

Next of “King”¹

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“I am now the next of ‘king,’” Shima insisted during the village meeting to make some burial arrangements for his late father. Shima was an insatiable son who depended on his father. He nevertheless even wished his father dead so that he could inherit his father’s belongings. He was “half educated,” seeing no need for school since he was destined to acquire as his father’s next of kin. In fact, he neglected with his destiny even when he had everything at his disposal to be well-educated.

At school, Shima would announce to his teachers that he was the “next of king,” which automatically made him the next “king” after his father’s death. His position as next of kin was misinterpreted as being the heir to the throne of the Ute district.

Shima came from a polygamous family. His father, Chief Ate, had a lasting stigma regarding women, so his kinsmen never spoke well of him. At one point, nobody wanted to take any law case to him, because he

¹ Editor’s note: this story is not a fictional work but “a real life issue,” but the author “changed the names in case those involved wouldn’t be offended if they happen to read this story” (from author’s email on June 22, 2016).

would always delay justice to take sides with the highest bidder. He had particularly stained his image in cases of divorce. If he fell in love with the lady in question, he will quickly pass judgment in her favor with a supporting claim of getting married to her. There were times when he would encourage a woman to file a divorce suit so that he could make her a “royal lady.” Chief Ate saw no shame in his actions; neither did he care for the insults that were rained on him. All his wives were married this way, except for his first, who was inherited from his late brother when he died during the civil war. He fought on the Nigerian side; rumors had it that Ate gave him an amulet which deceived him that he was bullet-proof. This, too, was connected to the envy he had for his brother’s wife, because he hurriedly conducted the marriage before his brother’s corpse was brought for burial.

Chief Ate wives were a crop of beauties, and so were his children: handsome souls and beautiful peaches. However, character-wise, there was no measure of recommendation quite satisfying for them. The boys were all troublemakers at the market place and the school playground, and brought no good news from their farm. The girls were usually deficient; no old woman around recommended them for marriage, their only recommendation being discouragement. Among them, Shima took the lead; he was anxious for leadership, never waiting to be appointed. He gave no chance to any of his brothers, nor even his father’s kinsmen.

Shima was not even aware when Chief Ate passed on; his nonchalance told him away. Chief Ate slept as usual in his cloth knitted chair with his pipe on his mouth. A loyal kinsman who was always coming to pay homage discovered his body. He quickly alerted some other kinsmen who took counsel to deprive Shima of this long-expected dream. The staff of office, which was always put in Ate’s goatskin bag, was quickly sneaked out to be handed over to whomever they chose. The eldest of them summoned all the chief’s wives together, instructing them to prepare cassava for “akpu” and gather condiments for soup for the great

feast ahead of them.

It surprised the chief's first wives that this elder spoke to them courageously without the chief's authorization. Torkwase was her name; she spoke on behalf of her co-wives. The other wives asked, "When were you sworn as the chief's spokesperson? How dare you address us so bravely when my lord has not spoken?"

Torkwase challenged him while she went towards the king. She knelt beside him as usual and tapped him to wake him up. The chief's pipe fell from his mouth, which remained mouth wide open. This was when she wailed. It was then that they discovered the chief's death.

At the sound of this wailing, Shima rushed from where he was to take over. He was too late; he hurriedly checked his father's goatskin bag, and found nothing. Sweat from disappointment filled his face, and shame did not allow him look up. His long-nursed dreams failed to materialize. He had failed! His failure made him feel a stomachache; he wished something else could happen to cover his shame! His threats were those of a barking and toothless dog.

As a last desperate resort, he begged for the first time in his life to be considered by his kinsmen and brothers to see how he had spent much time serving his father. Of course, he had spent much time serving his father for selfish reasons.

In one of the meetings to make arrangements for the burial, Shima explained to them in a calm voice like that of a professor teaching algebra to a class of mutes that he was the "next of king"; therefore, in his father's absence, he was the right replacement. This made his kinsmen laugh at him. Anongo, who was thought to be dumb because of gunshot wounds when he was in the army, spoke for the first time: "If you are the right replacement, where is your staff of office?" He continued then in a threatening voice: "if you have stolen the staff of office to boast before us, save our time and bring it out. Let us crown you and proceed with the arrangements." This comment changed the topic of

discussion. Some wondered how Chief Ate's death had healed Anongo. Some cursed him for pretending for too long, while others expressed fear of being denounced for discussing secrets before him. Mixed feelings filled the people, and no meaningful thing was done that day.

The burial arrangement was finally concluded the next day. However, Shima was not crowned as chief of Ute; he felt he should go on exile or commit suicide. Annoyingly, the staff of office was given to Imo, Shima's second younger brother. He had been borne to Chief Ate's third wife, and never saw eye to eye with Shima. They were no less than archenemies.

The burial continued, with Imo presiding over the occasion; his father's kinsmen paid homage, and expected Shima to do same. Shima's reluctance was clearly exhibited, though he had no choice but to go through the motions. His obedience incited the new chief to proceed with the burial rites. As expected, nobody wanted the corpse to last longer than two markets. This was a taboo: the chief's corpse's decay was a sign of rejection by his ancestors. It was said, "The voice of the people is the voice of God." Shima quickly remembered the saying, and in a snail-like movement, walked towards his younger brother and bowed. The anxious mourners almost clapped, but quickly stopped themselves with the thought that this was a funeral.

All the burial rites were duly performed, and the chief was laid to rest to meet his ancestors, never to return again. Cries of different styles reached the air with drumming and dirges meant for a royal being. People dispersed, though not in a hurry, for their various hamlets and villages, leaving the immediate family members of Chief Ate to mourn further.

Shima could not sit and look at his younger brother reigning in his presence--ruling him as a subject. He decided to go on exile. He left at night, two days after his father's burial, going to settle with the Udam in the Ogoja area. Even though his body was not at home, his mind, eyes

and ears were always there, thinking about the throne. He really longed for it.

His father's house, on the other hand, knew no peace; crises were the order of the day. Quarrelling among the wives, insults and envy occupied their time. The late chief's wife, Imo's mother, controlled the throne, because Imo was still a boy. This control was not directly from her; her man friend from the neighboring clan ruled her. The late chief's kinsmen regretted ever giving the staff office to Imo; they wished power had changed hands. For the second time, Anongo spoke: "I have never seen a man feeding another when he is desperately hungry. You had always wished to be the chief, having discussed this times without number, but when the opportunity came, you happily threw it away." All his kinsmen agreed with him, but regretted they could now do nothing, as it was said that, "When the excreta is cold, it is never eaten by the dogs."

In Udam, Shima continued to show his character by forgetting he was still not at home; favor was not on his side, as the indigenes counseled and asked him to go back to his place. After two years of unacceptable sojourn, Shima returned to his birthplace, unprepared to face the challenges of his father's house.

NB: "akpu" is a paste made from peeled cassava, boiled, pounded and eaten with stew or soup in most African homes.