

Appel Project

Tomi Oyedeji-Olaniyan

The Question of Stories

They met in church.

Ayoola tightened her scarf reaching for the comforting scratchiness of the material. The object in question belonged to her mother and although the polyester was undoubtedly uncomfortable, Ayoola had always been fond of tying the thin red scarf around her head for church. The sermon was long and every couple minutes, she relished the feel of the cool air touching her skin from the rotating fan. They were set up all over the church, standing at the beginning of every couple rows like surrogate ushers. But while big and bulky, they were cheap and most importantly efficient. The perfect compliment to a pastor who always spoke 30 minutes past his allotted sermon time. Eventually church ended and her mother began to make the rounds, insisting on saying a proper hello to everyone filled with laughter and small chats. Ayoola knew they would be here for at least another hour. She spied her little brother, Yemi, by the back of the church where the younger kids liked to gather, so while he was occupied, she went to search for Bisi in the choir section. Her best friend had been part of the choir for as long as the two girls had known each other. Their schedules were quite packed especially on Sundays when they had to arrive an hour early to rehearse and don the official church robes. So Ayoola expected to find Bisi in the rehearsal area; a little alcove was tucked away behind the altar.

By the time she arrived, Bisi was already out of her robes.

“Ah, ah, *na wa* for you!” she clapped her hands jokingly. “I sent you a message about Ezinwa yesterday and no response.”

Bisi blushed sheepishly. A choir girl or not, her best friend knew how to push her buttons.

“I fell asleep now! And then yesterday, we went for a wedding in Ijebu. By the time I came back, it was dead and there was no NEPA to charge it.”

“Why would you ever rely on NEPA?” Ayoola gave a small sigh. NEPA was notorious for constantly taking the power. She knew the feeling of annoyance well. It was particularly trying when coming back after a long day to a devilishly hot house, the air conditioning machines asleep without any electricity to wake them up or spending an extra 15 minutes in the morning boiling water on the stove because the microwave would not work. “ You need to get a power bank, this girl, it is really not that -“

A young boy popped his head round the frame, his wire glasses magnifying his childishly huge eyes. His name was Zion, one of the younger kids at church. He came running in breathlessly, calling out her name.

“Ayo! Aunty Tutu is calling you!”

And just as quickly as he appeared, he was gone. His message delivered, he returned to the back of the church where the kids seemed to be enraptured in a serious game of tic tac toe.

“Well, I need to go,” Ayoola jumped up and began to walk out, quickly whipping around to face her friend. “ Charge. Your. Phone.”

And with a cheeky wink, she left Bisi on her own and went to search for her mother back in the main hall. The church hall was populated with aunties and uncles draped in an

array of colorful fabrics. Many of the women donned traditional *iro* and *buba* but some still opted for Western clothing and brightly patterned dresses. In the sea of vibrant colors, Ayoola spotted her mother's red and blue gele headpiece and began to make her way toward her.

Her mother was deep in conversation with a woman, Ayoola quickly recognised her as Aunt Mary. While her mother was gesturing wildly, completely engrossed in their topic of discussion, Aunt Mary was the first to spot Ayoola coming toward them. Her mother could easily get lost when talking. This time after church was the peak socialisation period and she loved every minute of it.

Ayoola bent her knees in the style of traditional greeting and motioned as if kneeling to the ground.

"Good afternoon, Aunt Mary!"

It was then her mother realised her presence, her face relighting. "Ehen! Ayoola, you know Aunt Mary now?"

Without waiting for a response, she continued on. "Have you met her daughter yet? She just came back. Our little *Americanah!*" She sang the last part; it was jest but the girl seemed to grimace at the nickname. She seemed to notice Ayoola peering at her and immediately hid it with a smile.

"Thank you, ma," she said, "It's good to be home."

Her voice lilted, high, airy and void of the forced caricature American accent one can sometimes hear from someone who has lived in Lagos their whole life. Her voice was tinged with the West but not quite there. Ayoola couldn't quite decide whether this girl had been abroad for one year or ten.

“This is my daughter, Ayo,” she motioned toward her, oblivious to the girl’s poorly hidden expressions. “You should take down her number. You can be friends, mhm?”

And with a twinkling smile, she was off, onto the next church member. Aunt Mary seemed to have disappeared too and so they stood in silence, the discomfort of the forced meeting between them. Ayoola broke it.

“I hope it’s not too hot for you?”

The girl smiled back but it didn’t reach her eyes. And just like that, Ayoola knew the girl had already heard that question today.

“It’s been okay. I find it too cold abroad.” she said it off hand but Ayoola could hear what she was saying. *I haven’t been abroad that long. I am not an alien here.*

“So did you enjoy the church service?”

That seemed to catch the girl’s attention, and she turned her body around.

“I was able to follow it, I can’t say I found it particularly applicable.”

“Oh,” Ayoola’s eyes dropped. “Do you prefer your church abroad?”

The question seemed to turn something off in the girl and Ayoola sensed that she was losing her. Brushing off any personal offense, she continued on. “I don’t recall your name.”

“Don’t worry, I never gave it. It’s Ite.”

The girl was Ite.

“So how do you like to worship God?”

Ite stiffened again and Ayoola felt that she was on the cusp of discovering something about this strange girl. That if she approached this smartly enough, Ite might share whatever it was that seemed to plague her.

“I think we can worship God in many ways,” she finally responded. “I think God may be different from what we have always believed.

Ayoola didn't understand.

“Like how?”

Ite's eyes lit up and she leaned closer, her voice a step lower than before.

“What do you know of traditional Yoruba worship?”

Ayoola did not know much. She had memories of the African Magic movies she spied out the side of her eye whenever she went to braid her hair. The TV was tucked away in the corner of the room, placed in a little cage suspended from the peeling yellowed ceiling. Although they were notoriously not good, the movies offered some respite from the quick fingers leaving a trail of stinging kisses along her scalp. She remembered it almost painfully well. Playing on the small screen, the effects were always pixelated in splashes of saturated greens and blue. And those screens were the only place Ayoola had ever seen people practise *juju*, black magic. Cheap Nollywood movies do not have time for innovative plots and often the villains were in cahoots with a *babalawo*, traditional herbalist, to curse the protagonist.

It was fun to laugh at and make fun of; the bad effects, the horrible acting, the crazy plots but something always picked at the back of Ayoola's mind. She knew, in some capacity, that *juju* was real as her mother would constantly tell her. She knew it didn't just exist on the screens of her braider's salon.

Ayoola gave a small nod. “Like *juju*?” she queried.

“Well, kind of, but not exactly.”

Juju but not *juju*. Ayoola had questions.

“What do you mean?”

Ite huddled even closer toward her, as if she was about to divulge an important secret, “I mean the Orishas, Yoruba mythology. All the things parents never talk about because they’re demonic.” She rolled her eyes at “demonic,” her hands mimicking air quotes. “But it’s not their fault, it’s colonisation.” Ite continued without looking at her. “We are all just so colonised.”

Ayoola felt a black hole in the pit of her stomach. Ite must have been away too long for her to be saying things like this, in a church for that matter. Trying to keep herself calm she looked at Ite, like really looked at her.

“But you know it’s all real right? That demons exist, that people die from ritual killings and people do get cursed by *juju* magic. That’s why it’s so important to pray. That’s why we are in church.”

At the last sentence, Ite looked taken back like she never could have expected so much out of her in one go. Ayoola understood though, she did not come across as an outspoken girl. But everything Ite was saying, screamed red lights in her head. It was the same feeling she felt when she saw the dishes in the sink and chose to ignore them. The feeling that you’ve already done something wrong and now you’re waiting for the other shoe to drop.

She remembered how she had wanted to watch the Aquaman last year in Ikeja City Mall. She had mentioned it to her mother, and she had refused. “Don’t you know Mami Water is real? The *oyinbos* might call it mermaid but it is the same thing.” Later that night Ayoola googled Mami Water and found a Nairaland thread. The stories were disturbing to say the least. One story detailed regular nightmares and illnesses with all

his dreams seeming to center around an old woman beckoning him into the water.

Another user wrote that he had been at the beach when he saw a young woman walk calmly from the shore and descend into the water. She had never come out. The stories continued, and Ayoola concluded that her mother was right and Mami Water was real. Incidentally, it would also be the last time she would ever search up Yoruba folklore on the internet.

So when she asked Ite if she knew juju was real, Ite could hear her mother in her own voice. She could feel the fear of nights wondering if she would be accosted by Mami Water in her dreams that night. To Ayoola they were not just stories.

Ite recovered quickly, her eyes glossing over the other girl and her now tightened jaw. She seemed to realise her reaction for what it was. Ayoola was scared.

“Yes, I know it’s real.” she softened her voice. “ I understand what you mean. I just think we can’t forget our culture and our stories.”

She took a pause. “When I was abroad I realised we are the only ones that do that. It’s a colonialism thing I think. The Greeks, the Egyptians, even the Chinese, we actually have to learn their stories in literature classes. And I know all of theirs but none of mine.”

She looked at Ayoola, vulnerability in her eyes and Ayoola began to realise that in some way Ite just wanted to belong, to have something to show for herself. But Ayoola shared no such interest, the Whatsapp horror stories she received periodically from distant aunties and the Nollywood movies were enough for her.

And so there stood the two girls, sitting in the church hall and both pondering the truth about everything they had ever known.

Ite let out a sigh. “But sha, this your hair fine o! I’ve been carrying these braids for over a month. Where did you make it?”

Ayoola snatched the topic gratefully. This she could answer. And so she did. They chatted pleasantries, and Ayoola was too happy to give her recommendations of the best places to eat or not to go to Ikeja City Mall on the weekends. Soon Zion was running back in.

“Ayo! your mama is calling you from the car.”

With quick goodbyes, Ayoola quickly made her out the hall and into the car. Her brother was already there and the air conditioning was on at full blast. As she helped Yemi secure his seat belt, her mother looked back.

“So, how was Aunt Mary’s daughter. You two are the same age now?”

Ayoola rested her head back, taking a moment to close her eyes. “She is *omo oyinbo*, you know she has been studying in America for a while. But she is nice. She had lots of stories to tell me.”

“It is good like that.” Her mother slid into the driver’s seat. “You know you can probably learn a lot from her.”

The girl in the back seat mulled it over in her brain, her mother would not be saying the same if she had been privy to their conversation and yet Ayoola could remove the idea of Ite in her mind. She was certain Ite was a little crazy for playing with things she could not possibly understand and yet she could not ignore questions that were beginning to crop up.

“Yes, mama,” she leaned her head against the window, watching the impatient yellow *keke* buses as they descended into the Lagos patchwork traffic. “Maybe I can.”

