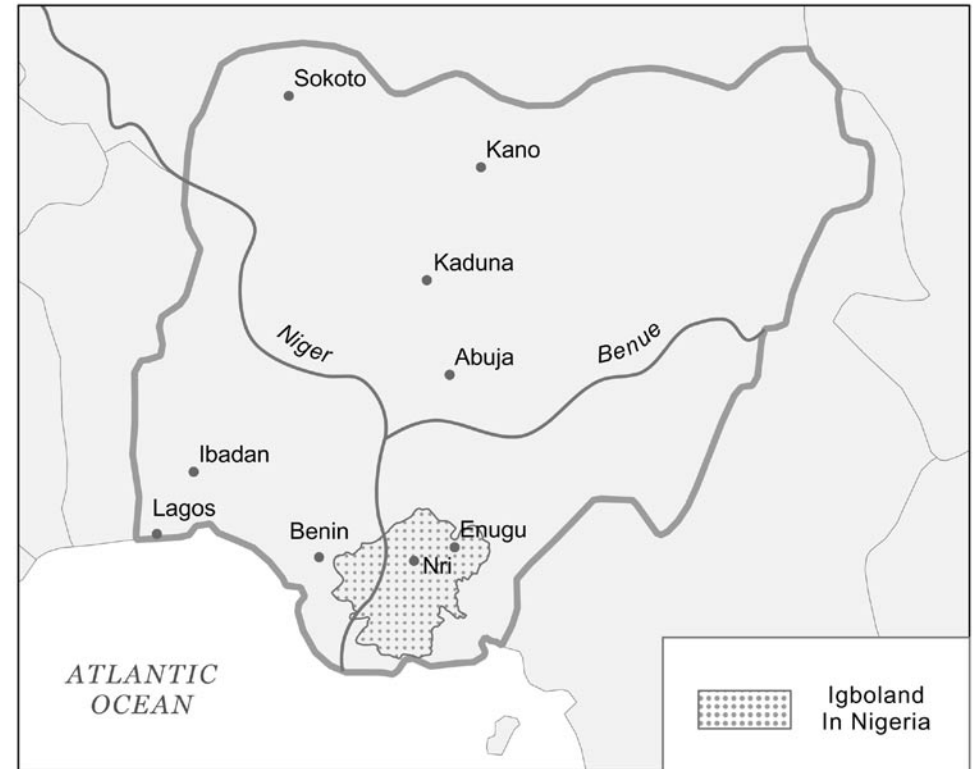


NIGERIA



IGBOLAND IN NIGERIA





PROLOGUE

Husband of Fish

In the fortieth year of the Third Century B.C., Okolo, a fisherman of the Igbo tribe, whose homeland was south of the Sahara Desert and a few day's walk by foot north of the Atlantic Ocean, sat in quiet meditation at the bank of the Ama-Mbala River. His back was to the river, his eyes were shut, his legs were folded in front of him, and his breathing was even. He saw nothing and thought of nothing. His senses were voluntarily silenced.

The Egbenu sect he belonged to jokingly called this mind-suspending technique hanging, for that was what it sometimes felt like. It was like being suspended in nothingness where time and space had no value—the border between the human and spiritual world. The Egbenu believed that if one hung in this void often and for long periods of time, one would learn to float and, someday, even fly. The purpose of this mystical practice was to reach *amam-ife* (wisdom) and *acham-akwu* (enlightenment).

The Egbenu were a guild of full-time hunters who had adopted this technique and customized it to their liking. Egbenu men had been hanging for many years, but none had yet floated or flown. But the practice certainly relaxed their nerves when they went after the wild bulls. Okolo was not a full-time hunter, but he enjoyed the fellowship of the other men. Egbenu men were considered the wise men of their time, and Okolo enjoyed their association. Also, he reasoned, fishing was not so different from hunting.

Okolo had no way of knowing how long he had been in this state of mental suspension. That was why he always faced east so that when the

sun rose it would remind him that the soul had been fed, and it was time to fish so the body could be fed as well.

This particular morning, he had not been long in meditation before the sun rose with full force. Okolo opened his eyes and was temporarily blinded. This was not unusual—it happened all the time. He knew he just needed to wait until his eyes adjusted. He closed his eyes for a few moments, gently opening them again. The sun must have moved closer, because it was now right in his face. It seemed as if it was only a few foot-steps away, and he could see nothing but the sun. Now that was unusual.

Okolo could not move. He tried to see the big ball of light before him. He felt like a wild bull looking at a hunter's lamp on a perfectly dark night. He could feel the sun's warmth all over his body and found it comforting.

Then, in the middle of the light, he saw a figure. It hung in the air. He shivered. It reminded him of the ghost tales he had heard as a child. Maybe if he rubbed his eyes and wiped them, his nightmare would end and no one would ever hear a word of it. He rubbed his eyes, wiped his face, and opened his eyes again. His eyes were clear all right. Before him stood a male figure who appeared to be between the ages of twenty-five and forty. He looked young but, at the same time, ageless. He smiled and spread both arms outward. *Was he the sun?* He radiated the light from the sun. Even his garment radiated light.

"Greetings to you, Okolo, the son of Nwanna," the figure said in perfect Igbo. That was real.

In an Igbo story, the lamb said that he was not gifted with the art of dancing, so he did not go around looking for music to dance to. If, however, the music missed its way and ended up at his doorstep, he would do his best, even though it meant simply jumping up and down. Like the lamb, Okolo had to do something, so he spoke.

"Chineke! (God!) Is that you?"

There was silence.

"Chineke! I said . . ."

"Call me Anyanwu, Light. I am not Chineke. Chineke is the Creator and Father of all. He is the Origin and the Destination. He is everywhere and yet nowhere."

"Well, it is nice to meet you—Anyanwu. What do you want of me, a poor fisherman?" Okolo asked confidently, knowing that if Chineke, his creator, was everywhere all the time, He was watching this drama.

"I came to tell you that I like how you devote time to rest your mind every morning. It is a good habit. I watch you every morning."

"Thank you very much. I enjoy it myself. It makes me feel good," said Okolo, now proud of himself.

"It is more than that to you. You do not miss it because it helps you catch more and bigger fish. You have learned that the days when you do not keep a quiet mind before a fishing trip, you catch far less. So you have to do it."

"So you have been watching me and know me that well."

The Light moved his arms for the first time. He pointed at Okolo with his right index finger, saying, "I know you more than you know yourself." Then he folded both arms across his lower abdomen like a wise teacher.

"Now you have my attention," said Okolo. "What else do you know about me?"

"I knew you would ask that because you are curious about things. I know also that you are not a fisherman, but a teacher. You are the teacher and leader among your people. You see yourself as a perfect fisherman. They call you 'Di-Azu' (Husband of Fish), and you enjoy that title. But this is not your true talent. You must lead your people to total freedom. You must prepare yourself. Before you engage in a quiet mind, instead of visualizing a big fish, see instead a happy, healthy, and peaceful community."

"Then what?"

"It is only then that you can float and fly just like I do. It is only then that you can teach your people to float and fly."

Then the Light started to retreat farther and farther away. A chill came over Okolo's body. He was usually tongue-tied and nervous around people, always searching for the right words to say, but sitting in front of the Light, he felt powerful. He also felt a peace he had never had before. He felt at one with the Light and was filled with an abundance of energy. Thoughts and words came naturally and freely. But now the Light was

withdrawing, and he felt like his old self again—empty and powerless. When the Light was present, things happened in slow motion. When the Light lifted its hand and pointed at him, it had taken forever, and Okolo saw every detail of the hand lifting and pointing. He saw the spark of light leaving the finger and entering his heart. Then he felt the connection. But now the Light was leaving and he felt empty.

“Wait! Wait for a moment! Come back here! When can I expect to see you again?”

“The Light can come to you only once. After that, you must seek the Light by your own efforts. I will send you the perfect spirit to guide and counsel you. Call it ‘Agbala,’ because it will make you agile and give you wisdom. You will recognize it when it comes. Agbala will guide you to the Light. It is the giver of insight. It will give you wisdom and guide you all the way to the Light.”

When Okolo awoke from his vision, he looked around him. The other fishermen were pointing at him and laughing at the loner who kept to himself.

“Now he is talking to himself, too,” one of them said while others burst out laughing.

Yes, Agbala had come fifty years later, and led Okolo to the Light. Standing in front of the Light, Okolo had seen the vision very clearly, but at ninety-six he was too old to act on it so he put all his children, both male and female, to the test. Uyanna, his seventh son, did better than the rest, so Okolo gave Uyanna the nickname “Nri” meaning manifestation (of the vision, of the ideal). He changed his own name to “Eri” meaning manifestor (manifestor of the vision, the ideal). Okolo (Eri) shared the vision with Uyanna (Nri) and gave him his blessings, sending him on his way.

Uyanna, now known as Nri, moved south and settled at an uninhabited lake. He called his community Nri, meaning the ideal (or at least the beginning of it).



ONE

Turning Points

On an Nkwo market day, Okoye Nweri, a thirteenth generation descendant of Nri, walked home happy and proud of himself with a basket on his head. In the basket were his hunting club, a machete, and seven dead animals: three squirrels, four full-sized nchi (grass cutters or beavers), and one live baby ogini. The animals were his share from an all-morning hunting adventure at Ofia Okpukpo, a small wilderness belonging to his village, Nri-Agu, one of the fourteen Nri villages.

Okoye had since bade farewell to his three hunting partners, three brothers, the twins and their elder brother, from his maternal village of Nri-Ejiofor. He was particularly happy because the brothers had let him have the only living ogini any of them had caught. The ogini was a small animal that can easily be mistaken for a big rat if not for its beautiful spotted skin. It was rarely caught alive, and Okoye was looking forward to showing it off as a pet. The brothers had let him have it because he was the trip’s organizer and had invited them to hunt in his own backyard wilderness. But this was not the only gift they had given to Okoye.

After giving him the ogini, the oldest of the boys dipped his hand into his basket, took out the biggest nchi, and dropped it into Okoye’s basket.

“That one is for Our Big Sister.”

The boy, Nweze, was sixteen years old, only two years older than Okoye, but he called Okoye’s mother their Big Sister, making the boy look and sound more mature than he really was. Okoye was a little intimidated. He knew the brothers’ mother was much younger than his own, but it was Nri custom to refer to all males in a mother’s birth village as Symbolic Uncle and,

in turn, every male in that village called the birth mother Big Sister. Even men twice her age called her Ada-Anyi-Nwanya. So Okoye felt a little uncomfortable whenever the boys asserted their rights as his symbolic uncles. It was very thoughtful and nice of the boy, though, to hold his mother in such high regard, and Okoye knew he would enjoy passing the gift along to his mother. He was sure she would be thrilled and would talk about it all day long. She always talked about the people of Nri-Ejiofor, her birth village, as some special breed of Nri people and she would use an event like this to her advantage, making sure that everyone around her knew about it. Okoye adored his mother and was always happy when she glowed while talking about her birth village and her youth years.

The time was inching into the first hour of the afternoon as Okoye came closer and closer to his home. The sun was still sweet on his body. Okoye could feel it on his neck and shoulders as he turned a corner and entered the Ebe Nri-Agu. As soon as he saw the old udala (apple) tree covered with yellow fruits, pleading to be eaten, he became hungry. Surely there would be children sitting all around the tree as usual, waiting for udala fruit to fall. Certainly they would give him one. Okoye wondered if he should show the ogini to the children. He decided that he would not unless the animal made noise and someone asked about it.

There were many legends and taboos about the udala tree at Nri. Its fruit must never be plucked. It must be allowed to fall on its own accord. Udala trees were native to the area, but were not planted by humans. They just showed up in big compounds or public squares where there were lots of children. Almost all of the public squares at Nri had one or two udala trees, and children at Nri knew which one had the sweetest fruit. Children and their baby watchers usually gathered around that one to play and wait for the fruit to drop. Then they would have a group chase to retrieve the udala; only one person would win the race. Because the udala dropped frequently, many children would be winners. The Nri believed that spirits hung around the udala trees when humans were not there. So it was taboo for a person to sit near an udala tree waiting for falling fruit. Nri were suspicious of anyone who did this.

As Okoye stepped into the square, no one was in sight. On an Nkwo market day, young mothers commonly brought their children to the

square's communal child watch while the parents went to the market to buy or sell. Okoye wondered if he had mistaken the day, but he had not. His mother had mentioned leaving early for the market to sell a goat.

As he walked into the square, he was temporarily shielded from the sun by the udala tree which shaded most of the square. Then he heard a pleasant sound. An udala was falling from the tree! "Kpa-cham! Kpa-cham! Kpam!" It sounded as the fruit fell, touching leaves and branches, dropping finally on the ground in front of Okoye, "Kpooo!"

It was a good omen for an udala to greet someone by falling in front of him. With the basket still on his head, Okoye bent halfway down and picked up the fruit without looking at it. When he stood up, he saw it was filled with fruit bugs. He quickly dropped it on the ground. This was a bad omen. In the old days, his highly spiritual forebearers would have pointed the fruit to the sun and prayed that any misfortune it might bring be taken away. But Okoye did not know this.

As he walked towards his home past his uncle, Ozo Ikezuo's compound, he saw his uncle standing there with three other men; all of them had crossed their arms on their chests. The three men were all from his village. He saluted his uncle as he approached them.

"Ozo Nwayoo!"

Ozo Ikezuo did not reply but bent his neck to the right and sighed, a sign of frustration, of surrender.

"Ozo Nna-anyi!," Okoye saluted again and this time raised his voice to be heard.

"My Son, rain has beaten the elephant and has entered its eyes."

Okoye stopped, not knowing what to say. Two of the men headed toward Okoye's father's compound. The third man, Nwangene, invited Okoye to come into his uncle's compound. When they reached the front of the obu, Nwangene took the basket from Okoye's head and put it on the ground. Okoye's heart started racing. He did not need to be told that something terrible had happened, but what? Ozo Ikezuo sat down, looking very resigned. Then Nwangene, too, sat down and invited Okoye to join them.

"What happened?" Okoye asked.

"How many years are you?" asked Nwangene.

"Ten and four years," replied Okoye, more puzzled.