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CHILDREN
OF THE
QUICKSANDS

Chicken
House

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*For my daughters
Shola, Enina and Leila.
And in memory of Ese.*



Glossary

AGBALUMO – A dark-orange forest tree fruit roughly the size of a mandarin. It has soft orange flesh with milky, sticky juice and large dark-brown kernels. The kernels are used to decorate ankle strings for dancing because they make a nice jingling sound. As kids we used to chew the skin until it turned to chewing gum.

AGBO – The leaves of a medicinal plant used to heal malaria and other illnesses. It is very bitter.

AGEGE BREAD – A famous soft, stretchy, sweet white bread that originated from a part of Lagos called Agege.

AGOGO – A very old musical instrument made of metal that is shaped like a cowbell and has a long handle. It is hit with a wooden stick to create

a high-pitched sound and is often used in ceremonies in Yorubaland.

AJEBUTTER – Common Nigerian slang for a rich or spoilt kid or a softie. Butter is not a traditional Nigerian food. The term ‘ajebutter’ originated because butter was first introduced as an expensive and imported product that not everyone could afford.

AKARA – A fried spicy bean cake often eaten for breakfast with soft bread or corn porridge.

ASHE – Magical power.

AYO – A wooden board game with twelve pits into which round hazelnut-sized seeds are dropped. When I was little we sometimes played ayo in twelve small holes we had dug into the earth.

BATA DRUM – A double-sided drum of which one side is larger than the other. It is historically used by the Yoruba people in religious ceremonies.

BE-ENI – Yes.

CAFTAN – A tunic, traditionally worn in hot African and Middle Eastern climates. In Nigeria, caftans are formal wear, especially for men, and are often made with expensive materials and elaborately and stylishly embroidered.

CORAL BEADS – These are mined from coral stones in the oceans and are cut and polished as beads. They are important in Yoruba tradition as they are used to show royal status, wealth or age.

EFUN – A white chalk made of ground snail shell and white clay. It is used to draw magic symbols and to paint the body in traditional religious ceremonies to appease the gods and goddesses.

EGUN – Spirits of departed ancestors.

EWA AGOYIN – A meal of soft cooked beans eaten with a very spicy, peppery sauce made with palm oil and red bell peppers.

FILA – A soft hat traditionally worn by Yoruba men. It fits snugly on the head and can be worn tilted to one side, or with flaps on both sides, depending on the style.

GALAGOS – Also called a bushbaby. A nocturnal animal that looks like a little monkey with very large eyes. It has a lot of mysterious stories around it due to the fact that it cries like a baby. It is said to lure people into the forest at night with its cries.

GBEDU DRUM – The largest of the Yoruba drums. It signifies royalty and was traditionally only ever played in the presence of kings. It is played using

an open palm and a stick. An old proverb says ‘No thief will ever dare steal a gbedu drum’.

GELE – Large and elaborately styled headties made of firm and often shiny or colourful fabrics. They can be worn daily but are mostly worn to weddings, church or special events.

IJOKO – A wooden stool that may be carved with very intricate designs.

IRUKERE – A staff of office for a chief, made of horsetail hairs attached to a wooden handle. It is also used by priests and priestesses in religious ceremonies or held by traditional dancers.

JUUU – African magic and spiritual beliefs.

KOLANUT – The nut of a tree found in the African rainforests. The first taste is bitter, but then it sweetens after a while. It can be used like coffee to keep awake but can also be used as a medicine. It is often used ceremonially for guests or chiefs.

KOSI IBERU – No fear.

OFADA RICE – A type of unpolished rice famously eaten with ofada stew, which is made with locust beans.

OKADA – A slang term in Nigeria used for motor-cycle taxis.

ORISHA – Deities, or gods and goddesses in Yoruba religion. The deities have different roles and powers.

SHEKERE – Shakers made from the gourds of a calabash tree and decorated with beads that rattle against the gourd to make music.

SHOKOTO – A traditional trouser in Yorubaland with a drawstring to fasten on the waist.

SUYA – Grilled meat skewers served with a red peppery spice and raw onions. It is a famous street food in Nigeria and is also commonly sold at the beaches in Lagos.

TALKING DRUM – An hourglass-shaped drum that is clamped under the arm and hit with a curved stick. By striking and holding the drum in a certain way, the drummer can mimic human speech and tones and can communicate messages.

ZOBO – A refreshing drink commonly served cold in Nigeria. It is made of dried hibiscus petals and other ingredients like orange, lemon or pineapple juice, ginger and honey.



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Holidays at the Other End of the World

Simi climbed into the taxi reluctantly. The seats were threadbare and it smelt as if the last passengers had been goats. She wrinkled her nose, desperately trying to suppress a new wave of anger and tears.

Her mum, who had just given the driver instructions, came around the car and put a slim hand on the still open door. Simi ignored her, folding her arms across her chest and looking straight ahead.

‘Simi, it’s only for two months,’ her mum said softly.

She didn’t reply.

‘Please don’t make this more difficult for me

than it already is. I am so happy to have found this new job. But I have to go to London for training and I can't leave you alone in Lagos for so long. And you know we really need the money now that your dad and I . . .' Her mum broke off.

Simi winced at the reminder of the divorce they had all gone through in the past year.

'Simi, believe me, if I had any other option, I would definitely have chosen it rather than send you there. But we do not have the money for any summer camps and I do not have any other family than *her*.' The way her mum always said '*her*' made Simi really nervous about meeting her grandmother.

She felt her mum's eyes on her, hoping she would smile and say that she understood, that she forgave her. Simi did not look up. She had spent the last weeks begging. Telling her mum that she was thirteen and old enough to stay at home alone. That she could borrow the money for a summer camp from her dad, who definitely had enough of it. But her mum had shaken her head and ignored her pleas. So now she ignored her back.

Her mum sighed, then pulled something out of her handbag. It was a little envelope.

‘This is for *her*,’ she said. ‘You must give it to her immediately. On the spot! And I mean as soon as you get there!’

Simi looked up, irritated. What was in the letter? And why was her mum acting so strangely again? All this secrecy really annoyed her. She didn’t know anything about this woman who was supposed to be her grandmother. She hadn’t even known that she existed until recently, when the holiday decision had been made. Just like that: ‘*You’re going to your grandmother! That’s where you will spend the school holidays!*’

And as far as Simi had understood, this grandmother lived in the middle of some jungle! A place called Ajao. She would even have gone to stay with her dad and his fancy new girlfriend instead. But her mum was too proud. She would never ask him or anybody else for help.

‘Are you listening to me at all?’ she asked impatiently. She held the letter under Simi’s nose. ‘It is very important that you give her the letter at once!’

‘Yes, yes. OK,’ Simi muttered and took it from her. She slid the envelope into her rucksack, which was on her lap. For a brief moment she felt her mum’s hand on her shoulder. Then the rusty car door slammed shut with a rattle and Simi immediately felt the sticky air enclose her like a heavy blanket.

Simi suddenly panicked and rolled down the stuttering window to make one last attempt.

‘Please, Mum! Can’t you at least take me there? Only until . . .’

Her mum immediately took a step back. Her expression tolerated no further discussion and Simi gave up. She knew that stony, distant look all too well. Whenever it came to the subject of the past or her family, her mum fell silent and became a total stranger to her. The past was an absolute taboo. Simi had always assumed that her grandparents had died in a bad accident or something, and that her mum couldn’t bear to talk about them.

She sighed. Now she would have to go alone to this grandmother that she had never met. And she would just turn up at her door unannounced. Her

mum had come most of the way, taking the five-hour bus journey from Lagos with her. But now Simi was to travel the last stretch to Ajao in the taxi on her own.

‘But what if she’s not there?’ she’d asked desperately on the bus earlier.

‘She never goes anywhere,’ her mum had replied dryly. ‘Except into the forest to her heathen . . .’ She had stalled before continuing more gently, ‘She visits a few neighbours, but everyone knows where to find her.’

‘Yes, but what if she is not, erm . . . not living there any more?’ Simi had stammered. She had actually wanted to say ‘alive’.

‘She still lives in Ajao,’ her mum had replied. ‘And she is *alive*.’

‘And what if she doesn’t feel like having her granddaughter for two months without being asked?’

But her mum had just shaken her head. ‘She’ll take you in. She’ll be very glad to see you.’ And that had been the end of the matter.

Now her mum gave the old driver a few more instructions. His name was Mr Balogun, and he

had been very excited to hear where he was to take her. He even recognized her mum from years ago.

‘You will be in good hands with him,’ her mum said as the car rattled to life.

And that was that.