

The dangerous life of Ngozi

Scholarly sources:

Uchendu, Victor C. (1965). *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*.
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Meet Ngozi

Ngozi was a ten-year-old boy living in Africa in about 1800. He was a member of the Igbo ethnic group from the west coast of Africa.

Ngozi lived in a world of great joy—
but also one of great danger.



Fortunately Ngozi had an entire village (see right) to help him when he faced threats. The saying, "It takes a village to raise a child" came from Igboland, and it really applied to his life.

But before we talk about all those dangers, let's first tell you something about Ngozi's *joy-filled* world.

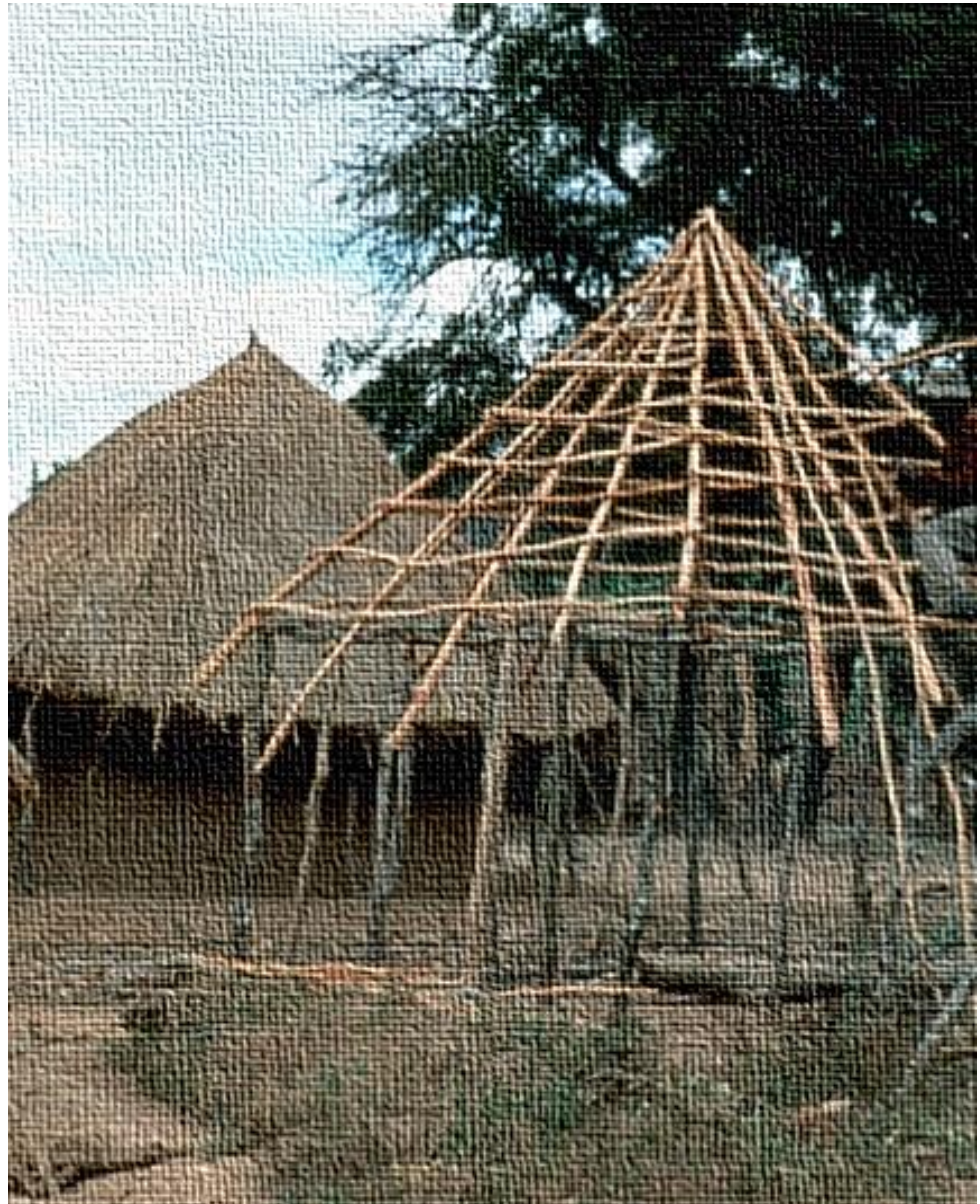


Ngozi's home

Ngozi lived in a beautiful rainforest with a canopy of palm trees and all kinds of animals. It was never cold and he never knew snow.



Within that rainforest the Igbos cleared areas to build villages and plant crops. The villages had groups of huts called compounds where extended families lived, worked, and played together.



All the people in the village were descended from the male lines of one male ancestor. This is called a patrilineage. So the people in this village weren't just Ngozi's neighbors, but were also his relatives.

The Igbos celebrated their patrilineages in their art forms, like mask-making.



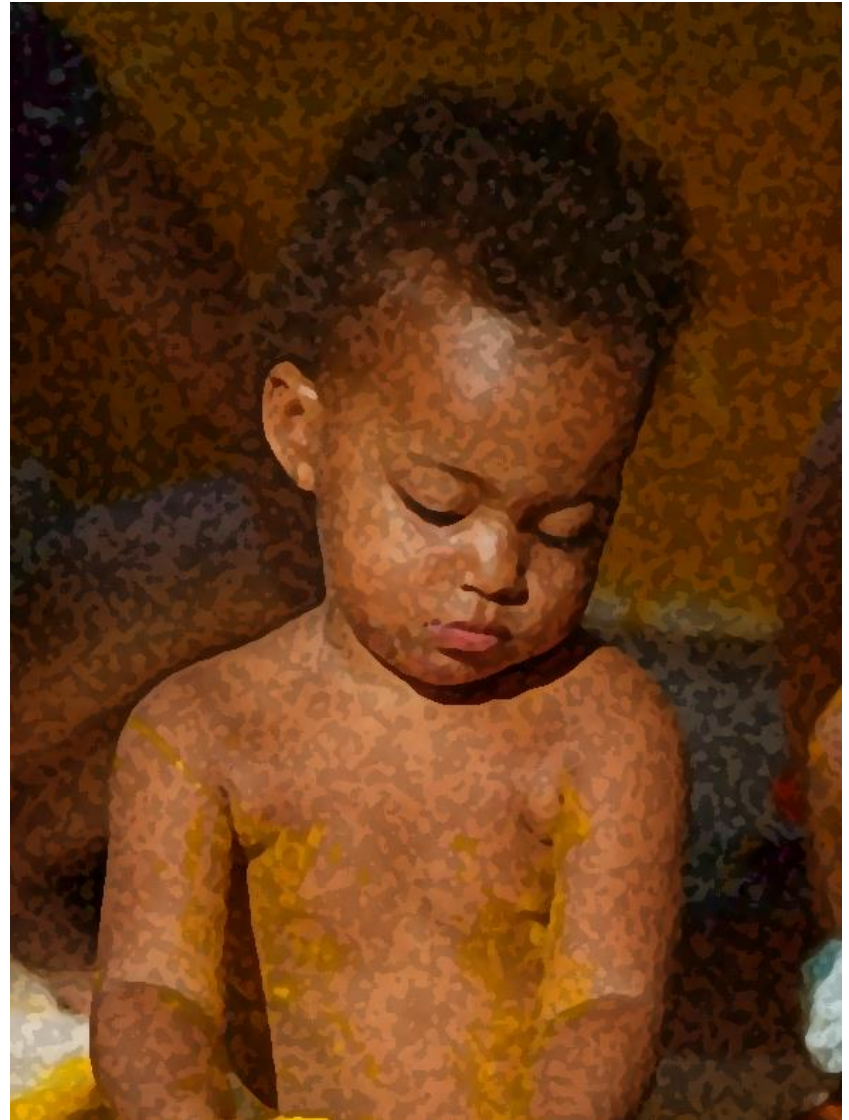
And people in the village
worshipped their ancestors.
They gave them daily blessings
and believed that after the
ancestors died, they still
continued to play roles in the
lives of their children and
grandchildren.



In fact, the Igbos believed their ancestors would reincarnate in their own family.

When a child was born, the parents and relatives would work to figure out which ancestor he or she actually was.

When Ngozi was born, his father and uncle decided that the infant was actually their grandfather's brother, Chimobi. This was because Ngozi had Chimobi's thoughtful disposition.



In order to welcome baby Ngozi into his village and patriline, his parents very carefully buried his birth umbilical cord under a nearby palm tree. This was a standard Igbo custom to give the children a permanent home. It was like a contract between the child and the village.



Village life was bursting with activity.

At the beginning of each planting season, all the males in the village (including the older boys) planted yams. Yams to the Igbo were like bread to Americans or tortillas to Mexicans. Every meal included yams.



After the men had planted the yams,
the women planted their crops.
These included okra, melon, corn,
pumpkin, and beans.



During harvest time, the village would celebrate a festival of the yams. All those in the patriline would dress up in costumes and masks, dance, sing, hold processions, and, of course, feast.



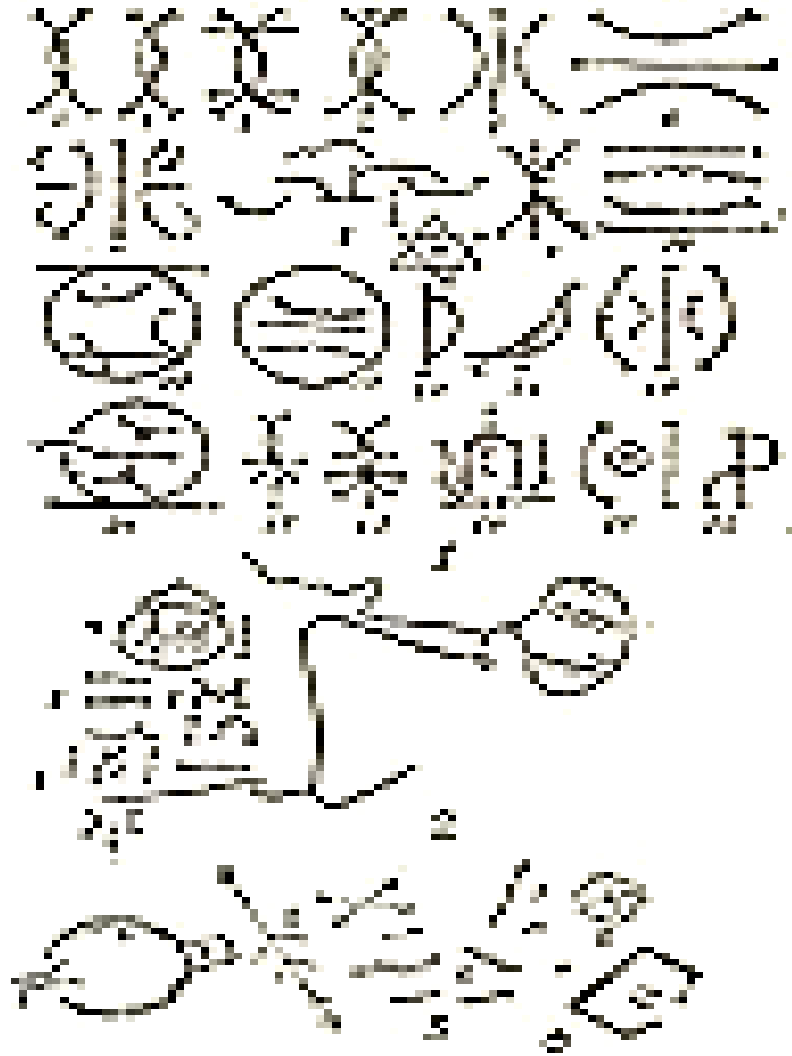
The women would later take their crops to the market. They were more active in selling surplus produce than the men. And the women were very skilled at this.

Ngozi went with his mother to market when he was a small child, but as he grew older he had other things to occupy his days.



Ngozi and his brothers and sisters learned basic mathematics and language from the village elders. The mathematics included the Igbo calendar, a banking system, and a strategic betting game called *Okwe* that was played by most Igbos.

Ngozi also learned a written language called *Nsibidi*. Nsibidi was a public and sacred system of writing that included over one thousand characters.



The men often used the *sacred* writing in secret societies requiring initiation rites. These societies would share hidden knowledge from the ancestors.

The women usually used the *public* writing in decorative arts, such as the beautiful Ukara cloth.

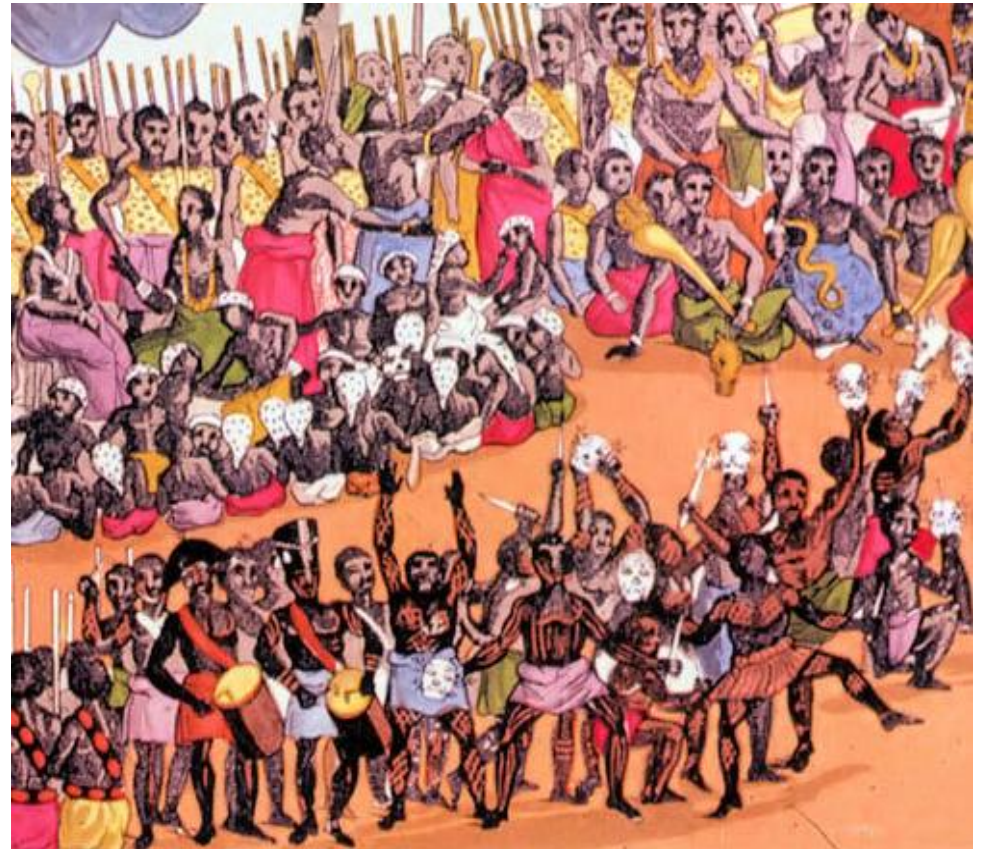
Ngozi, at ten, was too young to join a secret society.



But Ngozi wasn't too young to belong to an age grade society, and here is where he began to understand danger. Age grades were groups of people born around the same time. For example, there might be an age grade of young women who were 20 to 24. Ngozi belonged to an age grade of boys who were 10 to 14.

The age grades played key roles in large ceremonies, but they were also a group that hung out together and offered protection.

One age grade was usually selected to protect the village against attack. This was dangerous in *this way*, but even more dangerous in *another way*.



The dangers

If an Igbo was in the age grade assigned to protect the village, he might be captured by the enemy. That was bad enough, but he could then be sold into slavery. And people from Europe and America were anxious to buy these slaves and take them as prisoners back to their home lands.

There was still another way the age grades could face dangers.



And that had to do with palm trees. Palm trees in Igboland were a source of wealth.

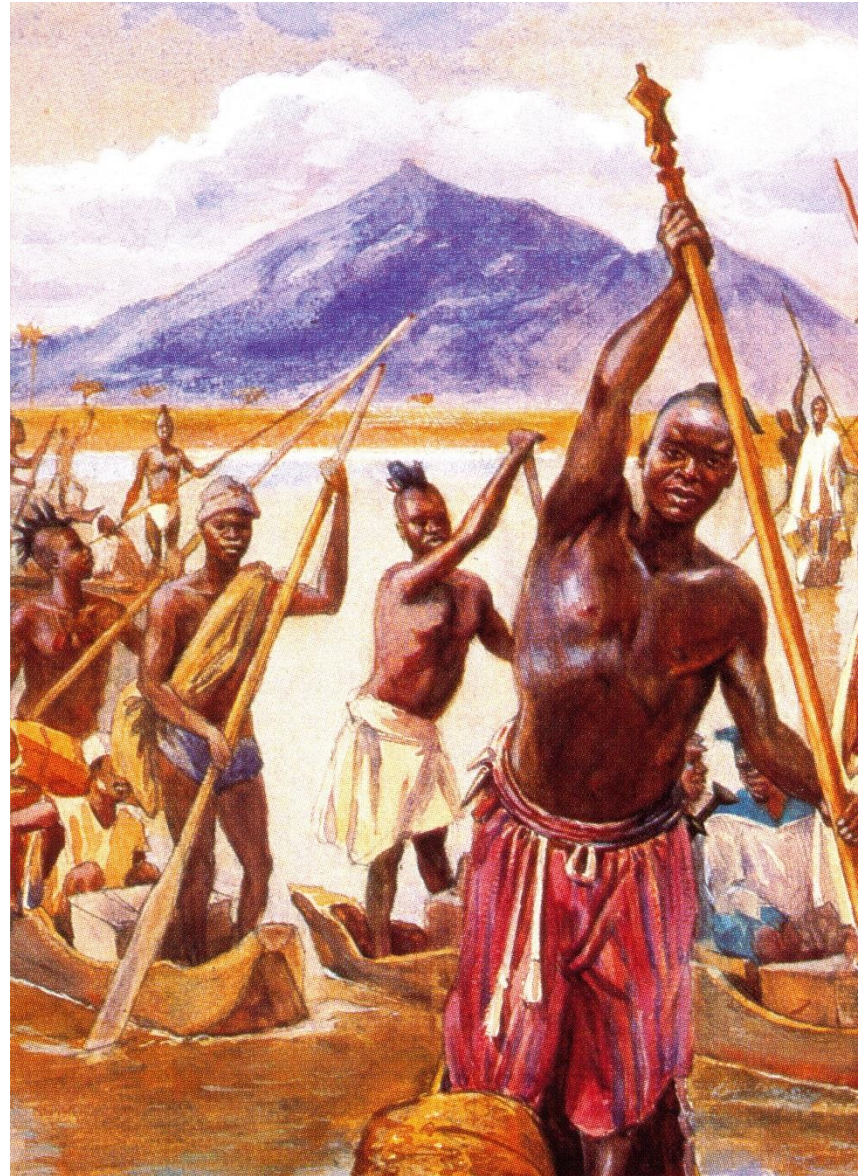


The Igbos made palm oil from the trees. This was a product much desired in trade—not just in Africa, but in Europe as well. Palm oil was used to make soap and lubricants for machinery before petroleum was developed.



Age grades would be assigned to move the oil down rivers and streams that led to the Niger Delta.

This was a pleasant journey, but there were scary unknowns at the end of it.



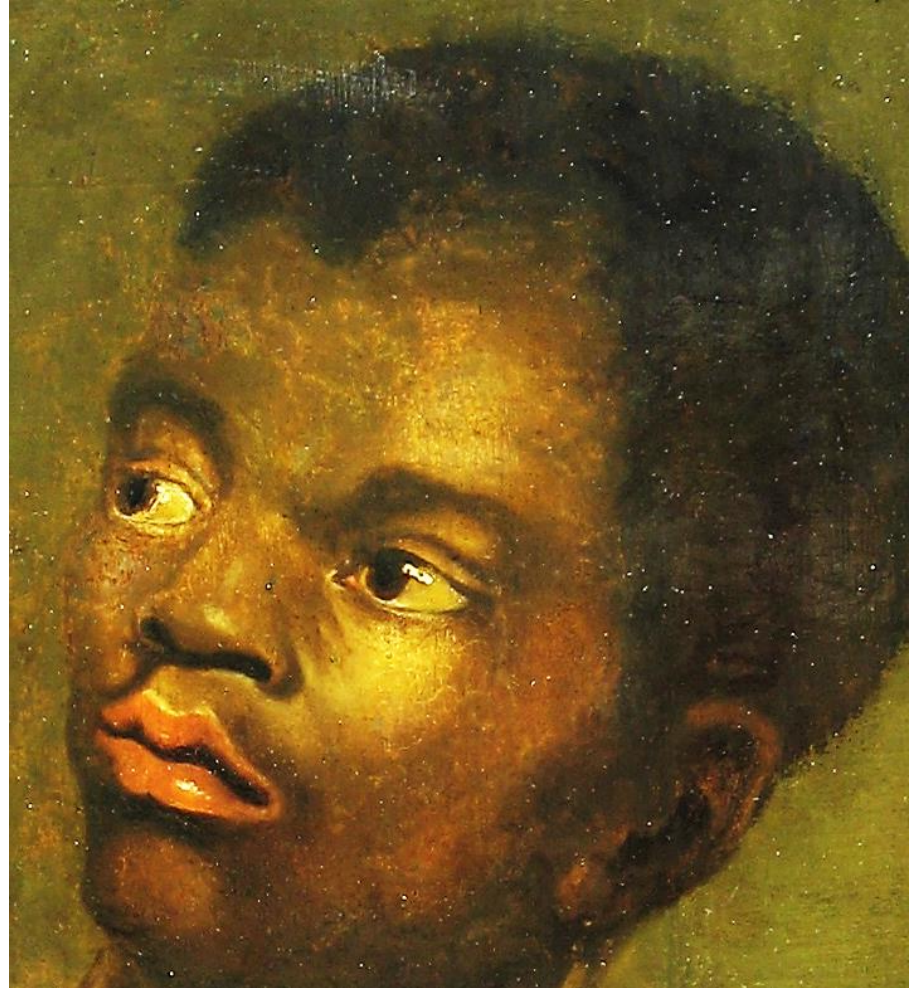
At the shore were ships of European merchants ready to make the exchange. But these merchants were often those who were receiving slaves as cargo too.

The age grades would stick together in large numbers to avoid being kidnapped into slavery. They had to make sure they greatly outnumbered the white men who were carrying guns.

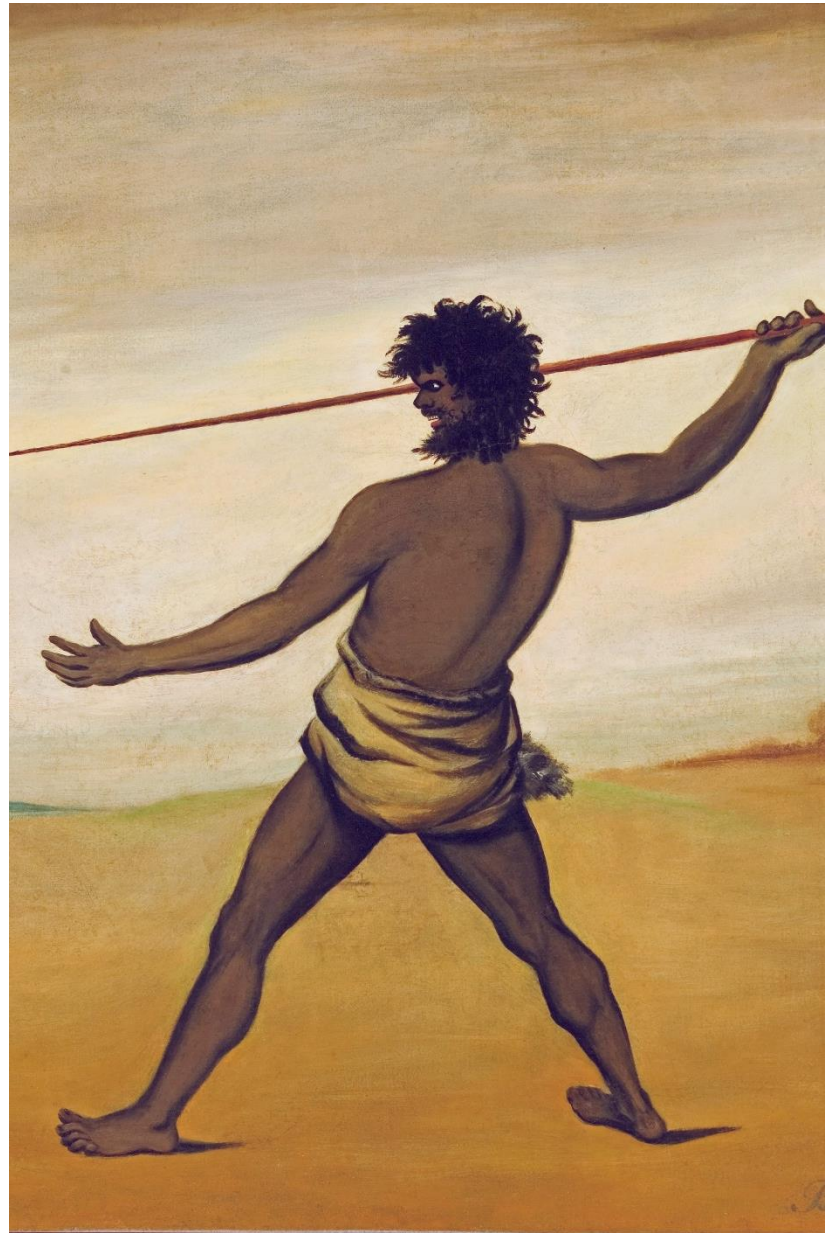


Ngozi's life at ten was filled with love and joyous activity, but he wasn't looking forward to growing older and having to join these age grades. He was happy spending his time in pleasurable activities like wrestling, sand games, and archery.

But that all changed when he went with his age grade on his first hunt.



The boys from an older age grade had taken his group out to show them how to hunt with a bow and spear and stalk animals like birds and chimpanzees.



Ngozi was out for an entire afternoon, and he was really enjoying himself.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, Ngozi saw a young chimp in the trees all alone. He focused on his target and stealthily approached the site. The chimp immediately swung onto another tree, and then another. Ngozi followed.



Ngozi aimed his bow to shoot and released his arrow. He missed.

He tried again. Again he missed. The chimp snarled at him and swung to another tree.

Ngozi sighed. He wasn't as good an archer as he thought he was. He gave up. He put his bow back in his pack and turned to find his group.



They were nowhere to be found.

He backtracked to where he thought he'd started. There were no landmarks he recognized. Ngozi was terrified. He didn't know where he was or how to find his village.

And it was getting very, very late in the afternoon.



Suddenly there—nearly in front of him—was a white man next to the stream. The man was looking in the opposite direction.

Ngozi instantly ducked into the bushes. He watched the man cross the waters and join several other white men.

Ngozi suspected who they were. They were slave hunters.

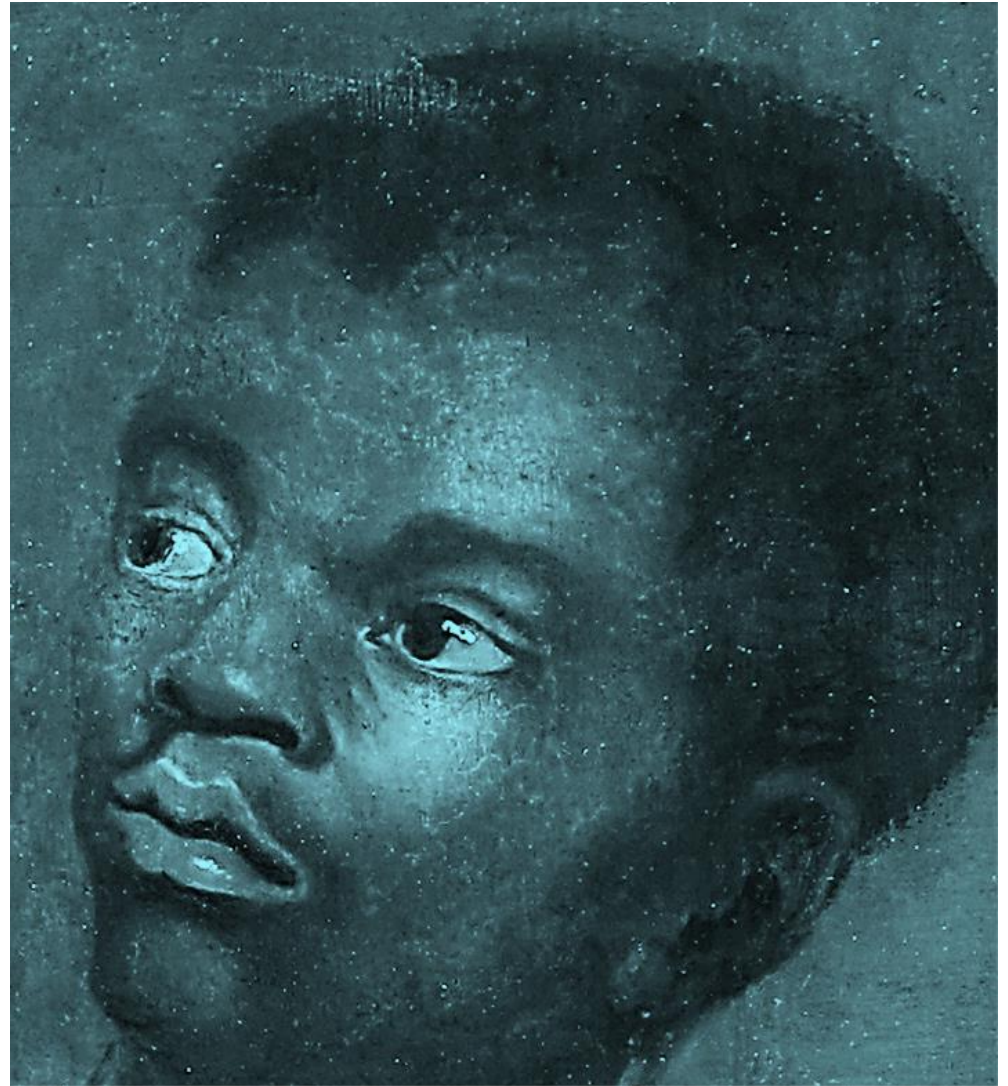


Ngozi watched the men. They were sitting on the ground smoking tobacco and eating bread. He knew they were settling in for the night. It was already getting dark and it was hard to see.

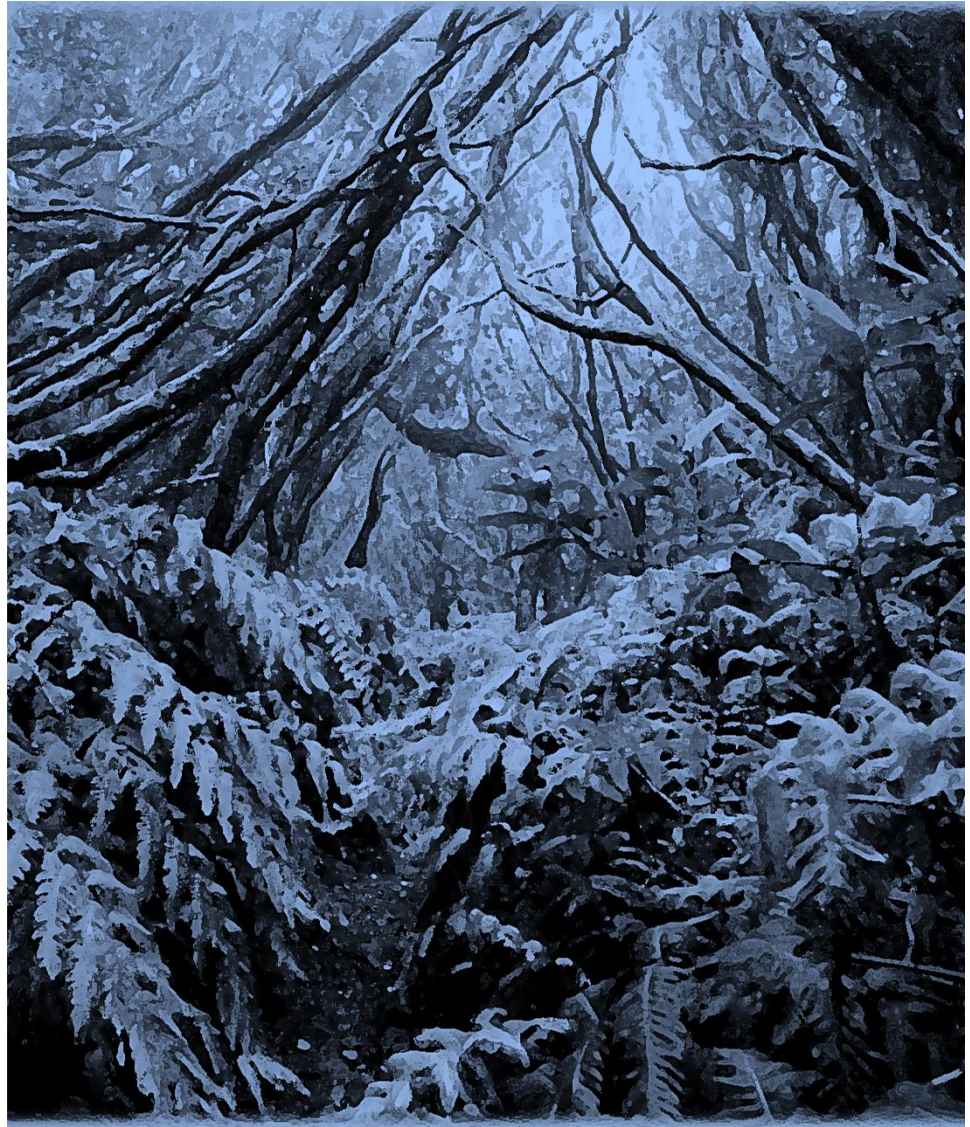


Ngozi stayed hidden, barely breathing lest he make a sound. He hoped they would all fall asleep and perhaps he could make his escape.

But he also knew he was lost. He could come to an even worse end.

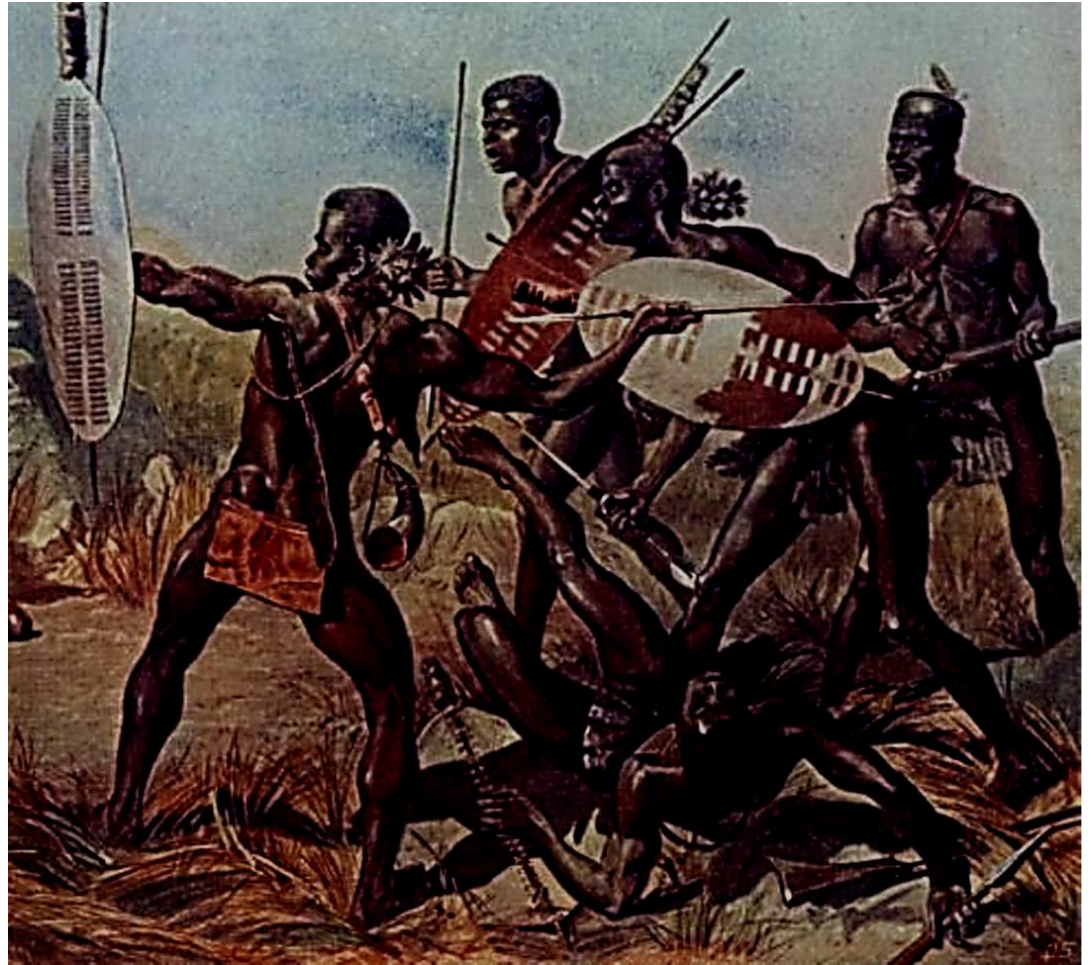


He remained hidden in the bushes.
Hours past. Night had fallen. Ngozi
thought this might be his last night
as a free Igbo boy.



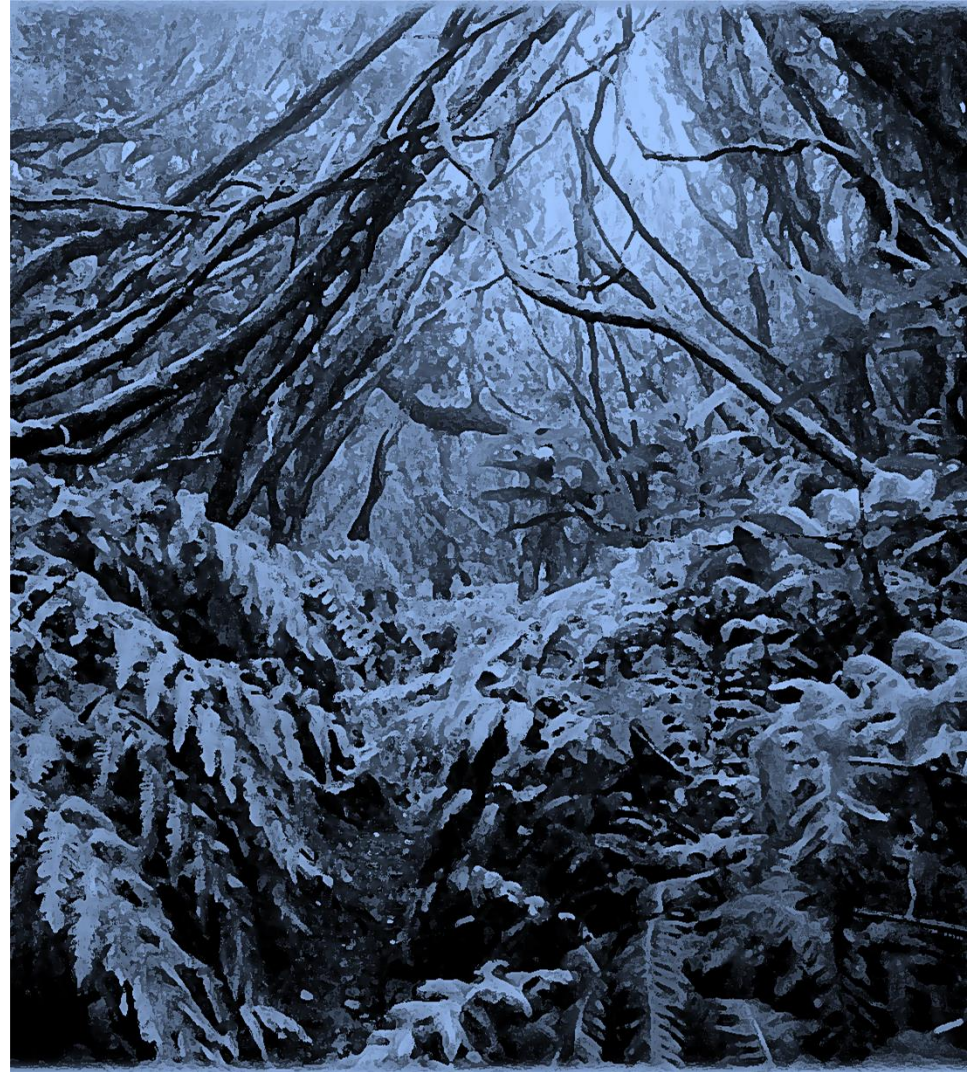
Then suddenly, there in the moonlight without a sound and out of nowhere, were his villagers—his patriline. They came armed in great numbers and surrounded the white men.

"Come!" screamed several members of his age grade. "Follow me back!"

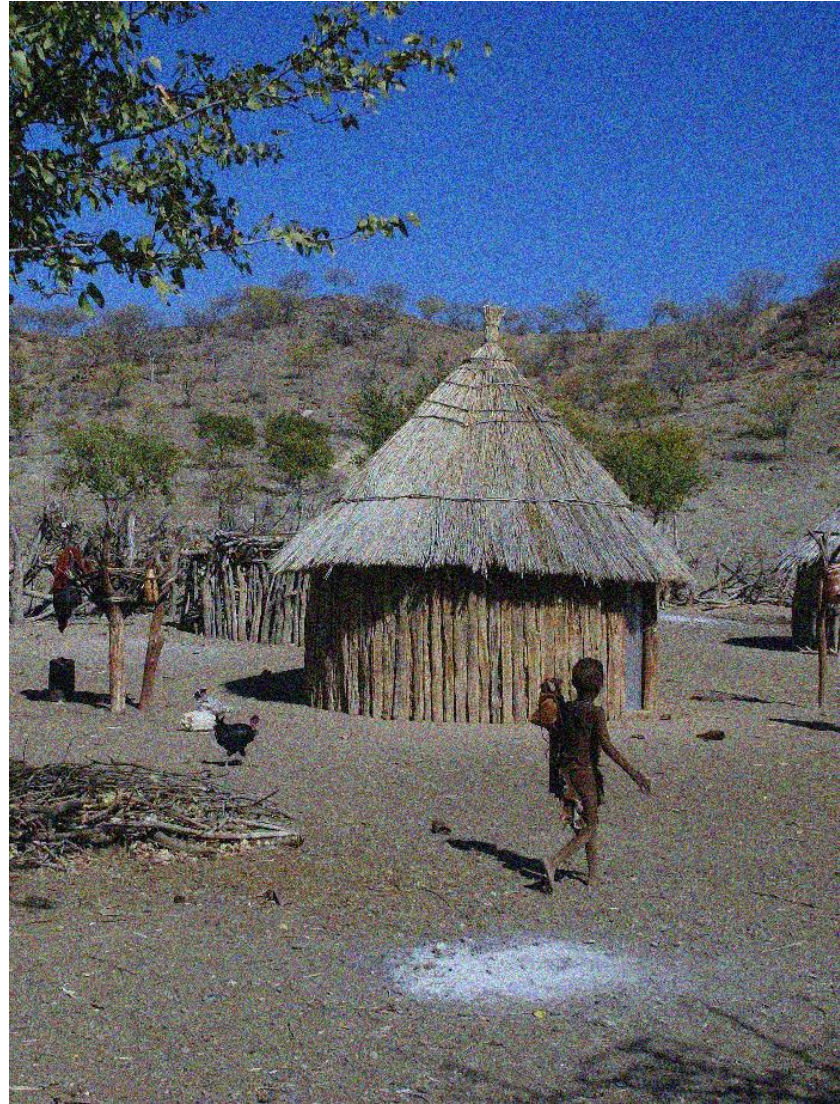


Ngozi followed and they raced through the rain forest.

Seeing this entire village of men after them, the white men were terrified. They didn't move or follow any of the Igbo..



That night, safely back in his village, Ngozi could not sleep. He got up and walked around until dawn. He blessed his ancestors and knew what a fortunate boy he was to have a village that cared so much for him.



The end

Let's talk!!