The Rituals

Chief FAMA
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Ilé Ọ̀rúnmìlà Communications
San Bernardino, California, U.S.A.



An Ògún Priest, propitiating Ògún

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Comments about the *The Rituals*

"The story was suspenseful...you got my attention and held my interest from the very first sentence....The story was very rich and vivid in detail."

--Misty Reed

"The action throughout the story consistently pushes the story further." --Pieter Smith

"I appreciated being transported to this African culture....The ritual of the cobra and the umbilical cord and your explanation of its spiritual significance was engaging." --Mathew DeMeritt

"What I appreciated most about this piece was the description of the African life, which is something not readily available in contemporary fiction."

--Julie Nelson

Dedication

Professor James Brown of California State University, San Bernardino, California, U.S.A. and his Creative Writing Students of the Fall and Winter Quarters of 1999 and Spring Quarter of 2000.

Comments

"FAMA'S knack for intricate detailed description brings the reader right into her world. I have a better understanding of African culture now. The stylistic and syntactic differences in the language used in the story, and the language that native speakers use, add authenticity to the story that strict adherence to standard English could not have accomplished.

--Sandra Halsey (Sandy)

"A compelling story with cultural traditions and the Yorùbá religion, Ifá, given prominence."

--Willa McClain (Ìyá 'Fádùnmádé)

"Overall, this was another fascinating story by the author....It was visual, exotic...."

--Bobbie Summers.

How Far, How Much

It is not how fast you run
But, what art you bring into running.

It is not how far you've gone
But, the quality of the distance

It is not just the knowledge
But, how the knowledge enriches others

It is not how much education you have
It is how much use you make of the education.

It is not what works
But what works best.

Living is what life makes out of you
Life is what you make out of living.

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Emùré Ilé

Emùré Ilé is a beautiful town in the tropical region of West Africa. It is one of the nine Emùrés that came into being at the collapse of the mother Emùré, in the fourteenth century, during Yorùbá's ethnic wars. Emùré Ilé, six miles from another town, Ọ̀wọ̀, is located in Òndó State region of Yorùbáland in Nigeria. It has a population of about two thousand people, and it is a community with a diverse economy even though the main occupation is farming. It is also among the leading producers of cocoa—an important base product for chocolate. Emùré Ilé has two untarred access roads that connect it to one of Nigeria's major Federal Highways. The roughness of these roads limits automobile traffic, however, it boosts heavy foot traffic in and out of the town. Along one of these roads is the town's main traditional smithery where iron is forged into different farming implements, with the heat

generated from burning palm kernel nuts.

Bàbá 'Jìmí owned this smithery. Not far from this smithery was an Ifá shrine whose entrance was decorated with beautifully woven palm fronds. Other sceneries along these roads were courtyards within which traditional looms were located. In some cases, the looms were constructed on the front porch. Approaching one of the looms was 'Jìmí carrying a bowl of kolanuts sent by his mother to Màmá Rónkẹ́, her friend. Merchants, particularly women, could be seen going in and out of the town with their wares delicately balanced on their heads. Young children—the town's communication network—were busy running errands or transmitting greetings and simple messages between their parents. These two roads were seldom deserted, not even at night.

Life was relatively safe and peaceful in Emùré Ilé. Everyone had a duty to the community. The elderly people were cared for with loving respect; older parents relied on their adult children for financial support and care; middle aged men and women served as mentors to the youths of the community. The young adults were the arms and feet, the soldiers and protectors of the community. It was the duty of these young adults to teach the children morals, work etiquette, responsibilities to themselves and their families; plus respect

for constituted authorities. According to the tradition of Emùré Ilé, boys and girls were trained to be good ambassadors of their families. In particular, however, girls were implored to accept, as well as treat, the families of their future spouses as their own families.

Bàbá 'Jìmí ('Jìmí's father) walked into his smithery for the day's job. He was among the few residents of Emùré Ilé who do not go to the farm every day as their farming occupation demanded. He looked around himself and beamed with a smile saying, "It is unbelievable! My son, 'Jìmí, sent me five hundred American dollars!" Bàbá 'Jìmí broke into a wild dance, and like a Ṣàngó priest possessed by the spirit of fire, he danced with ecstasy toward the Ògún shrine located in a corner of the smithery. It was time for his daily invocation to Ògún. "Today's invocation is different, it is an invocation of thanksgiving and of a fervent request," Bàbá 'Jìmí thought to himself. With a bell to invite the spirit of Ògún, he started his invocation: "Ògún lákáayé (Ògún, god of metals) / Ọ̀ṣin Imọ̀lẹ̀ (god of the gods) / Alágbẹ̀dẹ ọ̀run (the heavenly smith) / Olùlànà... (the mystic road opener)...who is that?" Bàbá 'Jìmí asked in response to the footsteps coming from the doorway. Five feet from the entrance to the shrine, whose door was made of freshly cut palm fronds, were Bàbá 'Jìmí's friends—Chief Ọláwọyin

and Bàbá Rónkẹ́. "Come in, come in and join me in praising Olódùmarè (God), through Ògún, for his blessings," Bàbá 'Jìmí invited his friends enthusiastically. Chief Ọláwọyin and Bàbá Rónkẹ́ joined Bàbá 'Jìmí in his prayers to Olódùmarè. They, too, asked Ògún, one of the gods worshipped in Emùré Ilé for protection against war and for abundant blessing of bountiful crop harvests, to bless them. Bàbá 'Jìmí brought out a keg of palm wine and three calabash cups. He poured the wine for libation, sipped it and commended the wine's good taste. Sensing that his friend, Bàbá Rónkẹ́, was about to ask him if the palm wine was for a special celebration, Bàbá 'Jìmí offered an explanation, "Bàbá Rónkẹ́, there doesn't have to be any special occasion to have palm wine in Ògún's shrine." Chief Ọláwọyin nodded in agreement. "However, you are right about your observation, I have just received a message from my son, 'Jìmí, who is in America. On one hand, I am very happy that he is doing okay, and I thank Ògún greatly for that; on the other hand, I am worried that he might not come back home. I labored painfully, almost to the point of breaking by back bone from hard farm work and exhausting iron bending, to send him to school. I have always hoped that he would come home and take over this smithery when the time comes for me to join the ancestors. His replies on the

subject, each time I bring it up in my letters to him, are not encouraging. He has been gone now for ten long years..."

"Don't even expect him back," Chief Ọláwọyin said under his breath.

"Chief Ọláwọyin, did I hear you say, ''don't expect him back'?"

"Yes."

"You might be right, none of these children ever come back once they go to America. I remember your nephew, Ìdòwú, who came home for the first time in thirty years only because his father, your brother, died. Isn't his wife òyìnbó?"

"Yes. His wife is òyìnbó," Chief Ọláwọyin answered.

"I understand these foreign wives never let their husbands come back home. That is the worst of my fears, gentlemen," Bàbá 'Jìmí continued. "Not only am I worried that my family's smithery profession might come to an end, I am concerned about my old age, too. Who will take care of me when I become physically weak? I will have to find him a wife, and fast, too." Bàbá 'Jìmí looked up with a bemused smile at his friends and asked, "Oh, Bàbá Rónkẹ́, how is your wife Màmá Rónkẹ́?" Almost immediately, the smile is replaced with a frown. "Màmá 'Jìmí already had this

planned. What a wicked twist of irony. I wish I was with her in the farm that day, the venom could have been extracted instantly before its poison spread to her lungs. She would have been the happiest person today. I wonder what 'Jìmí feels about his mother's wish."

Bi-Cultural Dilemma

This is a complex situation, 'Jimí thought to himself. I am torn between two cultures—one that I understand perfectly even though not in totality, and the other one that is my heritage. I like them both. I understand my native culture, and I love my heritage that confers on me the unblemished image of what makes me a member of the human race. I can relate to its language, its way of life, its food, its diet, its landscape; I can analyze its people and their behavioral patterns, I can relate to its expectations—all of these I learned first hand. My moral obligation to my parents is to return home. Return home for what? America is home now. My adult life started here. My significant friends are here because they were my friends in high school and college. They have become my family now—a family who knows me in my adulthood. They witnessed my metamorphosis. As a native Nigerian

American, thousands of miles separated from heavy native influence, I am more of an American in terms of environmental indoctrination; but I long to speak my language, I love to eat my native food, and every once in a while, I yearn for the warmth of my native *home*. "Son, come back home!" My mother's pleading farewell at the airport on the day of my departure rings like a bell now that I am thinking of marriage. But this is my life not hers. I understand American culture perfectly and know enough about its women. Come to think of it, how much do I know about the women of my generation born and raised on the continent. Gosh, my moral obligation to my parents! I can continue to send my father money every once in a while, but my mother, how do I compensate her? If not for her motherly love and affection, plus her never ending letters of encouragement during the turbulence of my college years, I probably would not have achieved much. I owe her an obligation. I hope that girl, hmmmm, Rónkẹ́, my mother's friend's daughter, is still single. She was a beautiful, well mannered girl. I will write my father and inquire about her.

Rónkẹ́

"Màmá Rónkẹ́, I suspect Bàbá 'Jìmí wants our daughter, Rónkẹ́, for a daughter-in-law...." That was an awful dream, or did I actually hear my parents talk last night about 'Jìmí who is in America? Màmá 'Jìmí and my mother used to be close friends. I know they both wished that their friendship could be cemented with a marriage between us—their children. Judging from Màmá 'Jìmí's special interest in me, I suspect that she wanted me, Rónkẹ́, for her daughter-in-law, but then, that was two years ago. That was when Màmá 'Jìmí used to share information about her son with my mother. I really looked forward to the time when I would be formally informed that I was the chosen wife for 'Jìmí. Because of this hope, I never dated openly. In fact, the only boyfriend I have works in another town, one hundred miles away and he is married. His marriage is to my advantage because I

know he would also keep our affair secret. Since the last two years, however, I have kept my relationship with Bọ̀dé strictly to myself. Bọ̀dé is one of the co-teachers at the community high school where I teach. Even though my mother suspects that I am in love with him, I have been careful enough to play it off whenever she brings up the subject. Now I am two months pregnant by Bọ̀dé and suddenly, there is the talk between my parents about 'Jìmí. Of course I would like to go to America. Actually, I want to go to America. I know my parents want me to go, too. And from what I heard my father tell my mother last night, I know Bàbá 'Jìmí was thinking of me as his prospective daughter-in-law. It is a good thing I have not told my mother about my pregnancy nor confided in anyone else. I have to think—think fast and act fast. Bọ̀dé is the only obstacle between me and America.

Cobra: Pregnancy

Rónkẹ́ was almost run over by a truck. She was so preoccupied with thoughts about the minute life taking shape inside her that she did not notice the truck. Her trip to the community where she teaches was a waste of her valuable time. Rónkẹ́ had gone there with the hope of discussing her delicate situation with her girl friend. On this return trip, she crossed the freeway absentmindedly. Now she must put on a good act, otherwise, every one at the bus station will know that she is worried. She heard one of the elders ask if she was okay. She answered that she was okay, thanked the woman and continued her trek home.

Her peace was shattered again that night. As soon as her head hit the pillow, she saw it. It was a cobra—about a foot away from her. Inert and watchful, the snake had its tail tucked in its curled form and its head poised for a strike. Its glaring penetrated Rónkẹ́'s

subconsciousness, so much that it jolted her to reality. She rolled to the other side of her mat and bolted towards the door. In this frightful race against death, she smashed her head against the door and passed out. Rónkẹ́ woke up screaming, "Help, help, help...."

"My God, it was a dream: a nightmare," she said.

"Rónkẹ́, are you okay?" Rónkẹ́'s mother inquired.

"Yes mother, I am fine."

"Your scream woke us up."

"I had a bad dream, but I am fine now," Rónkẹ́ told her mother.

"A bad dream? Did you nullify it?"

"No. I was so frightened when I woke up that I forgot to nullify it."

"Alright, tell me about the dream in the morning."

Instead of going back to her room, Màmá Rónkẹ́ went to Rónkẹ́'s grandfather's room. The room had become a mini shrine since grandfather passed on. She went to the head of the grave and said a prayer for Rónkẹ́'s protection.

Bàbá Rónkẹ́ and Màmá Rónkẹ́ had been awakened simultaneously by Rónkẹ́'s screaming. Alarmed by the scream, Bàbá Rónkẹ́ had tapped the wall that separates him from his wife and asked in a heightened but calmed voice, "Màmá Rónkẹ́, was that Rónkẹ́ screaming?"

Cobra: Pregnancy

"I bet she is dreaming," Màmá Rónkẹ́ responded.

Except for hunters and the revered night birds—the witches—Emùré Ilé, their community, is a safe place at nights. It is also a safe community at day time. With this knowledge of safety, the mutual understanding between Bàbá Rónkẹ́ and Màmá Rónkẹ́ was for Màmá Rónkẹ́ to investigate Rónkẹ́'s distress. Back in her room, Màmá Rónkẹ́ spoke softly to her husband across the wall,

"Rónkẹ́ was dreaming as I suspected."

Bàbá Rónkẹ́ had gone to the living room to rummage his bag for his tobacco pipe, therefore, he did not hear his wife's whisper through the wall.

"Bàbá Rónkẹ́, are you there?"

"Yes, I am."

"She was dreaming as I suspected."

"So, she is okay."

"She is," Màmá Rónkẹ́ answered.

"But I have noticed some changes in her lately. I will discuss fully with you at day break. It is almost day break anyway. Enjoy your rest."

Màmá Rónkẹ́ was unable to go back to sleep. She was thinking of her daughter's single status. By custom, Rónkẹ́ should have been married by then, but she used her education as a good excuse for being single at twenty six years of age.

"Now that a suitor is on the horizon..." the cock crowed.

"That was the third crow," she remarked.

Reliance on nature and natural phenomena was still very much a way of life in the community. Even though western culture was felt here and there in the community, most of their activities were dependent on observation of nature's division of labor. As a result of that division, the elders still relied on cockcrows for their out-of-bed timing. Màmá Rónkẹ́ got up and reached for her chewing-stick to brush her teeth. She mentally arranged her activities for the day. After the morning chores and before she went to her husband to discuss Rónkẹ́'s concerns, she needed to speak to the spiritual adviser. But, she wanted to know about Rónkẹ́'s dream first. Stepping out of her room, she noticed that the light was on in Rónkẹ́'s room. Rónkẹ́ was reading a book written by Chief FAMA titled *Fundamentals of the Yorùbá Religion (Òrìṣà Worship)*. Rónkẹ́ had been awakened by the soft voices of early risers going about their morning chores. She perceived her mother's presence before her mother knocked on her door.

"Good morning mother," she greeted.

"The treasured one / Child of the fearless warriors....

"Good morning," Màmá Rónkẹ́ responded with

the usual eulogistic greeting expected of mothers and female elders.

"Hope you are awake in good spirit?"

"Yes mother, I am."

"I plan to see Chief Ọláwọyin, the Ifá priest, this morning. As you know, I am going for spiritual guidance and would like to hear your dream before I leave."

Rónkẹ́ was alarmed at her mother's mention of a psychic consultation. She knew that her pregnancy would be revealed through the priest. At any rate, she was determined to hide that fact for now. So, she narrated her dream to her mother.

"The snake did not bite you?" Màmá Rónkẹ́ repeated after Rónkẹ́.

"No, mother. It did not bite me."

"Lunch will be pounded yam and okra soup. Your father has gone to tap palm wine. If he is back before me, tell him that I will stop by the priest's house."

Rónkẹ́ hurried out of bed as soon as her mother left the room and went for the castor oil. She shook the bottle, looked at it, then shook her head.

"I have been thinking of all the methods I know about abortion ever since I overhead my parents' conversation about 'Jímí. Moreover, my mother's mention of 'Jímí in our conversation last week was an

indication that marriage is on the horizon. I cannot afford to waste any more time. I need to do it now, or else it will be too late. The first thing is to take care of the loose ends."

Rónkẹ́ had resolved to terminate her relationship with Bọ̀dé, her professional colleague. She rummaged her purse for a copy of the letter she had written to Bọ̀dé. She was surprised that the original letter had not been sent. Initially, she had planned to give the letter personally to Bọ̀dé at their last rendezvous. Somehow, she lacked the courage to do so. Her other option then was to send it to him through the mutual courier. Now, time was of the essence. She needed to send it right away. She read the letter again to be sure that the main point was clearly conveyed.

"Dear Bọ̀dé:

As you might recall, I once told you my mother's comment about married men. My mother had said:

> Rónkẹ́ my child, never marry a married man. Borrow from the experience of your aunt. You know that most of the times, her complaints are about her polygamous marriage. If she does not cry about her husband's neglect of her needs, that include her sexual desires, she

> complains of insinuations from the co-wives. When neither of these is the problem, the complaint will most likely be about her children—the husband does not love her children as he loves the children of her rivals—the co-wives. Or, that either one or some of the co-wives did something bad to her children....

Even though we have discussed this concern several times as it relates to our relationship, I have lately decided against such a life-style.

At our last rendezvous a week ago, I told you that I feel sick in the mornings; that my appetite has been funny—an unusual craving for dòdò (fried plantain); and that I had strong urges to vomit. As a married man and a father of two children, you told me that I was probably pregnant. Well, it's been confirmed, and you know how. Bọ̀dé, the thought of breaking my mother's heart pierced mine. Girls my age—26 years—are expected to have been married anyway. Therefore, being pregnant will not be a surprise. However, it will be a disappointment to many, particularly my extended family, because of the expectation of a society wedding. Every parent looks forward to the

day their daughter will be given away in marriage. In my own case, the expectation is doubled—my teenage years were *spotless*—truthfully spotless. As I told you when you prompted me to tell you the truth about my teenage adventures, my first intimate knowledge of a man was when I was twenty one. As a teacher, my community expects to see me in a monogamous marriage.

I drank a bottle of castor oil last night, and I woke up this morning soaked in heavy perspiration. The good news now is that I am no more sick; I am whole again. I would not be able to keep our monthly rendezvous at our usual hideout until...I am not even sure when. Remember that I have always complained that your timing was at odds with mine. I have decided to spend quality times with my mother in her cloth weaving business. Moreover, I want to learn the full technique of cloth weaving now while I am still single. My mother has repeatedly persuaded me to learn it now before family responsibility makes the acquisition impossible for me. Bọ̀dé, this is a heartbreaking letter, but please understand. You know how to contact me: send words to me through our mutual courier. Bye." She sealed the letter.

Being a Thursday, Rónkẹ́ knew that Bọ̀dé would be at school. She mounted her bicycle and rode fast

to the bus station that was about six blocks from her house. She made it just in time to catch the driver through whom she intended to send the letter to Bọ̀dé. On her way back, she plucked some limes from her uncle's fruit garden. Next, she stopped at the home of a liquor seller and bought a pint of *ogogoro*, a locally brewed gin. She then stopped at the petty seller's home, two houses away from hers, to buy potash. In her determination not to leave a telltale sign with the seller, Rónkẹ́ decided to feign ignorance of the petty seller's wares.

"Màmá, I am wondering if you sell potash. If you don't, will you please give me some of yours for my okra soup. I believe my mother forgot to buy some at the last market day."

The seller brought out the potash container and asked Rónkẹ́ to make her selection. Rónkẹ́ picked the smallest of the pieces that was about an ounce size. She paid for it, thanked the seller and headed home.

Rónkẹ́'s attempt to abort her pregnancy the week before was a failure. Even though she claimed in her letter to Bọ̀dé that the pregnancy was aborted, the speck of blood that came was nothing near her regular bleeding. Resolved to solve the problem by all means, Rónkẹ́ decided to take the medicine that had

the highest rate of success. As she was putting the components of her intended medicine on the floor, she thought about the experience of other teenagers when she was young, "The *òògun wálẹ̀*—come down medicine—that I am about to concoct used to work; it also used to be fatal if it is not mixed in the right proportion."

Rónkẹ́ squeezed a cupful of lime juice and poured three-quarter of it into a bottle. She intended to use it the next day should the first dose fail to flush her womb. She ground the potash, measured one-eighth of an ounce, and poured it into the lime juice in the cup. Using another cup, she measured four ounces of *ogogoro* and poured it to the mixture of the lime juice and the potash. She stirred the medicine. The effervescence of the mixture made her heart reel in fear. Her entire body convulsed in anticipation of the medicine's effect.

"Be brave, it is going to be alright," her inner self assured her as she held the cup to her mouth.

With her eyes closed and her stomach held tight, she swallowed the medicine in two gulps. She opened her eyes slowly, relaxed the tightness of her stomach, examined herself, and said, "Thank you God, I survived the expected immediate catastrophe." Having escaped an apparent hemorrhage that sometimes arise

from taking the medicine, Rónkẹ́ knew that she had to wait, at least, another six hours for a conclusive result of the medicine.

First Ifá Divination

Màmá Rónkẹ́ looked at the sun and remarked, "I had meant to be at the priest's house earlier than now. I hope he hasn't left for the town's meeting."

She knocked on the entrance door and announced her presence.

"Come in, Màmá Rónkẹ́," Chief Ọláwọyin called from his shrine located within the house.

After her solemn reverence to the spirits, Màmá Rónkẹ́ sat down on the mat opposite Chief Ọláwọyin. She told the priest that she needed to consult Ifá. Chief Ọláwọyin touched Màmá Rónkẹ́'s forehead with the divining instrument three times. The process was for the esoteric diagnosis of a client's problem. He chanted some incantations, swung the instrument a couple of times while calling the spirits to descend, then cast the instrument for reading. With a sneaky, eerie look at Màmá Rónkẹ́, he cast again and asked

Màmá Rónkẹ́, "How is your daughter, Rónkẹ́?"

The tone of his question alarmed Màmá Rónkẹ́. As an experienced psychic client, Màmá Rónkẹ́ knew that the priest's question was an indication of a serious problem.

"What does Ifá say about her, Chief?"

"That her life is in danger," said Chief Ọláwọyin. He cast again for further investigation.

"Your daughter is in a precarious situation."

He told her that Rónkẹ́ needed to be fortified against an attack by a cobra. Furthermore, he told her that Rónkẹ́ was pregnant and that her marriage....

"Pregnant?" She interjected.

"Yes, Màmá Rónkẹ́. It is revealed here that your daughter is pregnant," the priest answered.

Màmá Rónkẹ́ looked at the divining instrument with disbelief. She liked to think that the pregnancy information did not relate to Rónkẹ́. But, she has had enough readings to know that Ifá's revelations are not necessarily about the present, Ifá talks about the future, too. Màmá Rónkẹ́ had so much confidence in the priest's psychic ability that she didn't want to disregard the information, even though it sounded remote to her immediate concern. She mentally searched for clues and came to the conclusion that she had not noticed anything unusual about Rónkẹ́. The next

sentence from the priest jolted her back to reality. She heard him mention a distant journey and a tumultuous marriage.

"Chief, please repeat that message."

"It is revealed that your daughter's deception will ruin her future marriage."

The priest then advised her to hold a memorial service in honor of a particular female ancestor. Also, he encouraged her to share the psychic messages with Rónkẹ́ since Rónkẹ́ was the principal character in the scene that was revealed.

Marriage Proposal

Bàbá 'Jìmí was reading 'Jìmí's letter when Bàbá Rónkẹ́ walked into the smithery.

"You came in just as I was thinking about you," Bàbá 'Jìmí told his friend.

"'Jìmí has agreed to marry your daughter. He is coming for a visit next month. He plans to perform the wedding ceremony during the visit. Unless your daughter objects, the spiritual aspect of the wedding, as well as the *consensual ceremony,* can begin in a fortnight," he concluded.

Bàbá Rónkẹ́ knew that his friend was being sarcastic with his *objection* cliché. He responded to his friend's sarcasm, "Bàbá 'Jìmí, I don't believe you mentioned *objection.* You know Rónkẹ́ will not object."

Bàbá 'Jìmí looked at his friend for a brief moment, then resumed his reading. As his friend was busy reading 'Jìmí's letter, Bàbá Rónkẹ́ thought about their

mutual agreement to keep the marriage arrangement to themselves until a definite answer of—"Yes, I will marry Rónkẹ́"—was received from 'Jìmí. He was happy at the prospect of Rónkẹ́'s marriage to 'Jìmí. From the information he had gathered from Bàbá 'Jìmí about 'Jìmí, he convinced himself that 'Jìmí would be a good husband to his daughter. Moreover, he thought about the gain of a union that was sponsored by parents. He knew that such marriages usually last forever. He hoped that 'Jìmí still remembers the importance of a sponsored marriage. Since the young couple was bound to experience difficulty at the initial stage of their marriage, sponsorship of the marriage makes it the parents' responsibility to steer the couple through the initial *bumpy road* of their marriage. He prayed that his daughter's marriage to 'Jìmí would last forever.

Bàbá 'Jìmí looked at his friend again, thereby breaking the silence that ensued while he was reading the letter.

"'Jìmí says he wants to marry your daughter out of obligation."

"To his mother?" Bàbá Rónkẹ́ asked.

"Yes," Bàbá 'Jìmí answered in a muffled voice and continued, "he says his best gift to his mother will be a marriage to Rónkẹ́. You know how much his mother

had wished it."

He folded the letter and tucked it among some old ones on the shelf. He picked the little box that came with the letter and gave it to Bàbá Rónkẹ́.

"What is this for?"

"'Jìmí sent it to your daughter."

"And its contents are?"

"Just a ring," Bàbá 'Jìmí answered. Then explained, "according to 'Jìmí's letter, the ring is an *òyìnbó's* way of a marriage promise to the woman in his life. I think he says they call it *engagement ring*."

"Well, I bet Rónkẹ́ understands that sentiment," Bàbá Rónkẹ́ said as he slipped the box in his *agbádá's* (big robe) pocket.

"Bàbá 'Jìmí, I agree with your initial suggestion that the consensual ceremony be held right away. After all, it is not compulsory for either of the children to be present during the ceremony."

"Talk to your wife and let me know what day is suitable for the commencement rites," Bàbá 'Jìmí concluded.

Having taken care of their children's business as it relates to them, the two friends engaged in an *ayò* game. After the first round, Bàbá 'Jìmí went to the shelf in another corner of the room; brought out two clean, concave-shaped calabash cups from the stack;

set them on the carved stool by their seats; and went to get the keg of the freshly tapped palm wine setting in another corner of the room. Bàbá 'Jìmí poured libation and then invited Bàbá Rónkẹ́ to treat himself to the palm wine. After awhile, Bàbá Rónkẹ́ told his friend that he needed to go home and share the wedding news with his wife. Bàbá 'Jìmí responded that he, too, needed to summon his family and his in-laws (his wife's family) for the first of the series of meetings that were to be held before the consensual ceremony and the eventual marriage rites.

As soon as Bàbá Rónkẹ́ left, Bàbá 'Jìmí got back to the letter. He re-read the sentence that informed him of Rónkẹ́'s tentative emigration from the town, "If everything goes well, Rónkẹ́ should be in the United States within six months of our wedding...." Bàbá 'Jìmí thought about the snake that was part of a marriage ritual in his wife's family tradition. The ritual required a first time mother to wrestle a cobra a week before the delivery of her baby, or at the onset of her delivery process. Màmá 'Jìmí had intended to perform the ritual for 'Jìmí's wife when she becomes pregnant. However, having considered the possibility that 'Jìmí might marry an *òyìnbó* or a non-native, she had devised a way to circumvent the failure of the ritual. Usually, the umbilical cord of a child is kept in a fortified

place after its initial use of being in the baby's body oil. At the last snake ritual that Màmá 'Jìmí witnessed, she had presented 'Jìmí's preserved umbilical cord to the cobra. She sought the spirit's protection for 'Jìmí and his future family. In particular, she implored the cobra to manifest itself if a bastard were to be born to the family. This ritual was approved and supported by Bàbá 'Jìmí and their son, 'Jìmí. Bàbá 'Jìmí shifted his thoughts to the business at hand. He stepped into the botanical garden at his backyard to tend the herbs. He gazed at the sun for a moment and commented, "My in-law, Màmá 'Jìmí's sister, should be back at home by sunset. I need to see her to discuss her sister's wish for the incorporation of the snake ritual in the plan for 'Jìmí's marriage ceremony." He cut some *efinrin*, to treat one of his customers for cold, and went back into his shrine.

Consensual Agreement

The elated laughter coming from the loom area of the corridor amused Bàbá Rónkẹ́. A comic in the community was at his best in the corridor entertaining the household children with one of his performance-backed tales. His tale was about a greedy friend who was plastered with monkey faeces while beating a monkey in the stomach, in an attempt to force the monkey to excrete gold. The children looked toward the front entrance at the sound of Bàbá Rónkẹ́'s familiar sentence of "Hey, my children." They trooped to him with their "Welcome Bàbá, welcome Bàbá..." greetings that sound more like songs. They clustered him in a warm embrace. Before the adults had time to exchange greetings, two of the children—seven year old twin cousins of Rónkẹ́—started to chatter about their trip to the bus station. They had helped Rónkẹ́ with her bags to the station. They came back to tell Màmá

Rónkẹ́ that Aunt Rónkẹ́ boarded the bus before they left the station. They also brought the news of their neighboring community's *king's day festival* scheduled for the following market day. They were happy for the privilege of the news and at the prospect of going with their 'Aunt Rónkẹ́.' They had heard the driver say something about a festival, "...the festival falls on a Sunday this time, according to the *òyìnbó* calendar.... Bring your *children*, too; it would be fun for them."

Not wanting to hear "No" for an answer, and a few seconds before the bus drove off, the children chorused their request to Rónkẹ́ to take them along. They were so passionate about going that they implored Màmá Rónkẹ́'s cooperation in their quest. They now asked Bàbá Rónkẹ́ for the same cooperation.

"Okay children, I will talk to your aunt about it when she gets back," Bàbá Rónkẹ́ told them.

The children danced excitedly around him for the promise and trotted out at his gentle prompt of "go outside and play."

Having received the hint that Bàbá Rónkẹ́ wanted a quality time alone with his wife, the comedian humorously announced his intention to leave, "me, too, need to go out and wrestle the monkey for gold."

Màmá Rónkẹ́ thanked the man for his tale to the children.

Turning to his wife, Bàbá Rónkẹ́ remarked, "Rónkẹ́ must have gone somewhere, judging from the account of the twins."

"She went to visit grandmother."

"Will she be back by nightfall?"

"No, she is spending the night there." Màmá Rónkẹ́ answered as she stepped into the backyard. She added some sticks to the half-burnt wood in-between her cooking tripod and started the fire. She went into the pantry for the okra soup, put the pot on the tripod and stepped back into the corridor.

"Is my food ready, Màmá Rónkẹ́?"

"I am warming the soup now."

Màmá Rónkẹ́ brought the little dining table that was in one corner of the pantry and set it in front of her husband. She unwrapped two of the pounded yams into an earthenware dish and went back to the backyard for the soup. The fire had extinguished itself as was the case sometime when the sticks fail to burn deeply after ignition. She was frantically fanning the sticks to kindle them when she heard her husband's pleading voice, "May I have the soup, please?"

"It is not warm enough, and I am trying to start the fire again."

Consensual Agreement

"Is it warm at all?"

"Just a little bit," Màmá Rónkẹ́ answered.

To her relief, the fire started to burn and, within seconds, the soup bubbled. She served her husband and sat by the loom. She waited for Bàbá Rónkẹ́ to finish his meal before telling him about Rónkẹ́'s dream and the outcome of her visit to the priest. Bàbá Rónkẹ́ finished his half of the meal and called the children for the remaining half. Usually, a parent's meal is always more than she or he could eat; the practice had always been to have extra for the children. Even though the children always had their meals before the adults, and were usually full, they always looked forward to the joy and bonding that come with eating with their parents and great-members of their extended families—grand parents, great uncles and aunts. Because of the serious business at hand, the children were not given the opportunity to eat with Bàbá Rónkẹ́. Just as Bàbá Rónkẹ́ was about to call them, one of the children walked in. She was asked to clear the table and to take their portion of the food into one of the front rooms where they sometimes dine.

"Are you sure Rónkẹ́ will be back tomorrow?" Bàbá Rónkẹ́ asked his wife.

"That was what she told me. From experience though, she may not be back tomorrow. She loves

hanging around grandmother."

"We might have to send for her if she is not back by tomorrow."

"Why the urgency, Bàbá Rónkẹ́?"

"I stopped at Bàbá 'Jímí's smithery. He was reading a letter from 'Jímí when I walked in. Màmá Rónkẹ́, the request is formal."

He looked towards Rónkẹ́'s room and wondered how she would react to the news. He looked back at his wife and reminded her of their various discussions about Bàbá 'Jímí wanting their daughter, Rónkẹ́, as a daughter in-law. He reached into his agbádá pocket and retrieved the box that contained the engagement ring. He held the tiny box in his palm for a moment, then set it on the floor.

"The box is for Rónkẹ́."

"Did 'Jímí send it?"

"Yes, Màmá Rónkẹ́. The box contains a ring."

"An òyìnbó ring like the one on Màmá Dúpẹ́'s finger?"

"Which Màmá Dúpẹ́?" Bàbá Rónkẹ́ queried.

"Your friend's daughter in-law. The one that came back from London and now works at the General Hospital in Lagos."

"Maybe, I really didn't pay any attention to the ring on her finger to know the difference," Bàbá Rónkẹ́

replied.

Màmá Rónkẹ́ was silent for a moment. She thought about the response she got when she joked about Mrs. Teacher's *òyìnbó* ring. Mrs. Teacher had told Màmá Rónkẹ́ that the ring was a symbolic wedding band just as *Idè Ifá*, a wrist band worn by a married woman, symbolizes eternal marriage.

"Anyway," Bàbá Rónkẹ́ continued, "according to 'Jimí's explanation in his letter to his father, the ring is a symbol of his promise to marry Rónkẹ́."

"Is she...?" Màmá Rónkẹ́ stopped mid-sentence.

"Is she what?" Bàbá Rónkẹ́ asked.

Màmá Rónkẹ́ told her husband that she didn't like the idea of a *marriage by post.* She reminded him of the bedridden woman that was stuck in London. According to the story about her marriage, her husband forced her to work eighteen hours a day, seven days a week, in order to pay the cost of her air fare to London. In addition to that, it was rumored that he was an abusive husband. The story attributed her massive heart attack to the stress from odd jobs and the constant physical abuse from her husband. She was ashamed to come back home after she became bedridden.

Màmá Rónkẹ́ looked away to hide the well of tears in her eyes. She continued, "Bàbá Rónkẹ́, I don't

want no marriage by post for Rónkẹ́."

Bàbá Rónkẹ́ responded that he, too, would not be a party to a marriage by post.

Thus said, he told his wife that 'Jimí was coming home for the marriage ceremony.

Màmá Rónkẹ́ shifted forward with a start, held her breasts in the gracious manner that seemed to say "I can feel my baby's closeness, I can feel her sucking the milk." She thanked Providence that her daughter's marriage was not going to be by post.

She told her husband that she was happy that the marriage ceremony would be conducted the right way. And that with the family's premarital counselling and advice, the couple would be well grounded in wise ways to solve their differences before the differences ballooned to big problems. She asked her husband, "When is he coming?"

"From what his father told me, he will be here in two weeks," Bàbá Rónkẹ́ responded.

"How long will he stay?"

"Two to three weeks? I am not sure." He asked his wife if she thought Rónkẹ́ would object. Màmá Rónkẹ́ responded that Rónkẹ́ would not object. She told her husband that she had deliberately brought up topics about 'Jimí in her recent discussions with Rónkẹ́. Even though she believed that Rónkẹ́ would not

object to marrying 'Jímí, she discussed 'Jímí because she wanted to know Rónkẹ́'s true feelings about him.

"Màmá Rónkẹ́, was that a psychological profile?" Bàbá Rónkẹ́ asked sarcastically.

"Come off it Bàbá Rónkẹ́, don't be funny. You remember how your mother did that to me in order to know where my heart was—with you or with the other suitor. Unknown to you, my mother did her own psychological profile on me. What would have happened that night if it was revealed that *you did not meet me at home?*" They both smiled at the reminiscence of their first night together. Màmá Rónkẹ́ reminded her husband that she needed to do that in order to forestall possible disgrace that could come to the family should double-dealing be discovered on their daughter's part.

"As an objective person," she told her husband, I am not concerned about the *first time*, I am concerned, however, about whether or not Rónkẹ́'s heart is with someone else.

Telepathy

Màmá Rónkẹ́ had moved from the loom site to sit in her favorite built-in earthen seat. The seat was built into the corner wall of the back entrance. The seat was specifically designed that way to afford a clear view of the corridor from all angles. Sitting there, Màmá Rónkẹ́ was facing her husband with just the narrow passage between them. To still her mind from worries, she occupied herself with her other passion of thread making. She cut a handful of the cotton fluff with her left hand while pressing the rounded end of the delicately carved five foot spool in-between her thumb, index and the middle fingers of her right hand. Màmá Rónkẹ́ spun the elongated fluff held on both sides—with the bulk of it scooped in her left hand, and the other end held in place by the threaded part on the spool in her right hand—in quick successions, widening the distance, as well as pulling it to test the

strength, as the thread was spun. Once the pulling confirmed that the thread was strong enough to withstand the pressure of weaving, she rolled it onto the spool.

The aura on Màmá Rónkẹ́'s face spurred an intense desire in Bàbá Rónkẹ́ as he thought to himself, "I love this woman. Not only was she the epitome of physical beauty with a robust figure and a roundish face, she is beautiful in her demeanor, too." He eased himself from the built-in earthen seat into his rocking recliner. With his hefty athletic frame, he looked younger than his fifty seven years. He called one of the children to fetch him a glowing charcoal from the kitchen. Sitting forward, Bàbá Rónkẹ́ held out his tobacco pipe for the child to drop the minute piece of charcoal into it. He checked the pipe to make sure that the tobacco was lit, stretched back into the recliner and puffed on his pipe, inhaling the smoke as he relaxed. His wife's spinning reminded him of his own intended task for the day. His intention that morning was to stop at Bàbá 'Jìmí's smithery and then proceed to the construction site where an access road was being repaired. The engagement issue brought up by Bàbá 'Jìmí had diverted him back home.

As Màmá Rónkẹ́ reached into the basket with her left hand to scoop a handful of fluff to continue her

spinning, she looked at her husband briefly, returned her gaze to the thread being spun, pulled the spool to strengthen the thread and announced, "The priest said that Rónkẹ́ is pregnant." Her spinning had stopped momentarily at this announcement. She looked at her husband, this time, for mutual understanding. Bàbá Rónkẹ́ nodded in a suggestive way of "I am listening, go on, my wife."

"The priest was right about one thing though," Màmá Rónkẹ́ continued, "he was right about Rónkẹ́'s forthcoming marriage to 'Jìmí if we are to take the information you just shared with me as a marriage proposal."

"It was a marriage proposal."

"The priest seemed to infer, by virtue of the psychic messages, that Rónkẹ́'s marriage would be riddled with problems."

Outside the fact that her voice quivered a bit, Màmá Rónkẹ́'s outward appearance was as calm as ever. Her husband knew that she was worried about whatever aspect of the reading she had not told him. Therefore, he prompted her gently, "how bad is the problem? I imagine it to be beyond the usual, normal friction that come with every marriage."

According to the priest, "Rónkẹ́'s deception will ruin her future marriage." Her voice had an edge to it

as she spoke those words.

"Bàbá Rónkẹ́, I am worried by the priest's prediction of a cobra attack on Rónkẹ́."

"Is the attack linked to the marriage?" Bàbá Rónkẹ́ asked.

"Yes. According to the reading, the attack is linked to the marriage."

"How about prevention, did he recommend any?"

"He recommended *fortification*. But my feeling is that the most effective solution is with Rónkẹ́, since Ifá warns against deception."

"Don't worry yourself sick, Màmá Rónkẹ́. We will abide by the priest's recommendation. Hopefully, Rónkẹ́ will be honest with us, too. I can't imagine her being deceptive, but then, she is twenty six—she is grown."

"I was willing to let her spend as many days as she wanted with grandmother. I guess I'll have to summon her home now by telepathy."

Màmá Rónkẹ́ went into a brief meditation and then announced, "She has tuned in to us Bàbá Rónkẹ́. Do you have any special message for her?"

"Just for her to come home tomorrow."

Màmá Rónkẹ́ went into her room, picked up some instruments of àṣẹ: ataare, an orógbó, a piece of obì àbàtà—seeds and nuts—and chewed them. She

added an ọgbọ́ herb powder to the mixture of other sacred herbs and objects and sprinkled the powder on her left palm. She recited a *summons* chant on the powdery substance and called Rónkẹ́'s name three times afterwards. She instructed Rónkẹ́ to come home as soon as possible, then blew the powder in the direction of grandmother's home. She came out and told her husband that Rónkẹ́ would be home unfailingly the next day.

Ronkẹ́ with Her Grandmother

Rónkẹ́'s sleep on the night of her visit to her grandmother was a restless one. She slept with her wraparound securely tied at her waist. She intermittently checked the wraparound for signs of leaks. Each time she did this, she hissed her disappointment with "Nothing is happening; I am not wet."

Earlier in the day, Rónkẹ́ had kept very well to herself during her bus ride to her grandmother's place in Ọ̀wọ̀. Likewise, she avoided the thrill of the "How are you there, folks" greetings she always waved to the children on her grandmother's street that was about two blocks long. These children usually trooped in for their gift of *àádùn* that Rónkẹ́ always brought them. This time, Rónkẹ́ attracted little attention to herself. She reasoned that the less attention she drew to herself, the less people would know about her troubled demeanor. Having worked on herself seriously during

her one hour bus ride to the grandmother's place, Rónkẹ́ acted her congenial self, so she thought, for the benefit of her grandmother. Since the grandmother was her most respected family historian, Rónkẹ́ asked her about their family's rituals, if there were any, for children born out of wedlock. The look on her grandmother's face told her that she had made a bad mistake. To cover up, she quickly told the grandmother that she knew that out-of-wedlock children were uncommon in the culture and it was frowned upon, too. Justifiably, she said, "Grandmother, in addition to oral history, I am compiling our family history in written form."

Grandmother loosened her wraparound and reached inside her waistband for her small ground tobacco container. With the tips of the thumb and the forefinger of her right hand, she pinched a minute quantity of the ground tobacco, placed it in her curved tongue, sucked her cheeks in and out a couple of times, turned the tobacco briefly with her tongue for moisture, then let it set on the tongue. Rónkẹ́ looked at her grandmother in admiration. All of a sudden, she thought of the potash that is the only additive to the tobacco. Rónkẹ́ remembered the many times she had helped her grandmother grind the tobacco. She was young then—eight years or so. She also remembered the

numerous times she had helped her mother with the same task. Until the age of eighteen, she had ground this tobacco religiously, with love, for her grandmother, her mother and all the deserving women around her. Rónkẹ never put any of it in her mouth. She never even felt the urge to try it. The issue of her trying it never came up either. No doubt, Rónkẹ would have been chastised if she were to try it when she was a teenager, but no one would have said anything if she had tried it in her adulthood. In her mental recollection, the only time the tongue was free of the tiny tobacco ball was when the tobacco was to be replaced with a fresh one, which was the exercise her grandmother was performing at that time.

"I wonder what the tobacco does to the body. No, my concern is the potash in the tobacco, what effect does it have on the women?" she thought, looking pensive. At that stage, Rónkẹ's mind had gone to the potash concoction that was the reason she was visiting her grandmother. Lost in this thought, Rónkẹ was unaware of her grandmother's calculative stance of "Am listening child, go on." Surprised at her own giveaway mistake, and determined to cover her brief transition from her immediate realm, Rónkẹ decided to make a joke of her distraction.

"Grandmother, why is potash ground with the

tobacco?"

"My child, is everything okay with you?"

"Why my grandmother? I am okay."

"Your questions seem irrational. You know very well that there are consequences for women having children out of wedlock," the grandmother responded, ignoring Rónkẹ's last question.

"Is a snake ritual part of our family marriage ceremony?"

"No, it is part of the ritual for the marriage ceremony of..." The grandmother went into memory search for 'Jimí's progenital family name.

"Hemmmm," snapping her fingers, "you know the family that lives towards the west end of the street next to your father? I can't seem to remember the family's name."

"Is it that household from which one of their sons went to America?"

"Gbére 'màmí (what a wonderful child you are)," the grandmother commended Rónkẹ for reviving her memory.

Her grandmother decided to narrate the story of the snake ritual to Rónkẹ. She was at the point of telling the impact of the snake ritual on pregnant women when she realized that Rónkẹ was unusually quiet. She glanced at Rónkẹ for her usual amused interjections

Ronkę with Her Grandmother

to such stories. Rónkę was lost again in thought. Rónkę had always blamed the women for their predicaments. As far as she was concerned, everyone in the community knew that the traditional laws of the community were like live wires. Whoever messes with a live wire either gets burned or scarred for life. Such was the penalty for breaking the laws of the community. At this time, the grandmother's gentle, probing stare brought Rónkę back to the moment. Rónkę looked away to hide her discomfort. To ease the tension, grandmother asked, "Rónkę, have you eaten?"

"No, grandmother."

"Go eat some roasted deer meat cooked with your favorite vegetable." She went on to tell Rónkę about her visit to the market that morning and her shopping for the scarce deer meet. As Rónkę was about to get off her seat to go fix herself a plate of food, the grandmother stated, "my child, feel free to tell me what bothers you. I have seen many rains."

Rónkę was now worried that her grandmother suspected that she was troubled. "I bet she suspects I am pregnant, too," she thought. "Knowing grandmother, she is waiting for me to joyously announce my pregnancy to her. She has been waiting for the announcement for about four years now."

Rather than go for the food, Rónkę made excuses

to her grandmother and went to her room. That room used to be her mother's room. Ever since Rónkę started going to her grandmother's place on a regular basis, her mother's old room had become hers by way of conceptual understanding.

Rónkę went into the room and suddenly felt an urge to go back home. Simultaneously, she felt a wet sensation. She slammed the door closed in her excitement of the ultimate result. She wedged her body against the door to prevent her grandmother's entry in case the grandmother decided to come in. Rónkę pulled her stomach for additional pressure against the unwanted tenant inside of her. She tightened her thighs for the feel of the warm substance she imaged to trickle out of her. She scrutinized her body for confirmation of the wet feeling.

"No, I am not bleeding. It was a false alarm," she thought to herself.

Dejected and disappointed, Rónkę flopped on her mat for the night. It was too late to act on her urge to go back home. She resolved to go home on the first bus to leave the station the next morning.

"If nothing happens tonight, well, someone has to take responsibility for the life determined to survive inside of me."

'Jìmí's Family Meets

"Peace unto this house," Bàbá 'Jímí announced as soon as he stepped closer to the front entrance of his sister-in-law's single story house. The century old house, built of red clay, had recently gone through a minor refurbishing. The outside walls were plastered with cement. The old roof of galvanized tin was replaced with a deck (cemented roof). As opposed to the sand that previously covered the ninety square foot courtyard, the entire space was also cemented. The family was having a meeting in the courtyard at the time Bàbá 'Jímí arrived.

"May the meeting be fruitful," he wished.

"Àṣẹ (amen). My in-law, step in and have a seat." Bàbá 'Jímí's sister in-law invited as she called the children to bring an additional chair.

"Am I interrupting a meeting?"

"Not in the least. Actually you came at the right

time. We were just discussing 'Jímí's forthcoming home visit."

"Good, I have some issues about that, too," Bàbá 'Jímí responded.

He was handed a concave calabashful of palm wine for refreshment. A bowl of about five big obì àbàtà (kola nuts) was also presented to him. Being an elder, Bàbá 'Jímí offered prayers as expected. Concern for 'Jímí's upcoming marriage ceremony, and the future of the marriage itself, dominated the prayers. He ended the prayers with an invocation to Màmá 'Jímí to sanction the success of the snake ritual that would be part of the marriage ceremony. He went on to address the gathering that was comprised of his in-laws. "My in-laws, God bless you all, God bless my wife, Màmá 'Jímí...," he stopped briefly to control his emotions. The well of tears in his eyes was sucked right back into the sockets before they fell off. His sister in-law looked at him and mopped her face with the back of her hand. To break the morbid tension, the most senior family member asked, "What day exactly is 'Jímí arriving?" Bàbá 'Jímí looked at the man and continued his speech.

"Màmá 'Jímí should have been the one addressing you with the issue of 'Jímí's marriage and your role in the ceremony, unfortunately, that is history. I am here,

however, to ensure that her wishes are fulfilled. Màmá 'Jìmí wants the snake ritual administered to 'Jìmí and his wife. 'Jìmí will be arriving soon, and he will be here only for two weeks. As it is, he informed me in his letter that he had intimated his aunt of the identity of his bride." He gestured toward his sister in-law for confirmation.

"Do you know who 'Jìmí's bride is?" he asked her.

"Rónkẹ́, I suppose." The sister in-law thanked Bàbá 'Jìmí and told him that the snake ritual had been discussed at the beginning of the meeting. "The priest who will administer the ritual has already been summoned. Please tell your friend, Bàbá Rónkẹ́, that our family will get in touch with him soon," the sister in-law concluded.

Engagement Ring

"I am grateful for your help in driving me home," Rónkẹ́ told the driver that brought her from Ọ̀wọ̀ as she got out of the bus. The children's joyful shouts of "auntee, auntee, auntee..." alerted Màmá Rónkẹ́ that Rónkẹ́ was back.

"Rónkẹ́ is back," Màmá Rónkẹ́ announced to her husband who had walked in few minutes before then and was in his room hanging up his utility bag.

"Màmá Rónkẹ́, you are the mother. Find a subtle way to ask her about the pregnancy. Watch out for signs also," Bàbá Rónkẹ́ advised his wife.

Rónkẹ́ walked into her father's parlor and announced that she was back. After the exchange of pleasantries, the father asked her, "how was my mother?"

"She sends her love, my father."

"Did you tell her about 'Jìmí?"

Engagement Ring

"What about 'Jimí, my father?"

Bàbá Rónkẹ́ looked at his daughter with a teasing frown that seemed to suggest "things aren't the same since you left yesterday. Wait 'till you hear the news."

As she moved toward her mother, Rónkẹ́ was puzzled as well as alert at her father's unspoken, facial expression. His delightfulness suggested that something good must have happened while she was away. At the same time, she was alarmed. She hoped that her secret had not been discovered.

"How are you, mother, I am happy to be back home," she greeted her mother. She then headed for her room.

Having given Rónkẹ́ enough time to rest from her trip home, Màmá Rónkẹ́ called to announce that she was coming to Rónkẹ́'s room to hear her appraisal of her grandmother. Rónkẹ́ always had stories to tell her parents whenever she visited her grandmother.

"Your father and I have some good news for you from 'Jimí," she told Rónkẹ́, expecting her to be thrilled at the news. Her expectation was pleasantly rewarded with Rónkẹ́'s ecstatic "snap the fingers and shake the butt" motion. Màmá Rónkẹ́ went into a long discourse about her visit to the Priest. In particular, she emphasized the messages the priest gave about Rónkẹ́ and her future marriage. Then she called softly, "Rónkẹ́."

"Yes, my mother."

"Are you pregnant?"

Rónkẹ́ was alarmed. She scanned her room quickly for any careless evidence of her attempt to get rid of her burden.

"I am not pregnant," she muttered her response.

"I didn't hear you, Rónkẹ́"

"I am not pregnant. But, why did you ask?" Rónkẹ́ asked her mother in a solemn voice.

"It was inferred in the reading that you are."

"Believe me, my mother, I am not pregnant."

"You look worried though. I am your mother and I have seen many rains, don't hesitate to bare your mind to me."

Judging from her mother's pronouncements, Rónkẹ́ was relieved that her pregnancy had not been discovered. At the same time, she knew she also had to play it safe. If her grandmother knew she was worried and her mother knew she was worried, then her worries had surfaced, she reasoned. She decided to change the subject.

"I never told you about my dream before I went to visit grandmother."

"That is the reason I am here" her mother responded.

"What was the problem in your dream?"

Engagement Ring

Rónkẹ́ related the dream to her mother. She noticed that her mother was exceedingly quiet when the near-attack by the cobra was being told. Having heard the entire dream related, Màmá Rónkẹ́ was worried. All of a sudden, she remembered an incident in which she and her friend, Màmá 'Jìmí, were active participants. She decided to tell Rónkẹ́ the story.

According to Màmá Rónkẹ́, Màmá 'Jìmí was the last midwife to be contacted to attend to a woman who was in labor. The young woman had been in labor for four consecutive days. By the time Màmá 'Jìmí was summoned, the expectant mother was already losing her color. She, Màmá Rónkẹ́, was visiting Màmá 'Jìmí when the urgent message for Màmá 'Jìmí's attention was delivered. As soon as the emissary left, Màmá 'Jìmí consulted the spirits for guidance. It was revealed that the young mother's dilemma was cosmically induced. With the necessary atonement paraphernalia, Màmá 'Jìmí and Màmá Rónkẹ́ went to attend the woman. The young mother's-to-be condition was pathetic. Her labor groans were chilling to the ears. From her pale look, it was obvious that she was on the border line—one foot holding fast to life, the other one partially in the grave. There was no time for civilities. Màmá 'Jìmí coerced the woman to reveal the identity of the father of her

unborn child.

"My child, you have the choice of either life or death. Confess now. You don't have much time left. Who is the father of your child?"

A dead silence descended on the room at this request. Even though there had been speculations that the prolonged labor might have been the result of infidelity, everyone was careful not to mention such suspicion to a distressed woman.

Màmá 'Jìmí felt the periphery of the birth canal and repeated her question, this time, with a little force to her voice.

"My child, who is the father of this child that is about to come out?" Màmá 'Jìmí asked as she was rubbing the atonement oil on the woman's stomach. She explained to the woman that the oil would loosen the mystic seal on the mouth of the birth canal.

The woman gave a sharp cry in response to the debilitating labor pain that surged through her.

"The birth canal is opening now! The water bag might break in a few seconds, depending on whether or not the child is coming cocooned in its amniotic sac," Màmá 'Jìmí exclaimed. She continued to encourage the woman to tell the name of the father of the child.

"If you don't tell the truth, my child, I will be

unable to stop the bleeding once the child is born. Your child might be saved, but you are the savior of your own life from this moment." As if in response to this warning, the labor pain surged through the woman once again.

"God, please, spare my life. My mother! where are you?" the woman screamed in pain.

Màmá 'Jìmí examined the birth canal and exclaimed, "The baby's head is about to come. Squat!" she urged the woman. "Màmá Rónkẹ́, please prop her on the right side." Turning to the other three women in the room, she commanded, "prop the expectant mother on the left side and on the back, please. She needs to be held firmly. She is too weak to squat on her own."

Màmá 'Jìmí felt under the woman and urged her, "push, the baby is ready to come. Push! Push! Push!"

The woman pushed with all her might and with an accompanied deafening cry of 'MY MOTHER!' The baby's exhalant "wha, wha, wha" brought tears of mixed emotion to the eyes of the attending midwives. They were happy at the aura of the new life—God's mysterious work. At the same time, they were apprehensive of the likely outcome of the mother's predicament. Just as Màmá 'Jìmí was about to speak to the woman, a big clot of blood, almost the size of a fist, dropped.

"Please tell! I can't stop this blood on my own. Shame is not worth dying for! My child, please reveal the identity of the father of your child!" Màmá 'Jìmí screamed to the new mother.

"My child, the blood is spurting. Dignity, I agree with you, but death? No. Don't kill yourself, tell the secret, my child." Màmá Rónkẹ́ joined her friend in this frantic attempt to save the mother's life.

"His name is Reverend Joseph. The new Pastor at the Christ Apostolic Church. We got carried away during one of our secret, sacred prayer sessions. It was just the two of us in the sacred room," the mother revealed.

The blood stopped just as the woman finished her confession. The midwives looked at each other and wondered silently, "Poor child, referring to the new mother, what will she do now that she is going to be an outcast in the community."

"Did the new mother survive her child's birth?" Rónkẹ́ asked.

"Yes, she survived it. The child was equally okay."

"So, what happened to mother and child afterwards?"

"The mother's in-laws drove her out of her matrimonial home—back to her parents. The child was never accepted into the husband's family. The

Reverend denied the woman's confession."

"Did the woman leave the community?"

"My child, that is a whole different story."

Reverting to their initial topic, Màmá Rónkẹ́ asked Rónkẹ́, "are you sure you are not pregnant?"

"I am not pregnant," Rónkẹ́ muffled her response, once again.

Her mother continued, "anyway, each household has its own age old marriage ritual. I think 'Jimí's family ritual embodies the snake."

Rónkẹ́ was not just alarmed at this stage, she was also afraid. She asked her mother, "My mother, I am just being curious, will such practice bind 'Jimí? I asked because 'Jimí doesn't live here anymore. In fact, he has been away from the culture for a while now."

"If his parents decide to enforce the ritual, yes, 'Jimí will be bound by the ritual."

"Time to do away with such practice. Don't you think, mother? One of the things I learned in college is that such a practice is barbaric."

"My child, we didn't send you to school to demean your culture. We sent you to school to expand your knowledge. Don't you think that if we were to write those books you read in school, we would extol our own cultural values over the values of those minds we want to capture."

"Okay, mother, you win."

"No, child, I don't want to win. I want you to understand. Do you remember the time when you came home from school steaming with questions about why the abominable crimes of *incest, rape* and *serial killing* should be tolerated in other cultures."

"But mother, the point was justified in the book."

"That is the point, my child, brainwashing you into acceptance of other people's values at the detriment of your own values."

Having been carried away with her mother's story of the woman who almost bled to death after giving birth to a child, her mother's mention of *values* suddenly reminded her of her own problem—her unwanted pregnancy. She looked away and announced to her mother that she felt sick.

"Are you sure you are okay, Rónkẹ́?'

"I am okay. I am just sick from hearing that story. I hope such a thing never happens to me."

"You are talking strangely. Why should that happen to you? Even if you have known another man, it would not happen to you. It will only happen to you on two grounds: first, if the snake ritual is administered on 'Jimí and you; secondly, if you sleep with another man while pregnant with 'Jimí's child." Màmá Rónkẹ́ rose and told Rónkẹ́ that her father had some good

news for her.

"Come after you are rested." With that, Màmá Rónkẹ́ left the room.

Màmá Rónkẹ́ joined her husband in the parlor. He was resting after the day's work on the farm. He had been to the farm earlier to supervise the harvesting of his yam tubers. Being a respected and well loved elder in the community, the younger farmers had volunteered to help him harvest his crops, particularly the yam tubers.

"Bàbá Rónkẹ́, Rónkẹ́ is talking strangely." In the first place, her dream the night before she went to visit Màmá, grandmother, in Ọ̀wọ̀ was about a near cobra attack. According to her narration, the dream is strange and weird."

"Did you say the priest mentioned problem with marriage?"

"Yes, Bàbá Rónkẹ́, that is why I am concerned with her weird talk now."

"What about the pregnancy issue? Is she pregnant; or, do you think she is pregnant?"

"She said she is not pregnant. No, I have no evidence that suggests she is either. But, her weirdness! I don't know."

"If she said she is not pregnant, then she is not pregnant."

"But, Bàbá Rónkẹ́..."

"I know. I know your concern. The disgrace." Bàbá Rónkẹ́ stated as a matter of fact.

"Beyond that, Bàbá Rónkẹ́. We don't ever want to lose her."

"We will never lose her."

"Suppose she is pregnant now?"

"So be it. We will deal with the problem if and when it arises," Bàbá Rónkẹ́ responded.

"Furthermore, we cannot be concerned overtly about her. She is twenty six years."

Rónkẹ́ was at this stage standing by the entrance. She heard her parents' discussion about her. The parents were aware that she heard them.

"Come in Rónkẹ́," the mother invited her.

"Rónkẹ́, your mother probably told you already about 'Jimí."

"She told me you have some good news for me from him."

"That is correct. Let's clear one issue. Are you pregnant?"

"My father, I am not pregnant and the question is driving me crazy. My mother has been on me almost since I came in asking me the same question."

"Well then, sit down."

Rónkẹ́ sat on a chair, facing her parents. Her

father was the first to speak.

"Ever since our last question of whether or not you would like to marry 'Jìmí, we have been hesitant to bring the subject up too frequently. We did that to prevent dashed hope."

"Because we wanted 'Jìmí to convince us that he really wants to marry you," her mother interjected.

Rónkẹ́ began to relax. After all, her mother had already hinted that there "is some good news from 'Jìmí." She thought 'Jìmí had written her parents directly to confirm his intention to marry her. She herself had requested 'Jìmí to do that in one of her letters to him. Bàbá Rónkẹ́ reached on top of the stool by his side for the little *engagement ring box* that 'Jìmí had sent to Rónkẹ́. Rónkẹ́'s eyes widened when her father placed the box on her hand.

"Is this for me from 'Jìmí?"

Without waiting for her parents' answer, Rónkẹ́ opened the box and held the content up.

"It is an engagement ring, mother." With a big smile on her face, she knelt between her mother and her father and beamed a loud "thank you" to them. She also touched her forehead to the ground three times, to the ancestors, in appreciation of their support.

"Is 'Jìmí still going to kneel down to slip the ring into your finger?" her mother asked.

"Kneel down? We all know that he will never kneel down for that. African men are too proud to do that, regardless of whatever outside culture they imbibe."

"I am glad they hold on to that dignity," Bàbá 'Jìmí exclaimed.

"The culture that practices it is as sentimentally attached to it just as we are sentimentally detached from it," Rónkẹ́ offered.

"Remember our discussion a few minutes ago on imposition of moral values," Màmá Rónkẹ́ pointed out.

"Anyway, we have begun arrangements for our own cultural engagement," Bàbá Rónkẹ́ continued. Do you think you will be able to go with him to America when it is time for him to go back?"

"I am really not sure, my father. In the first place, there are papers to be filed with the American Embassy. 'Jìmí has more information on that."

"If the papers are approved, that means you will be leaving us soon," Màmá Rónkẹ́ stated, rather than asked.

"Hopefully, my mother. But, I am not entirely happy at that prospect because I will be leaving behind everything I have grown to love, to cherish and to appreciate. Anyway, mother, life itself is not stagnant, going to America will be an adventure for me, too," Rónkẹ́ concluded.

Engagement Ring

Her father briefed her about all the arrangements that had been going on. He told her about the fulfillment of Màmá 'Jímí's request that the snake ritual be included in the marriage ceremony. Once again, Rónkẹ́ lost her composure.

"Will the ritual be performed on 'Jímí and me?"

"Yes, my child," he said. "It is good for you. Passing the test will be a plus to your chastity. To think you don't have a man will be like wishing you bad luck at your age, at the same time, it will be good to dispel innuendos that another man might be hanging around you. Knowing that the children between you and 'Jímí will be genetically connected to both of you is the essence of the ritual."

"Can I decline participation in the ritual?"

"If you have any doubts about anything, decline the marriage offer," her father encouraged her.

"I have no doubts about anything father, I just think it is unnecessary since both of us will be living in America."

"The more reason why it is necessary, my child."

"Our children will be born there, too. My father, how about telling Bàbá 'Jímí that the ritual is not necessary."

"To discourage it will tantamount to admission of guilt of my daughter. Bàbá 'Jímí will want to know

why I don't want the snake ritual, do you have any concrete reason why you don't want it administered?"

"No concrete reason."

"The wedding robes have been contracted to the best weaver in town. They should be ready in a couple of days. Bàbá and Màmá Rónkẹ́ both congratulated her.

"Now it is our turn to finish the job. Rónkẹ́, your mother and I still need to talk a little bit more."

Rónkẹ́ responded to the subtle dismissal, she excused herself. "It seemed like they were trying to force a confession out of me," she thought as she headed outside—to the front yard for the evening's cool, fresh air.

Bàbá Rónkẹ́ proceeded to tell his wife the outcome of his meeting with two members of his family. He had gone to hold a brief meeting with his older brother who governed the extended family. Being the Head of the extended family, Bàbá Rónkẹ́ had gone to him to discuss Rónkẹ́'s forthcoming marriage ceremony. The *wives* of the family, who are technically the mothers, had also begun preparation for the ceremony. The women were the ones in charge of cooking, house and yard cleaning plus event decorations. These women usually bind together to entertain guests with music and dancing during big events like

marriage and burial ceremonies. Bàbá Rónkẹ́, his brother, and the most senior female in the family, invited for her input, were to sanction the preparations made by both groups of women in the family: the ones married into the family, and the direct descendants—sisters, aunts and cousins. The team of three also met for a final decision on the uniformity of the cloths that had been chosen for the marriage ceremony. The bride's parents were to wear colorful, embroided *aṣọ òkè*, the formal handwoven garments of the Yorùbás of Nigeria, West Africa. According to Bàbá Rónkẹ́, the men's wear was to consist of a roomy, long-sleeved, pullover shirt with no collar but with two pockets on the front or the sides (called bùbá or dànṣíkí); a brimless hat (cap, called fila); a pair of wide trousers (ṣòkòtò); and a large robe (agbádá). As for the women, their garments consisted of a wraparound (iró), a loose long-sleeved shirt with round neck (bùbá), a two and a half yards by one yard wide headwrap (gèlè), and a shawl (ipèlé or iboòrùn—sun shield). All these were accompanied with elegant foot wear made of skin and coral bead jewelry.

Jìmí's Home Visit

"From the moment I received my father's confirmation that Rónkẹ́ was still single, to the time I went shopping for her engagement ring; from the time I put in an application for my annual vacation from my job, to the time I paid for my round trip air ticket; I have been anxiously looking forward to this moment. I know she looks great. She is slim, just the five feet six inches in height, and the one hundred and forty four pounds in weight that I have always cherished in a woman. Forget about the height and weight requirements. To talk like that is guffy and surely, it will make me a target of wagging tongues—*the Been tos*. I will be surprised if she knows how tall she is and how much she weighs in mathematical calculation. Of course, she will know that in our own cultural measurement—moderate height and slim build." Acting in consonance with these thoughts, 'Jìmí reached for Rónkẹ́'s picture

in his pocket. He beamed at it with a sensuous smile. His thought continued, "she looks great, just as she looked when we were young. I hope she is great in other respects, too." He was still in this love-drunk stupor when he heard his father's voice.

"'Jìmí, Rónkẹ́ is here."

He slid his feet into his house shoes. Instead of having his traditional wraparound on, he put on his bathrobe, then a dab of his *old spice* aftershave lotion—all to create an impression on Rónkẹ́. He strapped on his gold chain wrist watch, checked himself in the mirror to make sure that his well trimmed, low cut, shiny, jet black hair still retained its sponge-like roundness. Satisfied that he looked his best, and that he had at least put on the distinctive robe that seemed to say, "look at me, I am from America"—typical mentality of the *Been tos*—'Jìmí stepped into the parlor with a big smile on his face. Since hugging and kissing are foreign to Yorùbá culture, 'Jìmí contented himself with the broad smile and repetitive *call and response* kind of greetings of "...Glad to see you again. How are you doing...?" Rónkẹ́ repressed the urge to jump into 'Jìmí's warm embrace. Doing that will expose her to cynical remarks since such open display of affection is frowned upon. A woman found with such act is usually considered loose. "I wonder

when he is going to invite me to his room," Rónkẹ́ thought. With the problem of her pregnancy unresolved, she had eagerly awaited this moment of talking to 'Jìmí face to face. Actually, she needed 'Jìmí more than 'Jìmí needed her since she had gotten Bọ̀dé out of her life. "Someone has to take responsibility for...," she switched her thought from the issue abruptly. Instead she decided to engage 'Jìmí in some idle talk.

"My friend, Lọlá, sends her greetings."

"Oh, thank you. Why is she not here? She changed her mind?"

"She doesn't want to be in the way."

"Never mind, let's go to my room. We have a lot to catch up on anyway."

As soon as the door closed behind them, Rónkẹ́ jumped into 'Jìmí's outstretched arms. They hugged passionately and held each other in a tangled embrace with their frontal instruments begging to be put into action. A soft knock on the door brought everything to a sudden climax.

Rónkẹ́ sat abruptly on the only chair in the room and started to fiddle with her purse. Another knock on the door induced a soft smile on her face. Tilting her head, she indicated to 'Jìmí to open the door.

"Just a second," 'Jìmí said as he reached for the door. His father was standing there. The look on his

father's face seemed to suggest, "You better wait till night time, son." 'Jìmí had his headphone on.

"I am sorry, father. Rónkẹ́ and I were listening to some music with our headphones on." He quickly put the headphone on his father's head as proof of his point. His father ignored the cover up tactic.

"There is a message from your aunt. She wants you to send her the money for the snake ritual. This child here, your cousin, is to take the money to her."

"Father, you can give her the money, please"

"No, 'Jìmí. The money has to come from you—directly from your pocket. That aspect of the payment is itself part of the ritual."

Rónkẹ́'s heart somersaulted at this dialogue between father and son. She was thinking, "my God, this is real. The snake ritual is for real. Disgrace or death? I can see myself experiencing a dreadful ordeal associated with such ritual when it is time to give birth to my baby. My God, that story that my mother told me about the victim of such ritual—the expectant mother—it is scary! If I decline the marriage offer now, there will be disgrace because I will have to tell the truth. After all, I cannot hide the pregnancy forever. I have to go along with the marriage to 'Jìmí. If I marry him, I am damned, might not though. If I don't marry him, I am damned, too. I am going to go ahead

with the marriage arrangement."

Having given the money to his father, 'Jìmí closed the door gently, then secured it. He asked Rónkẹ́ if she cared for a drink. Rónkẹ́ didn't answer because she was lost in her thought. 'Jìmí touched her cheeks and asked if she was okay. His touch and the question brought her to conscious awareness.

"I am okay. I was just thinking about the snake ritual."

"I love it. You know I have been away for so long. I have almost lost touch with the reality of my culture. With the ritual, I will be able to brag about your fidelity when other men whine about their spouse's infidelity."

"You will not have problem with my fidelity in America. The ritual is not necessary, 'Jìmí. I swear, I will be sincere to you."

"Wait till you get to America, you will appreciate why I want the ritual done."

"Why?"

"On one level, I love it. For another reason, I want the ritual documented. American Television Documentaries love to promote negative image of African cultural values. You know what they show in those documentaries?"

"What?"

"Crises-riddled areas, and poverty-ridden people

like the nomads."

"That is the truth, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is the truth except the documentaries are not objective.

"How?"

"They never portray the good image of Africa. They never show any of those structurally sound, high rise buildings; nice, expensive cars like Mercedes Benz, Volvo, BMW, Rolls Royce, Peugeot...; happy and buoyant people who are full of laughter and happiness; well-fed children beaming with pride of their cultural heritage..." 'Jimí stopped. The baffled look on Rónkẹ́'s face stopped him.

"I am sorry. I was a little bit emotional about the negative portrayals of my people. The portrayals make it seem like those plights are unique. People in America, and in other cultures, experience poverty, too. They eat out of the trash. They sleep and live in the streets. They...," he stopped. "Anyway, poverty and crises are universal phenomena."

Rónkẹ́ was thinking again. "God, if he is this emotional, what will happen if it is revealed that the life growing inside me now is not his? The earlier the better." She decided to spend the night with 'Jimí as opposed to her original plan of waiting till the night of the engagement, which is the night traditionally earmarked

for consummation of marriages. She decided to work on 'Jimí to get him back in the right mood.

"Did you bring any of those movies?"

"Which movies?"

"The one in which people are naked. I think you called it pornography? I have never seen any of it in my life."

'Jimí searched his luggage and responded, "sorry baby, I meant to, I must have left them inadvertently. We have much to entertain ourselves with anyway."

She moved from the chair, bent down in front of 'Jimí to pick up Barry White's latest CD and deliberately bumped her behind, actually rubbing it, against 'Jimí's pelvic region. 'Jimí responded with a gesture of "come on baby. Let me show you the latest dance." He switched on the tiny red light, held Rónkẹ́ in a tight embrace, and they began a grinding dance.

"You smell fresh and nice 'Jimí," Rónkẹ́ said while pressing herself tighter against 'Jimí's masculinity. 'Jimí's *little man* was groping his way around the entangled bodies now.

"Does that bother you, Rónkẹ́?" 'Jimí asked while they synchronized their bodies in natural harmony.

"I can't be happier," Rónkẹ́ professed. Responding to the throbbing that had become too erotic, she whispered softly to 'Jimí's ears, "'Jimí, I love you, I

love, I can't wait...."

'Jìmí propelled her slowly to the bed, and with mutual desire, they melted into each other and sank into oblivion. They were awakened by the voice at the door.

""Jìmí, dinner is ready."

"Thank you, Màmá. Rónkẹ́ and I have just been deeply engrossed in our discussion for the engagement coming up the day after tomorrow," 'Jímí told the woman by the door.

Rónkẹ́ looked out of the window and was surprised to notice that it was getting dark.

"I need to go home, 'Jímí. I have to let my parents know that I intend to spend the night here."

"They will allow that?"

"They will once I tell them that we are dealing with the immigration papers."

'Jìmí gave her a duplicate key to the room.

"Use that to get in when you come back—I might have gone to see my aunt by then.

Wedding/Snake Ritual

"Who says we have no fathers? Shut up, we have great fathers," the talking drums blasted the lyrics to the ecstatic continuous roaring response of "Shut up, we have great fathers" from the dancers/singers and onlookers.

Talking drums "Who says we have no fathers?"
Dancers/Singers "Shut up, we have great fathers,"
Talking drums "Bàbá 'Jìmí is our father"
Dancers/Singers "Shut up [yes], we have great fathers"
Talking drums "Bàbá Rónkẹ́ is our father."
Dancers/Singers "Shut up [yes], we have great fathers."
Talking drums "Who dare say we have no fathers?"
Dancers/Singers
"Shut up [yes], we have great fathers."

Wedding/Snake Ritual

"Shut up [yes], we have great fathers"

"Shut up [yes], we have great mothers, too...."

The bride and the groom were seated in the middle of the circle sporting their golden embroidered, gray background with black striped handwoven *aṣọ òkè*. Their elegantly dressed parents took the front row across from the bride and groom. All the wives in the families, that is, the women married to the families, were playing their different roles. Some were poetically reciting the families' history. Some were singing the praise of the couple, while some were dishing out the food. The young adults, girls and boys, were busy serving guests food and drinks.

The ninety five year old elder in Rónkẹ́'s family was called upon to lead the family in performing the marriage ritual.

"My children..." his speech was interrupted with soft murmurs and glances from the west end of the gathering. The popular snake priest had just walked in with his paraphernalia—a big calabash container that had its top securely attached. There were holes in the calabash for ventilation. It was obvious that the snake inside it was a big one. The sight of the big cobra, and the awe that surrounded it, sent shivers down the spines of the weak hearted. The murmur that welcomed the priest was a mild protest from some members of the

bride's family. They viewed the intended snake ritual as an infringement on their rights. The snake ritual was supposed to have been performed the night before and at the groom's family compound. Not everyone present at the gathering knew why the snake ritual was to be performed alongside the marriage ceremony. The elder and father figure, on whose shoulders the family's civic and social responsibilities laid, beckoned to Rónkẹ́'s father to bring order to the gathering. Bàbá Rónkẹ́ addressed the gathering, chanting a Yorùbá's poetic verse

To seek is to know
Hen
To question is to get answer
Hen
No problem is unique
Hen
Nothing that happens had never happened before
Hen
If we are patient we will know
Hen
If we are patient we will be rightly guided
Hen
If we are patient we will be rightly guided
If we are patient we will be rightly guided

Wedding/Snake Ritual

If we are patient we will be rightly guided....

Bàbá Rónkẹ́ took his seat as soon as order returned to the gathering.

"Thank you, my son" the elder praised Bàbá Rónkẹ́. Facing the gathering, he told them that Rónkẹ́ was one of his little glorious grandchildren. "Rónkẹ́ never forgot to ask, 'Grandfather, you want me to give you water? Are you ready for your meal?....' Such is my wonderful child—our child—who is now going to join 'Jìmí's family in marriage. She is precious to us. Treat her right," he concluded. He then invited Rónkẹ́ to come closer to him.

Rónkẹ́ moved and knelt in front of her elder who was reverentially called Bàbá Àgbà (great grandfather). The elder prayed for Rónkẹ́'s successful marriage and voyage to America. He rendered more words of wisdom and then took his seat.

It was Màmá Rónkẹ́'s turn to address the gathering. Rónkẹ́ had moved to kneel in front of her mother. Addressing the gathering, Màmá Rónkẹ́ called 'Jìmí, "'Jìmí, my child, I am not just your mother in-law, I am also your mother." Treat Rónkẹ́ as a sister, not just as a wife. Treat her as a friend because she is. Remember she was your friend prior to her being your wife now. Let that friendship prevail alongside the marriage partnership." She plunged into the historical

background of Rónkẹ́'s childhood relationship with 'Jìmí. She related the story of Rónkẹ́ and 'Jìmí, as children, running errands for her and her friend, Màmá 'Jìmí. She was suddenly overpowered with emotion at the mention of Màmá 'Jìmí.

"That is okay, she is being represented here now at this event. For sure, she is among us, we just can't see her," some of the women inferred in their attempt to console Màmá Rónkẹ́.

Màmá Rónkẹ́ thanked them and reached for the symbolic switch set by her side. She held the switch up simultaneously with the bowl that contained the dowry payment and warned the groom, "With the return of this dowry payment, we enjoin you never to beat, hit, or abuse Rónkẹ́ in anyway. "'Jìmí," she called the name for emphasis, "never punish Rónkẹ́ in any way." Màmá Rónkẹ́ went over the points item by item and concluded with a deep rooted prayer for everything and everyone, wishing the couple a happy married life. Then, she returned to her seat.

Being the father of the bride, Bàbá Rónkẹ́ was the last person to speak. He eloquently welcomed everyone to the gathering. He, too, spoke at length about his and Bàbá 'Jìmí's friendship. He indulged the gathering with information about the turning point in their families' relationship.

Wedding/Snake Ritual

"I went to Bàbá 'Jìmí's smithery one beautiful evening during the month of Ògún (August) for an *ayò* game. He was reading a letter from 'Jìmí. By the way he asked me about Rónkẹ́ from the corners of his eyes, I knew something was brewing. I also knew that something else would bloom as a result thereof. The rest is now history," he stopped. He invited both Rónkẹ́ and 'Jìmí to kneel before him for prayers. Placing his hands on their heads, he prayed for them and wished them happiness and the best of marital bliss. He told the bride and groom to rise. Looking up towards Bàbá 'Jìmí, he invited him. With mutual understanding, 'Jìmí's aunt, who stood in for her sister, followed. Chosen elders of the groom's family took the rear. Bàbá Rónkẹ́ took Rónkẹ́'s right hand, placed it in Bàbá 'Jìmí's outstretched hands; he took Rónkẹ́'s left hand and placed it in the hands of 'Jìmí's mother's representative—his aunt. He then put 'Jìmí's hands on each of Rónkẹ́'s hands. He began his invocation: "Bàbá 'Jìmí and Màmá..." Bàbá Rónkẹ́ got lost momentarily. The woman holding the hands was not 'Jìmí's mother. Having to address her as Màmá 'Jìmí, at this important point, might be interpreted as an act of insensitivity. The expected mutual compromise was delivered when Bàbá 'Jìmí asked Bàbá Rónkẹ́ to 'address her ['Jìmí's aunt] as Màmá 'Jìmí.' "It is okay

Bàbá Rónkẹ́, she is Jìmí's aunt."

Bàbá Rónkẹ́ began again.

"Bàbá Jìmí and Màmá 'Jìmí, our daughter, Rónkẹ́, is at this moment being handed over to you as 'Jìmí's wife. Even though 'Jìmí is the husband, you as 'Jìmí's parents, and acting in conjunction with the entire family, will be held jointly responsible for her welfare and comfort.

'Jìmí must love her.
'Jìmí must honor her.
'Jìmí must respect her.
'Jìmí must never beat her.
'Jìmí must never hit her.
'Jìmí must never abuse her.
'Jìmí must always respect her family.
'Jìmí must never make her suffer hunger.
'Jìmí must never suffer her clothing.
'Jìmí must never deny her comfort—of mind and body
'Jìmí must never mistreat her....

Rónkẹ́ is our precious child.
If she is disrespectful in any way, let us know
We will discipline her.
If she is mean in any way, let us know
We will discipline her.
If she is mouthy, let us know

We will discipline her.
If she is unruly, let us know
We will discipline her....
We don't expect her to be any of those characters
Because she is a disciplined child.
We assure you she will be a loving wife
Because she is a disciplined child.
We assure you she will be a doting mother
Because she is a disciplined child.
We assure you she will be a respectful wife
Because she is a disciplined child.
We assure you she will be a respectful daughter in law
Because she is a disciplined child.
Rónkẹ́ is our child, our precious daughter.
Before you decide to take any action against her
Consult us, we will take care of the problem....

Bàbá Rónkẹ́ went on and on with the invocational list at the end of which he clasped Rónkẹ́ and 'Jimí's hands together. He asked them to kneel for prayers. When he finished, 'Jimí and Rónkẹ́ went back to their seats in the middle of the circle. Afterward, Bàbá Rónkẹ́ cleared his voice and offered a general apology to members of his and his wife's family who were unaware of the reason for the snake priest's presence

at the wedding.

"You were right, my people. The snake ritual is not supposed to be administered here—at the bride's home. It was my idea that it be done here."

As her father was about to give his reasons for the shift of venue, Rónkẹ́ reached for 'Jimí's hand for comfort. She whispered her question to his ears:

"Are we still going on with the snake ritual?"

"I tried to stop it, but my father insisted that it be administered. It is in honor of my mother," 'Jimí petted Rónkẹ́'s hands lovingly. "You will be okay."

For the first time, Rónkẹ́ addressed 'Jimí by his newly defined title, "My husband, but...." She stopped in response to 'Jimí's gentle squeeze of her hand. She looked at him.

"Let's concentrate. I would like to hear Bàbá's reason for going against traditional norm."

Unknown to Rónkẹ́, her mother had begged her father to prevail on Bàbá 'Jimí to cancel the snake ritual. They both knew that Rónkẹ́ was not totally honest with them, but they couldn't prove it. Bàbá Rónkẹ́'s effort to convince his friend to cancel the ritual was to no avail. His tactics included the justification of distance. Rónkẹ́ listened as her father recapped the dialogue between him and Bàbá 'Jimí. She rested her head on her husband's right shoulder for support

and strength as she caught her father saying:

"Suppose something else, outside infidelity, happens to Rónkẹ́ or 'Jímí as a result of the ritual, none of us would be there to help."

"What else do you think might happen outside infidelity?" Bàbá 'Jímí asked Bàbá Rónkẹ́.

"What if 'Jímí is the architect of a pregnancy that is given to another man? Would such other woman suffer for such irresponsible behavior?"

"Yes. 'Jímí and I had talked about that. To prevent such catastrophe, another kind of ritual had been put in place."

"You mean the kind that will force the other man to be legally and morally bound to such child?"

"Yes. For as long as the woman is not married to 'Jímí, she and her child will be out of bounds to the effect of the snake ritual." Bàbá 'Jímí offered more explanations.

"Bàbá Rónkẹ́, the intention behind the ritual is to ensure that 'Jímí's wife, who now happens to be your daughter, doesn't sleep around. She and other wives in the family are the torch bearers for our future generation. We want continuity and stability in our family," Bàbá 'Jímí retorted.

"Anyway, not wanting to belabor the issue any further, we both agreed that the snake ritual be

incorporated into the marriage ceremony in order to encourage a wider, family participation. That way, we will all know what to do, should the need arise." Bàbá Rónkẹ́ concluded his recital. Facing his friend, Bàbá 'Jímí, he offered his thanks and then took his seat.

Rónkẹ́'s quick scan of faces suggested to her that not all the people present agreed to her father's points. She was happy at the knowledge that her parents were already thinking of a solution to a likely future problem.

Bàbá 'Jímí responded on behalf of his son and members of his extended family. He assured Rónkẹ́'s family that Rónkẹ́ would be properly taken care of, and that she will be adequately provided for also. He extolled the good qualities of his son, 'Jímí. He told them that 'Jímí was a good family provider. He told them of the many times that 'Jímí sent him money as well as other instances of caring he displayed towards him, the father, and the rest of the extended family.

A big applause greeted this disclosure. The lead drummer went into a tirade of a musical, poetic praise with his talking drum. Bàbá 'Jímí thanked them and called on the snake priest.

"Will Chief Modúpẹ́, the priest to administer the snake ritual, step forward please!"

An eerie silence descended on the gathering at this

announcement. The priest was accompanied to the newly set podium with enchanting drumming and singing. The talking drums were hilariously busy with the lyrics:

If you are not a good swimmer, don't jump into water.
If you are guilty, don't dare this ritual.
This is not a phantom.
If you are not a good swimmer, don't jump into water.
If you are guilty, don't dare this ritual.
This ritual is real.
It is potent.
If you are not a good swimmer, don't jump into water.
If you are guilty, don't dare this ritual....

"Thank you for that beautiful rendition," the priest waved to the drummers. He paid homage to the unseen spiritual forces in the gathering. He requested Màmá 'Jìmí's spirit to descend. Having finished with this initial ritual, he invited 'Jìmí and Rónkẹ́ to mount the podium. At this stage, the cobra, which was about twelve feet long and thirty pounds in weight had coiled up on the podium. Rónkẹ́ was shaking violently. She almost fell at one time. Her parents were equally apprehensive. Her mother almost screamed "stop it, stop

it" judging from the movement of her mouth. 'Jìmí held Rónkẹ́ tightly and even encouraged her to lean on him. Just like the rest of the people in the gathering felt, he thought Rónkẹ́'s plight was the typical display of fright associated with being in close proximity with a big reptile. The priest gave 'Jìmí and Rónkẹ́ some nuts, some seeds and other sacred things. He gave them a bowl of fresh water.

"Chew or swallow the nuts and the seeds first, then drink the water with 'Jìmí drinking first," the priest commanded. They did as they were told.

"The snake is not supposed to stir," the priest informed them. He told 'Jìmí to rub the snake on the head. 'Jìmí did. He gave him a rat to feed to the snake. 'Jìmí was scared now, but he did as he was told. The snake did not stir, not even the bait of the rat moved it. The priest took the rat from 'Jìmí's hand.

"Come to this side, Ìyàwó (bride)." The priest invited Rónkẹ́ to move to the spot just vacated by 'Jìmí. He told her to rub the snake on the head. As she was about to do that, the snake stirred subtly. The priest muffled a disappointment under his breath. He realized that Rónkẹ́ was pregnant. He also knew that he had to handle the snake carefully, otherwise, there would be chaos. Rónkẹ́ was now dropping on her knees as a result of guilt and the realization that the

priest knew she was pregnant. The priest whispered to 'Jìmí, "Hold her. She is scared." This statement was more for Rónkẹ́'s benefit because her passing out would be an instant exposure of her secret.

"Ìyàwó, hang on. Hold on tight to your husband." Hearing the encouraging words from the priest energized Rónkẹ́ a little bit. Rather than place the rat on Rónkẹ́'s hand like he did with 'Jìmí, the priest held the rat himself and told Rónkẹ́ to put her hand under his. He did that to control the instant reaction of the snake. If the snake's reaction is not controlled upfront, the snake will strike the adulterous woman. Just as the hands moved close to the snake's head, it poised for a strike. Because he knew that would happen, the priest cleverly diffused the audience concentration by asking them to hail the snake. He urged them to say "*kákò* (recoil)!" The snake recoiled back to its passive position as soon as the rat was moved away from it. Thinking that the ritual went smoothly as it was supposed to be, the gathering went agog with hysteria. The snake and the ritual paraphernalia were put back into their place. The priest told 'Jìmí to contact him as soon as Rónkẹ́'s pregnancy was obvious to the eyes. He threw a sarcastic glance at Rónkẹ́. Rónkẹ́ looked away. Stretching his hands, the priest gave Rónkẹ́ a small gourd.

"Take this and keep it safe. Swallow the entire content when your pregnancy is eight and a half months old and stay in touch." Turning to 'Jìmí, the priest pleaded, "my son, make sure to contact your aunt as soon as your wife falls in labor."

"I will, Bàbá. My father already told me that," 'Jìmí answered.

The talking drum's lyrics of *"no bastard in our family, that I can assure you. There is no bastard in our family, that I can assure you,"* concluded the ritual. 'Jìmí and Rónkẹ́ were accompanied out of the gathering with the wives singing their praises. The long happy hours of feasting and dancing continued till dawn the following morning.

Invocation to an Ancestor

Typical of her nightly experiences for the last couple of weeks, Màmá Rónkẹ́ was preoccupied with worries about Rónkẹ́. She shifted from side to side unable to go back to sleep. She had been aroused from sleep by a "mew, mew, mew" cry from Rónkẹ́'s cat. As she reached for the lantern to turn the wick up for brightness, she felt the cat nudging her elbow. She petted the cat and wondered what was happening spiritually. She thought about the only time, since Rónkẹ́ left for the United States, when the cat was heard chasing a rat. In her recollection, the cat's activities had always been limited to daytime. Moreover, the cat had always slept by Rónkẹ́'s door when the door was closed. Otherwise, it would curl up anywhere in the room. In Yorùbá mysticism, she thought, a nightly activity of a cat, such as she had just experienced, was suggestive of an active negative force. Her

mind was in a whirlwind with this thought. For a while, she remained alert trying to figure out the particular kind of spiritual force that caused the cat to react. Because the night was still young, she decided to go back to sleep. But sleep was elusive. She closed her eyes and chanted silently with the hope that the chant would induce sleep. In the chant, she invoked Ọ̀rúnmìlà to intervene saying:

Ọ̀rúnmìlà, give me succor
I cry "save me."
Ọ̀rúnmìlà, relieve me
I cry "deliverance."
Whoever cries for help
Deserves to be helped....

She did this for a while with no success. Her mind was just too active for sleep. Finally, she gave up and reached for her tobacco pipe. Màmá Rónkẹ́'s smoking was conditional: she smoked whenever she went to relieve herself in the woods, and whenever she was worried—as was the case that night. The aroma of the tobacco woke up Bàbá Rónkẹ́ who seldom slept deeply. He whispered to his wife, "Màmá Rónkẹ́, are you okay?"

"Nothing serious. I was just unable to go back to sleep. I am worried about Rónkẹ́ though."

"Any more news from her or about her?"

"Nothing new, but remember I am to travel to Ọ̀wọ̀ tomorrow to receive her telephone call."

"She's been gone now for..."

"Six months," Màmá Rónkẹ́ finished her husband's statement. "She seemed too scared in her recent letter to us when she wrote 'please my mother and my father, pray for me to survive this pregnancy—that I do not die while giving birth to the child.'"

"That is confirmation of our initial suspicion. Isn't it?"

"Bàbá Rónkẹ́, it also confirms Ifá's prophesy. Ifá's message of 'her being the architect of her own misfortune' rings constantly in my ears each time I think about her."

"Talking about Ifá's message, was the spiritual injunction from the last divination performed?"

"It was performed immediately. The injunction was that a specific ancestor be appeased," Màmá Rónkẹ́ answered.

"Remind me please, which of the ancestors?" Bàbá Rónkẹ́ asked his wife.

"It was Màmá 'Jímí that needed to be propitiated."

"Anyway, since you are going to Ọ̀wọ̀ tomorrow, stop by the Àràbà's house for further spiritual investigation."

"Which Àràbà?" Màmá Rónkẹ́ asked.

"My mother's spiritual adviser and counsellor."

"I understand he is a genius."

"He has to be, Màmá Rónkẹ́. Otherwise, his colleagues would not have made him their leader by conferring the Àràbà title on him."

"That is a good suggestion, Bàbá Rónkẹ́. Isn't he also Chief Ọláwọ̀yin's godfather?"

"He is. Even if Chief Ọláwọ̀yin had told him about Rónkẹ́ being in the United States, unless you tell him who you are, he wouldn't be able to connect you with Chief Ọláwọ̀yin. Regardless of that, however, Ifá's reading is objective; it has never been based on personality."

"That means that I will leave earlier than I had planned."

"That is a good idea, Màmá Rónkẹ́. Meanwhile, try to go back to sleep. Rónkẹ́ will be okay. We might have to intensify the spiritual consultations now that her pregnancy has advanced."

"'Till morning then, Bàbá Rónkẹ́.

"Let's think positive, Màmá Rónkẹ́. The problem will be resolved amicably."

Màmá Rónkẹ́ went to grandpa's grave in the adjoining room and poured palm wine in libation. Then, she started an invocation. With her left hand curled, she touched the wet grave with the right hand and gently

tapped the curled fist with the right palm. She did this three times—invoking grandpa's name, Alámanà—each time the palm tapped the curled fist. She explained that she did not mean to intrude on grandpa, but that she had come to him for a favor. Then, she prayed and implored grandpa's spirit to intervene in the spiritual world on Rónkẹ́'s behalf, and also to induce peace in Rónkẹ́'s life. Rónkẹ́'s cat had creeped in behind her while she was engrossed in the invocation. As she turned to go back into her room, she heard the cat's "mew" again. This time, she was relieved by the sound because it somehow indicated that she did the right thing by praying at grandpa's grave. With the impending doom forestalled, Màmá Rónkẹ́ went back to sleep.

Second Ifá Divination

The council of priests and priestesses had just dismissed when Màmá Rónkẹ́ walked into the Àràbà's compound. One of the priests was in the shrine having a professional discourse with the Àràbà on an intricate problem of one of his clients. In the process of consulting the spirits, Ifá verse of Ogbè Ìwòrì revealed itself. The priest looked at the revealed verse and commented, "Àràbà, you're having a client."

"For sure. The client is nearby, too. You can trust Ogbèwẹ̀hìn for such accuracy," the Àràbà responded.

The priest grabbed his walking stick as he said, "Thank you, Àràbà, for the additional information about my client's situation. I'll take care of the appeasement as soon as I get back home."

"You're not leaving, are you? If..." Both men looked up to acknowledge the presence of Àràbà's latest Ifá student.

Second Ifá Divination

"Bàbá, you have a visitor."

"Send the visitor in. What are you all doing?" the Àràbà asked in order to decide which of the students should come in with the client.

"We are constructing the grove for tomorrow's initiation," the student answered. "Do you want all of us in, Bàbá?"

"One or two."

"I will come in with the visitor then," the student stated and left.

"Àràbà, is that the student who suggested that an Àràbà should be addressed as The Reverend...instead of Bàbá?" The priest, Àràbà's colleague, asked him.

"He is. You know his background anyway. He graduated from a College of Technology, I think it is called Yaba College of Technology, Lagos, whatever that means. I am not sure though if 'The Reverend' reference is equivalent to an Àràbà title."

"Bàbá, my reverence to the spirits," Màmá Rónkẹ́ greeted as she entered the shrine. Àràbà responded that the spirits accepted her greetings and invited her to sit on the mat. The priest also greeted Màmá Rónkẹ́ and inquired about her family's welfare. Màmá Rónkẹ́ sat in front of the Àràbà while the student sat by the Àràbà's left side. She reached inside her wallet for the consultation fee. Following the standard

procedure, Màmá Rónkẹ́ held the money close to her mouth and said some prayers. She also bared her mind to the spirits in silence as was the custom. With the money cupped in her right hand, she touched it to her forehead three times. She then put the money gently on the beaded divination cloth, about twenty inches wide and sixteen inches long, decorated further with cowrie shells on its edges. The Àràbà touched the money with his divination instrument, the ọ̀pẹ̀lẹ̀, and then went into a reverie with the spirits; he enjoined them to guide him:

Ọ̀rúnmìlà, you are the guide
Guide this process.
Ọ̀rúnmìlà, you are the seer
Reveal the hidden truth.
Reveal the truth because the client needs to
hear the truth without fear or flavor.
Don't placate the client out of pity
Don't be harsh on the client out of anger,
either.
Please pinpoint what the exact situation is....

At the end of the short, but compulsory reverence to the spirits, the Àràbà cast the ọ̀pẹ̀lẹ̀. The priest, who had been a silent participant so far, cried out the revealed verse: "Ogbè 'Sá!" Innately, he was wondering how bad the situation that brought Màmá Rónkẹ́

to the shrine was. The Àràbà cast the ọ̀pẹ̀lẹ̀ a couple of more times and stopped. He looked at the student with the facial expression that indicated, "Hey, it is your turn." The student, prostrated for the spirits, sat up and then engaged Màmá Rónkẹ́'s attention. He chanted:

Ogbè runs to the house
Ọ̀sá runs to the woods.
Divine for the next person to take charge of things.
Divine same for the good doer.
Do good; be benevolent.
Whoever is next to take charge of things [responsibility]
Should be benevolent.
If you are next in line for the responsibility
Do good.
If I am the next one for the responsibility
I will do good....

"This is a final 'good bye' from a sick person—on the verge of death—to her or his survivors..."

"No one is sick around me, Bàbá," Màmá Rónkẹ́ said in a labored voice, interrupting the priest.

"I am glad for that confirmation," the Àràbà said on intervention. "I already checked on that though. However, someone is going through a life threatening

situation. A woman is in labor, and she is in grave danger of losing her life and that of the child."

Màmá Rónkẹ́ was silent for a while. When she looked at the Àràbà, her eyes were reddened.

"Bàbá, my daughter is pregnant. I am not sure when the baby is due, but her pregnancy has advanced." She then told the Àràbà that Ifá had answered her questions, and that there was no need for further messages. She reached in her purse for her wallet. She gave the Àràbà five thousand Nigerian Naira, enough for the ẹbọ, and requested that all required appeasement rituals to save her daughter's life, be started. She asked to be excused while she went to receive a telephone call. Outside, she flagged down the first taxi that came her way and asked the driver to take her to the Nigerian Telephone Exchange Branch Office where she was to receive Rónkẹ́'s call. As she was about to get out of the taxi, she asked the driver what the time was.

"One o'clock," the driver told her.

Màmá Rónkẹ́ thanked the driver and went into the modest office of the telephone exchange complex. One of the operators asked her what time her call was supposed to come and from where. She told the operator that her call was to come at two o'clock and that it was coming from the United State of America. The

operator told Màmá Rónkẹ́ to join the line. Màmá Rónkẹ́ listened and watched as each caller was announced and the line dwindled. After what seemed like eternity, she approached one of the operators and asked if her daughter had called.

"What is your daughter's name?" the operator asked.

"Rónkẹ́."

"Did you hear your her name announced?" the operator asked again.

"No."

"What time is she expected to call?"

"At two o'clock," Màmá Rónkẹ́ responded.

"Màmá, it is three o'clock now. It is doubtful if your daughter will call. Moreover, the office will close in another thirty minutes."

"Thank you," Màmá Rónkẹ́ said disappointedly. In her mind, she wondered why Rónkẹ́ did not call. Rónkẹ́ had never failed to keep her telephone appointment with her.

Leaving the telephone office, Màmá Rónkẹ́ took a taxi to the Àràbà's house. Having paid up-front for the ritual elements, the appeasement ritual was quickly performed. After the ritual, the Àràbà asked for the name of the pregnant woman.

"She is my daughter. Her name is Rónkẹ́."

"Her name is Rónkẹ́," the Àràbà repeated trying to place the name. He looked up at Màmá Rónkẹ́ and asked, "Are you from Emùré Ilé?"

"Yes, Bàbá. Your godson, Chief Ọláwọyin, is our family friend."

"He spoke highly of your family, particularly your daughter."

"Thank you, Bàbá."

"How did she, or why did she get herself in the mess that Ifá just revealed about her?"

"I am puzzled about that myself, Bàbá."

"Anyway, take this, pray on it and touch it to your navel three times." The Àràbà gave Màmá Rónkẹ́ a little charm that was wrapped with a black and red thread. The charm was reddened with the blood of the snake that was just offered to it. Màmá Rónkẹ́ did as instructed. Rather than take the charm back from her, the Àràbà told her to drop the charm in a little gourd that contained the mixture of various forgiveness herbs and a mystic powder, ìyẹ̀rẹ̀osùn, over which a powerful Ifá atonement verse had been chanted. The Àràbà chanted more Ifá verses on the gourd, exhaled on it three times and sealed it with the "so may it be!" command. He gave the gourd to Màmá Rónkẹ́ and told her to drop Rónkẹ́'s preserved umbilical cord in it as soon as she got back home.

Ronkẹ́ in Labor

As she did every week for the last months, Rónkẹ́ checked the last entry in her calender. It was marked 'the ninth of RRBJ'—her code for nine months. Her pregnancy was in full term. For Bọ̀dé, she was nine months pregnant; for her husband, 'Jimí, the pregnancy was just "seven months" old. She thought of Bọ̀dé and their secret rendezvous. As if in response to her wandering thoughts, the baby kicked her inside. Rónkẹ́ put her left hand on the part of the stomach that was just kicked from within and rocked the baby. The concern in her mind was about the baby's resemblance. Would the baby resemble Bọ̀dé; her, Rónkẹ́, the mother; or 'Jimí the architect? She quivered at the thought of her delicate cross-plantation of Bọ̀dé and 'Jimí's genetic codes in the baby.

The excitement caused a physiological exertion of added pressure on her already weak urethra. For the

tenth time within the hour, she felt the urge to urinate. What came out, however, was a reddish gelatinous substance. With this indication of the onset of her labor, Rónkẹ́ grabbed four big towels from the linen closet and went back quickly, but carefully, to the living room. She folded each towel in half and put each on top of the other. She put them on the floor by the love seat and lowered herself on them. She reached for the telephone and called 'Jimí at his job. She was simultaneously thinking of the best convincing story to tell him. 'Jimí's outgoing message of "...please leave a message" was going off when Rónkẹ́'s water bag broke. She cut off her call and dialed 911 for medical emergency. Her heart pounded as she summoned 'Jimí on his pager with the emergency code, 911. She thought of the game being over. The manipulation, the deception, the apparent crucial decision of life or death that she would make, the disgrace and scandal that would come after the fact—all became torturous to her confused mind. Her labor pains had set in at this stage. A sharp back pain that was accompanied with a twisting abdominal pain brought bitter tears to her eyes. She felt lonely and wished for her mother.

The phone rang as the emergency crew rushed in.

"Hello."

"Rónkẹ́, it's me. Are you okay?"

Ronkę in Labor

"It's the baby, 'Jimí."

"What about the baby?"

He heard some background noises and a distinctive question of "...how long has it been since the water broke?" 'Jimí called frantically again, "Rónkę! Are you there?"

"Yes, the ambulance is here, too, to take me to the hospital. Yeeeeeeeh!" Rónkę screamed in response to the contraction she felt.

"Rónkę! Rónkę! Rónkę!" 'Jimí called in panic, then hung up the phone. "Ambulance at my house, what is happening?" he muttered, while rushing to his car.

'Jimí missed the ambulance by seconds and decided to tailgate it. The picture of a tiny baby in a tank, with tubes, needles and bandages decorating the body, flashed through his mind. He thought about the ultrasound appointment scheduled for the following week. As anxious as he was to know the sex of the baby, Rónkę had persuaded him that they should wait until the pregnancy was *eight months* old. The request was a ploy on Rónkę's part to forestall information that could reveal the actual age of the fetus. 'Jimí now regretted having agreed to that. Justifiably, he thought that the miscarriage could have been prevented because the ultrasound examination would have probably prepared them for it. Just then he remembered

the snake priest's instruction during the snake ritual. Rónkę was to swallow *the entire content* of the gourd she was given, as soon as her pregnancy was eight and a half months old. He, 'Jimí, was to call his "aunt as soon as his wife [Rónkę] falls in labor." He thought about calling his aunt for advice on what to do with the medicine but decided against the urge. A look at his watch indicated that it was two o'clock in the morning in Nigeria. He reasoned that the medicine was probably meant to relieve Rónkę of a prolonged labor. Just then the ambulance made a turn toward the emergency building of the hospital. 'Jimí drove to the parking lot and joined the medical emergency crew as Rónkę was being wheeled to the Emergency Room. As he tried to take Rónkę's hand, one of the nurses asked if he was the husband. 'Jimí stammered "Yes" and asked if the baby would be okay. A stream of tears flowed from Rónkę's eyes at that question. She squeezed 'Jimí's hand and was about to say something when she heard one of the nurses say, "Everything seems to be alright. Your wife will be in the labor room until she is fully dilated."

"Fully dilated?" 'Jimí asked, puzzled.

The nurse looked at 'Jimí and asked if that would be his first experience of fatherhood.

'Jimí answered "Yes."

"Good luck to you both then. The labor is progressing smoothly," the nurse said and left.

Rónkę was by then tucked in her bed and was advised to breathe in and out, and not push, at her subsequent contractions.

The doctor walked in, read the chart, and gave some encouraging words to the expectant parents, in particular, to Rónkę. Just then, Rónkę was seized with a strong contraction.

"Don't push, just breathe in and out," the doctor said as she examined Rónkę. "It won't be long now."

'Jìmí decided to ask the question that had bothered him so much up to that time.

"Doctor, isn't this a miscarriage? What are the risks if labor is prolonged?"

The doctor checked the chart again and asked why 'Jìmí thought there was a miscarriage.

"The pregnancy is seven months only," 'Jìmí said, almost losing his temper.

"I doubt that. This is a fullterm pregnancy."

"Meaning?" 'Jìmí queried the doctor.

"Meaning that the pregnancy is nine months and four days old."

'Jìmí sprung out of his chair and stared at Rónkę in disbelief. Alarmed by the unexpected reaction, the doctor decided to play it safe. For the benefit of 'Jìmí,

she looked at the chart again and announced that she needed to confirm the date from her nurse.

"Is there anything else I can do before I leave, please?" the doctor asked on her way out of the room.

"For now, nothing, thank you doctor. I just wasn't sure of the month."

Rónkę pushed the red button as the doctor walked out. Not wanting to take chances with 'Jìmí's anger, she yanked the intravenous needle off her arm and held both her hands forward in defense.

Just as spontaneous as his initial reaction was, 'Jìmí reacted to the nurse's alarmed, facial expression of "what is going on here?" by saying that Rónkę had just experienced another contraction. Acting as a concerned husband, 'Jìmí asked Rónkę, "you sure you don't want to be sedated?"

"I don't want to be sedated," Rónkę snapped back.

"Honey," 'Jìmí caressed Rónkę with the pet word, again for the benefit of the nurse, "that would at least relax your mind."

"No, that might kill me."

Just as the nurse finished reinserting the needle in Rónkę's vein, and the intravenous fluid was back on, 'Jìmí sarcastically told Rónkę in Yorùbá language "good luck." He then thanked the nurse and left.

'Jìmí's telephone was ringing when he opened his

front door. He rushed in to answer it, kicking the pile of the wet towels on the floor in frustration.

"Hello"

"'Jìmí, I will stop by your house for a 'beer shower.' I was told in the office that your wife is having a baby," his Nigerian colleague enthused.

"Actually, I just came home to make a phone call. Moreover, the house is in a mess. I'll meet you at your house instead."

"I'll let my wife know. By the way, welcome to the Fathers' Club."

"I am not sure about that," 'Jìmí answered and hung up before the friend could respond.

'Jìmí called Home

Looking for other means to confirm that his wife was actually nine months pregnant, 'Jìmí went to the medicine cabinet for the gourd given to Rónkẹ́ by the snake priest. The gourd was empty. He put the gourd back and reached for his telephone in slow motion. The snake priest's instruction of "call your aunt..." whirled in his head. He questioned the rationale and wondered what would be the outcome of his compliance. He also wondered what the medicine in the gourd would do to Rónkẹ́. Apprehensive of these unknowns, he dialed his aunt's contact telephone number in Nigeria.

"Good morning, Uncle."

"Who? Oh 'Jìmí, good morning."

Without wasting time on pleasantries, 'Jìmí requested to speak to his aunt.

"It is six o'clock in the morning here in Nigeria,

'Jìmí, and your aunt lives far away. Call back by ten o'clock."

"It is an emergency, Uncle."

"I imagined that since you never called this time of the morning before. The taxis don't come to my area until eight o'clock."

"Uncle, how about Adé going on his bicycle?"

"Adé is knocked out by last night's 'young male adults' right of passage' celebration."

"Was last night the *ìjòṣán* ceremony?"

"It was. Very interesting, too. Those teenagers were brave. I am proud of Adé in particular. He didn't even blink an eye at the challenge of swallowing fire. By the way, the fire eating is a revived aspect of the rite of passage ceremony.

"Is the *ìjòṣán* still done the same way, with no shirts on?"

"This is our traditional culture 'Jìmí, you want it changed to an òyìnbó kind?" the man asked sarcastically.

"No, Uncle. I just wondered if the western culture has influenced it in anyway."

"Fortunately not, and I hope it never does. A new consciousness has evolved lately. The West refers to its past as the 'medieval times' or the 'middle ages' and to our own traditions as a 'primitive culture.' They

never use loving words—the *beginning* or *origin*—when the reference is to our culture."

"It is a question of semantics, Uncle."

"Yes, at the price of losing our tradition to western culture, and of our youth being barren of their own essence. *Pride* is our catchword now. Our children need to be proud of their heritage."

"How about the impact neutralizer medicine, still in force?"

"You mean the anesthetic herbal bath before the ceremony?"

"Yes, Uncle."

"Very much in force. In fact, it's being improved upon by the Council of Herbalists. There is an incision version of the medicine now for those who might prefer that."

"I remember my apprehension at the sight of the switches years back. I tightened my stomach muscles and squeezed my face in anticipation of cuts, bruises and pain. But none came. It was fun after that initial shock."

"From that standpoint, what is your opinion about it?"

"I like it, Uncle. I think it should be preserved. It is an important rite in a teenager's life."

"Our modern teenagers, particularly those in the

cities, prefer the western hip-hop culture to our traditions. They call some of our cultural ceremonies, like the *ìjọ̀ṣán*, primitive."

"Blame the Nigerian media, Uncle, for dancing to the western tunes."

"And our schools also. They are as guilty as the media. Their emphasis is on Shakespeare, King James, Aristole, Socrates and..."

"Uncle, nothing bad in learning about..."

"There is nothing bad in that, but what do the schools teach about our own ancestral past and great ancient philosophers—wise entities like Ọ̀rúnmìlà, for example?"

"Thinking about it, Uncle, nothing!"

"That is right. The schools don't teach anything about our own past. But, thanks to Ifá for being the encyclopedia of our past."

"I thought Ifá is only our religion, Uncle?"

"It is our religion as well as the recorder of our past. It is our most reliable oral record. From Ifá, one learns about the spiritual essence of our being, from the genesis—the very beginning."

"It is a pity that Ifá studies are not incorporated into our school curriculum."

"We are working on that, 'Jìmí. Remember that I mentioned 'new awareness earlier.'"

"That is right, Uncle. The snake ritual during my wedding brought me a new awareness, too."

"Did you like it?"

"I did, and I still do. I love it. Actually, I am calling to ask my aunt some questions about it."

"Talking about that, how is your wife doing?"

"She is doing okay. She will soon have the baby, I hope," 'Jìmí answered unconvincingly.

"What do you mean by 'I hope'?"

'Jìmí suddenly realized that his wife was supposed to have been pregnant for about seven months judging from the date of his visit to Nigeria and their subsequent wedding. In that split second, he decided to change the subject before he revealed too much of his dilemma.

"My knowledge about pregnancy is limited, Uncle. Rónkẹ́ might have an early delivery." Right now she is in the hospital for rehydration. She vomited too much. Anyway, thank you, Uncle. I will call back," 'Jìmí said before the man could continue the conversation.

The long distance telephone conversation with the man in Nigeria relaxed 'Jìmí's nerves and mind. After throwing the wet towels in the trash, he looked on his bookshelf for his copy of *1000+ (African) Òrìṣà Yorùbá Names* published by Ilé Ọ̀rúnmìlà Communications, U.S.A. Even though he was not sure whether

or not he would accept the child as his own, or would still be married to Rónkẹ́, assuming things went well, he wanted more information about the appropriate name for a child born under those circumstances like that of Rónkẹ́'s expected child. He read the names in the sections of "Destiny," "History," "Hope" and "Ifá." He was on the "Multipurpose" section for unique names when he dozed off.

The hard knock on the door woke him up. "Come in," he invited.

His colleague stepped in. "I have been knocking for about ten minutes. My wife suggested that I stop by."

"Why?" 'Jìmí asked.

"She thought Rónkẹ́ might be having a miscarriage, going by the date of your visit home..." The telephone rang.

"Excuse me," 'Jìmí said as he picked up the handset.

"She won't sign the consent form?" 'Jìmí said to the phone.

"I will be there right away. Please don't operate until I get there."

"Thank you," he said and hung up.

'Jìmí ignored his friend's questioning look. Instead, he told him that he needed to call his aunt in Nigeria

first before going to the hospital.

"How about the consent for the surgery? 'Jìmí, your wife's life, and that of the child, could be jeopardized."

"Their lives are already in danger. Thank you anyway," 'Jìmí stated as he dialed his aunt's message number.

"Good morning, mother," 'Jìmí greeted his aunt as she said "hello" from the other end.

"My child, good morning
—the fearless who challenges the most wicked
—winner of wars by virtue of the family's potent charms
—son, who is as difficult to cheat as it is to chew a cup of cayenne pepper
—spiritually powerful son, too risky to combat, as it is risky to lick the sharp side of a knife
—the fearsome who must be appeased before being given additional charm...

"Aunt, I mean, Mom!," 'Jìmí interjected, stopping his aunt from the eulogistic tirade. The aunt screamed "what happened?" in reaction to 'Jìmí's unusual tone. 'Jìmí had always enjoyed listening to his aunt chanting the family's praise song—*oríkì*. His impatience, therefore, was an indication to the aunt that things were not right with him.

"Rónkẹ́ is in labor," 'Jìmí stated coldly.

"In labor?"

"Actually, the hospital has prepared her for a cesarean. They are just waiting for me to give them the go-ahead. Rónkẹ́ would not give them her consent."

"No operation. Listen carefully, 'Jìmí, the knife will kill her instead."

"They have to do something, mother."

The aunt ignored that plea and asked 'Jìmí if Rónkẹ́ took the medicine given to her by the snake priest.

"She did, but..."

"No need for cutting her open then. The medicine will keep her and the baby alive, and safe, for a day. The danger is if she refuses to cooperate."

"What should I do now?"

"No operation. Insist that she shouldn't be cut. Fortunately, a driver is waiting for me outside. I had intended to go to Ọ̀ṣun river to join the procession in commencement of Ọ̀ṣun's annual celebration. Hopefully the snake priest hasn't left the grove. Call back in another hour," she hung up.

The Aunt Consulted the Snake Priest

Two of the women riding in the taxi with the aunt had come into the room without her knowing. One of them told her that the snake priest had left for home while the other said "I wonder who the father is?" 'Jìmí's aunt turned to the last speaker with a look that suggested a warning: "You better not start a scandal." Once inside the taxi, the aunt told the driver to drop the women off first and to take her to the snake priest's house. There was a chuckle again from the same woman. Wanting to start the scandal anyway, and for the benefit of the other passengers who did not go into the room with them, the woman asked the aunt, "Would 'Jìmí accept the child?" The question was answered with a chorus of "wwhhaatt? from the passengers. They were by then close to the river, and the aunt was glad to get rid of them.

The Aunt Consulted the Snake Priest

To keep up the conversation, the driver asked the aunt if Rónkẹ́ was okay.

"Yes, she is. We just need to do a ritual on her behalf to accelerate the delivery. The baby will be born as soon as that is done."

They talked more on some local gossip until they reached the snake priest's neighborhood.

"Stop. Here is the priest. Blow the horn to attract his attention." The driver did as commanded by the aunt. The priest stopped and looked inside the cab.

"Hi, how are you doing," he greeted the aunt.

"Please come inside the car. We need to talk." The priest entered the cab for the one block ride to his house.

"Bàbá, Rónkẹ́ is in labor," the aunt blurted as soon as they entered the house.

"Did she take the medicine?" the snake priest asked.

"Yes, she did."

"What is needed then is the activation chant."

"You mean you knew all along that she was pregnant before her wedding?"

"I realized that during the ceremony. To tell you, or anyone else, would have ruined the day for everyone, considering the dignitaries present. Moreover, disclosure of such mistrust, at that stage, could have destroyed your nephew's respect for our tradition. He

has been away for so long that I wasn't sure if he believed in the potency of such traditional practice anymore."

"You might be right about that. What do I do now. I told him to call me back within the hour."

"How long has Rónkẹ́ been in labor?" he asked.

"Since last night. From what 'Jìmí told me, the labor started in the afternoon (four o'clock, their time), in the United States, which is night in our time."

"You know that the medicine will protect her for one day."

"Yes, I know. I told 'Jìmí that, too," the aunt answered.

The priest entered his shrine and came out with a paper.

"Here is the activation chant. My daughter wrote it. Take it in case you need it. Meanwhile, let's practice. The priest led the aunt in the chant, once. By the second repetition, she chanted it verbatim. Go to your sister's grave now and say the chant three times on the head rest."

"That is all?" the aunt asked when the priest stopped talking.

"That is all on that part. But Rónkẹ́ herself has to reveal the name of the child's true father. The danger is her refusing to tell. Anyway, let me know how it

turns out."

The aunt thanked the priest and went back into the cab. "Let's go," she urged the driver. Please, stop by my house first." She went to 'Jìmí's mother's grave, performed the ritual, and was back in the cab within minutes.

Concern for Ronkẹ́'s Safety

Bàbá Rónkẹ́'s older brother and sister were with him in the parlor when Màmá Rónkẹ́ walked into the house. Before Màmá Rónkẹ́ could say anything, she heard her sister in-law's agitated voice saying, "we're glad you're back." A look at her husband smoking his pipe, and the brother in-law's statement of "I hope she confesses," alerted Màmá Rónkẹ́ that things were not okay. She went straight into the archive inside her room and brought down the basket that contained Rónkẹ́'s dried umbilical cord. She dropped the cord into the gourd that was given to her by the Àràbà. She took the gourd to grandpa's grave and prayed again. In addition to the ritual already performed by the Àràbà, she decided to call on the family's ancestors for support. First she poured libation on grandpa's grave on behalf of Rónkẹ́. She then went into a corner of her room and poured another libation for her

own ancestors. Specifically, she enjoined her ancestors to appeal to her friend, Màmá 'Jìmí, for forgiveness on behalf of Rónkẹ́. Having done all that, she went back to the parlor to inquire what was happening, and also to tell her husband the outcome of her visit to Ọ̀wọ̀.

"Bàbá Rónkẹ́, Rónkẹ́ did not call."

"She is in the hospital trying to deliver her baby. Actually, from the information flitting around, Rónkẹ́ has been in labor for a while," Bàbá Rónkẹ́ told his wife.

"Did 'Jìmí call?" Màmá Rónkẹ́ asked.

"Yes, he called his aunt as instructed by the snake priest," her husband responded.

Màmá Rónkẹ́ looked sadly from her husband to the other two family members present and asked, "What else has been going on?"

"Your conjecture is as good as ours," her husband responded. "Rónkẹ́'s pregnancy for 'Jìmí couldn't have been nine months. It's been only seven months between now and the time that 'Jìmí came home for the wedding. Unless..."

"I know." Màmá Rónkẹ́ interjected. "Has the snake priest been contacted?"

"Yes. And from the grapevine, he knew all along, even during the wedding, that Rónkẹ́ was a couple of

months pregnant."

"So," Màmá Rónkẹ́ quivered as she said that, "what are the alternatives considering the distance?"

"Fortunately, the snake priest is a godly man. He had thought of a solution ahead of time," Bàbá Rónkẹ́ responded. He told her that his friend and in-law, Bàbá 'Jìmí, confirmed that the snake priest had given 'Jìmí's aunt a charm to keep until Rónkẹ́ went into labor. He concluded that the effort being made was to contact 'Jìmí and give him the activation chant that would accelerate the child's delivery. Even with that, Rónkẹ́ needed to tell 'Jìmí who the father of the child is.

"Will 'Jìmí call his aunt back?" Màmá Rónkẹ́ asked.

"Yes, he will and within the hour. The aunt has been mandated to appeal to him to forgive Rónkẹ́. My prayer is that 'Jìmí calls back as he promised," Bàbá Rónkẹ́ informed his wife.

"I hope Rónkẹ́ will confess, too," Màmá Rónkẹ́ prayed and then continued, "I stopped by the Àràbà's shrine as agreed." She told the trio about the reading and the subsequent appeasement that was made. Calling her husband aside, she told him about the gourd that she brought home and about Rónkẹ́'s umbilical cord that was dropped inside of it. With tears in her eyes, she told her husband that she hoped for the best.

Concern for Ronkẹ́'s Safety

"Màmá Rónkẹ́, we know how Ifá works, Rónkẹ́ will be okay. Trust the spiritual forces," Bàbá Rónkẹ́ said with a heavy voice.

Just then the sister in-law asked, "What shall we do about the scandal?"

"Ignore it, what else can be done?" Màmá Rónkẹ́ snapped back.

"I mean, what about the man, the child's true father?"

"I am more concerned about my daughter being alive than to worry about the scandal, or the child's father, for now," Màmá Rónkẹ́ responded with a forceful voice.

"I think we need to end this conversation before things get ugly," the brother/brother in-law cautioned the family.

Pandemonium in Delivery Room

'Jìmí's aunt heard someone say "she is not back" as she, the aunt, stepped into the family friend's living room for the return call from 'Jìmí.

"I am here," she shouted before the phone was hung up.

"Hold on 'Jìmí, your aunt is back." She was handed over the handset.

"'Jìmí, have you been to the hospital?"

"I haven't. I was waiting to call you back first. I thought you said Rónkẹ́ would be safe for at least twenty-four hours."

"I said one day."

"Twenty four hours is one day, mother."

"Okay," the aunt continued. "The next step might be a little bit difficult, but be a man, 'Jìmí. You will have to hear the truth yourself. Urge Rónkẹ́ to reveal the identity of the child's father."

Pandemonium in Delivery Room

"Do I need to listen to that? My friend is here right now, I can send him to the hospital for that."

"No. Your friend is not your blood relation. The mandate is that either you or a member of your family has to hear the confession first hand. Your friend could be present though if you choose."

"Aunty, you want me to kill her? I am not sure I can listen to such confession," 'Jìmí stated in a shrilled voice.

"The snake priest was right then."

"Right about what?"

"That he was protective of your reaction during the ritual."

"You mean he knew all along."

"That was why he urged you to call me as soon as Rónkẹ́ goes into labor."

'Jìmí was quiet for a while. The aunt was quiet, too. After what seemed like an eternity, 'Jìmí told his aunt that he would do as instructed.

"'Jìmí, you have more to look forward to in life than to risk your freedom because of the birth of a bastard. Secondly, I want you to remember that the child is an innocent victim. Save the child's life, son. Keep in mind also that we will support your decision as far as your marriage to Rónkẹ́ is concerned."

"Thank you, mother."

"'Jìmí, remember, you are our hope and continuation for the next generation. Make the right decision." The aunt ended the conversation with a cooling eulogistic chant.

"'Jìmí repeated his aunt's sentence over and over again, "...You are our...continuation for the next generation....Make the right decision."

"A heck of a 'right decision' to make," he snorted.

"Take it easy 'Jìmí," his friend counseled, "let's go to the hospital."

"Your aunt doesn't want you to accept the child," 'Jìmí's friend remarked as they entered the hospital complex.

"She implied it strongly enough," 'Jìmí responded.

"What will you do?"

"I am still thinking," 'Jìmí responded.

Rónkẹ́ wasn't in the labor room when they got there. They rushed to the nurses' station in panic.

"Your wife is in the delivery room," a nurse answered 'Jìmí's inquiry. "Room Nine, down the hall.

The commotion in the room was enormous. A nurse was screaming "the baby's feet are out," while two of the doctors, an obstetrician and a pediatrician, were heard frantically persuading Rónkẹ́ to give the consent for cesarean section. "She is slipping off again," was yet another cry from the EKG technician.

Pandemonium in Delivery Room

"No, don't put the knife on me," Rónkẹ́ said in a dull voice that sounded like she was talking from her sleep.

"Your baby's feet are out. You don't have that much chance left," the obstetrician persuaded Rónkẹ́ softly, otherwise..."

"Otherwise I would bleed to death. Right? Rónkẹ́ snapped back.

"You might take the baby with you, too," the pediatrician offered.

"How about the husband, has he been reached?"

"We paged him nine times already."

The doctor turned to Rónkẹ́ and asked, "how else can we reach your husband, Miss?"

"Call the house?"

"We did. It seemed like the phone was off the hook."

Rónkẹ́ slipped off again. "Doctor, let's do something. We can't let her die on us," the technician said in a heightened voice.

The fingers probing Rónkẹ́'s lower abdomen made her shriek with hysteria. "Please don't cut me. You will kill me."

"Stop," 'Jìmí screamed as him and his friend burst into the room.

Everyone in the room looked at the intruding pair

in astonishment. Before anyone could ask "who are you," 'Jìmí introduced himself.

"My name is 'Jìmí."

"You're the husband, right? the doctor asked, looking at 'Jìmí for confirmation.

"I was. I mean, I am."

"You were?" the doctor asked in consternation.

"He is the husband, doctor," 'Jìmí's friend said in defense.

"I need you to sign the consent form for the cesarean section," the doctor said, tossing the paper in front of 'Jìmí.

"You don't need my consent, doctor. She doesn't need to be operated either. I have the solution." For a brief moment, everyone in the room stared at 'Jìmí, but none said anything. 'Jìmí moved close to Rónkẹ́ and shook her violently. 'Jìmí's action caused the doctor to activate the alarm system. Two security officers rushed in. 'Jìmí apologized instantly, blaming his action on anger. Quickly, he emphasized the importance of his talking to Rónkẹ́.

"Rónkẹ́, I spoke to my aunt. The priest implores you to tell me the secret."

Rónkẹ́ looked at him and slipped back into unconsciousness. 'Jìmí intensified his request.

"Rónkẹ́, please listen to me. Your mother is

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Chief FAMA, always on the move for quests, emigrated to the United States in December of 1990. As always, Providence opened another door for her to expand her literary knowledge. She enrolled in College and graduated from California State University, San Bernardino, U.S.A. with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English. This book, *The Rituals*, her first fictional writing, is the result of her life long-dream to write a novel.

Her other books, which are Yorùbá (African) centered, are:

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(Òrìṣà Worship)
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waiting to hear your voice. Who is he? You may whisper the name in my ear."

Rónkẹ́ murmured something just as her abdominal muscle contracted. There was an excited cry of "the baby is coming, push, push...." 'Jìmí also responded to the excitement by urging Rónkẹ́ to speak louder.

"You need to speak louder Rónkẹ́. Quick, don't hold back. Save your baby. Your mother is waiting to speak to you. Don't worry about the outcome. Who is he?"

"Bọ̀dé. His name is Bọ̀dé! His name is...Yeeeeeeeeh...Bọ̀dé!" she yelled in response to the contraction that had just seized her.

The baby shot out of the birth canal the moment Rónkẹ́ yelled the name "Bọ̀dé." Without even a glance at the baby, or at anyone else, 'Jìmí walked out of the delivery room.

THE END

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