Kraftgriots

Also in the series (DRAMA)


Chinyere Okafor: Campus Palavar & Other Plays Chinyere Okafor: The Lion and the Iroko

Ahmed Yerima: The Silent Gods Ebereonwu: Cobweb Seduction


Ahmed Yerima

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AUTHOR’S NOTE

This was not the story I set out to write. The conflict of the play, as it appears here, gradually took over the narrative, and I became a co-storyteller of my own story. I must also add that this is no contrived attempt at justifying a personal spiritual logic, which will be found in the play. As I wrote, I felt a compulsion to resolve the conflict of the play, the way it appears here. Interestingly, my story drifted towards the dwindling glory of the traditional gods, and the c in their of the worshippers when placed again their needs. Thus, this unwittingly became the thematic thrust of this play. Before I forget, music plays a major aspect in the aesthetics of this play. Igbo music must be played through out the production of the play.

I thank Almighty God, my good friend Casimir Onyemuchara, Rup, Kudi and our dear Aunty Selya for this one.

Ahmed Yerima
When play opens, dim light on stage at the shrine of Odenigbo. Five elderly women led by Ukatu sing and move in a slow and scary movement. They hold white staff which they stamp on the floor in a rhythmic order. They stop at the centre stage.

Ukatu: Spirits of our ancestors, we Ndi-inyom, mothers of the land, gather. Odenigbo, we mothers have come to tell you that our children cry. Listen to their pleas, guide and protect your children as it is meant to be.

All: Iseeeeee! Mgbeka: O great Odenigbo, your children wallow in patience and joy, and they become restless. All: Iseeeeee!

Chika: O Odenigbo, we beg you sit up, and be the god that you are to your people. Guide the Eze, and make ObodiIjeh great again.

All: Iseeeeee! Ojugo: Let peace reign, Odenigbo. As you protected our ancestors, continue to protect us. Let peace reign. All: Iseeeeee!

Nwakaego: Let your godly hands wipe away our tears. Let them hold up our tottering feet. Make a way for fruits from the farms. Let money fill our hands. Let smiles fill our faces again.
ALL: Iseeeeee!

UKATU: We promise you, if you refuse to care for us as we have asked, as mothers, we shall bite even the fingers that feed us. Let our ancestors stand by us.

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ALL: Iseeeeee! Slowly they exit the stage. Brighter lights as UBANTA steps out.

UBANTA: Dried up mothers of the land! Cursed bald vultures, all! Watch them go like a band of spent wet butterflies once brightly plumed, now stained in age and damped in blurred fuzzy colours. Pity. Bite the fingers that once fed you? Weak banters of old spoilt rattles now attempting feeble clings. See them wobble home, common dried up empty barrels. I hear footsteps. (Hides. Enter IKEDI.)

UBANTA: It is you. It is late.

IKEDI: Yes, it is me. If it is not too late for the old bones of our mothers, then how can darkness stop me? I was seated in front of my house when I heard their scary murmurs. I followed them until they started to climb the hill. It was then I knew they were coming here. What did they say?

UBANTA: What will women say? They just ranted threats at Odenigbo.

IKEDI: Aluemeeeee! Women!

UBANTA: Yes, women ... led by your sister, Ukatu. Empty talk. You needed to have seen them all bent ... spent.

IKEDI: You are well then?

UBANTA: Very well. Nothing touches the hard rock. You go home, our plan is secure. Ikedi, Onowu-in-waiting, I say go home, all is well.
IKEDI: (Lets out a chuckle.) Onowu Ikedi, the title sounds like gold.

UBANTA: And soon you shall wear it like a prized Onowu shoulder. From the visit of the old hags, I deduced that the villagers are becoming restless. The slow poison of death and mishap spoil the land. Like the angered cobra whose tail has been stepped on, ndi-inyom have bent their heads for a bite. But now I shall go for the neck of the cobra. You watch and see how this big wizard walks on the Ubele stream.

IKEDI: Ubanta, patience. Watch where we throw our stones, or we may hit our own.

UBANTA: Patience? But as things are going, we may be forced to throw stones at some of our own people. Like your mad sister, Ukatu.

IKEDI: Remember that she is an Ada Agbara, a sacred maiden of the strong and powerful deity that oversees the affairs of the ObodoIjeh community.

UBANTA: Listen to yourself. So the supreme god of the land, Odenigbo, must cower and bow? (Chuckles.) You play with fire ... raw from the blacksmith’s embers. The community tolerates her excesses and spoils her, I shall curb her. Are you now on her side? Does your brotherly love overwhelm you now?

IKEDI: No! Odenigbo forbid! I am a man. A warrior ....not a woman! All I am saying is that each god has its place. When she grew old, we all felt that her spirit had left her. But sometimes the gods take over her senses, and allow her sight see beyond. With age, she has gathered a boldness that allows her to confront even the gods. Yet the people have learnt to respect her every deed. That was why her name was changed from Akweke to Ukatu ... an epitome of trouble.

UBANTA: Your family would have forced her to marry ...
IKEDI: A maiden of the gods? No man would have her. Marry her out?

UBANTA: Yes. In order to break her stupid pride. She would have been a better person if she had a man.

IKEDI: The family gave up when she predicted the deaths of three Ezes, one after another. Remember? When it happened even our parents feared her shadow. So, please be patient with her. I think that even the gods fear her.

UBANTA: Afraid? (Chuckles.) I am afraid that she might be a stumbling block to our dream. We may need to curtail her ... slow her down ... if necessary.

IKEDI: Ubanta! I beg you. Give me some time. I shall talk with her. She is my blood.

UBANTA: No! Let me be the one that vomits fear into her aged heart. It will calm her down, you will see.

IKEDA: And the spirit of patience must also extend to the women elders. Ndi-inyom are sacred part of this community. Caution, great priest of Odenigbo.

UBANTA: Caution? No! The mothers of the land have thrown the first stone. I shall start from the top of the mountain to roll down my boulder of woes, until there is an avalanche of total destruction. Eze Ikeduru-idu, prepare to smell the anus of the dreaded baboon.

IKEDI: Yes ... but with tact.

UBANTA: Tact? That is a foolish notion. I say, no! I am the voice of Odenigbo. He does what I tell him to do. I am Odenigbo. Do you doubt me still?

IKEDI: Me? Never. Just be careful. Power takes over one slowly, until it gets to a point when it intoxicates. You are fearless and strong, but wisdom must also prevail. We must pick
our enemies one by one ... not all the soldiers in all the flanks at the same time ... or we lose our focus.

UBANTA: Wisdom? Again you make me laugh. Dimgba of Akabutu, the mad dibia has surrendered his magical powers to my ... sorry our use. Ezemuo, Ogalagu, the wizard has cooked us into a paste too deadly for even death to touch. That is wisdom, my friend. We remain infallible even at the very centre of a blazing flame. Okala mmadu, okala mmuo (half human, half spirit). We cannot die. That is wisdom, my friend.

IKEDI: This is good. I see your anger seeths.

UBANTA: Like wild fire. It reeks of the stench of death. And I wait for those who dare me.

IKEDI: Ugaganogu! Idede! Odumode!

UBANTA: Um! I hear you! Just you watch and see me wear the smelted cloaks of man with that of a god ... see me. Lewe anya! Just watch as my people cower behind their now weak god who has since been entrapped as my shadow, a common puppet. I say, watch! But first, I must visit this fading Ada whose aging rebellious spirit dares the hungry cobra!

Slowly, lights fade.

The spotlight is on the TOWN CRIER in front of UKATU’s house..

TOWNCRIER: Obodoanyi genunti o!

Umu Obodoljeh genu ti!

Eze Ikeduru-Idu has commanded that I tell you that the Odenigbo festival comes up again this year in six weeks. All the children of our village from far and wide should be told to return home for the festival.

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Okezie the son of Durumba is the new mask carrier of Odenigbo. Be merry, as what you will eat and drink on the day of the festival awaits you in the palace. I have spoken what I was sent.

Slowly the lights come on to reveal the house OFUKATU who is seated on a stool dressed in all black. She is crying when NGBEKE, another elderly woman, enters.

UKATU: Did you meet him on the way? NGBEKE: Who? UKATU: Oku-ekwe. Did you hear him with his gong? NGBEKE: Yes ... but I refused to listen to what he had to say.

UKATU: I could not stop myself. He stood right in my face and spoke his rubbish. (Chuckles.) He spoke of the impending Odenigbo festival. Poor fools. Our elders say that when the two sides of a road are well protected, children are not afraid to play on it. And neither are people afraid to walk in the middle of the road. But if the wood that holds the road together is rotten, all who walk on it will soon fall to their untimely deaths. All, Ngbeke, all.

NGBEKE: I have just returned from the third place sorrow and sadness bore fruits this morning. Death here and there ... young children ... young women ... dying at childbirth ... men dying foolish deaths which cannot be explained. ObodoIjeh is in trouble, and Odenigbo does nothing even after our visit to his shrine.

UKATU: I say the world is coming to an end. You know lately when young children greet me, it is the faces of their grandfathers and grandmothers that I see. The dead seem to be waiting to take us all away... one after the other.

NGBEKE: Olamma went mad at her son’s burial. She started to scream and roll on the floor pleading to confess.

UKATU: Confess? To what?
NGBEKE: She said she killed her son.

UKATU: Chineke mooooo!

NGBEKE: It was sheer madness.

UKATU: Why?

NGBEKE: She had asked her late son not to marry the woman from Ogwu, but to take his old wife back. He refused.

UKATU: So ...

NGBEKE: Angered by the harsh words he spoke to her, she waited for him at Aba junction as he returned to the village. She turned into a pussycat, and ran across the road, his bicycle swerved to avoid it fell and hit his head on the stony road. He died on the spot.

UKATU: Amadioha! When will this madness end? I say the world is coming to an end.

MGBEKE: ‘I gave birth to him, and it is my right to punish him for the insults he heaped on my person’, she kept screaming. They tied her hands as she tried to join him in the grave. Akrika, the dibia, was called, and with some concoction she slept. We all ran out of the compound allowing shame to reign.

UKATU: Where was he?

MGBEKE: Who?

UKATU: The one the town crier sang about not too long ago. Where is the great protector of the land whom we live and die for? Where was Odenigbo when Olamma was revealing her wicked act? Where was he?

MGBEKE: The very question we all asked ourselves after. Now, Akrika says that she was possessed.
UKATU: Alu! Please tell me who else was there? MGBEKE: The proud Chika. Her shoulders broader as ever. UKATU: Proud? Why?

MGBEKE: Her son, Okezie, is the new carrier of Odenigbo’s masquerade. (UKATU gives a long hiss.) She was wearing the new clothes the Eze gave her in gratitude for the choice of her son to serve the people.

UKATU: Okezie? But I thought she told me that he was to become the Onye-ocha’s priest?

MGBEKE: You have really switched off from what is happening around you. At the last minute, Ubanta visited Chika with gifts from the Odenigbo ... and she persuaded her son to change his mind.

UKATU: Um ... she should never have collected the gifts of death. She sold him out. Haa! I only pray that she does not live to regret her action. (Pause.) It is the boy that has my pity.

MGBEKE: Why do you say that?

UKATU: Odenigbo enjoys too much love of worship, so he has become complacent. (Chuckles.) However, it is the real spirit of the masquerade we should fear.

MGBEKE: The real spirit of the masquerade? I don’t understand.

UKATU: I am afraid that Ubanta may have become the god. When a man is favoured by the gods like Ubanta ... when he speaks for the gods... he often becomes power-drunk. First, struck by a sickened illusion.

MGBEKE: If that is the case, then we are in trouble. But the Eze will not let him.

UKATU: The Eze? (Chuckles.) I am afraid that the Eze may have collected a wrapper from his daughter and has become a woman ... day
by day ... his weakness manifests.

MGBEKE: I still don’t understand. UKATU: I fear Ubanta may want to become the Eze. MGBEKE: Alu! Why?

UKATU: (In a whisper.) I think that he dreams of becoming the Eze himself. I pray that when we decide to take Odenigbo to the bush and burn it ...

MGBEKE: Alu! Heh! Wash your mouth with salt water. (Disturbed.) It can never happen.

UKATU: Then go home. Hurry, woman, or he will pick you instead. Evil is about to unfold. Ekwensu roams! I say hurry home! I shall call you when the firewood is ready to be lit. Hurry.

MGBEKE: You have started to see things again. I swear, I should never have come. Send for me when your spirits is calmer. (Hurries out.)

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UKATU: Just go home, woman. What my eyes behold presently, frightens even the hardened heart of Uka tu. (As if speaking to people visible only to her.) You have returned? Welcome. (UBANTA enters behind her. she does not notice his presence.) What have you come to do? Your bright silvery dresses disturb my sight. Who are you? Where do you come from? If you come in peace, then why do you carry a sword and a lit torch of burning fire? Have you come to take me? No? Not me alone? Us? How many of us? (Startles.) I feel another presence. Who are you?

UBANTA: So the madness of Ada has not left you. In your old age you still talk to yourself.

UKATU: (Turns and sees him.) It is you?

UBANTA: Yes, me. I have come to see you.
UKATU: Why would a vulture fly in the day. I thought your scavenging was at night.

UBANTA: No. Now I come as the all-seeing owl during the day. Nwanyi ojo (a bad omen, mother.)

UKATU: An owl indeed is bad omen. Even as you are Ubanta, iwu onye ojo (you are bad omen enough). (Chuckles.) And besides, is it not enough that you have almost destroyed all the lives of the people of ObodoIjeh?

UBANTA: You flatter me. How can I wreck so much havoc when the people of ObodoIjeh have a great mother like you.

UKATU: I see you are in a good mood. But I’m tired of this game of spite. Let me be. But wait, I must say this. I see you engulfed in a ball of fire.

UBANTA: Haa ... I see the Ada is still at work. I see fire around you, too. Beware, woman. The enemy you have chosen is stronger than you.

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UKATU: Although they say that evil lives long, but it cannot outlive all of mankind. It ends one day. Beware, too, Ubanta. Do not be like the clay effigy, who demanded to feel the coolness of raindrops. You will melt in shame.

UBANTA: (Wild laugh.) Old blind seer, you want to see for the great seer? (Chuckles.) I am not made of clay but of raw iron. Not even the bellows of the ironsmith can blow enough flame to melt me. And even if I was clay, raindrops will be soothing to my thick skin.

UKATU: Fire then. (Chuckles.)

UBANTA: What? Why do you chuckle? What do you see now?

UKATU: No. I saw an antelope hopping, panting, boasting of how fast it can run. Then I wondered what if it meets a lion in the race, what will
be on its mind when its neck snaps? (Chuckles again.)

UBANTA: What again? Your twisted story amuses me. I see you as the antelope, and I, the lion of ObodoIjeh!

UKATU: Beware, Ubanta. The impending embers of consuming fire... Haa, see them ... those to light it have already arrived.

UBANTA: And those to burn in it ... into ashes and fragmented bones... are ready. Beware also, Ukatu! (Chuckles.) Until we meet at the heated edge of the burning gulf of fire then?

UKATU: Yes! Until then.

Slowly, lights fade.

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Lights come on to show EZE seated on his throne chair alone. lost in thought.

EZE: When the mother sparrow weans its chicks, it dotes like a good mother should. Each morning, it goes out,fetches food, chews it, and pours it into the mouths of its young ones. Then they grow... and fly away... leaving the mother sparrow to its lonely sad fate. I, Eze Ikeduru-idu, I am the tired mother sparrow whose beaks and wings hurt more than it should because of its ungrateful children. I, am now left to grope alone, in this darkness by his people. Me! Haa ... this unwholesome weight reduces me. But sadder, still, is the emptiness of my soul, made void in sad reflection. My heart bleeds from the hardened stones of jeers ... harsh pricks ... which my own people throw at me. The very people I gave my all to serve. Oh, Odenigbo, the sacred god of my people, where are you? Save me from this sickening darkness set to embrace my land and unveil a tirade of woes. (Sound of people arguing from backstage.) Who dares to enter the cursed, now abused, shrine of my people?

AGUBA: Onye-Eze, may you live long. We have big problem outside.
EZE: I said no one should come here. Who can force you to come before me? My order remains.

AGUBA: It is Ada-ezi, and some Umuada women. Your daughters want to see their father. I dare not stop them.

EZE: The Umuada. Our daughters. (Pause.) Yes, let them in. Indeed, no one can stop them. Hurry.

ADA-EZI: (Bursts in. Four women follow her. they all wear the same costume.) Onye-Eze, we greet you.

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EZE: Daughters of the land, I greet you! Mothers of tomorrow, I greet you! Welcome back home. The land is yours! Umuada dooo nu!

ADA-EZI: Onye-Eze, so it is true? This was not the palace we left behind to protect the father of the land. We are angered.

EZE: (Looks at each woman.) News does travel. From your different houses in different villages, you have heard of the storm that blew my throne room down.

ADA-EZI: Everything that happened. Our mother, Ukatu, sent word to each of us. Each one told the other, and we are here. We have gone to the shrine of Odenigbo, and we have spoken with Ubanta. We gave him our message.

EZE: Your message?

ADA-EZI: The Umuada met and they sent us a message to you, too, great Eze. We want peace in the land. The excesses of Ubanta must stop. I have been mandated by the rest of the daughters of ObodoIjeh who live outside the village to remain in the village until this matter is resolved, and both the god and the people are together again. We leave.

EZE: I have heard.

ADA-EZI: We have spoken. (They depart in a hurry.)
EZE: The storm begins to gather. I only pray that my destiny is in favour of my happiness. (Enters AGUBA.) What again?

AGUBA: It is the Princess my lord. She insists that she must enter.

EZE: Chisom. Aguba, I thought I told you not to let her in ... not now, not like this. Yet as a princess, she, too, must share this heavy bile that clogs tmy throat. (Chuckles.) After a very dark night, comes a bright morning. So let her in.

Let her see this hovering darkness, so that she can best appreciate as they ebb ... with the withdrawing hands of the once protective fingers of Odenigbo. And who knows, she may hold the light I need. Let her in. (AGUBA bows and exists.)

CHISOM: (Enter CHISOM.) Father.

EZE: My only dot of joy arrives after the storm has blown, as it should be. For sweet beauty must not meet with evil ... it erodes innocence. Yes, come in now as the dust settles on a false calmness.

CHISOM: (Looks around.) Now I know why the racy lips of my informant, breathless, ran beyond his words. “The King” he stammered ... his lower jaw trembling ... Odenigbo ....Alu ... run to your father, Princess. Hurry!” he screamed. (Looks round the throne room.) So it is true? Even as I speak, the wind carrying the news is everywhere. I ran as fast as my feet could carry me, Father.

EZE: You did well, Child.

CHISOM: But why? The sad tale is that the great Eze, my father, ran out of his throne room like a common thief. Why?

EZE: The foulness of the breeze with a convoluting stench wrecked havoc here. It overpowered our senses. Ubanta, the Chief Priest of the god himself, was the despicable wild hog sent to rampage the throne room.
CHISOM: The Chief Priest sent as a wild hog?

EZE: Indeed. Its wildness became one with him. Odenigbo possessed the Chief Priest, and wore him a mask! Almost naked, he prowled and pounced, like a cheated bawd. With a flounce, tied the legs of the young goat he carried on his shoulders.

CHISOM: A goat!

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EZE: A young bleating white and black goat. Before me, with a cutlass in one hand, he removed its head. Blood flowed ... everywhere. Then he went wilder, breaking everything that was in his way. Leaving the head of the goat on my throne.

CHISOM: Alu!

EZE: Indeed! He desecrated my throne. As Eze, I am not to see blood before the purification rites of Odenigbo festival. But Ubanta washed me in it.

CHISOM: Why? EZE: I shudder in thought, but each time it is the senselessness of his action that stares me in the face. (Chuckles.)

CHISOM: What, father?

EZE: Obiageli, the old witch, dances having sucked to her fill the blood of the young child. She sits under the coconut tree to celebrate and breathe the taste of new life in her fangs. Then comes a whiff of breeze which shakes a coconut. It falls straight on the head of the old witch, and crushes her skull. (Chuckles again sadly.) I shall crush Ubanta’s head, I swear!

CHISOM: No, Father. He is protected by the great god, Odenigbo.

EZE: That one, too.
CHISOM: No! No mere ranting of an angry man. (Pause.) Did the elders not see this coming?

EZE: See what coming? Ubanta’s madness? (Chuckles.) Has he ever been sane? But I swear, I shall crush him as he has disgraced me ... I shall ...

CHISOM: Hush, Father. The gods hear you.

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EZE: Which gods? Those who clapped at Ubanta’s foolery? I say, I shall...

CHISOM: No, Father! But did you not hear the approach of the evil spirits? Did you not perceive the awful stench?

EZE: The only stench I perceived was the defying foaming blood. In my stupefied state, I could only hear the bloody ??? jeers of the goat.

CHISOM: But why? Which of the gods blocked your ears until all you heard was the muffled sound of impending danger. Haa, what ills? Not even the whisper of chirping birds? I smell foul manipulating hands of deviously wrapped up enemies, even now as I speak. So why did no one see the smoked haze of the impending thick black smoke of doom. And always, you say that I am only a child.

EZE: No ... not anymore. Your words make sense to me.

CHISOM: What a damned lying myth. (Chuckles.)

EZE: What?

CHISOM:I thought the Eze had the overbearing power to know and see things with a magical third eye of the owl?

EZE: That was what I was told as the coronation ritual ended. I am infallible, they said. And like a deified fool, I nodded and believed.

CHISOM: Enough! No need, Father. Some of these tales I too have
heard from the lips of Ichie Udengwu. Please forgive me. Are these all lies to deceive the unknowing fool then?

EZE: No. They worked for my father, and the ancestors before me. The problem started with me ... just me.

CHISOM: Then why did they not work for you? Tell me, great Eze. I mean, how then was this abomination allowed to happen?

EZE: First, I thought I had the power, In fact, I was told I did when during my preparation to sit on the throne of my fathers, I was covered with the all-protective power. Odenigbo filled me up, so I thought, and I was said to be one with the gods. But alas, today I see differently. Today, the Odenigbo seized everything. I felt nothing ... I saw nothing coming, until it hit me that the cold arm of death was upon me, even as I speak.

CHISOM: Death? Impossible! The Iroko tree never dies.

EZE: It does when it is cut down. And Ubanta aided by Odenigbo, has resolved to fell me.

CHISOM: Now I fear. Tell me, Father. How did it happen? Tell me.

EZE: (Chuckles.) This was what I feared when Odenigbo chose Okezie ... and we almost hesitated in releasing him to Odenigbo.

CHISOM: No, Father. Okezie has no hand in the anger of Odenigbo or even the madness of Ubanta. Talk to me, Father.

EZE: All I saw was a flash of shut wavering eyelids, its redness creating a thin veil between life and death, or so it seemed. Then madness reigned everywhere!

CHISOM: Father, I don’t understand.

EZE: Yes ... I am sorry ... that was how it seemed at first. (Clears his throat.) Everything was going on well. Ndi ichie were seated. Kolanuts
and palm wine passed. I had even sent for the town crier to speak with
the people. The Ikoro was set to speak too ... when ....

CHISOM: Yes, when ...? EZE: When Ekwensu danced in.

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CHISOM: Ekwensu, kwa?

EZE: The devil himself. Tying amulets of red cowries on his long
beard. Haa, Ekwensu reigned here for as long as Ubanta’s madness
manifested.

CHISOM: Madness?

EZE: In one blinding flash, Ubanta came in, fiery as fire itself, to
deliver the message of Odenigbo in a bloody non-
dignified mien.

CHISOM: Haa ... I thought he was supposed to have been part of the
deliberations.

EZE: He did not come, as he was waiting for the message of Odenigbo.
But we proceeded without him as he had sent word.

CHISOM: So he sent no one?

EZE: He sent a young man, Okezie ... the new carrier of the Odenigbo
masquerade.

CHISOM: Okezie. EZE: You know him? CHISOM: Yes. I have
heard of him. What did he say?

EZE: Nothing. All morning, he just sat, murmuring the chant of
Odenigbo. Our eyes never met. Not a word from him. He just listened
to the elders speak, gritting his teeth ... a perfect carrier, I thought.
Odenigbo made the right choice. A perfect specimen of a man.

CHISOM: Oh. So what did Ubanta do?

EZE: Ekwensu empowered his usually embittered fangs, and he sunk
them deep into my heart where it hurt. A deadly cursed force loomed within him. At that moment, I felt, it

would be wise if I left the throne room. But I decided otherwise.

CHISOM: Why? You should have, Father. EZE: Yes, I should have. But I needed to know where the ill

wind was blowing from. (Pause.) CHISOM: And Ndiichie, what did they do? EZE: They ran. CHISOM: Ubanta, what did he say?

EZE: Everything. First he said that Odenigbo sent him to tell me that I have ten years left to sit on the throne of our ancestors. He said that since I did not have a male child, my lineage would lose the title.

CHISOM: Chukwu ekwena! Tufiakwa! (the gods forbid!) (Rolls her hands over her head and throws it aside with the thumb and the middle finger meeting to produce sound.)

EZE: Which one? I say, Odenigbo sent Ubanta ... his spokesman.

CHISOM: Simple. Father, take a new wife today. In ten years, your heir will be ripe enough to sit on the throne. My late mother’s younger sister agreed three years ago to marry you. If you want her tonight, I can send for her. What do you say, Father?

EZE: You banter, Girl. This is not the time. CHISOM: How about Ngozi, my friend. EZE: No. She calls me, Father. How can I? No. CHISOM: Speak to me father, please. EZE: No. My words, if spoken, portend fearful meanings.

CHISOM: I don’t understand.

EZE: Then let me be, woman. The fire that threatens to engulf me is mine alone.
UDENGWU: (Enter an old bent man, with a stick. CHISOM runs to him.) Who told you?

CHISOM: Nnanna (grandfather.)

UDENGWU: (Embraces her.) It is the jewel of the crown of ObodoIjeh. How are you, my dear?

CHISOM: Heavenly, now that you are here. Everything was dark before you arrived.

UDENGWU: Not anymore. Things are only dark when one refuses to open wide his eyes. Have you done what I advised?

CHISOM: No, Nnanna, but I am working on it. Soon... I promise.
UDENGWU: Let it be soon, child ... by the gods let it be soon.

(Turns away from her.) Onye-Eze! You sent for me.

EZE: You have heard everything, I am sure, wise one.

UDENGWU: Yes.

EZE: I am shattered. Odenigbo pitched his battle tent not too far from her. His message heralds my doom, wise man.

UDENGWU: How, my king?

EZE: He says my days are numbered. Ten years, to be precise.

UDENGWU: Ten years is a lot of years.

EZE: What do you mean?

UDENGWU: What can I mean? The gods smile on you. Eze Ogbuewu was not as lucky. Three days before the

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Odenigbo festival, the then chief priest of Odenigbo, Okpalla, came into this obi (throne room) and offered him a set of covered white
calabash. According to Okpalla, Odenigbo commanded that he wanted the calabash filled with his head. He had no heir. That was how the throne came to your family. Your great-grandfather ruled after Ogbuewu. You see why ten years is a blessing? Smile and rejoice, great King.

CHISOM: (Clears her throat. respectfully.) Nnanna, what did Eze Ogbuewu do to incur the wrath of Odenigbo?

EZE: Woman!

UDENGWU: He slept with his brother’s wife, hus defiled the rituals before the festival.

CHISOM: And the brother, why was he not made Eze?

UDENGWU: Eze Ogbuewu had sent him to a stupid war to die. Just so he could have his wife. But after much supplication, Odenigbo saved Ogbuewu dying a terrible death. He died in his sleep.

EZE: That was when Odenigbo was a close part of our lives. He lived with us, knew our dark secrets, and pulled our ears when we wronged ourselves. But now ...

CHISOM: My father has not touched anybody’s wife.

EZE: Chisom.

UDENGWU: No, let her. Speak, daughter. What concerns the nose concerns the eyes. Speak, Child.

CHISOM: Thank you, Nnanna. It is a month to the festival, and the Eze has ten years to live... Can my father not take a wife? He has ten years. The law of the land says that only a ten-year-old son can be King ... but he refuses to heed my simple solution to the problem.

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UDENGWU: (Chuckles sadly.) Your statement reminds me of an old story my mother once told me. All the animals in the animal kingdom
gathered for a meeting. The great ones spoke. First the lion, then the elephant, and then came the tiger’s turn ... one after the other they spoke. And the Frog who had been blowing the air with its lungs all day, picking insects, felt left out. Although he had nothing to say, he still needed to speak at such an auspicious gathering. “My great friends,” he spluttered...“do you know that I have no tail?”

CHISOM: Then I speak stupid things?

EZE: Woman!

UDENGWU: All the animals laughed, and the tension was eased. The animals then managed through the wise counsel of the tortoise to resolve the matter. In your intrusion lies the solution, Child.

CHISOM: I told him.

UDENGWU: The day often dies when the sun goes to sleep. But because of its restless nature, it jumps up at sunset to start another day.

CHISOM: I don’t understand.

UDENGWU: But your father does. The kola nut may taste bitter in the mouth of the youth, but the tongue of an elder know how to find its sweetness. The solution may lie close ... even closer than we think.

EZE: Let us hear it, wise one.

UDENGWU: (Pause.) Onye-Eze, I am your father-in-law, and you have not welcomed me well. A big keg of palm wine. And the hind foot of a well smoked antelope.

EZE: In double folds. I will send them when all this is over and peace is restored again.

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UDENGWU: Good. The word of the Eze is good enough for me. Why go to the salty sea when the Ubele stream has good, cool and clear water. With Chisom lies the solution.
EZE: As sacrifice? No! He says that I must produce a heir for the throne. Not a sacrificial lamb.

UKATU: (Enters OBI EZE the throne room. AGUBA follows her.) Onye-Eze, not one more drop of blood shall be split in this palace. Odenigbo should have had his fill by now. Not a drop, I say.

UDENGWU: Who has the effontery to barge into this room against the order of the Eze?

UKATU: It is I. EZE: It is the mother of the land, Father. Great woman, Nnenne,
gudugudu! I salute you. So you have heard?

UKATU: Onye-Eze, I have. Like the news of every bad deed, it spreads fast, fouling the air as it flowed from ear to ear. Udengwu, in-law of the Eze, I greet you. Onye-Eze, I warned you.

EZE: You did.

UKATU: But you did not listen. With blocked ears you gave up your manhood for the sake of the peace of the land. Odenigbo collected it, now he wants more.

EZE: He wants my head, Nnem (Mother.)

UKATU: And Amadioha will not let him touch a strand of hair on your head, Eze.

CHISOM: Gave up his manhood? My father? The Eze?

UDENGWU: Er ... it is only a figure of speech. One meant to say many things suppressed. Ukatu, please, he worries.

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UKATU: Let her hear the bitter truth. After all, the bitter kola does not consider which mouth to soil with its bitterness. It just spreads it.

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UDENGWU: Ukatu! Please...

UKATU: Let me speak to the little girl. Let her hear it all. Um!. You call me as if you know me. Who are you? (Pause.) Come closer, old man. (UDENGWU does not move.) I say come closer. You remind me of Okoronta, the late palm wine tapper who fell from the palm tree to an early death. His wife died, and his son ran away with a woman when he was supposed to have carried the Odenigbo masquerade. (Pause. Looks at him closely.) Are you the one? Odenigbo always eats its own. As it is now set to eat the Eze. (Pause. Moves closer to UDENGWU.) Raise your head. I see the face of Okoronta. You are sure you are not the one I speak about, old man?

CHISOM: No, mother of the land. He is Udengwu, the father of my late mother.

UKATU: Udengwu! I heard the story. Your wife died at child birth, just like your daughter, our Queen, her mother. I later heard that both women carried stillborn sons. Ubanta must have had a hand in both deaths.

UDENGWU: Ubanta?

UKATU: Believe me, Ukatu is never wrong. Mark my words, I am never wrong.

UDENGWU: So what can we do, mother of the land? My in-law, the Eze, remains harassed by a higher being.

UKATU: Destroy Ubanta and his god. EZE: Which god will we worship then? UKATU: I don’t know yet. But I can see it.

CHISOM: See what, Nnenne?

UKATU: I just see change, people ... our children ... singing and dancing in strange tongues. Hands, clasped faces, raised. Often, I see these images lately.
UDENGWU: Alu! Rinse your mouth, Mother.

UKATU: I have spoken only what I have seen.

UDENGWU: Easy, Mother. Remember that the fire of revenge often burns the person determined to revenge. The wind blows fire in all directions ... remember!

CHISOM: And the matter of the heir?

UKATU: Your strange grandfather has spoken. Your womb is fresh, get a man to fill it up.

CHISOM: A man.

UKATU: Yes. Or Ubanta will soon ask for your hand as his queen. That animal’s greed, like his god’s is insatiable.

CHISOM: May the gods forbid! UDENGWU: Ise! EZE: I will kill him first.

UKATU: (Lets out a wild laugh.) Onye-Eze, forgive me. That is if he does not take your royal crown before you can locate the sharp edge of your sword. I leave.

Sharp lights fade.

31

When lights come on, OKEZIE is seated on a stool, a needle and thread in his hand sewing the costume of ODENIGBO. Enter some drummers.

OKEZIE: Haa, you have come. I now have the dance steps. Let us take it from where we stopped yesterday. (The drummers begin to drum as OKEZIE dances. Enters CHISOM with two fierce male guards.)

CHISOM: Your steps may please the gods, but tread on my heart.

OKEZIE: (Startled.) Ada-Eze! (Princess!) Chisom, you came. I never knew you would. (He orders the drummers to leave. Excited.) I was just
trying to perfect the steps. These ones are the difficult ones. They are the dance steps for collecting the calabash of woes from the Eze. The mask is heavy. They say with time it will be easier. Oh, I am going to be a great carrier. I can feel it. With my sweat and on my blood, all the problems of ObodoIjeh will be wiped away. You will see. Why have you come?

CHISOM: To make a request before Odenigbo. OKEZIE: Odenigbo welcomes you. CHISOM: I am honoured. I see you now speak for it.

OKEZIE: Odenigbo is not an idol. It lives. It is a god. The all- caring true god.

CHISOM: A true god heh? A god who cannot even care for itself.

OKEZIE: (In whispers) Ada-Eze. Odenigbo hears your every word.

CHISOM: I don’t care. (Walks towards the sewing materials on the side of the stage.) Hmm, I see they are domesticating you for the every need of your caring god. (Chuckles.) Well, at least you will be married to the god for seven years.

OKEZIE: Please don’t talk like that. It is my duty. My call. It is an honour to serve my people.

CHISOM: (Cynical.) Honour? So this is the work given to the chosen one of the god? After sewing your husband’s costume, will you cook for it?

OKEZIE: My princess, you mock me.

CHISOM: What else should I do? (Chuckles.)

OKEZIE: What are you doing here then? What do you want from me? Are you still angry with me?

CHISOM: Yes. I begged you not to join the Whiteman’s priesthood.
OKEZIE: I listened. I chose my people’s instead. I am here with you, am I not? Cheer up, my princess.

CHISOM: Why? By your very action of becoming the carrier of Odenigbo, you mock me. Here, in the shrine of Odenigbo. The pain in my heart triples. You never loved me, as you claimed you did.

OKEZIE: I did ... I do. With all my heart, I do.

CHISOM: Then what are you doing sewing the dress of a god? What are you doing polishing its mask when my body aches for you to enter it.

OKEZIE: Forgive me. By the gods, forgive me. Seven years. That is all. I will be the carrier for seven years. Only seven years. As at this year, I have six left. We shall sleep and wake, and each day is passed. In no time, it shall be over. Please, my princess, I shall be yours in no time.

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CHISOM: Seven years. For a woman seven years is enough to blossom and rot. By the time you are released from this sacred bondage, I will be a rotten dried up seedpod.

OKEZIE: Princess, please. (Takes a step towards her.)

CHISOM: Don’t come close to me. I gave you a chance to take me ... whole, but instead, you embrace a wooden face in torn calico cloth, with coloured raffia strung together in black smelly thread. Okezie, I offered you opulence. Come! (Moves closer to him, hands stretched.)

OKEZIE: No! Don’t even speak like that in the presence of the god or else he may damn our dream.

CHISOM: Dream? Whose dream? My eyes are now wide open and I see it all. I was ready to lift you up, make you the sole contender for the throne, while I sit by you as your queen. But no, see how well and how low you sit as a tender of the shrine. You left me with ease, as if you
were never born to rise. Haa... You stooped too low and shattered my heart. Is your god better than me? Has it got a heart? Can it feel? Or is it just a wooden face that needs tending?

OKEZIE: Please, whisper your thoughts. These are forbidden words.

CHISOM: Then let me leave the presence of your god ... slave master ... and husband. (Begins to leave.)

OKEZIE: Wait for me. Soon all your dreams will come to pass, I swear!

CHISOM: What dream? Mere empty words. Dead ... spoken words not propelled by the power of love. You hurt me. And now I must find a place to heal the hurt. I too am a carrier.

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CHISOM: Pleas. Your feeble pleas fall on deaf tender ears.I will regret this but I must be a carrier to heal. See, now it makes sense too.

OKEZIE: Regret? I don’t understand.

CHISOM: Not one word. Not one more sound from you. Only one thing binds us now. I need it ... I must take it.

OKEZIE: I don’t understand.

CHISOM: I do. And I am sure Odenigbo understands too. As carriers, we two must face our masks. (To the two gaurds.) Grab him.

OKEZIE: (The two gaurds drag OKEZIE by both arms. He struggles.) What is this? Chisom, Princess, what do you want from me? What have I done to deserve this?

CHISOM: (Does not utter a word. She follows them as she points behind the shrine.) I pleaded with you, but you failed to listen. I ask of you another service for the land. Now let start afresh.
OKEZIE: (Backstage as we hear the sound of struggle.) Princess, I beg you. You defile the shrine of the Odenigbo. You defile me. Huh! (Sound of something hitting his head.)

CHISOM: (Emerges from behind the stage.) The deed is done. But you hit him too hard. When he wakes up I shall send my maidens to nurse him. Hurry, let us go. (Exit all three.)

OKEZIE: (Staggers out, holding his bleeding head.) I am finished. (He staggers to the shrine of ODENIGBO and kneels before it.) Forgive me, great god. This servant is soiled and can no longer carry the mantle of your grace. (He staggers out of the stage.)

Slow lights fade.

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Dark stage. Dim lights reveal a forest scene. It is dim and eerie, sounds of night birds are heard. Slowly the lights reveal the body of OKEZIE wrapped in a mat. Slow sound of the drum is heard from backstage. CHIKA comes in carrying an oil lamp, and a small wrapped bundle. She is crying and distraught.

CHIKA: Ten thousand curses on the heads of those who killed my son. The pox of Ani, mother earth paste them with a painful death. I must find him. My own child whom I carried for nine months in my womb, dies a useless death, and the whole village was quick to throw him into the big bush like a common house rat. I must find my son. Udoka told me he was laid at a spot near the stream as I pleaded they should. Okezie, talk to me, I can feel your pained spirit; crying, moaning, roaming, yearning, searching for the reason why such a shameful death seemed the most reasonable way to go. Why? Tell me, son ... what led you to put a rope round your precious, tender neck? You should have told me what dulled your spirit, what made life and me seem so inconsequential. You should have told your mother who gave you life. Okezie! I say, where are you? Where do you lie? Why do you continue to hide from me? (Broken. She begins to cry.) I must find you, my son. This is not the time for a game of hide and seek. I have a message for
you. (She stops and with a jerk, she turns and finds the body of OKEZIE. She drops her bundle and places the light closer to his face.)
It is you, Son. I find you. First, let us talk before they find me. (She opens the bundle, pours some powder on her right palm, she blows it round the body of OKEZIE.) Spirit of my son, awake! There is work to be done. Rise and roam. Avenge my shame. Go, Okezie and avenge me. Go with the still calm breeze of the morning dew and mollify them. Go! (Sound of blowing breeze is heard.) Go, Son, and do it, as I have sent you! Go!

UDOKA: (Muffled whisper. Calls from within.) Chika! Chika! 36

CHIKA: Who calls me?

UDOKA: (Enters.) It is I. You said you would not stay too long. I became worried. We must leave. Have you done it?

CHIKA: (Crying. Raises her voice.) See, Udoka, see what they did to my son. See how he lies unattended. His once tender skin peeling by the harshness of the stale breeze.

UDOKA: Woman, you shout! Shii! Save our necks, I beg you.

CHIKA: Our necks?

UDOKA: Yes. Ukatu refused to go home. She waits at the entrance. We should never have gone to see her first before coming here.

CHIKA: It seemed the right thing to do at the time. She has remained with me since she heard the sad news of my son’s death. Not even a relative did. He o! Such a cold night. Hurry, we must hurry to her.

UDOKA: Woman, please remember, no one must know I told you anything. No one must know we came here to see your son.

CHIKA: See who? This rotting thing?This ... this ... that is not my son. Just an effigy of a wasted case...an empty shell of a man I once knew. Three days ... three planting days in the farm ... that was all I went for. and see how we part ways. Hee! My own flesh ... my only child ... who
once brought tears of joy to my eyes, now empties me from within.

UDOKA: Shii, woman. It is alright. This is not the place to mourn.
CHIKA: (Sees UKATU seated on a cut tree trunk smoking her pipe.) Mother, you waited? UKATU: Is it done?

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CHIKA: (Gets up.) Yes. Now, his spirit looms.

UKATU: (Gets up.) Very well then. Let us hurry home. Leave the lamp behind. No one must see a ray of light in the field of darkness. Hurry home, children! (Lights slowly fade as UDOKA holds her hand and they both start to leave. Slowly CHIKA turns to look back.)

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Lights slowly fade.

When lights come on, the shrine of ODENIGBO is revealed.

CHIKA: I have been, and I have seen the frail still figures of cursed shameful death. It reeks. And I have seen my blood congeal in carcass form. Cased up for rot. I once called him son. A son you asked for ... a son I gave you as the carrier of your masque. Yet you took him and gave him to bald wicked vultures to devour. Uncared for, he lies still, decaying in the big bush, long gone and shamed ancestors, his new companions. (Begins to cry.) Where did I go wrong? What did I do, that you watched them strip me of the only ornament of my soul? Odenigbo, tell me. Because you lie dumb and still, same shall I serve you. Here! The gift of a god whose usefulness diminishes. Here, my people of Amigbo sent you these as insult. For your drink, they send dirty water from the stream, where children wee and women wash their redness, instead of fresh palm wine. Shame! For food, they send a dead dried up, stinking plucked vulture, instead of a fat wild dog. (As she is about to place it before the shrine, UBANTA stops her.)

UBANTA: Woman, do not put it down!
CHIKA: Why? A god that serves nothing to its worshippers, gets nothing good in return. I loathe this one now. To think that I once called him in utter reverence. See how now he stoops so low ... a blind man could step on him. Here, seated in the comfort of his shrine, he could not protect my son from those who envied him, Ha! Stupid enough to believe in the efficacy of a god. I left my son uncovered, unprotected until he embraced death. Now he lies frozen ... decaying ... in the big cursed forest, my own beloved son.

UBANTA: Woman, your cries have touched the ears of god, but remember, my god, Odenigbo, had no hand in your son’s death.

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CHIKA: But let him stand up for me not remain mute. Let him not seat still, let him find the killers of my only son ... my child. He is god, after all. Let him with one wave of the hand bring him back from the land of the dead.

UBANTA: Go home, Mother. Your painful tears have, through me, reached the concerned ears of Odenigbo. But remember no god can bring the dead back to life.

CHIKA: Haa! Odenigbo has lied. We were told he had powers over life and death. Why are we so foolish, we gave hot drinks and the fattest chickens, picked warm freshly laid eggs from the bottom of the chickens. He ate fat while he fooled us. Tell him that this old broken woman needs his embrace to believe in life one more time. Who, then, is on my side?

UBANTA: Yes, Odenigbo himself lost his life. With his own hands ... noose in his dirty hands... he quenched the light on a would-have-been shiny chosen carrier. See him now.

CHIKA: (Chuckles.) Shiny chosen carrier my foot? This means that Odenigbo chose my son too. Okezie did not force himself on the god then?
UBANTA: No one can force himself on the great god, Odenigbo.

CHIKA: He weeps for me then? Does Odenigbo share in my grief now? When you came to ask for my son’s service, you never... you never told me to buy a burial shroud. Deceit, all! Deceit!

UBANTA: Chika, aggrieved mother of Okezie, Odenigbo shares in your bitterness.

CHIKA: Does he? Then why did he not save him? UBANTA: It was his decision. No one told him to do it.

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CHIKA: Lie! He was guaranteed ever lasting life. Liar!

UBANTA: Liar? You pour liquid bile into Odenigbo’s ears. Why make a god suffer for the act of the ones who pushed your son to dangle. One by one, I promise, Odenigbo’s judgment shall reign. Go home, Woman

CHIKA: Another promise. A lie!

UBANTA: Woman!

CHIKA: Woman ... there you go again. Woman ... a mere title for a foolish fickle-minded doting fool. Mind what you say to a broken woman, man. Will he forgive this fool then? I am a woman ... remember... and I tend to spit out my pain. Will he assent to my demands then? Speak wisely, Priest. Or I will assume that Ukatu was right.

UBANTA: Ukatu ... that woman.

CHIKA: Yes that woman.

UBANTA: Go home. I fear that if you linger longer, you might vomit more bile.

CHIKA: Yes, I said a mouthful ... didn’t I? Another sin of women, But I am wiser now. It is clear that even the gods have their limitations.
And it is feeble men who suffer their weaknesses. Pity.

UBANTA: Go home. (CHIKA is still crying. Slow lights fade.)

In the throne room. The CHIEFS and the EZE are seated.

IKEDI: Onye-Eze! Ndi iche! I am happy today. I pray that this is the last of the mad display of Ubanta before the festival of Odenigbo. His visit to the palace two weeks ago was one of pain and shame.

APETE: Maybe Ubanta should come more often to destroy things. As I can see, the throne room looks better than it was before it was destroyed. (All laugh.)

EZE: Onowu, is everybody present?

APETE: (Looks around.) Yes, Onye-Eze. Except Ichie Ofodire. (The other ichies give a sad sigh of empathy.) Yes. He lost his youngest wife and child this morning.

EZE: Pity. That is the third child he has lost this past four months.

IROHA: Yes, Onye-Eze. A broken Ichie Ofodire came to my house immediately it happened.

EZE: We empathize with him.

IROHA: (Chuckles) It was what Ukatu did at the burial that baffled everyone.

EZE: What did the mother of the land do again? Ichie Idehi, were you there?

IKEDI: No. My sister is like a whirlwind ... it carries even its own.

IROHA: Onye-Eze, I was there. While the burial of the wife was going, Ukatu took the unwrapped body of the child, tied it to her back, and ran to the shrine of Odenigbo.
ALL: Alu!

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OBI: Dead bodies are never taken to the shrine of Odenigbo. Not even the body of the Chief Priest can be taken to the shrine.

EZE: So what happened to the mother of the land and the dead child?

IROHA: Uban ta bundled her and the child’s body and told his thugs to return them to the house of Ofodire. Thinking that his buried wife had been dug up, Ichie Ofodire ran out of the house, straight to mine, to tell me of his woes. (All laugh.) But I am sure that this is not the last of the matter. Ukatu will surely come to tell the Eze her woes herself. (They all laugh again.)

EZE: Ichie Iroha, we had earlier sent you to Ubanta. What other madness do we have to hear before Ubanta bundles us all into the valley of foolery?

IROHA: Onye-Eze, you did. I went with Ichie Kunyembeh. We could not meet Ubanta for a long time. Then he emerged still fearsome as always. He told us to tell the Eze that he is still awaiting a message from the gods.

EZE: Um ... another one. Let us hope an earthquake will not accompany this message. (All laugh.) I have placed my faith in the hands of the gods. If they want me dead, they can come and take. Ten years is enough for a man of sixty to live in royal splendor. I cannot create a son.

IROHA: Watch what you say, great Eze. The gods may misinterpret your words. They may feel that the Eze is resolved to vacate the throne of his father to another family.

EZE: Let their will be done. I am tired. They said they wanted obscene, I gave them obscene. They wanted sacrifice...and I gave them. They are all-powerful. I swear as I sit on this throne, if the gods want my head, they can have it.
ALL: Onye-Eze! OBI: May that day never come. ALL: Iseeeeee!

OBI: We all know what you did for this land. We are alive today, saved by the god, Odenigbo, because he asked for the supreme sacrifice from us. You, Eze, gave ... and our village was saved from the destructive wild soldiers of those animals of the mountain people of Ogidi.

ALL: Yes! Onye-Eze!

OBI: So why do the gods continue to taunt the Eze? Has Odenigbo forgotten that the royal eggs of the Eze were used for the sacrifice he demanded? Why does he taunt him with childlessness when he ate up the Eze’s eggs? Why?

IROHA: The very reason why I remain disturbed. When we got to the shrine with gifts to appease Odenigbo, the face of Ubanta was still unfriendly, his gaze distant and his voice hoax. I was troubled. And he promised to come with a message for the Eze. What kind of message. The last time he came here, he killed a goat.

EZE: Maybe he will kill a buffalo when next he comes. I cannot move my palace because of Ubanta’s message.

APETE: I swear, I understand the thinking of the Eze. I feel his pains. When a father always beats his child at any little excuse. The child now hardened would take the whip along before the child reports any incidence he is involved in. Odenigbo and Ubanta should be told to hold their messages. They should first unravel the reason why a chosen carrier of Odenigbo’s masquerade chose to hang himself without a good reason. Odenigbo, forgive me, but with Ubanta’s behaviour and Okezie’s dastardly act, his

EZE: Ichie Apete, you are the Onowu. Mind what you say, or Ubanta
may kill a crocodile from the Udi River in your palace. (They all laugh.) But seriously, as the Onowu, today, if I should join my ancestors, appoint a new Eze a day after I am buried.

APETE: May the gods forbid!

EZE: They may forbid but this is my command. I am tired of the fear of Ubanta and his god. Let them take it all. Let them. (Enter two district women.)

OJUGO: Elders of our land what is happening?

NWAKAEGO: The god, Odenigbo, is indeed angry.

APETE: What great thing has happened that you burst into the obi, Eze?

OJUGO: The stream that gives water of life to the women, children and men of this village has dried up. We hear that Osimili, the goddess of the stream, was defiled.

ALL: Hei! Alueme!

NWAKAEGO: We were told that Ubanta himself came to the stream, and drove the maidens fetching water away before he committed the abominable act. Eze, biko do something. Do something before an angry goddess wipes us all out of existence.

KUNYEMBEH: Ubanta was there?

OBI: Again? This man will kill us all in the name of Odenigbo.

OJUGO: How do we eat, how do we cook? This is death. Eze, do something.

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NWAKAEGO: EzeIdu, please do something before we all die.

OBI: Mothers, go home. The Eze has heard you.
EZE: When trees begin to fall on trees, then the road of life begins to close, and our ancestors beckon. Mothers, go home. What concerns the nose concerns the mouth.

APETE: And even the eyes.

EZE: I shall send men to Udi River to fetch water. But tell the women to use what they get sparingly. No waste. Onowu Apete will go and see the river goddess in order to appease her. All will be well.

OJUGO: We have heard you, Eze. (Exit women.)

EZE: Haa, the rapid flashes of evil flows ... and this frightens me. Is this the hand of Odenigbo or man? Ndi iche, we need to tread with caution else we all dry up like the stream. Caution.

ALL: Onye-Eze! (Enter UBANTA. All ichies rise in fear.)

EZE: The saliva of my mouth is not yet dry and Odenigbo has sent his Chief Priest. What have we done this time, Ubanta, messenger of the great god (UBANTA does not say a word.)

APETE: Great priest, you kill us with anxiety. Speak!

UBANTA: Onowu Apete, Odenigbo has a message for you. Begin to prepare to crown a new Eze. The days of EzeIdu are over. Odenigbo has found out that the python that swallowed Okezie, the carrier of the Odenigbo masquerade, is from the royal corner of the Eze’s bedroom. (EZE rises.) For you and within you, a sin has been committed. A mistake can be forgotten, not a sin. For this, Odenigbo removes you as Eze. And Odenigbo has chosen you to carry his masquerade since your blood killed his carrier.

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EZE: (What?) Gini ! My blood?

UBANTA: Your blood! Eze, follow me to the shrine where you shall dance on the tethering rope with death or Odenigbo will strike you
down here and now.


IROHA: Ubanta it has never happened that the king dances the steps of the masquerade. My elders, if the king dances what happens to him?

ALL: Onwu nu! (Death!) He dies on the spot.  UBANTA: You have heard your answer. An eye for an eye ...

that is Odenigbo’s judgement.

IROHA: (Chuckles.) So why send the king on a fatal dance of death when Odenigbo knows what he wants. He could have just asked the war general Obi to plunge a sword into his stomach ... tear it apart and let his guts flow. Ubanta, tell Odenigbo that our king will not dance wearing his masquerade. We have spoken!

UBANTA: You?

IROHA: Yes, we. The voice of the people is the voice of the god. Now Odenigbo begins to speak a different voice.

UBANTA: Onowu Apete, speak to the fool who rattles foolishness with every word he utters, else ...

IROHA: Or else you will kill me? Odenigbo rides us like fools indeed; maybe that is why we now speak foolish words. I remember that it was in this same palace that Ubanta was appointed the Chief Priest of Odenigbo by the late Eze. But

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now our mouths who pronounced him priest smell. Yet Odenigbo and his chief priest must also remember that they cannot serve us then let us seek for another god.

UBANTA: Alu!
APETE: Alu, did you say? Ubanta, tell your god that he pushes us to the wall. I am afraid that we shall face him when our backs are turned. May the gods forbid. I shudder to think of what will happen.

UBANTA: Why should the gods forbid? This palace has already connived with the oldest women of the land by dancing naked to the shrine of Odenigbo. If a man dares to a fight by holding sand in both hands, once you empty one hand the battle line is drawn. Your mothers drew the battle line. And now that the battle is coming, you are saying that the gods should forbid? Never!

OBI: Yes. Why should, gods forbid? You are only two. We are many. It is our song he dances to, our drums. It is our maidens that scream his name. It is when we say he should reign that he sits on his thrown as god...

UBANTA: Alright. We shall see.

APETE: As Obi spoke, an idea came to my mind. Maybe... just maybe Eze should dissolve the village, send the people packing to other villages and ask Ubanta to select new villagers for Odenigbo.

ALL: (Laugh.) UBANTA: EzeIdu, speak to your acolytes. Their voices anger the true god.

APETE: The true god? The village is happy with EzeIdu but we are not happy with Odenigbo. Our children are dying. Evil everywhere. Not too long ago, we were told that the stream where the village drinks water has gone dry. Is our great god touched?

ALL: No!

APETE: Instead, it is the dance of death of the Eze that concerns Odenigbo. Ubanta, go home and tell your god that he drives us to the
state where the land will reject him.

KUNYEMBEH: And also tell him that man creates the gods. When they fail him, he throws them into the bush to rot. Odenigbo has already defiled this palace by asking his Chief Priest to kill a goat and leave the head on the seat of the throne. An abomination! Odenigbo pushes us, he is our god, he should fight for us, not fight against us. This story of a python is just his way of telling us how much he hates the Eze. By the gods, I swear... by our ancestors, I take an oath, if anything should happen to our Eze, with this hand I shall light the fire that will burn Odenigbo’s shrine.

UBANTA: EzeIdu, I see that having fed your elders with so much food and palm wine, their brains have become those of little children. They embrace death. Come peacefully or else Odenigbo will strike you with madness and we shall have to drag you like a wild animal to his shrine. Remember, Eze, the tender embers of the gods will burn you if you refuse his call. Come!

EZE: It is clear that my tender wishes are not my destiny. It is finished. Ubanta, let us go before I anger Odenigbo with one delayed step. Onowu Apete, the palace is yours. Fill my seat with a man ...

UBANTA: Never mind. Concentrate on the dance of Odenigbo. My god, Odenigbo, will choose a deserving Eze for ObodoIjeh. (Stupefied, the ELDERS watch them leave. A slow dirge.)

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APETE: Ndi iche, please be seated. (They sit.) You all heard the Eze, and besides, an Eze will be needed to welcome Odenigbo when he dances into the palace. Who will give the cursed calabash of our communal problems to Odenigbo to take to the river? Who?

ALL: Eze Idu!

Eze kwasiri King who deserve to be King. Ezeora King for all Eze ukwu King above all and everything Eze diora mma King who is
loved by everybody EzeIdu!

APETE: It is EzeIdu then. No man shall sit on his throne while he is alive!

ALL: Gbam! (Applauds as the NDI ICHIE exchange greetings.)

KUNYEMBEH: Onowu, may I speak? APETE: Please speak.

KUNYEMBEH: Ndi iche ibem ... I agree with you all. There is no need to search for what is not missing. Odenigbo and Ubanta have confronted us. It is time to confront them too or we shall all die in fear.

OBI: I agree with Ichie Kunyembeh. Please go on to the point.

KUYEMBEH: Thank you, Iche Obi. (Clears his throat.) I say we should all go to the shrine of Odenigbo and demand for the return of our Eze! Now!

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OBI: I swear, Ndi ichie, if we do not do what Ichie Kunyembeh says, we would have failed generations yet unborn.

APETE: Ndi ichie, do we agree? ALL: We agree! Okwu di ya. AGUBA: (Runs in.) Elders! Ada-Eze has fainted. APETE: Why?

AGUBA: She ran from her room when she heard the noise and cries of the women, as the Eze followed Ubanta. Then she fainted when we tried to stop her from following them.

APETE: Then hurry. Hurry! (Turns to NDI ICHIE.) Elders, it’s clear to us all now that Ubanta has fetched ant-infested firewood, now he must be visited by lizards. Let us all go to the shrine of Odenigbo and demand that he gives us our Eze. (He starts a war chant. The others join and exit the stage.)

Slowly, lights fade.

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ODENIGBO’s shrine. NDI ICHIE, UMUADA, and the youths stand outside before the masquerade of ODENIGBO. UBANTA stands by the masquerade. ONOWU APETE steps forward. They all chant a song of defiance as lights come on.

UBANTA: When a herd of cattle lose their shepherd, they wander round and around, until they tire and die. Onowu Apete, what do you want at the shrine of Odenigbo without notice?

APETE: The reason why we are here? Do children need a reason to see their father?

ALL: No!

APETE: You have heard the very people whom you, the mouth of Odenigbo should know or is pretending to forget.

UBANTA: You waste the time of Odenigbo. It is time to teach the former Eze the dance steps of god. I think you should go home and prepare for a befitting funeral for your Eze.

APETE: Tufiakwa! I spit out the mention of death on the head of our Eze. Ubanta, tell your god, that we have come for our Eze. Bring him out for his people to take him home. (UBANTA steps forward. Two soldiers step forward facing UBANTA with cutlasses.)Ubanta, you are a wise man. Your head for our king. Or you give us our King peacefully, and we leave without a drop of blood.

UBANTA: (Thinks for a while.) In the inner room by the inner shrine room.

APETE: I see you have already prepared him for sacrifice. But not this one, not today. Aguba, go and bring out the Eze.

(AGUBA goes in with three warriors. One of the warriors carries a bag of clothes. The villagers are restless and quiet.

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After a while AGUDA steps out, with a straight face he chants.)

AGUBA: Ona nu zo

Ezenobia, Iyo iyoee! Odenigbo Ikwakukwa Iyoiyoeee! Idenmo

Ezenobia, Iyo iyoee! Umumo Ezenobia, Iyo iyoee! Ona nu zo, Ezenobia, Iyo iyoee! ObodoIjeh!

Ezenobia! Iyo, iyoee!

(EZE steps out. Music starts. Each group dances for the EZE. Gradually he begins to sway to the music as he leads the group out of the stage.)

UBANTA: You all will see. You have dared to look Odenigbo in the face, now death will drown your chi! All of you! Even as I speak, the spirit of death looms!

Slowly, lights fade.

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When lights come on, CHISOM’s room is revealed. CHISOM lies on the bed and two elderly women attend to her. Enters UDENGWU.

CHISOM: Nnanna, they took him. They took my father, EzeIdu, like a common thief, to the shrine of Odenigbo.

UDENGWU: Let it be. When the gods take a man, they search his soul. If he is clean, they return him to his people, untouched. But if he is not, his ill-doing consumes him. The Eze shall return to his palace soon.

CHISOM: But Odenigbo wants him dead. Ubanta the Chief Priest had more than shown the desire of Odenigbo on his last visit to the palace.

UDENGWU: What message did he bring this time?

CHISOM: He said that Odenigbo wanted the Eze to dance.
UDENGWU: Dance?

CHISOM: Yes. He must carry the masquerade of Odenigbo.

UDENGWU: Mbanu! No! It must not happen!

CHISOM: If it does ... if my father should dance ... what will happen? Nnanna.

UDENGWU: Death. A quick death. His heart will cease to beat after the first three steps. He will fall on the spot, worms coming off his rotted body instantly.

CHISOM: Alu!

UDENGWU: (To himself. In a whisper.) What can we do to stop this? (To her.) Only once did it happen before, an uninitiated man angry over the choice of his younger brother as the carrier, ran to shrine and wore the mask.

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CHISOM: What happened after?

UDENGWU: Death wore him. From there he was taken to the big forest. His awful stench filled the village for six months.

CHISOM: So there is no cure?

UDENGWU: None. Or have you heard of another way out of this predicament?

CHISOM: The two women who tended to me after I fell said except an initiate of the shrine gives his life willingly, there is no solution to our problem.

UDENGWU: I heard about that. I also heard that the house of Eluchie has been asked to nominate the next Eze.

CHISOM: I see the elders do not waste time in appointing another Eze.
They cannot even wait for my father to join his ancestors before hurrying to the house of Eluchie.

UDENGWU: I am sorry. But that is the right thing to do. The throne must not be left empty for more than ten days before a replacement is made.

CHISOM: Ten. That word has caused all these trouble in the land.

UDENGWU: If only we knew the motive behind it.

CHISOM: The motive?

UDENGWU: My late father used to say that we must know first the direction the sound came from before we begin to run or else, we could run into the very mouth of death. Questions continue to echo and re-echo in my head.

CHISOM: Questions, Nnanna? UDENGWU: Yes, questions ... and the answers remain unknown for now. (Pause in thought.) Who killed Okezie? 55

The chosen carrier does not choose a useless way to die, unless he is pushed.

CHISOM: No carrier has ever died that way?

UDENGWU: No. There is talk of one who ran away with her lover to another village.

CHISOM: (Excited.) To where? Does he still live? What happened to them? Did you know him, Grandfather? What was his name?

UDENGWU: No one knows. He has never been heard off after his damned action. To date the whole village seeks him. We heard his wife died. But no one has seen him alive or dead.

CHISOM: Pity.
UDENGWU: Pity indeed. But what is the use of a broken pot? If we discard it, the burning embers of coal may overcook the soup, and lead to disaster. So we pour some water to put out the embers and reduce the impending disaster. (Pause.) If only we knew cursed evil souls. May they not know peace ...

CHISOM: Nnanna, enough! Or else the burning embers may burn down the hut with the thatched roof. Enough, I say!

UDENGWU: Alright, my lips are sealed, but the heart burns.

CHISOM: I am really frightened for the Eze’s life. If he dances as the masquerade, he will die on the spot and it was not his fault. (In a whisper.) It was me Nnanna!

UDENGWU: You? May the gods forbid. Hurry, rinse your mouth with salt water. How can you utter such an abomination?

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CHISOM: Eziokwu, Nnanna. I swear ... I did it.

UDENGWU: What foul act is this? What did you do, Child?

CHISOM: It was me ... I who defiled the shrine of Odenigbo, with my two hands I defiled him.

UDENGWU: Suddenly, darkness returns. You? My own blood is the harbinger of this ill luck?

CHISOM: Yes, me. The seed you planted into my thoughts took root and blossomed. I took some men to the shrine of Odenigbo ... defiled it ... and raped Okezie. (Breaks into tears.) I swear I never meant it to happen that way. I never knew he would kill himself. I was a desperate princess and so I took a desperate step.

UDENGWU: Ada-Eze ikpa alu. Oh my God! Chisom, you slapped the gods, you slapped Odenigbo, Now he shall unsheathe his fangs and bite deep, deeper than we expect.
CHISOM: Nnanna, I killed him. I never knew he would hang himself.

UDENGWU: You have killed us al, Child, I was more worried when I heard you fainted, you should not have ventured to go with them to the shrine. Um! The rain is about to fall, the moon refuses to go to sleep and the sun refuses to rise. What a dark day ... a very dark, dark murky day.

CHISOM: Then I am finished. Efuo m.

UDENGWU: Why, Child?

CHISOM: If only the rains had fallen at the right time, the farmers would rejoice, Worse still, I am pregnant with Okezie’s child, and Odenigbo has damned us all. Death looms and like a deaf dog I gallop ... we gallop to it’s cold embrace. Haa!

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UDENGWU: Ha! Suddenly, the rain stops, the moon sleeps and the sun rises to announce a bright new day, but the gods are set to spread decay. Child, I must hurry.

CHISOM: Hurry? To where, Grand father?

UDENGWU: To find a big fat clay pot without a crack that can contain all the ingredients of life. And the wood gatherer is in the bush, but before the fire burns, I must hurry.

CHISOM: Wait, Grandfather! Wait! (UDENGWU hurries out slow light fades.)

(CHISOM returns to her bed. Slowly dim lights come again to reveal CHISOM’s room.)

OKEZIE: I have come, Chisom. CHISOM: I know. Is it time?
OKEZIE: Time?

CHISOM: From the time I heard that your mother went to the big bush where you were laid and that with a cutlass, which you hold right now,
she asked you to avenge her pain and loss, I have been waiting. I inflicted the pain. There, the cutlass is my message. Have you come to take me?

OKEZIE: Yes.

CHISOM: (Kneels.) Here I am, take us. One clean swipe should do it.

OKEZIE: Us?

CHISOM: Yes, us. The action of forcing you against your wish may have appeared dull, but not colourless. I am with child.

OKEZIE: Child!

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CHISOM: Your child. One who will carry your blood through life. One who will sit on the throne of my fathers if you let him live. What I did was not done with hatred in my heart, I had to do it. I never knew you would take your life. Now, our child will be fatherless. (Pause.) My neck is stretched, cut us down the way, cut our father down.

OKEZIE: I never knew. I am sorry. I had given my life to Odenigbo. I felt empty when you forced yourself on me. I was defiled ... not fit to carry the pains of the village. You yanked me from the hands of a god so I tried to save myself from the clutches of shame.

CHISOM: Cut us down, please. The fire I lit that day hungers. It spreads ... and soon it will burn the whole village to ashes. Save us too from the shame which you once ran from and let us join you. Protect us with your cutlass of justice which you wield with so much hate.

OKEZIE: I am sorry. It was the last message I heard my mother say. First, it sounded like a distant whisper. Then beyond my control I felt the surge ... propelled by an inner spirit. Then it all played back in an inner mind. Your face appeared ... and so did your name resound ... kill her...(The whisper continued... all three of them.)
CHISOM: Three of us ... Odenigbo, forgive me. The two palace guards.

OKEZIE: Like you said, in one quick swipe, one after the other, I removed their heads.

CHISOM: The poor innocent men.

OKEZIE: They held me down ... too tightly ... until I became helpless. In the struggle, my manhood rose, to a shameless height and I lost everything. (Holds his head as if in pain.) Oh, the commanding whisper again ... her incessant whisper reechoes.

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CHISOM: My waiting neck is still bare. Take it, angered spirit, let calmness return. Take us. (OKEZIE raises the cutlass.) But a moment. If you can calm your spirit for a moment ... then think of your mother.

OKEZIE: (Broken.) My mother ... my poor ... poor mother now made more desolate through your despicable act.

CHISOM: But if you let us live, then your mother shall be our mother. My son ... our son ... shall grow up taught to wipe her tears. Joy and laughter shall be her lot again. She will live with us as Queen mother. Akpu and rich Okazi soup in her mouth. Her fingers will never tend cassava farms again. We shall both dote on our son, and make him be like you, his father. Please, give me a chance to be worthy of your love. Forgive me!

OKEZIE: (Slowly he lowers the cutlass.) The whisper fades. Peace is restored. Go to Ubanta, tell him what transpired here. Tell him that I said that...after the angered thunder and lightning, soothing rain has fallen. I go now to my rest.

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Slowly lights fade.

When lights come on, ODENIGBO’s shrine is revealed. UBANTA and
IKEDI stand by the side of the shrine.

UBANTA: It is done. We have the Eze with us now. He dances for Odenigbo and he dies in three days time.

IKEDI: Odenigbo be praised!

UBANTA: All the gods are on our side. Chisom the princess will die too. So will the child she carries for Okezie.

IKEDI: Now I am worried. Too many deaths is not good for a people.

UBANTA: Fear is a good poison for capturing the mind. The people will fall under a helpless spell and allow us wipe away the linage of EzeIdu. I become the new Eze and you the Onowu.

IKEDI: But the people begin to grumble. The scandal about the rape of Mbajonu’s daughter created more trouble for you ... us. She still insists that it was you who raped her in the middle of the night.

UBANTA: But I swore!

IKEDI: Yes, you did. But people believe you returned to Achala’s shrine to overturn the reparation, and that was why she died seven days after. Now the youths, led by Mbachu, are beginning to clamour for a confrontation with the god and yourself.

UBANTA: Hapu ha. Let them. I say, let them dare to stare at the hungry lion’s fangs. (Chuckles.) The spell that I will place on Ndi ichie is almost ready. The whole village will be under my power. (UDENGWU coughs from backstage.) Hurry, let us go in. Someone approaches. (Both go into the shrine house. UDENGWU enters with a bag. He comes before ODENIGBO.)

UDENGWU: Odenigbo, Odenigbo! Ekenem gi.Ogbu onye mgbe ndun’aguya, one that kills when life is sweet I greet you great god. Abiagom (I have come). I have come to see you, Great Odenigbo, so I
must greet you. Nna ma nwa ya. A father always knows his son. I, Udengwu, son of Ezeigboezue greet you. O Odenigbo, I have returned. Akam di na elu. My hands in supplication, My head bent...Odenigbo...I have returned. Father of the land, I beg you. Odenigbo, biko. Forgive your son. My blood killed your carrier. Ikperem di na’la. On bent knees...Odenigbo...forgive them all. And most of all forgive my childish pranks. Here. (Opens the bag.) Your food great one. Two dozen eggs. (Places them before ODENIGBO.) A big fat chicken ... all white.

The way you like it. (Places it before ODENIGBO.) And a bottle of the water you drink. Take them and find a place in your godly heart to forgive and welcome me back to your shrine. As an acolyte of the great Odenigbo. O d e n i g b o , cover us with your protection.

(As if in a trance.) Hmm ... Odenigbo I feel your soft feet gently touch the air ... coming here ... your heavy feet light as thin air. Ibiala. Welcome. Odenigbo, welcome to the arena of your village this year. Let me dance with you and for you ... in joy and happiness.

UBANTA: What do you thank my god for? And you do it so well. Are you, a priest of Odenigbo?

UDENGWU: No. I was an apprentice to the Priest of Okunpko in my mother’s village when I was a young boy.

UBANTA: You praised Odenigbo so well. And I don’t think I know you, old man. But stay close to me, I might need an apprentice too in this shrine.

UDENGWU: I know you, great Ubanta. You are like the shining moon. Who will not know you?

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UBANTA: (Lets out a loud laugh.) Yes, everyone knows Ubanta ... the eye, ear and mouth of Odenigbo. I say why are you here? My master welcomes you. He even accepts your gifts. Why? Your gifts are rightly arranged ... and well chosen. I say who are you?
UDENGWU: Udengwu.

UBANTA: Udengwu? But I don’t know you.

UDENGWU: I say I know the great Ubanta ... the one who spits fire ... even with a mere whisper as message from the Odenigbo. Ubanta, I greet you.

UBANTA: I greet you too. But you flatter me.

UDENGWU: To flatter you is to deceive the tender ears of the gods. To flatter you is death. To flatter the true messenger of Odenigbo is to smell the anus of a lion.

UBANTA: You know me. (As if receiving a spiritual message.) I hear you, great one. My hands peeled, my heart open to this strange man. You know him? How? (Breaks out of the trance.) Old man, my master wants to know who you want him to forgive. Speak.

UDENGWU: My son-in-law, the Eze. If he dances for Odenigbo, he will die.

UBANTA: Exactly what the god wants. His daughter killed Odenigbo’s carrier.

UDENGWU: Did she hold the noose? She only pushed him gently towards her desire. It takes two. And in fact, all these ill happenings occurred due to the compulsive wish to obey Odenigbo.

UBANTA: Did Odenigbo ask him to rape one of his own? Answer! Did Odenigbo ask her to commit a taboo? All she needed was a son, she did not have to strip an acolyte of

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Odenigbo of his honour. A dozen virile men in the village could have performed the same task successfully. She came with two guards and forced herself on the innocent child. The King shall carry the Odenigbo masquerade, and that is final.
UDENGWU: And if he dies in the process?

UBANTA: Ife onye cho kaofu. What you seek is what you find. A man who dines with the devil must be prepared for the consequence.

UDENGWU: Tufiakwa! It will not happen.

UBANTA: This is a simple case of an eye for an eye. The Eze and his daughter took forcefully from Odenigbo. In return, Odenigbo shall take from them too ... their lives.

UDENGWU: Including an unborn child?

UBANTA: Including all the ears who hear the news. Even those who give an innocent nod to the news. I say Okezie’s spirit looms.

IKEDI: My lord Ubanta.

UDENGWU: My lord Ubanta? I thought he was only a priest.

UBANTA: Please, let him speak. I like the tone of his voice. Speak, Ikedi.

IKEDI: If we left home to fetch water in the peaceful stream, what then are we doing chasing an antelope in the bush. This is not what we agreed.

UBANTA: Mechie onu! Ikedi, shut up. UDENGWU: Shut up? Agreed upon? I smell a fat stinking long nosed rat here (Nkapi or Nkapia).

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IKEDI: The truth must be told. It was only the Eze we spoke about.

UBANTA: Ikedi, mechie onu gi! If a child knows that he cannot keep the sacred secrets of the masquerade, he does not dare to go to where it is being dressed. He may choke on his words. Mind what you say before Odenigbo, or else...
IKEDI: I don’t care anymore! The lives of a young girl and an unborn child was not part of our plan. I change my mind. Release the Eze and let us forget everything we planned.

UBANTA: Too late. As I speak, I await the news of the death of Chisom, the one who hung the acolyte of Odenigbo.

UDENGWU: It shall not happen. Take the advise of your accomplice and release the Eze to me, or you may go the way you planned for him. (In one swift move he goes before ODENIGBO. UBANTA laughs wildly through out the speech.) Odenigbo, you heard everything. Your people doubt your supremacy as god. In one last move turn your hand to the right side and sweeten the minds of your people. Vent your anger on the guilty, and release my children, I beg you great one.

UBANTA: Old man, go home. The ears of my god are blocked to your feeble supplications. (Enter UKATU and CHISOM. A tired CHISOM comes before UBANTA.)

UBANTA: You? CHISOM: He came. UBANTA: Who came?

CHISOM: Okezie. He said I should tell you that after the angered thunder and lightning, the soothing rain has fallen. (She faints.)

IKEDI: You have heard him. Spare her life and that of Okezie’s 65 child. Even the wronged spirit has forgiven them. Odenigbo has forgiven them, too. See, she lives.

UBANTA: Odenigbo lied! Okezie, a wimp even in death, lied too. They must all die. When you go into the swampy forest where crocodiles live, one must be prepared to risk losing his legs. And you Ikedi, one more word from you and you shall go before them to serve them even in death. Inuru ya, do you hear that?

UKATU: I now see that madness reigns here. Udengwu, this is not a task for us anymore. I need to see Mbachu. Let us go to the palace and await the return of the Eze.
(They bend to carry CHISOM. Lights slowly fade.)

When lights come on, UKACHI’s carver’s shed is revealed. he is seated working on a mask when UKATU enters. UKATU is dressed like a red cap chief, whiskers and all. Behind her is UDENGWU, who carries a bag.

UKATU: I come from the meeting of the elders. I seek for the wood carver. The king of the Otuosisi of the seven villages, Ukachi Iwuhuchukwu.

UKACHI: I am he. May I know who is dressed like an ichie but speaks with the voice of a woman.

UKATU: I am known throughout Mba asaa. The seven villages know me as Ukatu.

UKACHI: Your name inspires the Ikoro to sing. I know of you.

UKATU: My desire may inspire you to carve a mask for my people.

UKACHI: Your people. My late great-grandfather carved their mask of Odenigbo.


UKACHI: Yes. Does your mask need an amendment. Do I have to come polish it? (Both UKATU and UDENGWU shake their heads.) Then why do you want to change the face of your god?

UDENGWU: Relax, Ukachi. We are not here to ask you to make excuses for your ancestors. Their work was good. It is the people we choose to take care of their work that are bad.

UKACHI: So why are you here?

UKATU: Now we can talk. I am Ada AgbaIa, the Nnenne of my people and I come on the order of the Eze. This is a man is he not? His name is
Udengwu, he is an elder in the palace. Are we not enough?

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UKACHI: You are both enough.

UKATU: And we are both initiates the cult from which we seek a new masquerade.

UKACHI: I beg your forgiveness. Please go ahead.

UDENGWU: Ode nigbo is our god. For years he has been our link with our ancestors. When he turns his face to us, he represents them, and when he turns his face to them, he represents us. But lately, his back is turned away from both worlds.

UKACHI: A bad sign.

UKATU: A bad sign indeed. (Clears her throat.) In my very long years on earth, Odenigbo has continued to fail us. He too has become old and weak, his priest now controls him.

UKACHI: Ubanta ... the most feared Chief Priest of Mba asaa.

UKATU: I see you have heard of us.

UKACHI: I know of him. Our ears are full of his escapades.

UDENGWU: Good. Then our words will be limited on this matter. Nnenne, tell him why we are here.

UKACHI: Rumour has it that he has travelled the seven villages to possess powers that will make him more powerful than the god he serves.

UKATU: Iji okwu. Truly (you have word. And he succeeds. He has forced Odenigbo into a marriage of forced silence, and has made the Eze a prisoner in his own shrine. Agbala ransi, agwaya osisi eji tuo ya. If a god/deity messes around, he will be told the wood from which it is carved from. Ubanta and Odenigbo aghuo anyi aka na imi. They have

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put their hands in our nostril. We want a new god.

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UKACHI: Remember, Mother, it is not just the rise of the new bright morning Sun that means it will be a good day.

UKATU: Yes, but at least it will be a new day. And one has the power to choose what the day should be. Give us a new god.

UDENGWU: Yes.

UKACHI: Aka kuru nkwa ya ekwuo, the hand beats the drum to sound. Man makes a god, his god decides what it will be.

UKATU: Ta! A god becomes what man wants it to be. A god must serve the people, not the people serving the god. A god must grow with the face of the people. Our Odenigbo has another face... strange and bitter to us. He derives pleasure from our pains.

UDENGWU: Yes. This is why the Eze has sent us to you.

UKACHI: I see. We heard of the bitterness in your land. We heard of deaths of women and children. We heard of fights among the youths who should build the land but we never heard that Odenigbo crossed the boundaries of the two worlds, came down himself, to perpetrate the ills in your land.

UKATU: Even mother earth is tired of our diggings to bury our children in its belly. She, too, moans.

UDENGWU: So will you help us?

UKACHI: What type of mask do you want from me, brave woman?

UKATU: Okumkpo. The masquerade of peace. The masquerade of togetherness and love. The masquerade ...

UKACHI: Okumkpo. A big ancestral masquerade. It is the masquerade of the initiates.
UKATU: Who says I am not one. I know the seven steps of the Okumkpo. I know the what it drinks, and the colours it likes. I know the songs it sings at sunset and the sound it makes when darkness envelopes the world. Give us Okumkpo.

UKACHI: Do you have what it needs to step out? It is only carved wood...until it is called.

UDENGWU: Indeed we know the songs to call the great Okumkpo out. Our drummers know what to say. We know the chant to appease the great Okumkpo. (Breaks into a chant which leads to a dance. UKATU and UKACHI join in the dance.)

UKATU: (Exhausted, does not utter a word. Slowly she raises the bag with her left hand.) Here, the blessed messages of the elders.

UKACHI: (Collects the bag with his left hand. Opens it and peeps.) All are there. It is complete.

UDENGWU: The only other problem is that we need it very soon.

UKACHI: Soon? But it normally takes seven months to build.

UDENGWU: Our festival comes soon. That is when we want to change the face of the masquerade.

UKACHI: A change of this nature meets certain oppositions. I hope your people will not burn my masquerade?

UKATU: (In a whisper.) Burn the masquerade? Ha, the visit of torches of fire.

UKACHI: What did you say, Mother? UKATU: Nothing. We need one urgently.

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UKACHI: I have one ready. It actually belongs to a people who have
not completed the payment for the wood. How soon did you say you want it?

UKATU: Bring it to the palace once you see burning fire in your sleep.

UKACHI: Burning fire? What does that mean?

UDENGWU: Yes, soon. That is why I came with her. She drifts. Soon. She means soon.

UKACHI: Yes. And before I forget, the mask will also need a good priest.

UKATU: The Eze will appoint one when he sees the mask. We have put more money than is required in the bag. We may never meet again, but please, do not fail my people. The evening breeze blows with the smell of impending rains. We must leave now.

UKACHI: Go home and be assured, Nnenne. I shall await the sign of the burning fire. May Okumkpo see you home safely. (Exit UKATU and UDENGWU.) What a world this new one is turning out to be. When bold women take on the task of the gods and men. Burning torches of fire ...

Slowly lights fade.

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Throne room. EZE is seated with the ELDERs.

EZE: The young men came, singing and dancing, leaves in their hands. In one flash, they rushed into the room where I was kept, and I was released. They brought me here, back to the splendor of the palace. Ubanta was determined to humiliate me and have me drop dead as I danced.

IROHA: That is why I keep asking myself the same question. Why did Ubanta want the Eze dead? The same Ubanta came here and said that Odenigbo had granted the Eze ten more years on the throne. So what
did the Eze do, what hideous crime did the Eze commit that now he has to dance and die?

OBI: Death was not on my mind. What Ubanta wants is my problem. Ikedi, an elder of this palace, was found dead by the shrine of Odenigbo. Two women saw Ubanta’s thugs drag his body to the hilly road. Although Ubanta claims innocence, we hear that the mark of Odenigbo which Ubanta puts on the necks of the visitors to the shrine was on his forehead. Only Ikedi knows who killed him. But we all know that the dead do not speak to the living.

ALL: Yes! True word!

OBI: Where do we go from here then? The Eze should know that Ikedi had forty-two sons, who are presently angered with the circumstance of their father’s death. They have mobilized the youths of the village, led by Mbachu, and they have threatened to burn down the shrine of Odenigbo.

ALL: Alu! IROHA: What will she do when she hears about her brother’s death? EZE: What will who do?

IROHA: Ukatu. Ikedi was the last child of Ukatu’s parents. All hell will break loose if she hears of Ikedi’s death. That was her only surviving relative.

EZE: We should be able to appease her. Ikedi left her forty-two sons to console her.

ALL: (Laugh.) OBI: I am afraid the village will burn with the wild unpredictable action the youths may take.

EZE: Yes. Those ones, too.
IROHA: Yes Onye-Eze, their anger usually spreads like wild fire. They only listen to Ukatu. Eze, I think you should send a message to Ukatu to come to the palace.

EZE: The good thing is she is not at home. Indeed, no one can guess what her reaction will be. She is wild fire herself.

OBI: You remember what she did to Nkem the drunk who raped the young girl, Kelechi? She went to him when he was supremely drunk, beat him to a pulp and tied his private part to a tree trunk after leaving him stark naked.

ALL: (Laugh.)

EZE: The good thing is that I sent her and Udengwu somewhere. They will be back soon. But before she returns, Iroha, you will go and see them. Tell Ikedi’s children that the palace will soon find out the reasons for all the ills in the land. Those guilty of Ikedi’s death will be punished after thorough investigations have been done. Please go. (MBACHU hurries in.)


ALL: We greet you.

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KUNYEMBEH: Mbachu, calm down. Why did you hurry into the palace the way you did? What’s the matter? You are breathless.

EZE: Yes. Ichie Kunyembeh is right. What does the leader of the youths have to say? The palace greets you. And I am still grateful for my release from the shrine of Odenigbo and his dreaded Chief Priest. Why have you come here, Mbachu? O gini mere?

MBACHU: Onye-Eze, I greet you. Our people say that what have eyes not seen that they will shed blood? Eze, tonight our eyes saw everything ... and blood flows.
APETE: Speak, Ochi agha, leader of our children...your proverb blurs our thinking.

MBACHU: Fire.

IROHA: Fire? Na ebe. Where?

MBACHU: At the palace of Odenigbo. We went to see Ubanta to tell him that the youths were not happy with the sinister death of our father Ikedi near the shrine of Odenigbo. Our investigations had shown foul play. Ubanta was still trying to speak with us, when Nnenna Ukatu entered with two of our other mothers, Ngbeke and Chika. In one move that no one understood, Ukatu ran into the shrine, and brought out the mask of Odenigbo. She poured oil on herself and the mask from inside the shrine. She also set them on fire.

EZE: Set who on fire? MBACHU: Herself and Odenigbo’s mask.

ALL: Alu!

MBACHU: Firmly, she held on to the mask as they burnt. Then Ubanta tried to save the mask by pulling it from Ukatu. It was then the mask pulled him in instead. May the gods punish me if I lie! We saw the fiery hands of Odenigbo grab and pull him into the fire as Ukatu continued to laugh as if the fire was a soothing welcome to her body.

EZE: May the gods forgive us. MBACHU: I think they did. Then came the explosion. EZE: What explosion?

MBACHU: All three of them. In one ball, the fire exploded into little balls of fire... and then ashes. All we have left is a burnt patch of grass. they are gone, Eze!

EZE: So Ubanta is gone?

AGBO: Yes, Eze. consumed by the fire Ukatu lit, and pulled into it by
the god he was supposed to be serving.

EZE: Where do we go from here? (UDENGWU enters with UKACHI. A young man with a wrapped load on his head follows.)

UDENGWU: Eze I!

EZE: Nna anyi Udengwu, is here. Father, our ears are full. O gini ozo kwa, what now?

UDENGWU: I heard everything. Eze, this is Ukachi, the wood carver of gods whom you sent Ukatu and I to.

EZE: Ukatu is no more. UDENGWU: I heard. She also knew how she would die. APETE: We don’t understand.

EZE: Elders, fed up with the problems of Odenigbo and Ubanta, I sent them to Ukachi the wood carver to make us a new mask. I actually asked them to request for the mask of Okumkpo. This is what you have brought?

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UKACHI: Yes.

UDENGWU: At Ukachi’s place, Ukatu asked him to bring the new mask of Okumkpo after he has seen the fire burning.

EZE: Fire burning? OBI: Did he see the fire burning? UKACHI: Yes, Eze!

UKACHI: I was tired from carving the mask of the whiteman which his catechist, Brother Peter was to pick later this morning, so we hurried to finish it and wrap it up for delivery. Tired, I slept off. That was when it happened.

EZE: What happened?

OKACHI: I did not know exactly how and where it started, but it looked like fire in a burning bush. Then three winged men.
APETE: Wizards?

UKACHI: No! They looked pure, they were dressed in shiny white silver drapings. One had a sword, and the other, a little torch of fire. He touched my other carvings and they started burning.

ALL: Alu!

UKACHI: As the old woman had asked me to expect to see fire, I concluded that that was the fire she spoke about. My boy and I set off immediately with your Okumkpo mask.

IROHA: Eze, I am sorry. But are we not in too much hurry in exchanging one god for another?

IBE: My very worry indeed. EZE: Why? Our people have been brought up to believe. We must believe in something or else we won’t be able to control ourselves. A people without a god is like an avalanche of mass flood, we all know how it starts, but no one knows its destination. May our ancestors save us from power-thirsty men who will lead us to destruction and inflict painful deaths like Ubanta did.

ALL: Iseeeee!

EZE: Ukachi, your mask of Okumkpo will be familiar to us. Bring it closer to my eyes. (UKACHI moves closer to the EZE. he begins to unwrap the mask. to everyone’s pleasant expectation.) Okumpko, we welcome you to our village. You shall be our new god. Udengwu, you shall be the new Chief Priest of our god. (There is jubilation.)

UDENGWU: (Steps forward. Moves to UKACHI. Collects the mask, makes some dance gestures.)

Okumpko! Qkumpko!

It is you I greet!
It is you I call!

Okumpko, answer me!

I am Udengwu, the son of Okoronta, your new voice in ObodoIjeh!

Give me your blessings like you gave the son of EwaAlu, Shower me with benevolence like you did for EwaUcha, and Dimgba of Amachi village.

The Eze of ObodoIjeh, greets you!

The essaas, great elders of the land, welcome you!

Before your arrival, hardship and death descended upon our people. That is why we have turned to you for protection.

Okumpko, cleanse our land. Your new children of ObodoIjeh welcome you. They have made you their new god. Because

you breathe the spirit of laughter and joy, do not damn us. (Slow music starts.)

ALL: Iseeeeee! EZE: To the village. Let us take Okumpko to its people. And let

the people meet their new god! ALL: Eze IdeduruIdu!Igaadi!

May you live long! Eze chikaa. (May the King rule well) Eze kwesiri! (The one who deserves kingship) Eze ukwu! (Great King) Ochuudo. (Peace maker) Odogwu! Odogwu! Odogwu! (Amidst slow music and dance, final lights fade.)

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The End

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Kraftgriot

Also in the series (DRAMA) (continued)