of the year to come home. November to March are the more permissible months, provided you are ready to overlook the dry cold weather and the dustiness of the season. We are harvesting at this time. We cannot plant our crops when it is dry. This season too, we celebrate great festivals and dances, to wipe all the labour we have done during the year.'

Ekoyata was listening as he took a seat beside the chief. He felt forced into a cheap surrender, but there was nothing he could do. It all looked strange. Ekoyata felt that he was supposed to be the host.

Next to take their position by the sitting arrangement was Obehi, followed by the rest of the leadership end and finally, the rank and file of the community. The compound buzzed with noise as people muttered things.

The chief sat haunch forward in the chair to resume his address directed at Ekoyata when they were sitting. The buzzing noise went down.

'We eat and drink and rejoice this season. We welcome visitors to join us and taste of Baneke's genuine hospitality.' He paused and cleaned the white spittle that gathered at the corner of his lips.

Ekoyata was amazed at the strength the aged man seemed to have.

Women were sitting on the ground. He saw some of them carrying and breastfeeding their black faced and chubby babies on their laps with other young ones sitting around them. There were several fireplaces to keep the gathering warm. One fire was right at the center. Other people apart from the

women also reclined on the ground around the fires. But a few able bodied men and youths were standing.

'All of these are your people,' the chief said. 'Don't worry about what you will offer us. You can give us something at other times. We know too that you need potters. We have arranged some for you. Here are two strong sturdy lads. Obas and Isibor are their names. Gloria and Ose too are two of our apple cheeked daughters. They will be your stewardesses. They will give you some of our treats. So, we want you to feel at home in your ancient home of Baneke.'

Now, the chief rested his back. And it seemed to Ekoyata that he had finished his welcome address. And the whole thing was beginning to be interesting to him. He prostrated in front of the chief who dabbed the horsetail at his back several times.

Ekoyata had another look at the gathering. There were strong and hardy looking lads. And their chocolaty cheeked women were tall. No wonder the chief was so proud of them to offer them as his potters and stewardesses. They were richly dressed for the evening. Old men were dressed in large shapeless clothes called Igbulu. The heavy clothes were thrown over one shoulder and then wrapped around the body. The young men wore colourful trousers ranging from velvet and jeans to soft cotton. But the men's dress was far too simple compared to the colourful gaiety of the women's attires. Some wore large colourful Bunuku skirts and their hair were made with threads of glowing colours.

On the seat, Obehi put a hand at the back of Ekoyata's neck and brought the head of the tall young man to her level. Then, she whispered something into his ear.

'This is the season of the Ikhio festival,' she said.

'What is Ikhio?' Ekoyata asked.

'It is a festival of a special dance competition. It comes up sometimes, once in a decade or at most twice. Participants dance out complete stories. They reveal some top secrets about people, ranging over moral atrocities committed during the time covered by the dance. They also review achievements.'

Suddenly, he had stopper listening to her. He was distracted by some people coming to the scene from outside. He saw men, women and children carrying some loads. And they went straight to the chief's presence.

'Here comes the envoys!' Obehi exclaimed. 'They brought something for the host of the Ikhio Gbedu. It is often part of it festival.'

All the while, Ekoyata had observed that most of the people who had come, carried something with them. The jars and several envelops of large forest leaves were taken to the passage inside the house. But two large gongs and other musical instruments were left to remain with the crowd outside. Obehi had called one of the instruments, Ikede. It was a set of three huge drums. It particularly caught his attention because of the size.

There was silence as they unfolded the contents of their loads, which reflected in the fire glow. Ekoyata saw that they brought a large amount of alligator pepper, kola nuts, spirit, palm wine, red oil and money, for the chief as gifts.

How did the news of his arrival spread so fast? Ekoyata was still wondering. How did all the people get to know? How were they able to make this kind of arrangement when he came only this morning? Were they witches?

'How did all this people know that the dance will be held here today?' Ekoyata asked aunt Obehi.

'Usually held every night for about one month, the venue for the next dance is announced at the end of a dance night. But if there is a change as in the case of tonight, it is transmitted from mouth to mouth. You won't believe it, everybody would hear before the night comes.'

But no, Ekoyata was disbelieving. No telephone and no radio. He felt that the news must have spread in some mysterious way. It all started to look that way, magical and supernatural. Baneke people that he heard of were one tribe and only a part of the vast tribe of the Ishans. Now, he believed that they had a rich culture. But was it also a tribe of witches. They could talk to one another at anytime and anywhere without the aid of modern communication technology. At least, that was the story he had of witches. But Baneke people looked very nice so far. Only the way they transmit information was strange.

'Let me tell you something about what our women are wearing,' Obehi offered. 'When a woman wraps double clothes under her blouse, it signifies that she is married. But the young unmarried girls wear only one cloth or a skirt. Those bright coloured clothes keep the girls on display for marriage bids. Look at their long glossy hair tied in woven stone beads. You no doubt like their chocolaty faces with round fleshy cheeks and their dark eyes that are set at a slant.'

Ekoyata didn't answer, but only nodded. Was Obehi trying to set passion flame on him? Did she think that he came to look for someone to marry? Maybe she thought so. But he didn't need any woman.

For the moment, people had spilled over the leaping fire flames. Ekoyata heard loud laughter occasionally, greeting the incredibly funny jokes of the Baneke natives.

Then, someone wanted a change, a light tapping on the Ikede drum. A sea of people responded. Ekoyata remembered that music was one of the things that makes man a unique animal. He is the only animal that appreciates art. Good music touches the soul of man, whether he is walking, sitting, or lying down on the bed.

'The introduction is danced by the girls,' Obehi explained. 'But the main dance is left for the oldest of the women folks.'

'The oldest?' Ekoyata asked.

'Yes. Eighty years, ninety, even over hundred,' Obehi said. 'I dance it too. I am more than fifty.'

Ekoyata wondered why the old people he had seen didn't like to say their ages. Obehi should be well above eighty. He was even more astonished to hear that they had the main dance. Could very old people dance?

But Obehi was wrong. The first dance belonged to him instead and not to the girls. Ekoyata found that he was the co-host with the chieftain. He was weak legged as one of his potters squatted in front of him and told him that he was needed to start the dance.

Boy, could he dance? Ekoyata was openly embarrassed. He hadn't danced cultural before. But the Ikede had a simple spirit that was in unity with his soul. Maybe it won't be difficult. Maybe, this spirit would help him. But he didn't stand up and begin to dance. Deep down in him, he was dancing subconsciously because his inner person could not resist the beautiful artful beats.

Next was a song singing his name and his life. It irked him because it started to calm his disquieting thoughts. And he started to rise to his feet placidly enough as though conceding to defeat. His nerves were shaking inside his muscles.

Open the floor, great son of the land

Ekoyata, unlock the dance

Ikede are barking furiously

As we touch the sambas

As we hit the gongs

To let you show the way

To heave the chest

To twist the waist

To count the feet

Then the spirit of the land will come

To bring us hope as sure as the mountain

Peace as abiding as the sun

Life as abundant as ocean waters

Blessings as many as the sand

History as endless as the sky

Until the night fire light

Chide out our insanity

And we have our fill

Of pleasure and of love

Cymbals clashed, the large gong rung out, cow horn trumpets blared, and the huge trio Ikede drums thundered their rhythmic beats. On the floor, Ekoyata wasn't dancing. He was looking at his legs as if they had to be moving on their own without effort from him. The legs were moving in steps. But he didn't know. He wasn't moving them. All he knew was that he was only standing in front of the crowd, feeling shame and naked embarrassment. He simply flowed along with the music and his spirit flowed

away with it. He thought that the people must know that he didn't know how to dance cultural. Finally, he heard a loud ovation went up. Then, suddenly, a sea of people joined him on the dance floor, hailing him. Dust rose from the ground. That was the time he realised that his legs had been moving in dance steps he didn't understand. Whether it was a good one, he didn't know. His mind didn't understand the night. His mind had no image form of the party to turn up in his body. He was not their kind. By the time they cut the music, he didn't know how long he had danced. All that he realised was that he didn't want it to end soon, the way it did. He was breathing heavily.

The two potters, Obas and Isibor came over and escorted him to his original sitting position. Beads of sweat were rolling down his nose. Gloria and Ose brought something for him to drink. It was palm wine served in a large calabash cup.

'This is Udin,' Gloria said.

Ekoyata was watching her. She was black and beautiful. Her long nose was straight in the ridge of her fleshy cheeks. She was so calm as she continued looking at him directly in the eyes that he started to feel embarrassed by the feeling that were getting to him.

'Sip it or drink it,' Gloria added. 'Anyhow, it is good. It is an appetizer different from any palm you've known.'

Ekoyata had still not fully understand the reality of the night and what it meant for his life. His head had not been able to adjust fully to the rapid panorama. They had succeeded in making him feel at home. He felt drunk now with pleasure and high ecstasy. It was a dream, the only place he did things without effort. And he hoped the dream never woke.

Smell of palm wine filled the whole place. Women were also drinking freely with the men folks. Baneke's social life looked too unusual to him. It was quite different from what he had known about many ethnics in the country where women often hovered at the background. More drink jars were hurling down and the wine was flowing freely.

Ekoyata was not new to the drink. He knew it to be available anywhere in the country. But his father had always said that the ones they had in Lagos were not original. The greedy sellers there dilute it with water and then add sugar and a leaven known as saccharin to make it swell up. The mere thought of this opportunity to experience a taste of the original filled him with some pride. He lifted the cup to his mouth. The smell went stronger in his nose. Then he sipped it. The fresh and sweet taste caught hold of his tongue while the rest of it went straight to his tired nerves. He lifted the cup again and began to gulp greedily. When it was empty. He set the cup on the ground. What an experience! he genuinely felt. Better than a banquet in Abuja Nicon hotel dining hall.

Gloria filled another cup for him. They cracked the fires and added fagots to the livid beds of red coals. And Ekoyata watched the shades of red as it took the darkness. Some girls took the stage. The dance was starting, he thought.

Ekoyata thought that they wore their costumes in their neighbour's house. They could not have been with the crowd and he didn't see them. Their grooming would have given them away. When he heard voices coming to him in song, he had looked. And he had seen them coming from there at the neighbour's compound.

The music beats changed as soon as the girls took the stage. Ekoyata soon realised it was going to be an energetic dance. But the most unbelievably seductive expressions were portrayed on their

dressing. The black girls wore short skirts that were fitted from the hips to the waistline. They shook the waists and the bead load that lay there began to tremble.

'We called those beads Akpono,' Obehi told Ekoyata. 'We make them from tiny discs. Have you seen them before?'

'No ma,' Ekoyata said.

'They are heavy too,' she continued. 'Our young girls use them. They help to put the girl's buttocks in good shape. But a girl never shows them to a man. They usually wear cloths over them to hide them. They are paraded on special occasions only. But if a man becomes interested in her, she could show them to him in secret.'

He didn't say anything. But his eyes were looking at the girls, their waists and the temperamental beads quivering on top of their buttocks. Hot saliva began to gather in his mouth. He felt shame inside himself. To him, the girls were naked. He didn't feel entertained by the dance as much as he felt by their dress and grooming. And he could not tell whether he was still controlling himself well enough. His acting might be awkward and he was afraid the people were going to find out. Maybe the perspective he was enjoying about the dancing black girls weren't what they wanted him to enjoy. He was trying not to look at the chests of the girls. It was even worse. From their navels to the top was a different book. The breasts were caught in bead nets. But they were too scanty to hide them from view. So he could look at them through the spaces. They were large, round and firm.

'I can see you like this,' Obehi said.

'Yes ma.'

'I can see the way you are looking.'

He thought briefly about her words. Suddenly, the flame in him died. How was he looking? I didn't act well, he thought. I know. She saw me. She caught me looking at them in the wrong places.

'I am enjoying the dance; I am seeing this for the first time,' he told her from a funny idea. Maybe they don't even care, he thought. Maybe I am just disturbing myself. They want me to look wherever I am pleased and see whatever I want to see. Isn't that the reason they brought them to dance in my front? Didn't his father say that people in the village use to walk naked in the past when clothe was a rare commodity? And naked mature girls with grown pubic hair and full breasts sit on the ground with big strong lads and play games. Still, they didn't know what to do with their organs until they were married. Maybe, nakedness still didn't mean anything to his people of Baneke.

His eyes strayed back to the girls. They were fleshy, fat-free and looked promiscuous in their dance. Their long, dark, glossy hair inter-plaited with coral beads reflected the red fire flame. And he felt he could extend his hand and lay it on one waist with the beads. The beads, deep black, bright orange, dark blue and gold, seemed to add to the softness of the waist as he imagined it. A low growl rumble in his chest to the buttocks that threw up, showing how freely they vibrated in the short skirts.

'The girls that are most ripe for marriage are the ones that are selected to participate in this dance,' Obehi told Ekoyata. 'It is opportunity for them to find a man.'

'In the end they get some man?' Ekoyata asked.

'Yes, some do.'

He cut the talk. The music continued. Voices rang in it. And the dance went on. It was a story. Everybody looked on. But Obehi explained the symbolisms to Ekoyata.

My Akpono,

Do not bring trouble for me

Beads are never missing

Around the waist of a queen.

When they finally left the stage, the music went up a full beat for a while before it finally sighed to a stop.

When the major dance started Ekoyata saw an old woman. She tied a cloth very tight to her waist. She walked with sharp straight strides to the center of the gathering. He watched what she was going to perform. But the scene faded into the images of the girls he saw in the previous dance in his mind.

He thought of the strength the girls had. He thought of their long straight legs and their agility. And he felt that if he wanted to, he could marry any of them. He knew that the entire population of Baneke was poor. And if he offered to marry any of the land's daughters, her family and their friends would receive it as a wand) of blessing touching their prayers and endowing it with reality and meaning. But now, he thought that his own life had already lost every meaning.

The woman who was dancing walked towards him and performed signs. Ekoyata didn't understand anything. He smiled at her.

She turned from him and spat out. She spat in the nearby fire.

'Did you see her?' Obehi asked.

'Yes ma,' Ekoyata said.

'Did you notice what she did?'

'No ma.'

'She spat away.'

'Yes, I saw that. Does it mean something?'

'Oh yes. She meant that you have offended her. She greeted you, but you didn't return it.'

'I didn't know,' he blurted embarrassingly.

'It is alright. The next time she approaches, place the palm of your right hand on her back. That settles it. You are the reason for this evening.'

'Okay ma.'

Ekoyata was half hearing her and half away in thought. Then, her voice was replaced by the picture in his mind again. He turned his head and glanced about. He could see fires and people. He could hear the music beats and see the dancing woman. But none was strong enough to pull him back from his self-immersion. He was still trying to find out what the night meant for him and what his life meant

there. America had sent him back home. He came back and found no home at home. There was only a wonderful people who tried to find the meaning of their existence by seeking pleasure and other mundane things. And he wished that he had come when his life was not glutted with problems. Unlike the individualistic life at large, he found that people here in Baneke needed one another, love one another and shared from the heart. And if he married one of the poor black girls, she could make him happy again. The girls looked strong and athletic. They looked simple and innocent.

He rested his back on the chair. He raised his head and looked beyond the fires at the party scene. And he saw the vast darkness that loomed over Baneke and sighed. He turned his head and glanced at his aunt. What she wore in the night was still not better than rags, a worn wrapper under an old blouse. But they seemed to be the best she had, reserved for special occasions. Still, she looked good, at least better than a madwoman that she was when he first saw her. Yet, she was the only family member sitting by him in his welcome party. She was the closest person to him now in the world.

Ekoyata reclined his back against the chair and started to laugh hysterically. He thought that he was falling but he had not landed yet. The fall started in Arizona, USA. But he didn't know where he was going to land. If he knew where, he would smuggle out one of the girls he saw in the dance down to the place for consolation.

His consciousness came back to the dance again. He saw the woman made signs with her hands and her voice ringing in a song that looked like incantations. Suppose in this fall I landed on my head instead of the feet. He thought to himself. And the laughter vibrated through his body again.

'I can see that you are enjoying yourself,' Obehi said.

'Oh yes ma,' Ekoyata feigned.

'Let me tell you the story she is dancing now.'

'Okay ma.'

Ekoyata was at ease now. His aunt's observation told him that he was acting well. He looked at the dance and saw the old woman dancing towards him again. Ekoyata did as he was told. He dabbed a palm on her back several times. Then there was an ovation. And the dance proper began as he was informed.

Obehi continued to interpret every step to Ekoyata. 'This first dance is a story about you. She said that you are a true son of your father. Baneke is happy to see you.'

Her agility despite her age, frightened Ekoyata. He thought that she should be about eighty.

When the dance finished, a third one began. It was a pair dance. Two women were on the stage to act. The story went to the market according to Obehi's interpretation. It said that hunters were already catching tortoise at the market. It was a way to review a time, when because of division, the routine maintenance of the market was let up and wild grasses grew over most of the market.

As the night wore on, Ekoata could see some old men, women and children dozing off, but not the youths and the musicians. When the wind blew, the music became a fine blend of instruments, rattle of fire, voices and the howling of the wind, helping to provoke insanity out of the sage women's heads.

By the time it was the second cockcrow, everybody began to wander back to their places.

