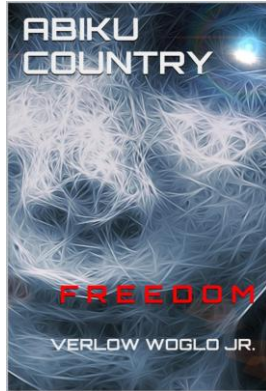


INTRO

“The Teacher” is a chapter of a novel I am working on:

ABIKU COUNTRY - FREEDOM.



The word “Abiku” refers to an ancient African spiritual myth, of children who die at a very young age. What makes it troubling is that they are born to the same parents several times, often presenting the same birthmarks and features of the previous children.

This is the story of an outsider who marries into an unknown culture, and comes to realize that his child is one of such children.

He must find the strength to return to a land he had sworn never to set foot on again, to search for answers. Only his answers are in a secret shrine, deep in the Nigerian Jungle, in territory currently under the control of Boko Haram.

And to break his son free from the cycle, he must be ready to fight in both the physical and spiritual worlds.

Enjoy!

“The Teacher”

By

Verlow W. Jr.



Torn-up clothes, visible effects of starvation, and the healing signs of burns, cuts and bruises from her flight from the Boko Haram soldiers that had burned down her school.

I was always impressed at how she managed to look so clean, calm, and cheerful when she was in front of the children. I had seen her crying several times in pain in her hiding spot next to mine at the outskirts of the village. I had also talked to her, even cried with her.

From the little she was willing to share with me, I had learned that she was an Elementary school teacher.

She spoke flawless English as far as I could tell. I had also noticed that the villagers respected, liked her, because she had been a teacher to some of their kids, most of who had been taken captive or killed, or were lost somewhere, hiding in the forest from the soldiers.

I suspected though, that she was not just a teacher. The villagers, including the elders, bowed to her constantly, much to her annoyance.

I suspected, from the way she talked, carried herself, that she was some kind of local noble, a princess, the daughter of some local chief or something. Still, she proved to be extremely humble, and made herself useful throughout the village, caring for the sick, the wounded, and the little ones.

I had been staring at her for quite some time when I noticed that she was looking back at me, embarrassed, blushing, slightly annoyed perhaps, because she had been explaining how the flour was made, realizing that I was not even listening.

“Mr. Brazil? Are you ok? She asked, “You haven’t listened to a word I said, have you?”

I had missed the part where they processed the cassava and allowed it to dry, before sort of frying it, or roasting it in large ceramic plates heated by firewood. That I had seen, but I had missed the whys of this and that in the process, which I did not really care about. I just wanted to look at her, hear her talk. See her blush whenever she caught me looking at her.

I wanted to brush the lock of hair from her face. Rub my thumb on her cheek to remove a speck of dirt. I wanted to hold her in my arms when she cried, comfort her, and tell her that all would be fine.

I wanted to take her away from this place, to somewhere where I could cook for her our most delicious Brazilian meal, take her dancing, see her laugh, see her happy.

I wanted to make her happy.

Was this love I was feeling, or just sympathy?

I placed all of my MREs [Meals Ready to Eat] on the floor and watched the little kids' eyes grow even bigger, almost like they would pop-out of their big heads. The effects of malnutrition and disease had left the poor kids looking like freakish little aliens.

Half of them covered by the rags I could make out to be much worn, torn-up, dirty clothes. Others were completely nude. All of them barefooted.

Some had blondish hair, another sign of malnutrition, along with sunshine vitamin D deficiency clearly manifested in its most distinctive signs – bow legs, or rickets.

The oldest of them was perhaps five or six, but I couldn't be sure. They could be older, suffering from stunted growth. All I know is that they were all looking fragile, sickly, hungry, and looking forward to what was probably their only meal for the day. Boko Haram soldiers had ransacked the village, taken all the food.

BASTARDS!

These Boko Haram scum had kept control of half of Nigeria for the past one year. The Nigerian armed forces were barely holding the line.

And to make things worse, a multinational veteran jihadist force sent from ISIS was now actively partaking in the conflict in support of Boko Haram!

Nigeria was forced to appeal to the international community for help. Something it had often been too proud to do.

However, many nations were afraid to help. They were already dealing with multiple suicide bombers and terrorist cells in their own territories. Public opinion was that they should stay out of it.

Not us. Not me!

BRAZIL, a once peace-loving, soccer-talented nation of beach, sun, bossa nova music, and carnival, was now a nation scarred by 25 simultaneous terrorist bombings.

Over three thousand of our people, INCLUDING MY SISTER, had lost their lives in schools, malls, subways, stadiums, beaches, and churches. The price we Brazilians paid for having sent medical supplies, food and relief personnel to countries opposing ISIS, Al Qaeda, and Boko Haram. The price we paid for thinking we were prepared.

So when Nigeria called out for military support, we answered in force, looking for payback.

The Brazilian armed forces had been looking to show what they could do beyond just peacekeeping missions under the UN. By answering Nigeria's call for help, we would have more than the opportunity to flex our military muscles. We would be going into war with a VENGEANCE.

And that was how I ended up hiding in this village, broken leg, the survivor of a failed joint-mission deep in Boko Haram territory.

That was how I met teacher Amina!

She placed a large bowl on the floor next to us. The children quickly gathered around it and started to look at the content of the bowl filled with the white, dry manioc flour. Surely, it would not be enough for the 13 kids who now sat patiently and motionless around the bowl, all staring, as if willing it to grow.

Teacher Amina fetched some water, which she poured into the bowl, just enough that the flour was submerged below about two fingers of water. Then turning to me, she pointed to the MREs and other sachets, asking me which one contained the sugar.

She found it before I even answered, and took one, opened it and poured it into the bowl. Her hands, burned by the fire that had killed most of her students, were looking better.

“Just one? Here, why don’t you put some more to really sweeten it?” I asked, but saw her shake her head. In spite, I opened another and poured the sugar with one hand, while I held her back with the other. The kids laughed.

“This should be enough. Let us save some for tomorrow.” She said, fuming.

I could see now why the kids were staring at the bowl, and it wasn’t just because they were hungry. They were watching the flour soak in the water, which was making it expand in size. What had seemed a small portion of the flour was now almost reaching the bowl’s full capacity!

I saw Amina place a package wrapped in newspaper on the floor, and could perceive a smell that reminded me of smoke, or perhaps it was charcoal, and something like fish. As she unwrapped it, slowly, carefully, the kids began to smile expectantly, some vividly salivating

“Have you eaten smoked fish with *garri* before, Mr. Brazil?” She asked, as she finished unwrapping the fish, to everyone’s delight. She then began to break the fish into little portions, careful to make sure that everyone had an equal share. She then gave the head to me.

I didn’t like eating fish head, fried, baked, smoked, or whatever. But I had been told by a fellow Nigerian soldier that the head of any good meat was reserved to the eldest or most prestigious person on the table.

So I took the fish and forged a smile that seem to make everyone happy, but did not really convince Amina, who just shook her head in amusement. And as the kids began to eat, I felt guilty about it and decided to dig into that strange manioc flour they called *garri*, soaked in water.

I noticed that they were all very interested in seeing if I would like it. Perhaps, I would disappoint them if I did, which meant I would eat more, and there would be less for them to eat.

Embarrassed at myself for thinking such little kids would entertain such selfishness, I introduced the spoon into my mouth and allowed the stuff to interact with my taste buds.

Bland, lightly sweetened by the sugar, grainy, coarse.

I did not have an opinion of it yet when Amina pushed some of the smoked fish into my mouth, which I resisted initially, but seeing that everyone was doing the same, I ended up doing it. I had already swallowed the first spoon of the stuff though, and could only taste the residues that were blending with the fish.

Some of the kids also had tiny wrappings of roasted groundnut. Hum! Interesting. One offered me some, which I accepted.

I savored the contrast of the smoked fish, with the sweetened, wet texture of the manioc flour, and the roasted groundnuts.

I closed my eyes.

I had never tasted anything like it before in my life.

It was different, simple, and tasteful.

Perhaps because I was hungry, starving, which would have perhaps made most edible things taste like heaven.

To be fair, this stuff, with the fish, the groundnuts, really did taste good!

The kids laughed, and I joined them.

At the end of the meal, they chanted a song in their traditional language, which I tried to sing along, causing more laughter in the process.

For a few minutes, Boko Haram, war, hunger, death, none of these things mattered.

Their little bellies were full!

I felt satisfied, even more so when I felt Amina's soft, gentle fingers reach out to wipe some of the stuff from the side of my mouth. She had a merry look on her face, her eyes overflowing with tears of joy.

SHOUTING FROM THE OUTSKIRTS OF THE VILLAGE STARTLED US.

Someone was coming!

The elderly women sprang from all corners, picking up the toddlers, and leading the rest of the kids away with them. Amina was already standing, talking to the village's lookout, an elderly yet sturdy looking man armed with a bow and arrow. Only then did I noticed that we had gone past the twilight. Darkness was upon us.

Was it a Boko Haram patrol? Unusual, because they usually passed through the village in the morning to terrorize the poor villagers, and steal their food and livestock.

Amina and the hunter spoke in their native language but I could feel the tension in their voices.

Despite my injured leg, I managed to get up halfway, and then stand with some help from both of them. Amina put my arm over her shoulder to help me as I limped along.

She was trembling. So was her voice, when she said, "we must hurry and hide! There is a Boko Haram group of 20+ men heading this way!" She managed to say.

"How much time have we got?" I asked, hoping that we could make it to our hiding spot in the bushes, some 20 or 30 meters from where we were.

“Not much! We must hurry!” I heard her say, as she almost dragged me away without any mercy for my poor leg.

THE PAIN!

I saw the world spin around, my hand losing its grip on my rifle. I fought to stay conscious, on my feet, for just a little longer, begging God to give me strength.

If they caught us here, they would kill us and the whole village to make an example of them. So I found the strength, endured the pain, and we made it into the hideout.

I took out my night vision binoculars to see them. They were more than twenty. They were also not the usual patrol we were used to seeing.

These were a multinational group of Jihadists, and they were packing heavy weapons. The same one that had ambushed my squad about a week ago. Given that I was the only one who had managed to escape, I knew these guys were the real deal.

I wondered if my squad was still alive. I believed they were. Foreign combatants would be more valuable as prisoners.

It was a good thing that they had showed at night, so they would not see the tracks we left behind. During the day, the women would have pretended to sweep the compound, wiping away any evidence of my presence.

My presence...

My heart sank, as I realized.

The MREs!

They were next to the bowl of garri!

AND ONE OF THE SOLDIERS SEEMED TO HAVE FOUND THEM!

“MERDA!”

To be continued...