

IN SEARCH OF RIVER OWENA

Abanla village was thrown into a joyful mood. The arrival of a convoy of cars preceded by Toyota Hilux vans filled with armed security agents put paid to speculations of the past few months. The governor of the state had come at last to commission River Owena Dam Project. Owena was a very big river and its bank touched the back of Abanla village such that during the raining season, it usually chased some people out of their hamlets. The villagers drink the water; they fish in it and after domestic consumption they sell the excess fishes in the main town which was some ten kilometers away. The water also served as a means of irrigation for their farms.

On this unique day, the Baale was full of joy as the governor addressed the villagers. The governor repeated all the statements that the Baale had used to convince the villagers, with the dam: fresh water would be treated for domestic use, electricity would be generated and the villagers would reap many other social and economic benefits in having a dam so close to the village. Nobody drank palm wine that day as bottles of beer were freely distributed from unknown sources.

The weeks that followed saw the arrival of some white men who came with cranes, bulldozers and other heavy machinery and soon, the big river Owena was caged into a dam. True to his words, the villagers benefitted economically as the youths provided raw labour and the women sold food and drinks to those who worked on the dam, but as soon as the work on the dam came to an end, the economic activities dried up. The river itself became gagged as the movement of the volume of water came under control as it could only trickled down its normal path every now and then.

The villagers could feel some changes in the atmosphere, only they could not put their fingers to what it was; they felt the weather had become harsher. The special breeze that normally cooled the villagers even under the harshest midday sun could no longer be felt. The mixture of sound of flora and fauna dwelling in the river with those dwelling on the land which lulled the villagers to sleep in the night ceased.

To the Abanla villagers, the arrival of the dam eventually came to be seen for what it actually was-an ill wind. The youths of the village, especially those who relied on the river for fishing and other agricultural purposes began to migrate to the main town. Thus, when the initial drove took vocation in Okada business (riding motorcycle as a means of mass transportation) and it appeared they were doing well, the entire village became depleted of its youths as all of them went to the city to take up this peculiar job. And soon the once bubbling village became a shadow of itself.

Tens of kilometers away from Abanla, the people of Ajebandele whose village was down the path of Owena were oblivious of what had happened to the river. And when Napo, one of the young men in the village called the attention of fellow fishermen to what he observed, the others told him he was exaggerating.

Napo was the envy of all the young men in the village of Ajebandele. He came all the way from the country's middle belt region to reside and engage in menial jobs in this village. He had no family except friends who also came from his home town, Oturkpo, to Ajebandele. Built like a weightlifter, he was a giant of a man. Apart from fishing, he was into so many other professions. He was a cocoa farmer and a carpenter. Nobody could

tell whether the name 'Napo', a short form of Napoleon that they called him was his real name, but whatever might be the case, it was a name duly earned. It was said that he earned the name some years back after he engaged in a brawl with one of the contractors who came to oversee the construction of the great bridge over river Owena.

The narrative has it that Napo was one of those who volunteer to work as labourers during the construction. However, at the end of the work, the contractor wanted to renege on the amount he promised to pay the youths of the village. Napo was said to have stood his ground even when other youths showed their fear of the white contractor and his security guards. In the heat of the argument, the contractor had thrown a punch at Napo who took it on his neck. Napo had shrugged his neck and involuntarily threw a punch in retaliation. The contractor had been lucky to move sideways just as Napo's fist brushed past his cheeks like a thunderbolt. The fist was said to have landed on a concrete pillar which was standing behind the contractor.

Everybody was horrified to see a concrete pillar broke into two. Other expatriates were said to have congratulated the man on his close shave with death and it was claimed the man immediately paid Napo and his friends more than was promised initially. This event confirmed he was 'Napo, the lion' as Napo in the local parlance means 'the one who punches down a pillar'. To buttress this narrative, Napo himself would never use stone to break coconuts- a punch or two and the kernel is smashed into bits.

Although other men carried out their fishing activities on the main Owena river, Napo usually set his peculiar traps at the estuary of Omi Gbooro and Owena. Omi Gbooro is

believed to be the wife of Owena who is a male. The estuary was where Napo caught rare fishes, lobsters, shrimps and other flora and fauna which he sold at the markets of the surrounding villages.

Being a keen observer, Napo could not but notice something was amiss with the volume of water flowing down the river. His colleagues discountenanced his fear because in their own observation, at the tail end of every dry season, the river merely trickled down. But Napo insisted the flow was unusual. At every occasion, he argued something had gone abnormal with the river and with this insistence, his colleagues, with a trace of envy told him to go and complain to Owena, his friend.

They had their reasons to tell him so. It was generally known that Napo's daily catch was more than that of any of his colleagues and this was attributed to the special relationship he had with the river. There was also a legend easily cited to substantiate this relationship. According to the legend, about seven kilometers upstream, river Owena separated two villages of Araro and Olodo. During the raining season, it was always difficult for the inhabitants of the two villages to cross from one village to the other.

Before any raining season, the two villages made it a duty to construct a makeshift bridges made of heavy logs ingenuously tied together. But this effort was never successful; with the first two rainfalls, Owena would have swept away this bridge. Owena at this time was a monster and it was at this time that people claimed this river blinks. But this is because; the volume of water would be so much that its current would become unnoticeable except for small jerky movements on the surface. The water by

this time would have covered the big rocks and the only sound was the roar of the river as it coursed its way down a thirty feet waterfall about five hundred meters away. It was this occasional movement that the villagers saw as menacing blinks of Owena.

Napo was an accomplished diver and swimmer. At this time, he became the villagers' saviour as he took it upon himself to ferry on his back any villager who wished to cross from one village to the other. This task he carried out in the morning and in the evening each day throughout the season.

It was what happened on one such occasion that confirmed that Napo was indeed Owena's friend. Early in the morning on one cloudy day, Napo was said to have ferried five men and their wives across the turbulent river. His final trip was to carry across a basket full of kolanuts from the other side. Kolanut was a taboo to river Owena and villagers far and near knew, thus they avoided washing kolanuts or throwing kolanuts into this river. Nobody could tell whether Napo knew of this taboo. The villagers subsequently attributed what happened to this basket of Kolanuts.

As Napo was swimming towards the bank with the basket on his head, a wave that the villagers described to be as high as a two storey building suddenly appeared. The strange part was that the wave came from downstream. Napo could do nothing as he was already in the middle of the river. The wave fell on him and swept him downstream towards the waterfall and some villagers could swear they saw a man in white apparel in the wave.

People immediately notified people at Ajebandele that Napo's body might be swept past the village. The villagers had given up hope of seeing him alive as nobody had ever survived a fall down the waterfall. The villagers at Ajebandele surrounded the banks, searching for a semblance of a body being hurled down the river. They waited the entire day, but they did not see Napo's body. The villagers searched for days and even navigated Owena river down its path to the estuary where it met with Omi funfun, another huge river and this was about 60 kilometers away. The aim was just to retrieve Napo's corpse.

After three months, the villagers gave up hope of ever recovering Napo's corpse from the river. It was therefore a shock to the villagers that one early morning, Napo appeared in the village. Ajebandele and its environs were in commotion for days. If this appearance was not strange enough, the robust and shiny face of Napo could not be explained. And when people asked him how he managed to escape and where he was for months, he didn't give any explanation.

The only inkling that there was more mystery involved was that occasionally, whether on the way to the market or to the river, Napo could be seen discussing with an invisible person. When his friends asked the reason for this abnormal dialogue, he usually asked in exasperation why they could not see that he was talking to a man in white apparel and also why they could not also see the man's dogs prancing around him. The friends eventually found a way round this mystery. Thus, one day after Napo had concluded such discussion with this invisible person, he asked his friends whether they saw whom

he was talking to and whether they saw the man's seven dogs as well, his friends replied that they actually saw a tall man, but could not remember who he was and where they had met him before. Napo immediately became happy and told them that it was Owena coming back from Onikoko market.

With the arrival of the raining season, the villagers saw the truth in Napo's claims. The flow of the river even at the peak of the season was merely a trickle giggling down its route. The normal lakes and heavy pools where the fishermen made their catch were very shallow indeed. The village as a whole met the Baale. The two churches in the village which belonged to different denominations quickly suspended their rivalry and embarked on seven days of joint prayers and fasting. The river had always served their mystic and spiritual needs. It was in the river they had baptism; it was in it their members had special baths to cleanse their bodies of spiritual problems and diseases. It was at the banks of the river that special candles must be lit to invite angels and heavenly hosts to hearken to special prayers.

Even after marathon fasting and prayers what appeared to be the results was the arrival of bulldozers, cranes and heavy machinery preceded by some men in uniform measuring the length and breadth of Owena with special equipments. And soon, the middle and the banks of the river were being excavated. Huge gulleys and craters crisscrossed the path of the river downstream. The Baale confirmed to the inquisitive villagers that the government had located precious stones deposit along the river and the excavation had even begun upstream some kilometers before Ajobandele.

This seemed to sound the death knell to Ajebandele village. Quite unlike other villagers, Napo was able to quickly realize that what made Ajebandele a village was the river Owena and what made Owena a river was Ajebandele. But he was alone in this line of thought as even colleagues from his home town saw the situations differently. And as much as he tried, Napo could not overcome his grief; the more the excavation went on, the more his sadness grew.

After his futile appeal to stop the excavation at Ajebandele, Napo decided to leave the village. He came to the realization that such project could not be stopped at Ajebandele. He must go to the big city where they made the decisions. There, he believed, his protest, even as a lone person, could appeal to change some minds. But when he was leaving, the envious among his own colleagues insinuated he was going in search of his friend, Owena.

It was unnoticeable at first, the changes made to the village eventually began to tell on the inhabitants. Mostly hard hit were the youths who began to migrate into towns far and near and this included even hundreds of those who were deriding Napo and the disappearance of his friend, Owena. They eventually followed in search of Napo to the city, leaving the once bubbling Ajebandele to become a shadow of itself.

Short Statement

This fictionalized true life story occurred in some villages near Ile-Ife, Osun State of Nigeria. It hints at the surreptitious and deleterious impact of civilization(this time, construction of a dam and excavation for precious metals) in the realm of climate change. The oblivious nature of the actors to their actions and the impotence of the recipients are denoted.

Biosketch

Adebisi Ademakinwa studied Russian Language and Theatre Arts(Combined Honours)at the B.A.level. His M.A. is in Theatre Arts while the second M.A. is in European Studies. He did his Ph.D. in African and European Drama and Theatre. Although, he has written many plays including the award winning play *Osusu; the Story of Creation*, he has never dabbled into short story writing. Currently, Adebisi is a lecturer in the Department of Creative Arts, University of Lagos, Nigeria.