

Chapter 17 from Gods Among Gazelles

The scene: The interior of the Church of the New Christ. The difference between the inside of the church and the outside is almost incomprehensible. One moment you are on the edge of the jungle heading towards the dusty ruins of a reddish-orange clay church and a wooden gate, and the next you are standing inside an ancient Gothic cathedral. Pillars one thousand feet high support a great vaulted ceiling, the arched latticework spreading out like the branches of a great tree, the branches disappearing into a hazy, soaring, swarming darkness. Chandeliers hang here and there from heavy, iron chains, the light of a thousand candles mixing with the shadows, a filtering of reality, of things half seen, half heard, half remembered, half hoped for. It is like standing inside one of the great cathedrals of Europe, but with an African twist. But it can hardly be real. Whoever heard of cathedrals in Africa, anyway? Perhaps it is simply an approximation of the feeling you have upon entering this Church of the New Christ. Perhaps the illusion of the cathedral is simply a metaphor to describe the power and presence of the new minister. But perhaps it is more than that. For one thing, the walls of the new church are made of stone, not the cement blocks or yellow brick of a more conventional African church, and the floor is also made of stone, and there is a polished roughness about the stone that comes from having existed for centuries. For another thing, there are small scenes etched in the walls, a variety of painted bas-reliefs depicting all manner of ancient stories handed down over millennia, the fertility goddess Yemayana seducing a variety of misshapen, hunchbacked spirits and giving birth to the stars, the hunger of The-One-Who-Bends-the-World and the dream of the first Africa, the jealousy of the older gods and the murderous rage of the god of one ear, the death of the god of the first great river, a raging river that fell from the sky and became the smoke that thunders, an old god buried inside a mountain, another god drowning at the bottom of the sea, and so forth, and so on, and there are dozens and dozens of stained glass windows on both sides of the cathedral depicting these same scenes, and many more besides, scenes of ancestral villages hidden beneath the leaves of *Okoumé* trees, scenes of magicians and sorcerers and witches doing battle with each other, armed only with strange fetishes, elongated figures or squashed figures carved from ebony or teak with nails driven into them, women with the legs of gazelles and men with exaggerated stomachs and the heads of crocodiles or elephants or leopards, scenes of ritual cleansing and initiation and sacrifice and war, the bloodletting cries of newly circumcised boys and girls, the burning of coffins and the families of the dead with necks outstretched like ostriches breathing in the smoke, a village priest drinking from a calabash of *malafu*, the priest then plunging a handful of *Okoumé* leaves into the sickly sweet wine and scattering the leaves to the wind and then the priest kneeling, sprinkling the wine on the ground, digging into the moist, fragrant, moaning earth with his hands and then rubbing his hands on his naked chest. The colors of the stained glass flash against the darkness inside, bright yellows and oranges and greens and husky blues and deepening purples and iridescent, fiery, illuminating reds. It is a kaleidoscope of color, a pulsing, vibrating patchwork of light that shows itself through the darkness and then fades and then shows itself again and then fades, and so on, and so forth. When you look at the windows you can hear the sounds of Africa rising up, a steady, pulsing, soul-wrenching, dreaming roar cascading up and up and up and disappearing into the hazy, glowing, soaring darkness. The sounds are spirits to bite the ears.

(The five pilgrims step inside and close the door and the small clay church becomes a great cathedral. Just like that. They breathe in the darkness and find themselves once again dressed, but not as before. The husky man is once again wearing a white shirt, neatly pressed, with a thin, black tie, but he is also wearing a suit jacket, a fancy French cut, and a fancy gold wristwatch. The sisters are once again wearing floral wraps, but the types of flowers have changed, and also the patterns. Their cheap, Oriental fans have become fancy lace handkerchiefs with emerald and sapphire sequins like the eyes of peacocks. The grandmother is now wearing a flowing, brocaded yellow caftan trimmed in lavender, and also a necklace of many polished beads. Her arms are covered in bronze and gold bangles and her head-tie is trimmed with cheap rubies and amethyst and a mash of feathers. The second man has traded in his ragged jeans and sandals for a simple, white *agbada*.)

(At first the darkness is smothering. It is like a dream at midnight. They can barely breathe as they ponder the great height of the pillars. The ceiling vanishes in the haze of their incredulity. They wonder at the emptiness of the cathedral, rows and rows and rows of empty wooden benches, a labyrinth of emptiness, and the hazy, steamy sunlight outside comes through the stained glass in wavering, rhythmic bursts, oranges and reds and blues and bright greens, like lantern lights in the fog. But then they see the wooden benches are not empty. Every seat is taken. Strange, elongated figures are sitting stiffly in the bluish, reddish, hazy light, long narrow necks like the necks of giraffes, short, squat necks like the necks of hippopotami, blue faces and blue-lipped smiles, silky blue head-ties and caps and lace *dashikis* and elegant wrappers and some in silk slacks and white sandals, but everything with a bluish tint. As the light from the stained glass changes color so does the throng on the benches. But they do not notice. The eyes of the throng are focused on a singular point. A fixed point of reality. If you are standing where the five pilgrims are, you can barely make it out. All you can see is a blazing ball of light burning away the edges of the darkness. Long tentacles of light radiate in all directions from the ball. It is enough to make you recoil for fear of getting burned. It is like the moment before an ancient sun explodes and scatters its wisdom across the black, empty spaces of the universe. But it is not an ancient sun. If you move closer to the center of the cathedral, you can see it is a man standing on a small podium in front of a white alabaster altar and a giant wooden cross hanging above the altar, the cross swaying back and forth. He is the new minister everyone has come to hear. He is wearing a simple white linen pullover and a pair of dark slacks. He is wearing loafers but no socks. Wherever you are in the cathedral it seems that he is looking directly at you. It is as if he has a four-sided head made only of faces. He is speaking to the sitting throng, to everyone gathered there, to the living and the dead who have come to hear the comfort of his words, to the spirits from the spirit world who have never been born who have come only to play in the streams of dancing, echoing, stained-glass light and sing songs of illumination with voices like jealous kites and kettles whistling steam, to the spirits who are wraiths with their blue skulls and burning blue eye sockets who have come to wreak havoc in the form of thunderstorms and infestations, to the spirits of our ancestors who have journeyed from their village beneath the leaves of the *Okoumé* trees to remind us that the ears do not grow higher than the head and then, if necessary, to pick us up by our heels and shake us violently until the green pus of our amnesia runs from our mouths and our eyes and burns itself into the ground like acid, leaving small, dark, gaping, smoky holes, to the gods who have been deposed, forgotten, the ones pictured in the windows and the bas-reliefs now seeking a way to re-enter the world, to all of them the new minister is speaking, but he is also speaking only to you. His voice carries the weight of centuries. His voice carries beyond the darkness.)

The New Minister: The priests and politicians say we should wait for god to reveal the time for independence because god's time is best. But their god is their god, and he does not even know our gods, but we have forgotten this. Instead, we strive to become fancy gentlemen and gentle ladies who drink European coffee from tiny china cups and drive tiny European cars, look how nicely we all dress in our fancy French suits and thin ties and our lace dashikis and elegant wrappers and head-ties, but we have no electricity, we have no roads, we have no indoor plumbing, we live in bent roof huts and mud bungalows with thatched roofs and cement block compounds, our schools do not teach Africa, our schools do not teach anything, our children are bloated and pockmarked and covered with the flies of starvation and disease, we die by the thousands in the mud slides that come after the rains, we die by the thousands in the searing heat of drought that comes before the rains, we die by the thousands in riots in the marketplace because they have run out of rotting fish or beef or goat meat or antelope, we die by the thousands in the sex shops and floating brothels because they told us we are good at fucking and being fucked, we are swept away by the delusion that a modern African man is but a shadow of the rest of the world, a second-rate copy descended from the baboons of our imagination. We have forgotten who we are. We have abandoned ourselves. We sniff the matted hair of our armpits and the musk of our shaggy cunts and breathe in the retching, moist, bloody, baboon sweat of centuries and we think this is how we smell, this is the smell of Africa. But this is not how we smell. This is the piss and shit smell of our imprisonment that clings to our skin and clogs our eyes, the stink of the white man's self-righteous, indignant breath and sweat as he fucks our women and our children, and then he lets loose his dog and his dog fucks all of us, and our smelly African continental cunt is split wide open, the raw pink flesh splayed, nailed to the four corners of the earth, and we bleed before the world and our great rivers turn red and we laugh while we are bleeding and beg the white man and the white man's Christ to forgive us our sins, but there is no forgiveness because we have allowed this to happen to ourselves. We are the ones bloated and bleeding and rotting away on the cross and covered with flies. We are the ones who climbed up there in the first place. We have bathed in our own excrement and yet we wonder why the worms and rats feast on our intestines. I have come to remind you that this smell we have come to call our own is not our smell. It is time to bathe in the cold, clear, cleansing waters of our own awakening. I have come to remind you who you are. I have come to bring you to forgiveness. I have come to show you there is no such thing as sin among a united people, there is only what we do for each other in the here and now, and now I say is the time for trouble, now is the time that we will become Africa once again, the original Africa, our Africa, and take our place beneath the original African sun. I have come to bring this kind of trouble to the world.

(Everything becomes suddenly silent, still, the words of the new minister lingering in that moment of distillation between hearing and understanding. The world stops breathing altogether. It is like looking at something submerged and shimmering at the bottom of the sea. Then the world takes a single breath and the sea disappears and you can hear a low-moaning wind swirl through the darkness like a single, clear reverberating note, and then the wind becomes a woman's voice, piercing, dazzling, vibrant, joyful, aroused, wounded, wondering, hopeful, intoxicated, and beneath the voice there is the sound of soft drumming, *pupatu pupatu pupatu pupatu*, and also the sounds of flutes and pianos and cowbells and electric guitars, and also those made of rosewood and *Okoumé*, and the thin metallic sound of a synthesizer, *baweninng, bawininng, baweninng, bawininng*, the sounds rising and falling and rising and falling, rhythmically, as if the great cathedral has become a conduit to the universe and the universe is about to give birth, expanding, then rippling, the great womb of time now shuddering, exploding, and then a cheer goes up, followed by whistles, applause, chanting, more cheers, shouting, laughter, singing, and the hundreds of pilgrims from every corner of Africa and beyond have now become thousands upon thousands of pilgrims, the living and the dead and the

spirits who have journeyed from the hidden village and the spirits who have never been born and the spirits who are wraiths and also those who were once gods themselves, all of them are now dancing, spinning, twirling to the music of the new minister's words, swimming in the joy of revolution, leaping into the air of infinite expectation, and you can see that some of the dead are newly arrived, for they are still covered in flies and worms and do not leap quite so high, still being somewhat bound to the earth, the worms still working their way through their rotting flesh and some of the worms falling to the floor of the cathedral, but many more among the dead have been dead for years, even centuries, some of them leaping and spinning even up to the rafters, the victims of earlier wars and guerilla uprisings, some missing arms, shoulders, legs, hips, some with ragged, burning holes showing through where they had been shot and killed, the embers of their wounded flesh still glowing, some without eyes, just two blood-stained sockets staring out at the world as they dance and twirl, some with no expression at all, victims of savage beatings that left them without faces, their ears still attached, but dangling, and still others who were caught in fiery explosions, their dried, blistered skin flaking off in specks of dust as they dance and twirl and sing and shout, leaving trails of dust spinning in the air, and dancing in the spaces between things are the spirits, all of them wearing long, flowing tunics, white tunics that change color with the light, and fishtails instead of feet, and lizards or great water snakes where their hands should be and the lizards and snakes flicking at the air with dark red, heavy tongues, and the spirits possess faces like strangely carved African masks, twisted, contorted yet immobile faces, faces made up of only mouths, the mouths wide open, gulping in the darkness, boiling over with dozens and dozens of jagged teeth, or long, languid albino faces with ears growing in place of noses, or pieces missing altogether, or darkly polished ebony faces with bulging red eyes and red noses and red mouths and rattan headpieces trimmed with the feathers of nightjars or hornbills or kites, or the faces of snarling, rabid goats or dogs with straw beards or baboons baring their fangs, or dark, vacant, empty faces with empty holes for nostrils and the lonely eyes of gazelles, and you can tell the nature of the spirit by the quality of the expression, sadness, despair, vengeance, hope, irreverence, joy, and then some of the spirits slipping out of their tunics, and then more, and then all of them, slipping in and out of the beams of flickering light, inhabiting the faces and bodies of the dead for a moment just to see what their deaths were like, then slipping in through the eyes of the living, the eyes softening, becoming trancelike, the spirits participating briefly in the lust and madness of the world, tearing off the elegant wrappers and lace dashikis of their living hosts, arms wrapped around arms and legs wrapped around legs in a sculpted, scripted, orgasmic frenzy, spinning and gyrating in unashamed depravity, an ocean of cocks and cunts writhing happily on the floor of the cathedral, rolling beneath the wooden benches and then up again and then tumbling back down, whirling through the air and around the great stone pillars and diving back in, wave after wave after wave, gasping for air in the glistening, swarming darkness, slipping into the beaming stained-glass window light and then out again, a sea of naked, sweaty, sex-stained bodies glistening with the salty sea-spray of procreation. Even those who were once gods are participating in this orgy of oceanic delight and transformation, though with vicarious restraint, for their organs have become too large for those in the swelling sea of humanity that surrounds them. So they watch with the excited, passionate interest of teenage voyeurs, as if they are watching a pornographic movie in the cinema for the first time, the flickering of the light on the screen moving faster and faster and faster, the gods stroking themselves, their organs aching, veins bulging, faster and faster and faster and faster, and then the universe contained within the architecture of the new minister's cathedral explodes, the gism of the gods raining down upon the still-squirming, writhing, matted throng, a great, relentless deluge of a wave to wash away the suffering of ten thousand lifetimes.)

The New Minister (now floating above the podium, suspended in the darkness above the raging, seminal sea, the faces of his four-sided head flickering with a cinematic cascade of emotions, hungry, impotent gratitude, irreverent, pliable anger, despairing confusion, seething loneliness, volatile joy, and so on, and so forth, and as he speaks this flickering cascade races around his four faces so everyone can see the depth of his feeling, flicker, flicker, flicker): Who is willing to stand against the misrule of progress and prosperity? Who is willing to stand up to the blood-stained darkness of our

despair? Who is willing to do battle against the oppressive silence of centuries? Who is willing to open the doors to our own suffering?

The Pilgrims: We are willing! We will stand with you! We will open the doors!

The New Minister: Where is the voice of our suffering?

The Pilgrims: It has been lashed into silence.

The New Minister: Where is the voice of our suffering?

The Pilgrims: It has been choked with the white dust of our progress.

(The voices take on an incantatory, ritual quality, the entire willing throng participating without hesitation, as if the whole dialogue is part of a script, or collective memory, or the sacred dream of an entire continent. The husky man is belting out his replies, the sweat of his glistening chest now penetrating through his fancy French suit coat, the heat of the moment becoming water dripping from his eyes. The two slender women in the floral print dresses are now swaying with the words, singing their hearts out to the hazy, glowing darkness, a great longing in their fluttering, childlike, unsubstantial voices. The grandmother is crying out with words she did not know she knew. Back and forth and back and forth the words go. The flickering cascade of emotions is still whirling around the four faces of the new minister. It is whirling so fast his features have become contorted. You cannot even see his mouth move when he speaks.)

Where is the voice of our suffering?

It is everywhere.

Where is the voice of our suffering?

It is a broken voice crumbling beneath the endless weight of endless sacks of cement to build the roads of our despair.

Where is the voice of our suffering?

It is a broken voice calling out to the world to bear witness to the sinful depravity of itself.

Do you see these new roads?

Yes.

But do you see these new roads?

Yes.

Who are they for?

They are not for us.

Who are they for?

They are for the sons and daughters of the bula-matadi.

Who are they for?

They are not for us.

Where is the voice of our suffering?

It has been lashed into silence.

Where is the voice of our suffering?

It has been choked with the white dust of our progress.

What have we done?

We have done nothing.

What have we done?

We are black.

What have we done?

We are African.

What have we done?

We have told the truth.

And what is the truth?

*The truth is the darkness.
And what is the truth?
The truth is the light.
And what is the truth?
The truth is everything.
And what is the truth?
The truth is they are killing us.
And what is the truth?
It is the same old story.
And what is the truth?
The truth is the truth.
And what is the truth?
The truth is they are killing us.
What one hopes for is better than what one has.
What one hopes for is better than what one has.
Let Africa return.
Let Africa return.
Let us go home.
Let us go home.*

(With a rush like a great flurry of wings, a giant, roaring "Amen" goes racing around the hazy, steamy, primordial darkness of the church. Parts of the chanting are repeated and then a second great roaring "Amen," and then more of the chanting, and then a third great "Amen." The walls of the great cathedral shake and rattle. It is a wonder the giant wooden cross does not come crashing down. Dust falls from the stone latticework of the ceiling, a waterfall of dust streaming down the stone pillars, taking on the various colors of the stained glass as it passes through the flickering, changing light. The multi-colored dust settles on the heads of the pilgrims, their shoulders, at their feet, on the benches, like soft snow settles, or a mountain mist, or the feathers of dying birds struggling to stay in the air, or ashes and glowing embers mixed with memories. In some places the dust is an inch thick. But the thousands and thousands of pilgrims do not notice. Then the new minister focuses his four faces, as if he is aligning his thoughts with the four corners of the world, and he begins singing his song of independence. He sings of the gazelle of the morning, a star in the summer sky that has come to the earth to help us escape from the hand of the hunter. He sings of the people rising up from the desecration of the towns and cities to greet the armies of the leopard men who come in clouds of smoke to destroy the crocodile men so we may return to our ancestral village. He sings of two young lovers, a young girl with breasts like two young gazelles and a young man with lips bright and thirsty like the blossoms of blue dahlias, the two of them lying down in a warm, wet, hazy embrace beneath the leaves of an *Okoumé* tree. He sings of the Garden of Eden hidden in the mountains of spice. His voice becomes bright like smoke. The light that radiates from his presence begins to work against the darkness, burning away the edges, molecule by molecule. The new minister sings in all the languages of the world at the same time. He sings to the living and the dead, to the spirits, to the neglected, forgotten gods. Everyone hears what they want to hear. To those who would be thugs and thieves and warlords and chieftains, he brings bullets and armed rebellion. To those who would be teachers and healers and farmers, he is a bountiful harvest. To those who would be spiritualists, priests, sorcerers and poets, he is the new messiah, the Black Christ. To everyone else, he is the father and mother of Africa. He is Africa incarnate. He gave birth to himself.)

*What one hopes for is better than what one has.
What one hopes for is better than what one has.*

Let Africa return.

Let Africa return.

Let us go home.

Let us go home.

(The new minister is now descending from his floating perch, heading down the aisle, the rows and rows of wooden benches brimming with a happy, eager, laughing, confident crowd, the radiance of his words now burning through the darkness of the entire cathedral, burning away the stone pillars, burning away the stone latticework of the ceiling, patches of blue sky appearing where before there was only a hazy, swarming, smothering darkness, the blue patches growing brighter and the darkness disintegrating, dissipating, until only the sky remains. The blueness of the sky reverberates with hope. The spirits who journeyed from the hidden village return home. The spirits who are wraiths are absorbed into the sky, the blueness of it, their blue skulls and burning blue eye sockets spinning away wildly like errant hurricanes. The spirits who have never been born are splashing in the footsteps of the new minister. Trumpets from somewhere are now blaring in a minor key and a rhythmic drum section takes up the beat of departure. Someone is beating on cow bells and someone else is strumming a jazz guitar. Everyone is chanting and clapping their hands. The new minister is joined by a parade of acolytes dressed in flowing white robes with red silk trim. Incense is burning. The smoke from the incense carries with it all the fragrances of the jungle. The acolytes are wearing thin, wooden crosses around their necks and holding small red hymnals. They are jostling each other to see who can get closest to the new minister. Hundreds and hundreds of hands are flailing madly against each other, snapping and scratching at each other, clawing at the air, drawing blood, a flurry of hands pushing itself into the aisle, desperate to connect, however briefly, with he who is the incarnation of Africa, the new Black Christ, to tap lightly his shoulder or his arm as he passes by, to grab a tiny piece of his power and eat it quickly so it will become a part of their burning, boiling, seething blood. The flurry is pecking away at the new minister like chickens. He smiles and allows the pecking to continue for a while and a cheer goes up. The flurry follows him. The music gets louder. So does the chanting. The acolytes stream past, dancing and twirling in the sunlight. The living and the dead join the procession. The forgotten, neglected gods are nowhere to be seen.)