



# SUZERAIN

by Tade Ipadeola

## of Totem Country

Lagos, Circa. 1639.

**Tales of their landing** drifted like camwood smoke, light-plumed and peregrine. The winds carried it. Natives further inland tasted the smoke, sea-spiced. Then the smoke-trace — mystery magnified. Men told the story to

'We do not really mean, we do not really mean, that what we are going to say is true.'

— Traditional beginning, Ashanti Folktales.

'The tale I frame be found to tally: the history is of myself.'

— The Seafarer.

'In time every event becomes an exertion of memory and is thus subject to invention.'

— Derek Walcott, *The Muse of History*.

women, women told it all over again to men. Children learnt of the landing in tales by moonlight, the rumours fanned out, thinned and then snowballed. The griots spoke and sang of the length of their ships, the size of their salt-laden sails, the beauty of the beads they

## brought and the golden hair of the brave white men.

It was harmattan. New weather. The north-eastern trade-winds brought a cold and dryness that cracked the feet of the natives and the lips of sailors on their ships. It left little to say. The dust from far away settled on the brows of natives and seamen alike. The weather brought a heavy mist with it that held the coast like a shroud of secrecy. Thrifty traders, market-women and some local chiefs ignored the dryness and the cold. They came to the coastline and traded food for mirrors, beads and liquor. The sailors obliged. There was a blanket on the land. There were goods on sale for which the parties had no name.

In the traffic, it was plain that the trade would never end. The women loved the merchandise, the chiefs came to love the power of the-thing-with-thunder-in-its-throat. The musket. Sailors loved the misty mornings on the shore, the bounty that followed them back on board the ship. The trade would continue in spite of a white death from malaria and the strange diseases that some of the market women caught.

The white men would sometimes row out to see the curve of the coast. Their boats were broad and joined. No one knew what they went to see under the cover of the mist. Their paddles were silent things, almost contemplative. They paddled like men in search of secrets. Our secrets.

Their chief men scanned the land from their mast-posts. We had no name for the folding beams they held up to their sights in the early morning sun. We felt they could see the hills of the North Country with those beams but none could be sure. Our chief men watched the commerce.

As the season changed, the harmattan began to lift. It became very green again along the coast. A verdant density. Deciduous emerald. The far-flung forests bloomed. Among the sailors was a man who walked the forests. Like a lover. He walked barefoot like all of us. We had no way of knowing how new it all was to him. We let him walk.

No one knew how many more barrels of palm oil the holds of their ships could take or how much more food and spice the sailors would barter for or how many more bales of cloth the seamen would buy in addition to their hoard. It seemed imminent though, that the ships would sail and the sailors bid good-bye.

Their chiefs, our chiefs, our commoners and theirs, the merchants and adventurers on both sides of the divide all knew. The ships would unfurl their sails and their keen keels would ride the ocean crests until they came to their home harbours. Then some more ships would come across from those and other harbours.

There would be more merchandise in the future. This made the traders glad. With the acumen of the traders for profit came a desire to own the means by which the profits came. This was inexorable. Sunrise would never be as placid

again on our shores; the dreams of beads and muskets decided that. Henceforth, there would be striving for more, whether men slept or woke. There would be lust for the miracle mirrors of the sallow skinned ones among the women. A hankering for guns among the men. New measures of beauty and power were born.

At last the ships sailed at noon on a certain peaceful day. I sometimes wonder why the roosters had not crowed that morning. It was, an elderly woman observed, a strange thing for the birds to do. Keeping gravid silence.

Yet the sun broke through that morning and the sea sparkled in it. We knew the quiet of that morning must have struck the sea itself as strange. The sea was calm. Very calm. In what became known as the 'Great Wait', months and years from that morning, the words of Olugbon would etch themselves in the hearts of all the elders of the natives:

'Epochs turn like tides dear ones, and your times on these shores would not be as predictable as the muzzles of muskets.'

Olugbon went to walk among the stars in the course of time. The burden of waiting fell on us. We were the waiting ones now. Our conclaves met and sat and rose. The Iyalode would speak in cryptic sentences reminding us all that it was better to know the art of bargaining than the art of brawls — if some acts may be dignified with that name. The burden hung heavy like wet wood-smoke.

Iyalode joined her ancestors. The elders joined the leagues of departed elders. The beads, the baubles, the looking-glasses and the muskets: these survived. And it was when they had all departed that I came to understand the geometry of dreams. It was then that I knew that the numbers of the living and the dead would never be even again. I do not measure time by the clocks anymore. I watch the seasons in transit. My burden the heaviest of all. So many years have since gone, and I alone live to tell you these.

## Two

The earth, the land, the country—these three. Of a piece of the earth was the land made and of a portion of the land was the country made. The ageless three agreed in one and abode together. They became witnesses of all that happened in their midst: the migrations and flights, the turns the several seasons took.

There were ants and earthworms, elephants and other pachyderms. They teemed throughout the country as they pleased and never dreamt of ceasing to thrive according to their kinds. The vast tracts of country between the sea and the desert saw millions of trees taking root as birds and breezes chose; they added to the grandeur of the land of their own accord. I thought as native and foreigner thought regarding the land, that it was a beautiful land. I rejoiced that I was



born in such a land though, with the passage of time, I wondered at how those born differently fared.

The coast dwellers had miles and miles of leaning coconut trees; the swamp dwellers grew amidst the mangroves with monstrous breathing roots - they had come to terms with the amphibians of the earth and the creatures others deemed as dangerous. Those that travelled told of the savanna; the monumental anthills, the elephant grasses, the lone *iroko* trees that dominated the landscapes, the flatlands of lush green grass. They spoke of the lions and the leopards, the various antelopes and their many names, they spoke of streams and rivers, and they spoke of springs and water holes. Sometimes they would speak of hills and valleys, rocks and ridges that dwarfed men and trees; they spoke of the people too, the ones that lived in clustered huts and the ones that dwelt in caves. They spoke of the plain-dweller's craft with bows and arrows, how they subdued the rampant dwellers of the wild. As a child, I listened to those stories and their variations - oblivious of my destiny.

There seemed to be a surfeit of stories in those days, no one could have imagined the drought of stories that would come. Of all the stories though, it was the stories of the Sahel that I loved the most. It seemed those tales riveted. The brown plains, the baobab trees, the horsemen of the north and their flowing robes. In the Sahel, it was said, they spoke in tongues so sweet that the winds obey them. They charmed the elements, the stories said. All these in my youth.

The multitude of names and their meanings was my lot in life—names to learn and remember, names to call and chant. I had twenty-seven regular names of my own and countless other praise-names. Apinke, my grandmother—she called me by my rare names and chanted my praise-names at family festivities. I felt I grew taller, mightier within. I felt I gathered more depth and power around me whenever she called me by my more hidden names. I was glad for them. I was glad for folks that knew my names and chanted my praise-names.

I learnt the names of others and their praise-names. I learnt to rise to the occasion of naming as my place in the family became confirmed. I was a drummer and singer, born to a line of drummers and singers that stretched to the very beginning. I lived in songs and I knew they lived in me, I drummed according to the rhythms of land and water and according to the nuances of the seasons, as did my fathers before me.

I grew. Time's tools lined my face and my country's face. I watched as the seasons sculpted away at the bodies of the elders and at my contemporaries. Time's craft was fair. As the poetries of place and being revealed themselves to me, I began to understand and to court the gentler forms. I drummed differently then. I did not drum to please the ticklish anymore. I ceased to lend my drums to sweat. I lost the zeal to conquer crowds and to make them part with cowry shells. Those of my

clan that observed my new inclinations warned me against poverty. I tried but I could not heed their warnings I was in love with gentle things, things my country brought to me.

One afternoon, immersed in the babble of the stream and drumming, I watched the winds upon the trees and shrubs, it seemed they danced and danced. I kept drumming then, I drummed until I felt the forest around me find its voice and sing, I kept drumming. What happened next was beyond me: I found the rhythms of youth yielding themselves to my drumming hands so that I could no more age like the rest of mortal men. Another gift of that day in the sun was the gift of the wind. I could thenceforth choose the colours of the wind as they suited me; I was free. I also found that no tongue was secret to me anymore, all scripts, even that which came to be known as braille, became open to me—I read intents and dreams.

## Five

Lord Alfred Logan made his way into the bedroom of his official residence. It was a pleasant evening. The crickets were tame. He trimmed the bedside lamp and spread his squat frame evenly on the vast colonial bed. This was the country for old men, he thought. He was five thousand imperial feet above sea level, seven hundred miles from the closest shoreline and ten degrees clear of the equator. All these made him miss his wife. He was in Africa — this made him the Zaki. The lion. He loved being the lion.

He dozed off in two minds, a lovesick lion. There was fear of him here but no love; there was love for him at home but no reverence. He was Alfred at home—nothing more. He sought resolution and repose in sleep...

## Six

"Who are these?" The lion asked, a trace of apprehension in his awe.

"These are they." The nymph replied. And they were many. Thousands upon thousands of them. They all knelt upon a knee like knights seeking blessings. They knelt in phalanxes so that they were not a rabble. Each of them leaned on a pick-axe. There was a power to their pose, a presence in their numbers that spoke of potentialities beyond what the lion could fathom.

'They are the men. The miners. They have the form of governable people and some of them are good, but most of them are bad. Incredibly bad. A few are incurably so, though they kneel in order with the rest. They are found, the good and the bad, wherever the sun shines and governments are formed.'

"Where are they from? The lion inquired. They must come from somewhere?"

There was a long pause and it seemed at first to the lion that the nymph would not answer. Slowly, it dawned upon him



that the nymph was searching for words to frame her answer, her meaning. Her reply came into the silence like a weight.

"They come from here. Every land has its own people, good and bad." The nymph said.

She added, "They are your people. The people are like their leader."

To this the lion muttered, 'My people, like me?'

They rose like one man, the host of them and like choreographed marionettes, took positions and began to dig severally. The thud, thudding of their implements put to work all at the same time; the earth flying in all directions, the grunts from their labouring throats great and small—all created a scene of continuous chaos. In their hundred of thousands strewn all around the nymph and the lion, they produced sweat that stank and stung the nostrils of the pair. The air thickened. *The hoard spread out and moved on and out into the horizon.*

Only after what seemed an eternity did rumblings of the earth around them begin to fade into the distance. The pace of the horde did not slacken neither did their wild fervour diminish. They went like truculent thunder into the horizon.

In their wake was the riven earth, devastated vegetation and dust. The springs and streams were muddied, there was a lake in the distance sprawling like a lynched man, and the rivers ran a sullen brown and dying fish added to the stench. The pair was left on an island barely big enough for two. It seemed that they could hear the uproar of the sea struck by the cataclysm. There were no standing mountains that could be seen anywhere, only stripped stone-faces.

A vision of blight and all things blasted was all the pair could see as far as the eyes could see in all directions. The greed-stench clung. The air groaned to their hearing as if in lament for the ravaged country.

"They are the driven. The good can do little in the midst of so many that are bad. They say wealth is all whereas wealth is wealth. They say time is money whereas time is time". The nymph said, breaking the brooding silence.

An irresistible urge to wail took control of the lion, an urge to roar a decree to make the horde stop. No roar came, no sound emanated from his throat; a soundless sorrow that made his ribs ache racked the lion. He wheezed his pain like an asthmatic cat in its death throes, it was a measure of his grief that each wordless gasp wrenched from the lion left his eyes weaker and weaker so that at length he was quite blind, his tears were stronger than brine. He staggered upon a rock in his distress to which he clung. The rock stayed him until he began to whimper like a child.

It was then that the nymph took him in hand and embraced him. He found his voice and wept at last, his babbling made meaning to him if to no one else. The world was wrecked and bankrupt, nothing could be right again.

'But you are wrong, my dear,' he heard her say, 'The

world is more full of sorrow than anyone can understand but it still goes on. No tragedy destroys everything, wounds heal.'

For the first time, in the shroud of his sorrow, he felt words of the nymph did not make her meaning, did not match reality. All was lost, could she not see? Utterly lost. The good could not redeem the bad, the bad were many. Very many. The world could not be the same.

She soothed him to sleep because she knew he would need strength to encounter the rest of the future. She sang a lullaby to the lion and sang herself to sleep with him. In a world of untold sorrows it was vital to dream and be strong. He lapsed into sleep in her arms and the stars bowed out one by one.

## Seven

The lion knew it was the hour before dawn. It was dark. Vestiges of his sorrow remained from his last adventure in the shadow lands, but a vestige of song also floated up and translated into peace. There was a woman in his past, angel or vixen he could not say, but that woman soothed him and he was grateful.

He saw he was in the precincts of a dungeon. He stirred from his bed of granite. He could take no bearing from the dog-star. He followed his ears into an entrance that took him inside the dungeon.

What appeared to him as a plain dungeon at first turned out to be a fortified, heavily guarded subterranean terrain. The guards patrolled like clockwork, dogs on leashes with them. The perimeter, as far as he could see, was fenced and barbed. Somehow, he walked into the midst of the underground prisons and no one seemed to take any notice of him. The dogs would prick up their ears as he approached but nothing more. He walked under the searchlights and cast no shadows. He was invisible.

It took a while to get used to his invisibility. For the longest time, he would avoid the guards on patrol, avoid the light and pray that the dogs pricking up their ears would not begin barking. He felt vulnerable to bullets. To the lion, the fact that he cast no shadow, that he was invisible, largely, to the guards, did not take him out of the realm of bullets. No one ever saw the shadow that a speeding bullet cast; no one ever saw a speeding bullet. The guards he saw would fire on a breath. He would take no chances.

But the initial caution faded. He even walked right through the pack of dogs and watched all their ears sweep up. He shadowboxed before an approaching guard simply to see if he would flinch. The guard did not as much as blink. It was then he summoned the courage to approach the inmates . . . GR