

The Family Tree

Introduction

In Nigeria, there is a little but magical village where the most hard-working people reside.

This village is not known by a single name.

The sun's peculiar effect on the land is its only claim to fame.

At noon, the sun reaches its highest point in the sky,

And the earth finds itself too weak and fragile to regulate the sun's power.

All afternoon, the sun scorches the earth, making the ground too hot to walk across.

At this time, the people of this village close their doors, shut their windows,

Shield their eyes from the blinding sun, and sleep.

Sleep is a difficult thing to achieve due to the heat,

But what else can be done when the land cannot be enjoyed and walked upon?

At night, everywhere cools down and the earth somehow recovers from its burns.

During the night, the sun's unbearable heat is faint and unnoticeable,

While the moon's comforting glow is overwhelming.

It is at this time that only the tiniest and most innocent of things — children —

Can harness the little power left of the sun, while reflecting the righteous rays of the moon.

It takes inner strength to wield both lights at once.

And as long as the children continue to sleep during the afternoon,

Rather than soaking in the heat, they will forever boast both the moon and sun.

Nighttime is when it is safe for children to play.

Playing doesn't drain their energy.

In fact, it excites and rejuvenates them.

It puts smiles on their faces that will sustain them and keep them joyful all morning,

Despite the tediousness of their work.

The best time to do one's work is early in the morning when the ground is calm,

Hearts are full, and peace can be found.

The Power of the Sun - Sun

The irritating crow of the rooster tells me that morning has arrived. It is time to work.

As I put on my blue sandals, I examine my feet.

"Why are your feet crispy?" my little brother asks with a disgusted look on his face.

"In time, yours will be like mine," I say.

His feet are soft for he has not yet felt the pain of work.

Even us children have ashy, rough feet thanks to the sun's impatience.

We do our chores in the morning, but weak sparks of heat still course through the ground,

Burn our shoes, and shock our weary feet.

I suppose it is the sun's way of warning us that it is coming.

I wonder how hot the land feels in the afternoon.

As the tree-picker of the family,
I have to pluck all the fruits on our property and wash them for our family.
I don't like my job very much,
But Father says that he used to pick fruits off the trees when he was a little boy.
Climbing up trees and falling, reaching for fruits and missing,
Carrying heavy baskets and dropping them,
Racing against limited time and failing shaped him into the man he is today,
Worthy of being the head of a respectable family.
It is the idea of following in his footsteps that keeps me going.

The cashew tree is the closest to our house, so I collect those easily and quickly.
I am carrying a heavy basket of cashews to the house,
When I see the sun peaking over the hills that protect our village.
Soon it will rise above our walls and reign over the land all afternoon.
We will have to succumb in fear and do what we don't do nearly as well as working — sleeping.
I hate sleeping. I can hardly sleep with the lights on.
It's nearly impossible to sleep with the brightest star in the sky on!
While my sister and I play during the cool night, my parents sleep soundly,
Knowing that the moon shines down on them.
I find the moon almost as boring as the rain. It's so dull and plain!
Who needs a satellite that waxes and wanes,
When a sun that lights up the whole world is right above you?

One day, I will step out of the house and stare bravely at the sun.

Everyone will see that there's no reason to run.

I place my basket of cashews on the porch, then hurry towards a distant tree to pick guava,

Before the land becomes as hot as lava.

Merely jumping won't help me reach the branches of the tree.

The tree is short, but I'm even shorter. Perhaps my sister should be the tree-picker instead.

She is taller than me, but, according to my father, I will be greater.

I jump once again, but my arm doesn't stretch far enough to reach the green fruit.

I look up towards the sun. It reminds me of the guava, but only it's yellow.

Though the sun has not yet reached its highest potential, it feels so far away.

I feel so small.

On my own two feet, I'll never reach the guava nor the sun until I grow up,

Become taller, and more like my father.

When you admire the sun long enough, you realize that it is not a ball of light.

It's like a spherical fruit of fire. A vessel of fiery might, stealing sight.

For this reason, my mother says that the sun is the opposite of love,

While the Son is the greatest example of love so true.

I try not to confuse the two.

My father is so big and strong that I like to believe he created the sun,

But my sister always tells me to stop encouraging such a silly notion.

Even higher than the sun is God, who put everything in motion.

She says that we should look past the sun and into the heavens in awe at the true Son,

For gazing directly at the star with desire could lead to consequences so dire.

I try to look past the sun and at the moving clouds, but I end up squinting.

I close my eyes to soak in the darkness, then open them.

My focus is entirely on tree-picking now.

I climb up the tree and nestle myself in a ridge of bark, so I do not fall.

I wrap my fingers around the guava ready to tug.

The fruit's warmth burns my bare and brown hand, for it has harnessed the sun's power.

My fingers recoil and cower,

But I must obtain the guava before the day turns rotten and the fruit of my labor spoils.

Enduring the heat, I tug on the fruit until it detaches from the Family Tree and gives itself to me.

The guava exudes warmth, but has it preserved such power, such warmth within?

Or is the power of the sun merely a mask for the cold ones to hide their sin behind?

It is the truth that I must find!

My teeth bite through the outer skin and sink into the soft core.

The heat dances on my tongue in bursts of warm water.

The water trickles down my throat and is sprinkled across the dry soil of my chest,

In which the guava seed resides.

I feel a sapling of warmth growing into a sturdy tree.

Its blooming flowers and leaves branch into the innermost chambers of my aching heart.

The tree's roots dig down and settle in my stomach.

The guava tastes delicious and the realization that dawns upon me is even sweeter.

Despite how pointless tree-picking feels currently,

The future of our family rests within me.

Positive that the fruits of this tree are fit for our family,

I pluck the rest of the guava and put it in a basket.

I take one last glance at the spherical fruit of fire.

I aspire to acquire its power someday, and I know that I will.

I carry the guava back home, slowly walking down my road to greatness before the sun reigns
and morning fades away.

The Power of the Daughter - Water

My alarm clock isn't the crowing of the rooster, the crying of my baby brother,

The shouting of my twin brother, the gentle prodding of my father,

Nor is it the smell of yam being boiled by my mother.

I am my own alarm clock.

I wake myself up hours before the rest of my family to fetch water.

My mother can't boil much, my family can't bathe, and the crops can't be watered without it.

My mother has been working too hard lately and has other jobs of her own,

So I must make her load easier by making breakfast today too.

I tie my black braids up, put on my brown sandals, and prepare myself for the journey ahead.

The well is far away and I'm not the only one seeking water.

Water-carriers from all over the village will flock to the well, trying to provide for their families.

Carrying two jugs, I leave the house in a hurry to beat the sun.

I walk for 20 minutes before I realize that I took a wrong turn earlier.

The unfamiliar path before me is split by a daunting, beautiful river.

Instead of turning around, I am drawn to the body of water.

The sight of the winding ribbon makes my heart swell and my soul soar.

The river blocks my path, yet I feel as if it has simultaneously made it so clear.

Oh, how I wish I were a fish!

I would no longer be limited to admiring the river's surface, so obscure.

I could either swim with the flow or dare to go against it,

Rather than go down a single path to the well.

I would stay cool and refreshed,

Rather than oppressed by the heat.

No matter how far my fins propel me forward,

I would still feel secure in the river's encompassing nature.

I could not only truly say that I am a child of God,

But also that I live within one of His most fascinating creations.

Maybe being the water-carrier made me more appreciative of all appearances of water.

Or perhaps water is just naturally majestic.

I would sit by the river and cool myself down, but the current is quite fast today.

One can easily fall in and be carried away.

Besides, though it looks lovely,

The water is teeming with algae, creatures, and unclean things.

It is not safe to drink.

So, I cautiously step on the stones littered across the river until I get to the other side.

I pray that this new route is a shortcut to the well.

The sun fiercely shines down on me.

I yearn to return to the river,

But I cannot allow my selfish wants distract me from my family's collective needs.

Beads of sweat roll down my face.

If I stay out here any longer, my beautiful brown skin will dry up, losing its elegance and grace.

I set one jug down and try to raise the other to shield me from the light,

But my arms are drained of their usual might.

My feet hurt so much that I can no longer stride.

I slowly proceed, dragging my jugs through the gravel and sand.

I struggle to keep my disoriented mind focused and my eyes open wide.

To a foreigner, I bet I looked like a malfunctioning, leaking machine,

About to break down, and in need of repair.

A foreigner wouldn't know that this strenuous journey is a daily routine for us, water-carriers.

A foreigner wouldn't realize that the joy on my brother's faces

And the satisfaction of my parents, regardless of whether their reactions lack gratitude or not,
Give me the medicine I need to go on the journey again.

I wearily raise my head and squint at the sun in disgust.

It is selfishly extracting the water, the life out of me.

No matter the obstacle that obstructs my way,

I am expected to do my job until my dying day.

Father thinks that traveling alone in the dark is not safe,

But I still wish I could complete my job at night.

I would be guided by the soft moonlight.

I admire the moon's tranquil, yet firm expression of its power. It has inner strength,

Which I find more priceless than the sun's flamboyant display of its outer strength.

I look past the egoistic sun and concentrate on the clouds as I move along.

Just as the clouds are serene, surreal, and peaceful,

So is the Kingdom of Heaven, I imagine.

I consider the clouds to be superior to the sun because rain,

Which cools the earth, falls from them.

The rain is one of the few things strong enough to combat the impact of the sun.

For this reason, the rainy season is a blessing.

Unfortunately, it lasts for a shorter amount of time in our village,

Than it does in the rest of Nigeria.

I muster up the strength to balance the two jugs atop my head.

I am now able to pick up the pace.

As I reach the midpoint of my race, I try to ponder my job.

I value the honor of being a water-carrier.

I believe it has taught me perseverance, discipline, and how to be selfless,

But I know that I can use these gifts for something more.

I don't want to stay in the village and continue to gather water.

My desire is to gather knowledge beyond my narrow horizons,

And gain experience away from home.

Only one child from this village was given the chance to let go of their work and freely roam.

In boarding school, they cultivated their mind, instead of crops.

They picked their future, rather than fruits.

But they never returned to their village, their family, their roots.

Due to their negligence and absence, their family depleted,

Legacy receded, and reputation reduced.

I will not let my curiosity leave what my parents have planted uncared for.

I will stay rooted in my family and grounded in my faith, while being as mobile as the water.

I want to flow from one stage of life to another,

Acquiring knowledge and growing like a flower by the riverbank in summer.

I dream of reading about how ancient history affects our current activities.

I dream of obtaining the insight and courage to imagine future possibilities.

I dream of learning about worldwide realities,
and delighting in my continent's magical mythologies.

I believe that one day, my family's legacy will be in a book of Nigerian mythology, not history,
To make people believe that there is already magic and excitement in their current situation,
If only they are willing to see it.

I need to take my own advice because, on days like today, I find myself discontent.

My brother tells me to stop complaining. He says that my job is much easier than his.

If he stops obsessing over the sun and tries to even consider why we need water,

Perhaps he'll understand how difficult my job is.

My brother isn't the only one who adores the sun, despite its merciless nature.

The sun is the defining feature of this land,

Which causes people to forget about the significance of water.

My brother being the favorite child is considered more important than me,

Which causes people to forget about the significance of the daughter.

Indeed, my father, along with everyone in the village, thinks that the tree-pickers — the sons —

Are more important than the water-carriers — the daughters.

“It is easier said than done, but it must be done,” is my father's way of comforting me.

My mother doesn't care if things get done or not.

She cares about how and why I do it, or choose not to do it.

Instead of being despondent and refusing to do my job,

I choose to fetch and carry water for my family,
And I try to do it with a smile on my face.

I lose sight of the path, so I stop walking and put my two empty jugs down.

Mother always tells me not to worry if I lose my way.

“Sometimes you must lose who you think you are to find who you truly are,” she says.

Hopefully her wise advice applies to finding a literal path, not a personal one.

I close my eyes, take a deep breath,

And let my instincts guide me west.

My thoughts, however, swerve in different directions and I think about the sun with objection.

Those boys, those ambitious tree-pickers,

Hope to climb a fruit tree so high that they’ll be able to pluck the sun right out of the sky.

But I don’t want to cradle the sun. I want to be a carrier of living water.

Jesus, the true Son, is the source of such revitalizing water.

I would let streams of living water flow from Jesus, through me,

And pour onto those in need in a tangible way –

A kind act or a compliment that will brighten their day.

Mother always says that no matter how big our problems may seem,

We should try to make another suffering person beam,

By giving our time and energy in charity.

Water reminds me of my mother. I believe that she already is a carrier of living water,

For her mere love rejuvenates my heart when I feel discouraged.

My mother is the nurturer and caretaker of the family.

I would like to be like her one day – a true caretaker of my family, but also of the whole world.

It is frightening to see the sun rising higher.

I need to return home, or else I will burn and wither away.

No amount of rainfall could save me.

At the same time, I don't want to go back to a disappointed house.

My jugs would be filled with tears, not well water.

Yet, that still wouldn't be enough for my father.

That still wouldn't prove my love for this family.

I am startled to suddenly feel a light tapping on my shoulder,

Distracting me from my worries.

I spin around to see a pale, barefooted man.

He is dressed in dirty, ragged clothes.

He says that he is a stranger to this land,

And apologizes for tainting its beauty with his lowly presence.

Although he looks unkempt, there is a palpable but invisible radiance about him.

With a hoarse and weak voice, he politely asks for water.

“I have traveled for so long without rest. I only need a sip,” he says.

I sorrowfully tell him that his efforts are in vain,

For my jugs are empty and the well must be far away.

He urges me to follow him, as if he knows where he is going.

He leads me to the well and I gape in awe.

It was so close this whole time, yet my discouragement made it seem miles away.

I am shocked to see that it is deserted.

Leaping for joy, the man exclaims,

“What a lucky day! It seems as if this time and place was predestined for us!”

I run to the well before the man’s cracked lips rust.

I tie the handles of one jug to a rope and lower it into the dark void that is the village’s well.

I pull the jug, now filled with water, out.

I tell him to cup his hands and take some water, but he refuses.

It is as if he feels unworthy to drink it, despite how parched his throat is.

He takes a small, gilded chalice out of his tattered pocket.

I pour water into his cup until it overflows, and then he takes a sip.

He smiles, thanks me, and says, “Dear Father, I ask you to multiply any blessings that are coming this girl’s way, for she is a true carrier of living water! I feel alive again!”

I’m glad that I helped the foreigner.

After helping someone, many expect a treasure trove of prizes and praise.

I don’t seek anything in return for serving others.

I simply think everyone deserves to be happy.

Seeing the joy and gratitude of the man I helped,

And knowing that he is better off than before I met them, is enough.

I lower my jug into the well again to fill it to the brim. I fill up the second jug as well.

I smile as I pull it up,

For the man is still praising the Lord and singing about how much he is blessed.

I would bid him goodbye and my best,

But when I turn around, I see that he left without his much needed rest.

The increasing heat of the sun lets me know that it is time to go.

Though I am now carrying the weight of water upon my head,

I offer up this trial to Jesus, whose burden is light and yoke is easy.

Doing this always makes it easier to come home than it is to leave it.

One day, the people of this village will see how valuable the water is and learn to love it.

I just have to believe it.

The Power of the Mother - Soil and Roots

I saunter across the soil, planting seeds destined to be crops of prosperity.

Though I am a human of flesh and bone, I think that my spirit is fused with the soil.

I care for my children with tender love and affection.

The soil nurtures the seeds buried in her embrace with the same sincerity.

Although the fathers are the heads of their household,

The mothers of this village are thought of as the foundation of the house,

The beginning of everything.

I don't discredit my dear husband, of course.

His love and authority harden the ties that bind us, so they can never be severed.

He keeps this family united forever.

However, I, by the grace of God, brought this family together.

I am the soil that gives my children the nutrients they need to grow,

But I am also the roots that keep them grounded.

No matter how far they go, they can always return to their roots.

They can always return to their earthly mother.

When the day comes that I am absent from their lives, but ever present in their thoughts,

They have their divine Mother to turn to.

She anticipates their needs far better than can.

They just need to ask for her help.

I love my children dearly with all my heart,

But to say that they are loved by others equally would be a lie.

The tree-pickers are elevated and promised to inherit the greatness of their fathers,

While the water-carriers are destined to carry on the unappreciated,

But valuable work of their mothers.

I wear a brown and blue head wrap as I work in the fields,

To show God how appreciative I am of my relationship with my daughter,

And that I recognize the fruits that our cooperation yields.

The soil and the water must harmonize for crops to grow and flowers to sprout.

I always tell my daughter not to limit her scope like her brother does.

Fruits are sustenance only for our bodies.

The sun can be enjoyed only during our temporary time on earth.

But there is something spiritual and lasting about water. It has a greater worth.

I teach my son about the dark side of the sun, so he does not get attached.

The sun steals sight,

But there is still a beautiful aspect of it that rings true:

It provides warmth and light.

When thinking about the sun from this perspective,

It could be counted as an example of love and perhaps the Holy Spirit working in our lives.

Unfortunately, warmth and light is not enough for my son.

He wants to harness the star's power,

And won't stop dreaming until the deed is done.

I walk barefoot around the compound, so I can truly feel the earth.

Instead of focusing on how hot the ground is,

I feel comforted by its warmth and close my eyes to savor the sun's bright rays.

They shine on my skin, making it gleam with enhanced brilliance.

There is one patch of soil on the compound, protected by the shade of an iroko tree,

That neither dries up nor gets too moist.

Nothing will be planted there.

One day, I will sink my hand into the soil to imprint and preserve my family's legacy forever.

After sowing and watering some seeds,

I reap the crops that are ready to be harvested and place them in my basket.

I hope that my children sow their own seeds of love in this land.

The seeds will sprout and grow into two tall trees of generosity.

By then, they will understand the importance of giving the fruit of their labor

To those who need a helping hand.

Even a simple cherry of charity will be appreciated,

For quality is greater than quantity.

As the sun rises higher and higher, my toes squirm.

The ground is getting too hot to ignore.

I quietly sing a song to myself to unburden my heart,

Continuing to do my part.

I am not afraid of the sun, but that doesn't mean I disregard its strength.

I just don't let it intimidate me into hastening my pace and failing to do my task with grace.

I am feeling lightheaded, but I cannot quit now.

I still have a few parts of the garden to plow.

I will not accept defeat.

In my head, I repeat, "Let it be done to me according to your will."

However, I know that God will not let me die on this hill,

Because there are still things that he needs me to fulfill.

After watering, planting, and harvesting, I depart from my beloved soil,

And return home after a strenuous day of sweat and toil.

My determination is the one piece of me that the sun can never spoil.

The Power of the Father - Tree

The fathers of this village are the leaders, the heads of their respective households.

My son likes to think that I am the sun that lights up this little village,

But I try my very best to emulate the true Son.

He is the divine shepherd and the whole world is His flock.

I am lucky that as an earthly goat herder, I am tasked only with caring for my family

And tending to the small flock of animals that we own.

Sometimes, it is so difficult to follow in the footsteps of Jesus – divinity and perfection itself –

That you need to start off with something more tangible.

As a child idolizes and imitates their parents,

I strive to echo the reliability yet humble expendability of a tree.

Like a tree, I am strong, sturdy, tall,

And was created to shepherd and shelter creatures, big and small.

My authority and influence branches out and affect all.

A tree is useless without creatures to shade, feed, give oxygen to, and provide wood for.

Likewise, I, a father, am useless without a family to care for.

A tree is useless without purpose, and so are we.

If you don't live for a purpose, you won't yield any fruit.

If you don't search with purpose, you won't find the truth.

The truth is that even though the sun beams and gleams,

It isn't as wondrous as it seems.

There is one aspect of the tree that separates it from me.

A tree is a product of sunlight, water, and good soil,

While my children are a product of my influence.

My son equates the sun's power with mine, but I was raised to be brighter than the sun.

I am supposed to be a pillar of eye-opening light and guidance for my people.

My son thinks that by harnessing the sun, he'll be like me.

If I continue to fuel those thoughts,

Then I will be leading my unsuspecting child into the darkness,

Rather than towards the light that he craves.

I admire the tree's leaves because it shields my family from excessive light.

The light filters through the spaces between the tree's branches,

So they get enough light to see, but enough shade to hide what they don't need to see.

I don't want my children to get used to having an abundance and wanting more,

Nor do I want them to be exposed too early to the corrupt side of life.

It all starts with not being content with the sweet glow of the moon,

And wanting to foolishly bask in the sunlight, while others are reasonably hiding.

Since the boy hates the leaves and adores the sunlight,

He'll grow up to want too much sun and become greedy.

He is exposed to the cruel side of life,

The aspect of the sun that scorches you,

The feature of its power that changes you.

I admit that as the head of the house,

I get more credit than I deserve.

I wish the whole world could see how much I appreciate my wife,

For without her, we could never tolerate this land that generates daily pain and strife.

While my wife is the backbone of this family,

Our children are the beating heart.

Although I favor my son more and pray that he will be a great heir,

To deny that my daughter is more reliable is unfair.

I want my son to succeed, but see that my daughter is already succeeding.

I do not know where her road is leading,

But I recognize that her mind contemplates beyond what I can imagine,

And her heart desires more than I can offer.

I am inspired by her determination, and try to give her as much freedom as I can,

So she will not suffer.

I only hope that my daughter grows to resemble her mother,

So that they can easily harmonize and heal what is bound to be broken.

My daughter must extinguish the greedy fires that will ensnare her brother,

So he can be replanted and reoriented with love by his mother.

If my heir doesn't change his ways and dares to embrace the sun,

As the father of this family, I will feel solely responsible for any damage that is done.

Taking the goats to the market to be sheared,

Is only one of the duties that I do for my tribe, which I hold dear.

After feeding and milking the goats,

I am ready to return home to sleep.

When I count my goats, I see that one is missing.

It isn't the biggest or best of the tribe, but it is mine and I cannot leave it behind.

Driven by the ominous sun, I seek my lost goat.

It is nearly noon. I am used to the sun's preliminary tricks,

So the heat only tingles my bare feet a bit.

Even a great goat herd like me has a limit.

If I don't find the animal soon, we will both face a fiery doom in a few minutes.

I finally spot it trying to climb up a tree,

But its weak hind leg doesn't allow it to be so nimble and free.

The earth heats up like a stove ready to fry goat meat for stew.

The goat's bleating sounds like a child's cry,

As it hops and scampers around the burning ground.

I scoop it up with one strong arm and cradle it, keeping it from harm.

When we return to the tribe, I briskly guide them all home.

I hope that one day the sun's flaming fury will cease and grant us peace,

So that our lovely village will be safe to roam.