

## WASTED ENERGY

Long, long ago in the Ibibio tribe there lived a man, Imeh, and his wife, Nsikan. He stood tall and huge with broad shoulders. His wife was beautiful and was loved by her husband's kinsmen. Ete-Imeh, as kids fondly referred to him, was loved by both the young and old in the village. Nsikan, his wife, was noted for her enthusiasm in community affairs. In fact, she was noted as the best "ata-ikwo" (lead singer) in every current dance group.

Imeh's unabbreviated name was Anyan-Imeh (fathomless patience) and Nsikan's was Nsikan-Abasi (who can conquer God). They were very much in love. But as our people say, there is no clay pot without a crack. Nsikan had seen all six of her babies carried away wrapped in leaves to be buried. The babies could not be given proper burial because they had died too young. Therefore they were *eye-eka-abasi* (messengers of the earth goddess). Sometimes the dead bodies were mutilated so that the spirits of the children could experience great pain and thus break their evil cycle. As our people know very well, the messenger of the earth goddess can plague a woman in many different ways.

Nsikan had several miscarriages and two stillbirths which but for the expert midwifery of old Ekanem (mother is supreme) would have taken her life. Sometimes the child died during a midday nap. Sometimes the *eka abasi* children of other parents lived up to 10 years before they died. People argued that it was better they died really young without being named, but Nsikan and her husband wished theirs died older. In fact, only once did a boy live up to 10 moons. The rest died either before or a few weeks after the naming ceremony which involved sacrifices and celebration.

Imeh was rather a peculiar man among his people, for at his age with his wife unable to nurse even a single son to boyhood he had two alternatives. Imeh could either divorce his wife and marry another one or leave her in the family and marry another woman. Among his people, either of these alternatives was acceptable.

After her third child died of sudden convulsions after feeding, Nsikan called Imeh, her heart heavy with grief. "Imeh," she said, "if you still want me, I won't mind you having another wife!"

Imeh was very moved by her consideration. He recalled a name his people call a man with no children. He asked himself, "Am I really *obukpo-mfet* (dead penis)?" Imeh shook with embarrassment as Nsikan's eyes seemed to search his mind, for she could interpret the look in his eyes.



"Nsikan," he finally broke the silence, "I will not make you an old woman rag which becomes a possession on a rainy day. Have you ever thought about your name and mine? I have not yet given up hope and I believe I am at ease with our ancestors. When I married you, I offered all the right sacrifices for a first daughter. The oracle of the earth says the problem is with me while the oracle of the sea says your grandmother was a witch." After he had said this he asked quietly, "Did we not offer the right sacrifices?"

Two days after the death of his sixth child, Imeh walked to the door of his ufok (house) and called across the 50-yard distance to Nsikan's house. "Nsikan, come up here!"

She walked to his door and stood, her hands folded across her breasts, with a frightened look in her eyes. She called, "Imeh!"

"Since when did you become a stranger in my house?" he snapped.

She walked in still unsure of what he had in mind. Imeh informed her that they were going to consult Ibit-Itam, the god of the mighty water of his mother's people. This journey took several days.

Itam, the village which had the oracle, was surrounded by water. There was no way one could get there without crossing some. The oracle stood on the sunset side of a mountain. This mountain was part of the oracle. Sometimes the mountain roared and spat fire and steam-hot water. This only happened once in a long while and only the oldest people of Itam could remember the last time their god had showed such displeasure. The god was in constant communication with the dead ancestors and acted as their messenger. He showed them their displeasure by roaring and spitting fire. Sometimes he took the lives of the villagers to warn others to change their ways. At other times he sent floods to wash away their crops and livestock.

People came from far and wide to consult Ibit-Itam, people like Imeh and Nsikan who wanted children. There were others who had many children but had no means of feeding them because their farms yielded poor harvests. Others came because their kinsmen hated them and tried to kill them. They came for assurances and protection by the oracle. Some came because their wives were having twin babies which had to be cast into the evil forest. Young men came with brides to ask for blessing and protection against twins or complications at childbirth. People even came before they went on fishing trips. They asked for luck, peace and safety. These were a few of the kinds of people and problems the priest of the oracle had listened to patiently. The less serious ones he counseled and dis-



missed. The others he advised to talk to the god themselves. Such was Imeh's case. After a day of fasting, Imeh and Nsikan met the priest who led them to the cave's mouth. The priest advised them to walk fearlessly toward a spot of light and kneel down.

The couple stood quietly in the dark. The spot of light was moving everywhere. The gods were flying with their wings flapping on the walls of the cave. There were small strange sounds everywhere. When the spot of light settled finally, they strode trembling toward it and knelt down. Nsikan was breathing heavily. A loud guttural sound broke the silence. The voice called their names. The voice after recounting Imeh's family history went on to recount Nsikan's. Finally the voice said that Nsikan was a priestess who had neglected her office. The voice reminded her of incidences which had taken place in her life repeatedly. Nsikan's home was frequently visited by a sacred viper. Once the viper had coiled around her pot of water at the village stream. Everyone was surprised. Nsikan was also visited by white doves. Imeh and Nsikan had neglected these signs. The voice asked Nsikan to offer sacrifices of seven goats, seven cocks and sticks of smoked fish.

Imeh and his wife returned to his village hopeful that things would work out. Nsikan gave birth to another boy. She was glad and hopeful. Imeh, hoping that the child would live, named him Edemeka in homage to his mother's people. It was at the naming ceremony that the village chief poured libation and said, "A woman who plants cocoyams wants the tubers. A man who marries expects children." He invited the dead to accept this drink and bless the family with children.

Edemeka died two moons after he started walking. He died on fionatok, the same day of the week he was born.

Three harvests after the death of Edemeka, Nsikan had another baby, another boy. He looked very much like his father. Imeh received him less enthusiastically than the last one. He named him Etaha (wasted energy). He gave Etaha everything he needed but without any attachment. Etaha took his first step after eight moons. Nsikan nursed him diligently, hopeful that he might live. Etaha lived until another harvest season. He learned to call his father "Ete."

Imeh was not convinced the boy was going to live long enough, but he started giving his time to Etaha. Etaha was very fond of his father. As soon as he stopped wetting his bed, he slept in his father's house. Everyone thought he was going to live. He saw 10 harvests.

It was after the eleventh harvest that Etaha fell sick. He lost appetite. The white of his eyes turned yellow. Imeh called the native doctor who said Etaha had uto-eyin



(malaria). The treatment was administered but no one was sure the boy would live. Nsikan constantly attended to her only son, the very soul of her life. Her plea was like that of a little child with only one palm kernel who cannot be called closed-fisted because he refuses to share it with a friend. This time their gods heard their pleas.

Etaha soon grew into a handsome young man. He was the talk of the village among the young women. Mothers of young maidens were always nice to Etaha. Some used to invite him home. Others would stop him in the street saying, "Etaha, do you know me?"

Most often he would say, "I'm sorry, I don't."

"I am Afiang's mother," a mother might say, mentioning her daughter's name before going on to praise her. "I am a good friend of your mother." Or, "I am Ikwo's mother and my son Inyang was born at the same time with your brother who died just before you were born." Some of these women in an attempt to turn Etaha on to visit their family and meet their young daughters actually hopped around him.

Even though Etaha was no more regarded as an *eyen-ekabasi* because he broke the cycle which caused his mother to nurse six infants who died at early ages, he felt uneasy as an old woman feels when dry bones are mentioned in a parable. Etaha hated to be reminded of his mother's ordeal which he could not have been the cause of.

Imeh and Nsikan were proud of their only son. They knew the young girls of the town had their eyes on him. Men said Etaha resembled his mother while women said, "Look at his eyebrows and high forehead."

Lately Etaha was seen in the company of young women, and many of them were very nice and respectful to his mother. Each one of them hoped some day she would be the daughter-in-law of Nsikan.

Nsikan had mentioned to Etaha that his father thought they should get a wife for him. Etaha was not sure he wanted to get married yet and besides he did not particularly like the girl his parents thought he should marry. But he consented. The official asking ceremony was performed.

Etaha's bride came home to his family. She was beautiful and warm. Her parents-in-law loved her. They all looked forward to when she would have grandchildren for them. They hoped that what had plagued their marriage would not happen to their son's. Nsikan was always watching for signs of pregnancy from her son's wife.

It was about a full moon or two after the official home-coming of his wife that Etaha called his father and his mother. He told them he did not love his wife and that he wanted to divorce her. He said she was not beautiful



enough for him. The mother pleaded with her son not to divorce his wife.

"I am not going back to my family. I am your wife and will remain your wife," the young wife told him. They quarreled and fought but she finally left.

Etaha was a bachelor once more. This time he was going to choose a wife for himself. This time the woman he was going to marry would be the most beautiful woman in the land. Etaha searched everywhere for the woman of his dream. He neglected all the girls in his village. He went to every gathering of young people of his age. He went to all the marriage ceremonies in the neighborhood. He went to every market meeting to watch the girls.

At the end of the planting season, the rain fell in showers every day and the women and children did not have a lot to do. The young men helped their fathers to set up new barns or to repair the roof before the last heavy rains which were usually storms. Young maidens offered to carry their mother's market baskets for them. They had ideas other than just helping their mothers. They wanted to advertise their beauty to the prospective husbands who came to the market not only to sell their wares and baskets but to spot the beauties from adjoining villages.

On one of these market days, Etaha met a very beautiful girl who said her name was Usun-Urua (market begotten).

"Where are you from?" he asked.

"Oh, from the direction of the sunset."

"Is it Nung-Udoe or Ifa?" he asked.

"Maybe," she replied noncommittally.

They planned to meet at a marriage ceremony the following day at Ifa. Etaha did not waste much time, he asked Usun-Urua to marry him.

"No, I don't know you," she replied.

On the next market day Etaha searched for Usun-Urua and persuaded her to marry him.

Etaha met the young woman's mother and asked for her permission to take her daughter to meet his parents. At home Nsikan and Imeh were happy to see the dazzlingly beautiful wife of their son. They admitted their only son had a taste for good things, beautiful women in particular.

Nsikan and Imeh treated their son's wife kindly. She was not asked to do anything in the house. She was not asked to fetch water or go to farms or market. Etaha was happy with his parents for their treatment of his new wife, but he contemplated on how long his wife could live like she did, not touching anything. Soon he told her that they



should move into their own house which his father had helped him build. When they moved in, Etaha found out more about his wife. He hoped she would change for she never slept on the same bed with him. She would always put out all of the lights in the house before going to sleep.

Etaha's wife did not know how to set up a fire. She could not cook. She could not even fetch water. She always asked for help from her mother-in-law or asked her husband to do the task. When nobody could offer the service, then nothing could be done.

Etaha's wife could not do anything right. She always turned everything upside down. For instance, she would offer the back side of a plate to accept soup. She turned her back on the door to close it at night, and when she did close the door it became a wall.

Things like this made Etaha know where his search for the most beautiful wife had landed him. He could not tell his parents. It was about six market weeks after Etaha's wife came to live with him that Etaha tried to go to bed with her. She would not let him; but being stronger than she, he overpowered her

His parents could tell that they were taking loudly in their house but they decided not to interfere. Two or three mornings later, the mother went to find out how Etaha and his wife were doing. She found the door walled. She knocked and called out. Nobody was there, so she called Imeh for help. Imeh broke in through the window. Their son was lying on top of a coffin, naked and stone dead. So it was that they came to know their son's new bride was a ghost. So too they came to know their energy in bringing up the son was a waste.

-- Edem T. Udoh

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#### MAKING IT TURKEY

My 2 brothers going  
through school always  
doing it right, what  
they're supposed to, always  
excelling ... one  
now an important heart surgeon, the other  
a wealthy divorce lawyer (his way of  
rending hearts) and me