

Abiku: An Excerpt from the Novel

Débò Kòtún

Dr. Fall had just completed the first round of the retinal image test when Ademola entered the room. With the retinal scanner, Fall had sent a beam of low-intensity near-infrared light through Jason's pupils, illuminating the retina. The blood vessels did not respond to light as expected; they should have absorbed more light than the surrounding tissue. Fall couldn't understand why. The scanner must be defective, he concluded. "Dr. Ademola, I'm going to be here longer than I thought. I'd appreciate it if I could be left alone. This machine has never failed before. So, I've decided to try another one. Give me another forty minutes or so."

"Is it okay for the patient's parents to come and spend just a couple of minutes with him?"

"As long as they do it while I set up the machine."

"I'll get a nurse to bring them right away."

Johnson was at his desk when Ademola entered. "Sit down," he said in Yoruba.

Ademola stood transfixed. In the seven years since he had known the old physician he had never seen him look older and more distant. Johnson seemed cloaked in the vestment of a sojourner who had just received a missive from the gods. He seemed troubled. "One changes the course of destiny with one's hands. I'm about to make the most important decision yet. My life is no longer in the hands of the gods," he said cryptically.

Ademola stared at his mentor.

Johnson's essence radiated a waning hope. He got up, and with subdued humility asked Ademola, "Have you ever pondered about life?"

"Yes." Ademola wondered why the man seemed troubled.

"I wish to share my deep thoughts with you, son." Johnson cleared his throat and his expression became solemn. "From the beginning of time we have always known God exists. But we worship other deities. In our desire to be like God, who created all living things, we create our own gods to ease our simple, imperfect minds whenever the chores of living prove difficult. Our inordinate yearning to be like the Creator underscores our imperfection. It is this dichotomy that fuels human schizophrenia that in turn fuels our inner torments. Do I sound like a plebeian village philosopher?" He studied Ademola.

"No, but I fail to see how this connects to Jason."

"Not directly, but ultimately it does. Fifty years ago, after I graduated at the top of my class from Johns Hopkins Medical School, all sort of hell broke loose. It was bad enough being the only Negro there, but being better than all my classmates was another thing. It was even worse during the three years I spent in the army. Being the best was not good enough on account of the color of my skin. At the end of my third year I became so disillusioned and frustrated that I knew I had to get away for a while. That's how I ended up in Africa, in search of a higher meaning to my existence. Like you, I am an Abiku. My mother had three children that died before the age of two. I was the last, and I believe she sacrificed her life for mine." He sighed, eye shut, as though he needed to rid himself of an inner torment.

Ademola felt a deeper connection to his mentor.

"My mother died right after I was born, and my father believed that I was the cause of her death. He never forgave me. He never loved me. Smart as I was, I didn't know who I was until I arrived at Abeokuta."

"Why there of all places?"

"Good question, son. I've asked myself the same thing over the years, but the answer has eluded me. However, I believe there's a mysterious power within the rocks of Olumo, which loom over the township, where people worship anything that presents itself in a cryptic, non-empirical form. As a young man with Western sensibilities, I castigated the people and their beliefs as simple-minded, atheistic, and superstitious. I quickly discovered how wrong I was after meeting the blind

diviner who allowed me to experience the Yoruba belief in spiritualism. As an acolyte, I was allowed to enter the forbidden cave atop the hills, and son, that was one thing I would not exchange for all the riches in the world. I paid the price with my left eye but it was worth it." He sat down to face Ademola. "Seven of us, including your father, spent twenty-one years under the tutelage of the old master. I learned not only to appreciate the fact that my presence in this world is not an accident but that I was sent here for a specific purpose. I felt connected to a people, a culture and belief that existed on a spiritual level. I became challenged, and ultimately, filled with a sense of direction. Knowing who I was filled me with self-pride. And over the years, I have come to believe that therein lies the difference between Africans and black folks here in America, or shall I say African-Americans. This latest nomenclature is but another stage in the ongoing social metamorphosis that our people are going through. We have gone from slaves, to niggers, Negroes, blacks, Afro-Americans, Akatas, and now, African-Americans. The rest of the world must be weary of us by now. But when the butterfly finally emerges, it will bring forth a mind-numbing surprise."

"What do you mean?" Ademola asked.

"Of all the people in the world, the black folks in the Americas are quite different from the rest of mankind." He became silent for a while. His countenance grew somber. When he spoke, his voice reverberated with divine strength. "No other people have been so challenged and re-created as us. After all, it was the strongest among the African slaves who survived the terrifying journey across the ocean. And the strongest among those that arrived here survived the brutal near-genocidal attacks by their owners, who were also the strongest and smartest among their people. And when the two became one through crossbreeding, the inevitable result was a progeny stronger and smarter than the seeds. Yes, man re-created what God must've intended when He made the Africans in the Americas. The rest of the world needs to hurry up and see what happens when the butterfly emerges. And this is where Jason connects. That little boy's presence here, your being chased out of Nigeria, getting shot in Brooklyn, meeting and marrying Simone, who was the instrument of our association all these things are not mere happenstance or coincidence, my son. And that's why we must be careful where we go from here. They are all parts of a mosaic."

An inexplicable uneasiness enveloped Ademola. He searched his mentor's eye for meaning but none came.

Johnson's face was expressionless.

Just then, Dr. Fall hurried through the door and glared at Ademola. "I have the results of the test." His chest heaved as though he was having difficulty breathing. "What the hell is going on?"

"Sit down, Dr. Fall," Johnson said calmly.

"Not before I show you what I found. Come down to the lab and see." He turned around and exited the room.

As soon as Fall got to the ophthalmology laboratory he set up his apparatus. Ademola and Johnson came in and took their seats. Without wasting any time Fall turned off the lights. His neck showed thick and tense. "I want you to pay attention to the screen." He stepped backwards to press the switch on the lower side of the white screen. A computer-generated image appeared. "This is a normal human fovea centralis, the center of the retina. It gives the sharpest vision. The eye is like a camera and the retina acts as a living photographic film. When "

"Dr. Fall, this is all pretty basic. What's your point?" Ademola demanded.

"You dragged me out of bed, Dr. Ademola. The least I expect from you is to let me explain my findings my way."

"We don't have the time to be re-educated on the mechanics of the human eye. Tell us what you found out."

"I don't appreciate your interruptions, Dr. Ademola. As I was saying "

The door swung open and hurried footsteps echoed in the dark. "You can't go in there, sir," a female voice said.

"The hell I can't "

"What's going on here?" Fall switched on the light.

Johnson remained seated, resembling a king expecting a visitation from his subjects. He pointed to a couple of chairs nearby. "Have a seat, Mr. McFlarthey. You too, Mrs. McFlarthey." He waved the beleaguered nurse away.

Sixty-one-year-old William McFlarthey remained on his feet, towering over Johnson. At six feet five inches tall, his broad shoulders and muscular arms made him look like a football player. His face was angular, his neck thick. McFlarthey's graying blond hair was brushed back. He had a recently acquired tan that made him look even more handsome in old age than during his younger years. His raw energy seemed tempered by good living. William McFlarthey was one of the most powerful men in the world, a man not used to being told what to do.

"Dr. Fall, here are Jason's father and mother. Please, have a seat, Mr. McFlarthey," said Johnson simply.

"The McFlarthey media empire?" Fall asked in awe.

Kathleen nodded. She sat down and gently tugged at her husband's sleeve. He did likewise, letting her ease him down though with pronounced reluctance.

Fall turned off the light and approached the screen. "Compare the human eye to a camera wherein the retina is the film; everything it sees, it should be able to record. The eye should perform just like that, but it doesn't." He pressed a button at the bottom of the screen. A multitude of dots and striations appeared. "This picture was the first image observed on Jason's retina an hour ago." He pressed the button again. The picture disappeared and was replaced by another that looked like the one before. Again, he pressed the button and the picture disappeared and then reappeared. All the previous pictures of dots and striations appeared on the screen in squared boxes side by side. Fall started to perspire as he crossed over to the left side of the screen and pointed to the top layer of the first box. "This was Jason's ganglion cell layer at twelve-fifty this morning when the first picture of his retinal image was taken. Don't bother to count the number of dots here. Believe me, there's a difference. The last box, the picture of the same spot on his retina, taken an hour after the first shot, has eighteen more dots than the first. The same difference is evidenced in the densely packed bipolar which is the layer directly below the ganglion cells. Now, it's on the vertically arranged photoreceptor that the most significant aberration is observed. Pay close attention to this one." He touched a single line among the cluster. "With the help of magnified optography, I

decoded the hidden meaning of this line. I never believed the notion that the eyes could contain the portrait

"I believe we've heard enough, Dr. Fall." Johnson's voice thundered as he snapped the light switch. Everybody's attention turned to his empty chair. They all looked surprised by the swiftness of his movement and stared at him standing by the door. "Thank you, Dr. Fall. Dr. Ademola, make sure the McFlartheys visit Jason. Then, bring them to my office. We have lots of work to do before sunrise."

Ademola was the only one in the room who as much as blinked. The others stared at where Johnson stood seconds before he exited the room.

"Mr. and Mrs. McFlarthey, if you would follow me I'll escort you to the PICU." Ademola's voice snatched them back to consciousness and they followed him, leaving Fall glued to the spot in a zombie-like state.

Jason lay still. Alone in the room, his breathing was forced. The ceiling lights above his bed dimmed. Three luminous forms hovered around the fluorescent lamps. They stopped moving and peered down. Enveloped in a gray halo were newborn babies ranging from a few hours old to two days old. The oldest weighed eleven pounds and she was sucking her right thumb. Her almond-shaped eyes were old. Her supple skin was wrinkled, just like all newborn babies.

Farthest from the girl was a black child. He was restless. At two hours old, his curly jet-black hair made him look older and solemn. His eyes were big, black, and piercing.

Floating between the two was the third baby, a six-hundred-gram day-old brown neonate. His body was a network of wrinkles. He looked prunish, deathly. He twisted involuntarily, eyes shut as the lips parted to expose a dark crimson tongue. "Is he still alive?"

"Of course he is," snapped the black baby.

"We wait!" the Asian baby said with finality.

I love you, pumpkin," Kathleen whispered into her son's ear. "So do dad and

your baby brother inside me." She felt a kick from within. "Maybe I should've said sister." She smiled nervously, staring at the death mask that was Jason's face. "Mother of Jesus! Why? It's the same thing all over." Her voice sounded hollow as tears snaked down her cheeks. "William, I think Jason is "

McFlarthey dashed to the side of the bed. His strong legs began to shake. "Is he still alive?" He wiped tears off his face.

Kathleen nodded yes.

"I can't bear another death in the family. What on earth is going on?" His voice was barely audible. "Please, God, don't take my Jason away," he prayed.

McFlarthey had every reason to be worried and sad. Two years after graduating from Harvard he had inherited the richest and most powerful media conglomerate in the world. Soon after, he married the beautiful daughter of an Irish industrialist and they had a son that was the spitting image of his father. McFlarthey was not only rich and powerful, he was happy. Then one day, disaster struck. His wife and son were killed in a plane crash while on a visit to Ireland. He naturally mourned the death, but being a realist, he knew he had to get married again. There was just too much family history and heritage to be left to strangers. He needed to have a son to be groomed to follow in his footsteps. A year after the death of his wife and son, he met Kathleen, a twenty-eight-year-old with blue eyes and blond hair of Irish descent, who had just earned her doctorate degree in Anthropology from Columbia University. The courtship was brief. They married three months later, and nine months after their wedding their daughter, Elizabeth, was born. Fifteen-month-old Elizabeth was brought to Children's Hospital where she died a few hours later. The cause of death was Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. Now it looked as though tragedy was about to strike again.

McFlarthey watched Jason's chest and started to pray. Suddenly there was a change in the sound of the EKG monitor. Everything slipped into fast-forward. The dot on the monitor sped up leaving in its trail a luminous line as it disappeared on the right side of the screen only to reappear with the same flattened line on the left side.

"Dear God, he's fibrillating!" Kathleen screamed.

A nurse rushed in and pressed a button on the wall. The p.a. system came alive: Code Blue, PICU 2; Code&

Kathleen stood frozen beside the bed, her right hand covering her mouth, the left tight against the lower part of her bulging stomach.

McFlarthey watched Ademola and several nurses hover over Jason as they took turns performing all types of life-saving activities on his son.

Johnson and Ademola looked like father and son in the middle of a family discussion. There was love and wisdom in the voice of the older man. "I wish I could let you go to Nigeria in my place," Johnson said.

"I wouldn't know where to go."

"I've already made the arrangements. Dr. Awoyinka, who was also one of the seven acolytes that our master trained will meet me at Lagos airport and " He was interrupted by a knock at the door. "Please come in," he said.

McFlarthey and his wife strode in and took their seats facing Johnson. "I need answers fast. What on earth is going on?" McFlarthey demanded.

"Everything in due course."

"But, Doctor"

"Please!" Johnson's hypnotic stare chilled McFlarthey. "You have valid passports, I assume. We'll leave for Nigeria tomorrow evening yes, Mrs. McFlarthey?"

"Don't you think you're assuming a little too much? You're making arrangements for us to go to Africa while our son is dying, not to mention my pregnancy." Kathleen ruffled up like a bantam hen.

Johnson's eye narrowed but his voice remained soft. "Mrs. McFlarthey, I assure you, I'm not assuming anything. However, there is no technology in this

hospital capable of saving your son. Correct me if I'm wrong; you had a daughter who died under similar circumstance, didn't you?"

"Yes, from SIDS."

"SIDS, Crib Death. Elizabeth, Jason, and the baby inside you are one and the same."

"What do you mean?"

"They're Abikus."

"Oh, my God! Not the Yoruba Abiku?" Kathleen's face looked painted with chalk.

"What the hell is Arbeecoo?" McFlarthey snapped.

Kathleen clutched her husband's arm. "It makes sense, William. I know about the they are children born to die and born again only to die again. But I thought it happens only among the Yorubas?"

Johnson shrugged, eye locked onto McFlarthey's. "It does. But then, maybe it doesn't. The issue here is that Jason is an Abiku. And a special one at that."

McFlarthey stirred like a chained Great Dane.

"What makes you think Jason is an Abiku?" Kathleen asked, struggling, disbelief in her voice.

"In due course, Mrs. McFlarthey. Meanwhile, you and your husband need to fully appreciate the importance and urgency of the matter. If you don't get to Nigeria and carry out the necessary rituals, Jason's chances of survival are nil and you'll face a childless future."

"I beg your pardon? But how can we take Jason to Africa in his present condition?" McFlarthey asked.

"You can, with me."

"You? We need an entire staff. Didn't you see how my son is connected to all those machines?"

"I am not only one of the best doctors here, I am also a diviner, having spent twenty-one years in Nigeria to become one."

McFlarthey swung himself around as if to attack. "That's it. I've heard enough of this poppycock. I can't believe we're sitting here listening to "

"William, please, the mythology of Abiku exists among the Yorubas of Nigeria. I should know. I spent years with the people while I was working on my doctoral dissertation," Kathleen pleaded.

"I need to use your phone," McFlarthey snapped.

Johnson nodded and McFlarthey grabbed the receiver, dialed and waited. "Give me Richard Stormier in the Research department." His thick eyebrows rose. "Yes, Richard, this is McFlarthey. I need you to do a full background check on a Dr. William Doss Johnson and Dr. O-l-a-w-o-le A-d-e-m-o-l-a& Children's Hospital& Yes, do that& Also find out what the heck is the mythology of " He turned to his wife and whispered, "How do you spell that word again?"

Johnson wrote A-B-I-K-U and Y-O-R-U-B-A on a piece of paper and handed it to McFlarthey, who relayed the information to his employee. "Yes, Richard, everything. Bring it to the hospital& Good idea." He hung up and his blank expression changed, eyes narrowed and lips pressed against each other. He stared past Ademola at Johnson, his countenance dark. "I need to know what this is all about."

"From what I know about the mythology of Abiku, the phenomenon occurs only among the Yorubas of West Africa, doesn't it?" Kathleen asked.

"Generally speaking, yes," Johnson said, not looking away from McFlarthey.

"Then why do you think Jason's case is what you claim it to be?" McFlarthey

demanded gruffly.

"Here we are, William and I, we're both Caucasian. There's not a drop of African blood in us," Kathleen added.

Johnson sat back and smiled. "How far back in your genealogy did you check to make such a statement?"

Her face was bewildered. "Both my father and grandfather have blue eyes and blond hair. So do William's."

"Perhaps we should look at it from a different perspective." Johnson got on his feet and went to lock the door. "This country is presently the center of gravity. Millions of people from all over the world are flocking here. They all gravitate here to partake of the promise of a better life. What in the world makes you believe that only human beings of this world are attracted here? Is it just a coincidence that there have been more UFO sightings in America than anywhere else?"

Kathleen seemed about to break into hysterical laughter.

"UFOs landing in America in search of a better life? Are you out of your mind?"

Johnson walked back and forth. All three in the room watched him. "I didn't say that. Listen. Every couple of thousand years, the center of gravity shifts. It was Europe. Before that, it was Africa. Now it's North America. Soon it's going to shift to another continent. That's an absolute certainty. Where next, nobody knows. What you call UFOs are not just the abstract Unidentified Flying Objects beaming down in their flying machines. The real UFOs are the Jasons and Ademolas of this world. The Yorubas believe that there's another world out there inhabited by intelligent and beautiful children. These children are called Abikus."

Ademola cleared his throat.

Johnson smiled. "Here in the West we call the phenomenon Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, in total ignorance. The Yorubas know about these children. They know the symptomatology and the treatment. They can identify them. And they

know how to stop them from going back home. But most importantly, they respect them enough to worship them. The Abikus, like twins, are revered by the Yorubas. Do you think it's only coincidental that one out of every four twin births in the world are among the Yorubas?"

"Is that a fact?" McFlarthey looked astonished.

"Absolutely. The fact that the Yorubas worship the Abikus and twins does not make the phenomena exclusively theirs. The Yorubas only have a better handle on them. Their worship of the shrines of twins is not unlike the Cancer Centers in the United States. The reason cancer patients are brought here from all over the world is because the phenomenon is better understood and better treated here than elsewhere."

Kathleen leaned forward and frowned. "Dr. Johnson, that's comparing modern technology with native mythology. Isn't that like comparing apples and oranges?"

With majestic severity, Johnson said, "Is it? Mrs. McFlarthey, modern technology and native mythology have one thing in common. Belief! Without it, there is neither mythology nor technology."

The telephone shrilled. Ademola answered it and handed the receiver to McFlarthey.

"Yes, Richard?" His voice became more authoritative. "Bring it here right away& No, do it yourself& In the office of the Chief of Staff." He hung up and smiled. "Your achievements are impressive, Dr. Johnson. Impressive indeed. But I'm not sold yet."

"I'm not trying to sell you anything, Mr. McFlarthey. The decision to take Jason to Nigeria is not yours to make." Johnson leaned forward in his chair. His eye bored into McFlarthey's. "That decision was made before Jason came into this world. Call it his life script, if you will."

"What the devil is that supposed to mean?" McFlarthey asked. "Who is this one-eyed black man?" he pondered as his discomfort soared. He felt the intensity of Johnson's numinous gaze, whose soul seemed to regard McFlarthey with

serenity.

Johnson cleared his throat. "We need to proceed right away. Time is speeding off from us." He got up and took a cylindrical abstract terracotta object out of a concealed safe in the wall behind his desk. He closed the door of the safe and covered it with a framed oil painting. He gently placed the six-and-a-half-inch tall figure on the desk, stroking the sacred Aroye Pot: an elaborately decorated spiritual vessel that displayed a medium-relief image of a horned human head with its tongue protruding from a gaping mouth. Sixteen rosette centers with mica mirrors encircled the vessel.

"What is that?" McFlarthey asked.

Johnson turned the vessel so its human head faced the McFlartheys. The bulging left eye was the darkest shade of brown that made it look black and the right was deep yellow. Kathleen gasped and looked away, twisting the diamonds on her finger. She whispered, "Please put that thing away," not meeting the black-and-yellow stare of the terracotta head.

"You need not be afraid of it," Johnson said reassuringly.

"Is this some kind of a game?" Kathleen asked.

"This is not a game! The enormity of it is incomprehensible outside the Abiku world. The death of Elizabeth, the possibility of Jason's death, and that of the baby you carry, these are not accidents. There are opposing forces at work. Now listen. What I'm about to tell you is of enormous importance!"

McFlarthey looked into Johnson's hypnotic face.

"Mrs. McFlarthey, I want you to touch the eyes, one at a time. Go on, touch them."

Kathleen looked paralyzed by fear. Her chest heaved, betraying the speed at which her heart was racing. She hesitated, looking confused as though unable to identify the source of her fear. With a trembling right hand she touched the brown eye, then the yellow. She jerked her hand back and stared at Johnson.

He returned her gaze. "You won't need anything on your trip but these. They are not eyes. The brown one is kola nut, and the yellow is kaolin. Over a thousand years ago they were used as sacrificial offerings to ward off evil spirits. They have acquired great power over the millennium." Then he grew silent, floating off into a private reverie, staring at the fetish on his desk. He nodded abruptly to Ademola. "Take the kola nut and the kaolin with your left hand and place them together on your right palm."

Ademola did.

Kathleen opened her mouth to say something, but before any sound emerged from her trembling lips, the room darkened. The darkness turned licorice-colored, accompanied by a gentle wind that blew in through the window. The sound of a funeral procession filled the room, supplanting the noise of New York traffic and pedestrians.

McFlarthey shivered in the dark.

Ademola's right hand became luminous and the kaolin and kola nut in the middle of his palm began to throb evenly as if breathing. The luminosity concentrated on the kaolin, glowing and pulsating. Then the wind stopped and the light came back. Ademola closed his hand into a fist, covering the fetishes, his whole presence becoming even more powerful and protective.

"Dr. Ademola will accompany you and your wife to Jason's room," Johnson said as though oblivious of what had just taken place. "The power at your disposal must be used with the highest degree of prudence. You must realize and appreciate the first rule. You're a temporary custodian of the power that joins the two distinct yet inseparable realms of the Yoruba Cosmos, Orun and Aiye. Humans, not of the Abiku world, should not I repeat **SHOULD NOT** be allowed to come into contact with the kola nut and kaolin either separately or together. The consequence is death. The power increases with time."

"What do I have to do?" Ademola eyed the objects in his palm with trepidation.

"First, go downstairs to Jason's room and do the following: send everybody

except the McFlartheys out of the room " He stopped to look at the door as though expecting someone to barge in. He smiled faintly. "When it's safe, place the kola nut on the center of Jason's forehead. Keep it there for not more than thirty seconds. Replace it with the kaolin for sixty seconds. Then put them together for safekeeping. Afterwards you can all go home, catch some sleep and the McFlartheys can prepare to depart with me in the evening. Dr. Ademola will procure the required Nigerian visas. Give him your passports. Good luck."

With that Johnson bid them goodbye.

Before McFlarthey exited the office, he looked over his shoulder as Johnson's numinous voice echoed: "Our destinies are at stake. We must be careful, my friend. Goodbye."

Débò Kòtún is the author of *Abiku* CA: Nepotist Press, 1998. He is currently working on his second novel, *DaRos*,a.