
Chukwuma Azuonye, University of Massachusetts Boston
THE INSIDER

STORIES OF WAR AND PEACE
FROM NIGERIA

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Flutes and drums filter through the foliage of the flanking forests, stirring memories of festive days before the war; days of salt and pepper and the fragrance of rich dishes.

Achike, a fourteen-year old soldier is making his tenth attempt to reach the home of his birth, to see his mother and brothers—for the first time in six months. When he loses his way, the pleading voice of the madman, Izreani nwa Dimoji calls: “Come back, my child... Come... let us stay in this village and watch people... Can’t you hear me?” Achike hears but does not heed. The voice lingers. And just before Achike’s tenth attempt fails, it is an obsession a dragging weight on his feet.

* * *

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* * *
STRANGE WORDS

*Ojionu* . . . A masquerade symbolizing the hawk, which pursues people in mock-raids during festivals

*Chi* . . . Personal god.

*Izreani nwa Dimoji* . . . Izreani the son of Dimoji

*Amadioha* . . . God of Thunder

*Iyi-Mmuo* . . . The river of the evil spirits

*Chineke* . . . God the Creator

*Ikeji* . . . New Yam Feast.
THE LOST PATH

The sun was now overhead. Achike walked fast. He was barefoot, and his grey civilian trousers, almost threadbare, showed his buttocks from two big holes. But his shirt was new, though of cheap baft, dyed green. It was no matter. Few blockaded soldiers could afford to own even that. Achike’s heart sang home, home! Now, the shirt was glued to his skin with sweat. Perhaps, he had been walking for six hours, or more, through a maze of crisscrossing village paths. Far, far, now, he no longer knew his bearing. Still, he walked on with home in his heart. But after a double-bend shaded by outspreading boughs of oilbean trees, he came to a place where the road pronged into four. He stopped there and decided to go no further. “It should be ten miles to Umuna,” he thought. “Captain said so. But I have been walking since morning and yet no sign of the tarred road.”

He stood, contemplating the dark green buttons of his shirt. Now, he was becoming aware of his surroundings. Ahead of him, gongs and drums crackbellowed. He listened. He felt a shadow of something he could not tell crawl over his heart, like liquid flame. It burned. He listened. The fanfare of drums, of voices and footfalls was of a familiar kind. It was unmistakably festive; strange though for the season. He could hear the flutes filter through the leaves of the flanking forests, stirring them into a dance. Now, he remembered. Achike remembered. He remembered the festival days before the war. Salt days! He remembered the ecstatic runs before the raids of the hawk-mask, Ojionu, in re-enactment of a familiar natural drama. Days of salt and pepper! The smell of rice and stew filled his nose, flowing down his empty stomach with multillion needle-pricks. The bite of memories increased his frustration and made him more determined to reach home today; and as he waited his parched tongue and palate watered with memories and anticipation of well-cooked dish, with salt and meat.

He had not gone far when he sighted a heavily guarded checkpoint. He approached beyond a bend, from where he heard murmuring like tides breaking on a shore under whispering bamboos and rafliapalms. He thought it was a stream, but as he advanced, he found it was a market. A soldier could be sighted now and then amidst the surging crowd of mostly market-women: old women,
shrunken to the bones and selling practically nothing. Again he hesitated.

"Perhaps, there are Military Police, there," he feared. "They could grab me if I got there, pass or no pass." His heart pounded hard.

Achike did not want any more arrests. It had always been painful. He had just passed out of another training camp, at Umuduru-Egbe-Aguru, after floating through many other camps and escaping from many battle-fronts. He had been lucky this time to be deployed at the camp as a bat man to the Camp Commandant, a young captain who treated him like his own brother. It was rare luck and Achike was very afraid to lose his newfound security. His story had been piteous. He was just fourteen, or about that. And for six months, he had not seen his mother and brothers as he drifted from camp to camp, trained here today and escaping from there tomorrow, always in an effort to see his mother and brothers. Today he was determined to see them, and as he walked, he dreamed:

"If I reach home today," he kept saying to himself "I will eat well for the first time in six months. I will tell big stories..."

This would be his tenth effort to reach home; but his chi was bad. Very bad! Maybe because he was tall and big, he was an easy prey for the Military Police.

"I wish I can reach home today," he dreamed on: "I hope... I hope... I hope..."

Gradually the sun inclined to the West. Achike stood still with palpitating heart. He was very tired. Hunger was smacking him, intense like the sun, on his back. He wanted to sit there and wait awhile. There was no hope. Beyond the market, flourishes of festivity were growing more depressingly joyous.

Again, Achike took heart. He walked on. "Nothing is going to happen to me!" he muttered to himself. "Yes...yes... Nothing is going to happen to me!. No, nothing is going to happen. I have a genuine pass. Oga is Commandant."

He walked faster. The face of the sky darkened. Fast, fast.

One or two market women, old women, naked to the hips, with flabby breasts, came past him. But he did not want to ask them the way. Fast, fast. He wanted to get to the checkpoint, fast, fast, half-praying that a knowledgeable-looking man should come by so he wouldn't have any need to stop at the checkpoint. Fast, fast. As he walked he listened to everything—to the whispering branches of trees, to the birds, to the earth humming beneath his feet. Fast, fast.
There was a lone rumble of thunder.
The seafaring babble of tones in the market had now flowed into the festival noises above everything, and Achike was walking in dreams of yesterday, with consuming memories of such noises in his own village of Okom before the war.

Shadows floated before him. Rain-shadows over shadows of branches.

Fast, fast.

He was just about a hundred yards away from the checkpoint, when a man suddenly emerged from a nearby bush talking to himself and laughing. Achike looked him straight in the face and hesitated. Then he saluted. But the man continued to walk away, shaking his head and laughing. Again Achike saluted. The man stopped; but he was still talking to himself and laughing.

There was smell of water in the air.

"I am speaking to you," Achike said, firmly, as the man continued to walk away, scratching his dirty, matted hair. "I want to ask you something. Can't you hear!"

No answer.

"Can't you hear!"

The man turned and stopped. His beard, specked with yellowing grey dust of hairs, was as dirty and unkempt as the hair of his head. Achike approached with doubt in his eyes. And close, the man gave out a pale yellow smell that tasted castor-oil in the belly. Achike wondered. What sort of man was this? His rabbit-eyes quiver-glittered with a liveliness that contradicted his very shabby appearance. Still he was laughing, this time scratching his beard. He had not spoken a word yet. He looked like something out of a tale. But Achike took him to be one of the war casualties; one of the village-folks whom the war had turned beasts—with no soap to wash, no clothes to wear; beasts crazy with hunger. Again he saluted.

Then the man spoke: "My name is Izreani nwa Dimoji." Now he was scratching all over his body. "But why?" he frowned, with a fixed gaze on Achike, "Everybody has been asking me my name today?"

"I want you to show me the correct path to Umuna," said Achike; "I didn't ask you your name. I come from the camp at Umuduru-Egbe-Aguru. I have been walking since morning, but I cannot find the tarred road."

"Your name? Are you asking me your own name! You must be crazy!"

"The road... I said, the road..."
Two women passed just then and cast a surprised glance at Achike. They half-stopped as they caught a whiff of what he was saying. But they went on.

"I'm going to Umuna. I lost my way..."

Izreani nwa Dimoji listened carefully. Then, he rose storm-like in an inexplicably harsh voice. "But I've just told you that my name is Izreani nwa Dimoji."

Achike was put off. He stared at the man as he spumed out abuses on him: "Ha! What strange beasts I meet today? Look! Are those ears of yours ornaments? Didn't you hear when I said it—that my name is Izreani nwa Dimoji? Ah-ah!"

"I'm not asking you that! I mean..."

"Mean what?"

Achike heard peels of laughter from behind him at the check-point. He glanced back and found that eyes were on him. He felt foolish, and embarrassed. Was anything wrong? Were these people laughing at him? Why? He was sure he had asked the correct question. What was this talk of Izreani nwa Dimoji...and the laughter from the checkpoint? No! He was right! Yes! But... perhaps... Izreani nwa Dimoji was hard-eared? Achike found what seemed to be an explanation. He spoke again slowly, emphasizing every word, with appropriate gestures:

"I was asking you," he explained, "to show me the way to Umuna. I haven't gone there through this way before. I come from the camp at Umuduru-Egbe-Aguru and I am looking for the tarred road."

"I know..." said nwa Dimoji, gaping.

There was laughter again at the checkpoint.

"I mean the road," said Achike. "You see, I lost my way..."

Izreani nwa Dimoji listened as carefully as before, scratching like a hunter bothered with itching leaves. His eyes glistened, lighting Achike's heart with fresh hopes.

"What's your name?" he asked, calmly; quite responsibly.

"Achike! I am a native of Okom. That's where I'm going."

"Ha!" exclaimed nwa Dimoji, excitedly "That's where we're going? Ha!" His eyes rolled somewhat in mockery.

"As I told you," Achike began again, "I lost my way..."

"Yes, you lost your way! Isn't it what you're saying?"

"Yes. If you could show me the way to Umuna..."

"Look at this foolish boy!" Izreani nwa Dimoji flamed up, so suddenly that Achike trembled: "Earth and sky, listen to me and this foolish boy!" He stood priestlike as he invoked, with deep-furrowed frown on his face.

Achike was afraid. Izreani nwa Dimoji seemed to be in real
frenzy now, his voice rising higher and higher in the railing:

“What won’t I meet in this my life? Look, look, you troublesome rat, would you say I didn’t tell you everything? And didn’t I tell you all these—that the name of this village is Umuduru-Nso-ofo—that our ancestors descended from the Lord who lives in the sky! What are you asking me again? Ah-ah”

Achike was vexed. “You said nothing like that. And I didn’t ask for all that. I wanted you to show me the road to Umuna, I told you I lost my way.” He could feel the people at the checkpoint watching him.

“There are many mad people in this world,” said nwa Dimoji. He grunted and walked away, in silence, as if Achike never existed. Again thunder spoke.

Achike stood like someone marooned in a strange world. Once more the people at the checkpoint laughed. He couldn’t understand the crisis. People have always described situations like this as dreamlike. Achike was prepared to accept this description whole-and-whole for this situation. Sure. This could only happen in a dream. Yes. Izreani nwa Dimoji could exist nowhere else. And it was no exaggeration as it was. Achike felt a hollowness, a feeling of being lost in ghostland. It was alone in ghostland that a voice like that of Izreani nwa Dimoji could be heard, flowing out of shadows that looked substantial now and vanished in an eyeblink. Izreani nwa Dimoji had been here a while ago. Now he had vanished like a ghost—which indeed he was. Achike’s head swelled. The gongs and drums and voices from the next village trickled up his spine with a cold sensation that struck his heart and crawled down his guts and out of his anus. It was as if his life had gushed out of his anus into the wind. He did not notice it when about a dozen women came and passed by staring at him.

“Who could this man be?” he muttered to himself.

But presently Izreani nwa Dimoji returned. Achike was still standing there moveless. He didn’t even entertain any thought of moving.

Izreani nwa Dimoji stank close:

“Did you say you were going to Umuna?”

“Yes. I said so, but I don’t know what you’ve been talking.”

The strange snarling voices of nwa Dimoji now changed completely. It was almost sober and friendly. Achike felt a warmth, and the feeling of lostness melted inside him. Now, Izreani was no longer a ghost. A few more people, old men and women, came up, staring at them.

“The road to Umuna?” said Dimoji, frowning as if in deep thought.

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"Yes. I come from the camp at Umuduru-Egbe-Aguru," Achike began to explain again. "I am going to see my mother and brothers at Okom. But I got lost here. If I could get to Umuna on the tarred road, I can find transport home."

"Yes..."

Izreani nwa Dimoji stared vacantly at Achlke’s forehead for a long time without speaking. Achike stood and waited, watching the gradual change of the colour in the face of Izreani nwa Dimoji. It was getting ghastly again! He dreaded another fusilade of abuses. It was clouding up menacingly on the stranger’s face. And behind him, he felt a thousand eyes piercing his spine from the checkpoint. He was restless when he heard the repeated laugh and murmurs. But he did not look back. Now, when Izreani nwa Dimoji spoke, it was like thunder and lightning through him, both at a flash.

"You must be a mad man!" said Izreani, harsh again and invoking: "Hear, Amadioha! Earth and sky, hear! Is there nobody here who did not hear when I told it? That our ancestors were sons of the gods. I said it. Didn’t I say it? I said it. And did I not tell this goat here that our land is called Umuduru-Nso-Ofo? Yes, I said it. And I told you that there is a big stream up there; that there is a brook down the rock-valley, where there are bamboos!"

Now his voice fell to cool admonition: "We don’t eat the fishes in the brook," he said. "It is called Iyi-Mmuo. It’s a deadly place. But we eat the fishes in the big river. The water of the big river has a bitter taste. The water of the small river has a sweet taste. We drink the water of the small river and swim the water of the big river. If you go there now, you will see children splashing water about. They usually jump from the bridge in somersault. They dive deep under water like little fries. They get lost in the brown waters. The water is brown, you know. It is a finger of the Imo River in our land. Do you know which we call the Imo River? I am asking you, deaf rat."

The clouds rolled heavily, darkly westward, exuding the smell of water.

Achike was silent. He was quite impatient now. He no longer had that dream-like feeling which held him moveless under the ghost-dream presence of Izreani nwa Dimoji. The man must be an eccentric, a half-wit, or an outright lunatic. He turned to go. But again Izreani nwa Dimoji succeeded in detaining him:

"Did you say you wanted to go to Umuiariam?"

"I said Umuna! Umuna!" Achike repeated impatiently. "I told you I lost my way, but you’ve been talking all sorts of nonsense!

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If you don’t want to show me the way, you go your way, I think I can ask another person.”

Wind rustled through the grass and came chilly to the marrow.

Achike was too bitter to pay any heed to the repeated laughter at the checkpoint. He was thinking: “If I go on listening to this crazy man, it will be sundown and I won’t have a place to pass the night. And it’s going to rain.”

He had no money. He had left the camp at the first light of day hoping to reach Okom before lunchtime. But he wandered into this maze because he feared to ask questions as he dodged the Military Police.

But the voice of Izreani nwa Dimoji came again, now soft and conspiratorial.

“Do you know,” he whispered, “Those people there are our Simple Defend!” Achike knew he meant “Civil Defenders”. But he was too angry to be amused. Izreani nwa Dimoji now seemed to have something important to say, and he listened.

“I said they are Simple Defend, those people,” continued nwa Dimoji. “They were all born in this our Umuduru-Nso-Ofo. But I don’t know what is wrong with them. When a car that Chineke created comes to our land, they stop it, and ask the car silly questions. Then they will throw aside that pole across the road and the car will pass.” He stopped as if to watch the effect on Achike of what he had said. Then. Then, as if he was satisfied with it, he went on: “You see, I don’t know whether they are all mad. And don’t you see. Look at that crowd in that market. Tell me ... I wonder! Don’t you wonder? Why are they all floating about there, swarming like maggots on nightsoil from dawn to dusk? Aren’t they mad? Look everywhere, my son. Everybody moving up and down, down and up, up and down, down and up ... I don’t know my son. Is it just the war? Is everybody in this our land mad?” Izreani wore a frown like one making a serious comment on life.

Achike shook his head and laughed in his heart. He looked over the man again, and decided to leave him and go away. But he could feel his footsteps after him, fast, fast.

Then, the infernal voice: “Did you say you were going to Umuocharn?” The voice was eager. It was almost a passionate appeal.

“Thank you” said Achike. “Thank you.”

There was a slight shower.

Come, my child, let us stay in this our village and watch people. Come, come back, my child. Can’t you hear?"

The air cleared again in the wind.

Again, the voice pleaded: “My child, don’t you want to come back?”

“Thank you,” said Achike—without looking back.

Izreani nwa Dimoji heaved a moan of despair. He scratched up some soil from the earth, touched his tongue and showed it to the sky in oath.

“Witness Earth and Sky, I said everything! But he is going away, abusing me! Witness sky! When the fire rains— I shall not be there. Witness earth! When the python comes—I shall not be there!”

It drizzled.

Achike was now far away. The people at the checkpoint were beckoning. A breeze of friendliness flowed from their direction. Achike followed it. As he approached, he felt Izreani nwa Dimoji behind him again, fast, furious. The weight mounted behind him, and he dodged as if a stroke had already grazed him.

“Did you say you were going to Okwe?” Came the voice again, following close like a shadow. Once more it was paternal: “If you are going there, my child, watch out, watch out when you get to the market at Okwe. Today is their New Yam Feast. They call it Ikeji. Ojionu masks are floating everywhere. Walk by the bush, child, and watch out. Don’t let the masks flog you dead.”

Achike did not answer.

The masquerade music had attained a climatic frenzy and you could feel the vibrations of festivity on the earth as the sounds rose behind the palm trees and heavy irokos. Achike was no longer afraid of anybody. He was no longer afraid of the Military police. Home called and urged him on. Time pressed. The threatening rain sapped all his hope, and he feared the prospects of getting benighted in the land of Izreani nwa Dimoji. But the voice was receding behind him, like the fading wings of bats at daybreak. He saw the people at the checkpoint laugh as the voice cracked up again to them:

“Watch out, our people of the Simple Defend. Keep a strong hand on that soldierman. He went to Uninvasimtim. He went to Unimgbomgbom. Keep a strong hand on him. He is a man of Big Grammar. Remember, Grammar caused the war.” And the voice was heard no more.

Mist, Mist.

Achike’s heart leapt when he was halted at the checkpoint.
There was a Military Police Corporal there, and it seemed he had been waiting for him. What he had dreaded! Again he stood, hopeless—at attention. His despair deepened as the noise of festivities continued to rise. What help now? Would the big hands of the silkcotton tree in the market descend and carry him away? He half-hoped for the miracle; he half-expected it to happen. His panicked salute to the Corporal was awkward and amusing. He trembled at attention, then tensed up like a man about to face a firing-squad. In his head surged black memories of the training camps,—the hunger, the blood-sucking body-lice, the jiggers, and the perils of battle. Echoes of the voice of Izreani nwa Dimoji gripped him: "Come back, my child." He wished he had listened. And he waited, pining: "If only I can see my mother and brothers today; just today; if only today, O Death, come from the forward guns and kill me."

The Corporal detected his panic.  
"Ol' Boy, whosai you dey go?" he querried.
"My pass dey here, sir," Achike said in a trembling voice, fussing with his shirt-pockets. "I dey go home—to Okom. I come loss my way for this kind turn-turn bush. Na the Captain, my oga, wey sign my pass." He pulled it out. "Our location dey for Umuduru-Egbe-Aguru. I come loss my way for this bush..."

Again the Civil Defenders laughed, Achike was relieved to see the Corporal laugh too. The voice of Izreani nwa Dimoji returned to his mind. He wondered why they laughed.

"Ol' Boy," said one of the Civil Defenders, "wettin you dey ask that many wey been dey follow you now-now?"
Then Achike understood.
"I been dey ask am to show me the road to Umuna."
"Don't you know he's a mad man?"

But somehow Achike did not believe it. He had a safe-conduct at the checkpoint. Umuna was only five miles away, on the road. But a sense of insecurity dominated him as he walked towards the feasting village. Heavy shadows of branches fell across the path before him. At every point the voice of Izreani nwa Dimoji returned with a dragging weight on his feet. But he walked on.

There was a double report of thunder. Air thickened with darkness and moisture. And suddenly the fanfare of drums and voices was broken into a babble of whispers with punctuations of harsh peremptory voices. Achike half-stopped and listened. He heard the farting of a lorry with a bad exhaust pipe ahead. He stopped and listened. Noise of vehicles! That hatched a new hope. Perhaps the tarred road was near. Perhaps, one of the vehicles would go in the direction
of Okom. He hurried up, through an oilbean-flanked corridor, through the thickening jungle. Laughter was completely dispelled now ahead of him. There was wailing, and the scattered peremptory voices. Again a lorry farted. Another farted. And another. Yes. He could feel an assurance of the presence of several lorries. He ran.

He ran.

The corridor through the forest narrowed. The oilbean trees seemed to be drawing together; close upon him, as if intent on crushing him. The voice of Izreani nwa Dimoji filled him, and he wondered why the obsession with that voice. He tried to forget it but no, the voice lingered: “Come back, my child.” He turned his thoughts to home, to his mother and brothers, but no: “Come back, my child,” persisted the voice of Izreani nwa Dimoji.

Any moment rain could break from the over-charged clouds, it was necessary to speed up. He ran, fast through the bottle-neck.

Achike was taken by surprise. The corridor suddenly terminated in the open market where women and children stood wailing and pleading in the midst of a large squad of soldiers and five lorries filled with able-bodied men of the village. There was no hope now of going back, for Achike. He felt sure he had been seen. But a woman winked and signed to him to plunge into the bush. Another drew near and whispered: “Run now, brother, they are capturing both soldiers and civilians. Run. Run! Can’t you hear me?”

Achike stood.

What was the need of running, he thought. He felt sure he had been seen.

“Won’t you run now, brother?” said the woman. “They are still far from you, and I don’t think they have seen you. They even arrested the mask-players and the drummers. They tore the masks and bundled them all with the players into that lorry. Run away, now as fast as...”

She could not finish. A lieutenant pointed in their direction. Two armed soldiers approached.

Achike stood and waited. The voice of Izreani nwa Dimoji drummed in his heart. “Come back, my child! Come back! Come back!”