

The Passing of Aseli
Kenneth Usongo

On that beautiful Saturday afternoon in late August of 1980 when Aseli had visited his parents, the village of Njimtei was disturbed. Instead of the characteristic pomp that always accompanied Aseli's annual visits to the village, most villagers bore mournful faces.

Aseli was the pride of Njimtei, an accomplished son that everyone was proud of. He worked and lived in a big city, some five hundred kilometres away from Njimtei. As a director in the prestigious Ministry of Higher Education in Yaoundé and as one of the few men in his country to have studied abroad in the 1950s, Aseli enjoyed considerable respect. His humbleness, generosity and assiduity were laudable, qualities which endeared him to his village. Many people agreed that he was truly an exemplary man, a great son of the soil.

It was with much anxiety that Njimtei received the news about the broken glass from which Aseli attempted to drink water. Aseli had asked his younger sister, Engwali, for a glass of water, but when he held the glass in his hand, it suddenly split into two equal halves. According to his uncle, Atanduh, this suggested that there were malevolent forces bent on killing Aseli. Atanduh then suggested to Ijinjing, Aseli's father, that it was imperative for them to consult a medicine man for a protective amulet for Aseli. However, being the evangelist that he was, Ijinjing ruled out any discussion with what he considered demonic agents. He maintained that his fervent trust in God would enable him to overcome any evil forces trying to destroy his family.

Aseli's sudden death three weeks after the discussion between Atanduh and Ijinjing left the village in consternation. Njimtei was stunned following the demise of their beloved son and resolved to find out the cause of his death. While Ijinjing pleaded with mourners to accept this loss as divine, many people, particularly Atanduh, attributed Aseli's death to foul play. Atanduh did not need to stretch his mind for the cause of death. His suspicion immediately fell on Abarabuma, someone whom many people suspected of bad faith, considering the recent deaths in his family and his new-found wealth.

Abarabuma's successive loss of three children in a year, according to most people in Njimtei, was not unconnected to the immense wealth that he had accumulated within two years. Several people believed that he was a pipe smoker, someone who mysteriously killed his children and dispatched them to Kupe, where they toiled daily for his fortune. His wife's abandonment of him further corroborated the suspicion that he was a *nyongho* man, an evil person sacrificing his family for wealth. Without the powerful antidote that she got from a medicine man, many people in Njimtei affirmed that Abarabuma's wife would have been long dead.

It was a distraught Njimtei that insisted that Abarabuma had supernaturally killed Aseli, sending him to be one of his numerous workers in the underworld that brought goods to his shop every midnight. After all, nobody saw when he stocked his shop. No matter the quantity of items sold in this shop, it was always full of goods. In fact, one person even intimated that Abarabuma had been seen burying something at the entrance to Ijinjing's compound the last time that Aseli visited the village. Young

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boys of Njimtei swore to set ablaze Abarabuma's compound and shop if he were found guilty of diabolical practices. With their petrol bombs, they were ready for action. However, they were deterred by Ijinjing and the local gendarmerie.

Attempts by villagers to ostracize Abarabuma because of his suspicious activities met with opposition from the local administration that saw him as a source of revenue for the local community. The Divisional Officer for the area even warned that any attack on Abarabuma would be considered not only an infringement on liberty, but punishable before the law and he used the gendarmerie to enforce his authority. In this regard, some villagers argued that Abarabuma was in league with the local administration, bribing it to conceal his dubious activities.

On his part, Abarabuma accused several people, especially Atanduh, of jealousy and of concocting stories to taint his reputation. Almost overnight, Abarabuma's house and shop were declared ghost territories. His shop was boycotted by villagers and people were instructed not to visit him or do business with him. At the instigation of Atanduh, Abarabuma was declared an unwanted person in Njimtei. Women refused to sell him food in the local market. People were forbidden from exchanging greetings with him. As he walked in the village, he was booed and jeered at. Children taunted him behind his back, and men insulted him to his face, calling him a killer and a wizard.

Abarabuma was not the type of person who took insults without fighting back. He defied the threats to his life, and challenged people to the squirrel hunt to prove his innocence. Abarabuma went about his activities seemingly unperturbed, convinced that he would be vindicated in the *bu* hunt which, in the village, was considered a traditional court that determines whether a person is innocent or guilty. Some people explained Abarabuma's defiant attitude to be the result of powerful amulets that he might have procured from dibias.

It was an arrogant Abarabuma that was brought before Afah to assess his role in the death of Aseli. Afah, the custodian of the squirrel, led the search group to a forest inhabited by these rodents. As was the custom, Abarabuma was expected to enjoin a squirrel to run into his hands as a sign of innocence. In other words, if this rodent is effortlessly caught by him, it would be an indication of his good reputation. However, if it is not seen or it runs away from him, his guilt is established.

In the company of Abarabuma, Afah, Atanduh and other village notables, the hunting party combed *Engokub*, the abode of these rodents, to little avail. Determined as he was to catch a squirrel, Abarabuma's efforts appeared futile. He wriggled his waist in a circular motion and chanted mellifluous words to cajole the squirrel towards him. Unfortunately, nothing seemed to be working in his favour. Abarabuma now sang the famous *Adene* song, pleading with the squirrel to run to his arms, but luck was not with him. Armed with a club and a machete, Abarabuma beat down columns of bush and cut down several trees in desperate attempts to find a rodent. He peered into various crevices in the forest, and even climbed up several trees in vain efforts to locate a squirrel. He was now drenched in his sweat, like someone who had swum across the Dudum. His breathing was spasmodic like a wounded antelope in the throes of death. Exhausted by his singing and spirited attempts to catch a squirrel, Abarabuma turned towards the search party and, in a husky voice, cursed at everybody: '*Itene Bin.*'

Sensing imminent guilt, Abarabuma started protesting about the presence of

Atanduh in the search team. He argued that Atanduh was not a neutral party and he even accused him of chasing away rodents. He cried foul play, and stated that his innocence was compromised by the inclusion of Atanduh in the search party. In return, Atanduh saw Abarabuma's protests as the desperate attempts of a hardened villain to divert attention or cover up guilt. After all, within Njimtei, no one dared to express reservations about the integrity of the squirrel hunt. From time immemorial, the village has used this medium of justice to ascertain blame or underscore innocence.

Due to the intervention of the local administration, Abarabuma was spared lynching. The Divisional Officer pleaded with the family of late Aseli not to summarily kill Abarabuma, but to give him another opportunity of defending himself before Tegum. Throughout the entire division, Tegum was famous for his divination. In fact, within Widikum country, people flocked to him once they were hit by misfortune or when strange deaths occurred in their families.

It was before the renowned diviner of the grass fields of Bamenda that Abarabuma was summoned. Tegum's ability to resolve uncanny issues of death, theft or madness made many people see him as an enigma. His prescience of mind, humility and honesty won him considerable admiration. Tegum led Atanduh, Abarabuma and several curious onlookers to a cone-like hut that was roofed from top to bottom in dry grass. It was there that he established communication between the living and the living dead; it was also there that he was able to pry into the future. The interior of this hut was decorated with several gourds and statues. There were huge branches of *keng* hanging from the ceiling, an indication of his love for peace. Skulls of various animals stared at the visitor from the ceiling. On the walls of the hut were displayed animal skins of the tiger, panther and leopard. No one exactly knew how long these skins had been on the walls, but judging by their faded colours, they seemed to have outlived generations of Tegums.

There were beads of various colours and sizes hanging round Tegum's neck. On one of the beads hung a huge panther's tooth. Half of Tegum's face was painted in cam wood and the other half in clay. On his head was spotted a red fez cap from which dangled a brightly coloured eagle feather. Tegum turned towards Atanduh and said to him: 'You are not new here. You know the procedure.' Then Atanduh presented to him several kola nuts, a red-crested cock, some alligator pepper, a five thousand francs note and a calabash of palm wine. Tegum selected a kola nut from the lot, rubbed it in his palms and broke it. He threw the lobes on the floor and then counted them. There were six in number. He carefully examined them and noticed that four of the lobes were turned upwards. 'Your mission is well intentioned,' he told Atanduh. 'It is not every day that you see six lobes in a kola nut,' he added. He picked up two lobes and flung them outside while saying something like a prayer. From the remaining lobes on the floor, he handed one to Atanduh and then threw the rest into his mouth. After crushing them, he spat some of the paste into his hands and rubbed it on his face.

Atanduh poured some of the palm wine into a cow horn that he brought and drank it. Tegum brought down an old, long and twisted cow horn from the rafter and filled it with palm wine. He paced towards the threshold and poured out some of the wine, saying 'If someone has come here with an evil eye, may he lose his sight.' 'Amenié,' everyone responded. Tegum brought out his famous cowries and threw

them on the floor. He made the following prayer: 'By the power of Atabili, the Tegum to whom we owe our strength, our fathers' father, I request your guidance. Our waist is broken and we have come to you for treatment. Some of us have spoken words of truth while others have spoken through their nostrils. Tegum, we have always come to you when darkness and light collide. Please show us our left from our right. Until the rotten tooth is pulled out, the mouth must chew with caution. We have not come before you with wisdom, but with foolishness.' Now Tegum peered at the cowries on the floor and then exclaimed: '*Ego wun.*' He whistled and snapped his fingers over his head simultaneously. Atanduh and Abarabuma both burst out at once: 'Tegum, what is it?'

Tegum squatted at several vantage positions and examined the cowries as they chased each other on the floor. Again, he screamed: '*Weh meh, weh meh.*' He quickly put some alligator pepper into his mouth. Then he feverishly chewed it and spat some of it on the floor. He walked slowly like a masked spirit towards the special hole at the corner of the hut. Once more he spat out some alligator pepper, but this time into the hole. From this spot, he could communicate with people of the underworld. He began his incantation in the following words: 'Tegum, Father of our Fathers, your messenger is on his knees waiting to listen to you. Tegum, speak out to me.'

Tegum then wrenched the neck of the cock that he had collected from Atanduh; he let the blood from the struggling fowl drip into the hole in front of him. He plucked five feathers from the cock and carefully placed them in the hole. He filled it up with palm wine. He uttered a few inaudible words and then told Atanduh to explain the reason for their coming.

Atanduh walked piously towards the hole. He stooped before it and made the following pronouncement: 'Aseli, it is me Atanduh, the family head, speaking to you. We have come to determine the cause of your death. If you died old, we would have accepted your departure as the making of our ancestors. It is said that unless one touches bitter leaves, one's hands cannot be bitter. Aseli, we are suspicious that one of us has shat and that is why the air is foul. And there are flies all over the compound. Tell us who has done this and then we shall deal with him according to custom.' This time he prostrated himself before Tegum and stepped backwards. Abarabuma peered at this proceeding from a safe distance, trembling like a jug half full of palm wine.

Tegum now implored the departed spirit of Aseli to describe the circumstances of his death. There followed a rumbling sound from the hole and Tegum craned his neck towards the direction of the sound; he cocked one of his ears in order to listen to the twittering voice. Only Tegum could understand the esoteric sound that filtered from this hole. After what seemed an endless wait, Tegum turned to Atanduh and delivered Aseli's message: 'It is one of you who prematurely sent me to the grave. He is the person that you have all along been suspecting. Bale the water while it is ankle deep. If not, more people will follow my path. I salute you all.'

Abarabuma was thrown into a delirium. Before Tegum could finish interpreting Aseli's message, Abarabuma sneaked away from the crowd. His departure vindicated the Ngie saying that a dead man's drumming can only be heard by a wizard. He was now convinced that nothing could protect him from the wrath of the village, and that his machinations had been exposed. After all, no sane person would dare to express misgivings about Tegum's divination.

When Atanduh returned home, he formally charged Abarabuma before the

traditional council of Njimtei with witchcraft. While the council was still deliberating on the penalty for Abarabuma's act, news circulated within the village that he had escaped. Njimtei youths did not wait for the verdict of the council. Armed with clubs and petrol bombs, they stormed Abarabuma's compound, setting ablaze his shop. They vowed to burn him alive if he were caught.