

1 Marriage Of Convenience

When Mbionyi received his Baccalaureate degree from the hands of the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Penamboko, he said to himself that those years of hardship were over. Smiling from ear to ear he hugged and shook hands with his relatives who had come to see him graduate. Every member of his family was present at the commencement ceremony. Even his 89-year-old grandmother, enfeebled by Parkinson's disease, was in attendance. She had served as a surrogate mother for the young man when his mother died following a cesarean section.

"I thank you my child. Thank you very much for making me proud today. Who wouldn't be proud to have a son like you? You can call the white man's book and speak through your nostrils like the white man. I am a very proud old woman today. I only wish your mother were here to share this great joy with me," the haggard woman said, wiping abundant tears from her wrinkled face.

"It is all because of you, granny. You did your best to see me grow up," Mbionyi said, holding her emaciated arms.

"My creator may call me now. I will go with joy in my heart," the old woman said, holding her grandson in her bony hands.

When the ceremony was over, Mbionyi went home in the company of his jubilant relatives and friends. Dressed in a charcoal gray three-piece suit and a pair of black leather shoes, the 22-year-old man led the homebound procession, holding his Bachelor of Science

degree in his muscular hands. He gallivanted on stubby legs and winked at the young ladies in the crowd as if to seduce them. His friends kept badgering him with questions about his future career. When they reached home, his father asked him an unexpected question.

“This big certificate of yours will open all kinds of doors for you, isn’t that right, my son?”

The sexagenarian hadn’t said a word since they set out on the return journey from Penamboko. Sixty miles separated them from the village of Menka. If they had a car, it would have taken them less than an hour to get home. Hiring a taxi would have meant spending a whole year’s income from their farm produce. They had to walk home.

“Papa, with a certificate like this I will be able to work in any office I want in this country,” the young man said confidently. He was very proud of his achievement. He had worked very hard to earn an honors degree in plant science.

It was pitch dark when they got home. They were tired but happy. An illustrious son of the soil had just returned with a great booty. Mbionyi’s father, who equated his son’s achievement to killing a lion, had bought a five-year-old cow for his son’s graduation party. The very day his son set foot in the white man’s school, he knew that one day he would come back like a hero. Female members of the family had cooked basketsful of delicious food: *fufu and njama-njama* soup, *koki* and ripe plantains, *ero* and *water-fufu*, calabar yams, *kpa coco*, and *egusi* soup. There was alcohol galore: *manjunga*, *jobajo*, *odontol*, *matango*, *nkang*, *kwacha*, *mbu*, *fofo* and *palm-wine*. They ate and danced to favorite *makossa* and *mangangbeu* tunes till dawn.

Mbionyi woke up the following morning feeling ill at ease. In the midst of the excitement, he had not given thought to how he would get to Yaoundé in order to apply

for a job. To apply for a job he had to travel to the nation's capital. All applicants were required to personally submit their applications at the Ministry of the Public Service and be interviewed there. Yaoundé was some 2200 miles away from home. He couldn't cover that distance on foot. He needed the sum of 10.000 CFA francs to pay his fare. He didn't have the money. Worse still, he knew nobody in the capital city.

"Where will I live during my job search in Yaoundé?" the young man asked his father.

"When you get to Yaoundé, try your best to find Chui Bah's son. He lives in that city. He'll give you a place to sleep. A tribesman is a brother," his father said, giving him the sum of 11.000 CFA francs.

"Papa, I don't know Chui Bah's son." Mbionyi said, looking confused.

"Chui Bah's son is called Londu. His parents live in this village. Londu speaks the same language as you do. Go see him and ask for help," his father said, stroking his graying beard.

"Papa, Yaoundé is a big city. How am I going to find Londu in a huge city like that?"

"Oh, don't worry. He looks like his father. He is short and stout. When he comes to see his father and mother, he always wears a blue suit, a pair of brown leather shoes and a gold watch. You can't miss him," the old man said confidently.

"Papa, hundreds of men wear blue suits, brown leather shoes, and gold watches in Yaoundé. How am I going to pick out Londu from this crowd?"

"Well, you just have to try hard and you will find your tribesman. Remember that the woman that never tried hard enough to fall pregnant died childless."

"I will try my best, Papa."

“Go, my son. May the gods of our ancestors lead the way. May they open friendly doors for you,” his father said, holding his son close to his hairy chest.

They were standing at the *Amour Mezam* taxi rank. Suddenly, he let go his son and walked briskly away without looking back. He did not want him to see his tears.

“Stay well, Papa,” Mbionyi said, waving at his father.

“Go well, my son”, he answered in a broken voice without looking at his son. Tears stood in his panther eyes.

The trip to Yaoundé lasted eight hours. Mbionyi was at his wits’ end when the bus screeched to a halt at the Ndobolo bus station at *Carrefour Obili*ⁱ. The beehive activity in the city confused him. Yellow cabs sped past him at the speed of lightening. Infuriated taxi drivers hauled insults at one another. To Mbionyi’s surprise, two taximen who been pointing their index fingers into the air as a response to provocation, suddenly stopped the engines of their cars, jumped out and got into a fist-fight.

“*Youa mami pima!*”ⁱⁱ one of the drivers said.

“*Die dog! Ne me touche pas!*”ⁱⁱⁱ the other responded, grabbing the offender by the collar.

Mbionyi heard passengers inside both taxis screaming in French. He could hardly understand what they were saying.

As he wondered how he was going to find Londu, he heard passersby speaking languages he had never heard before. He prayed that some one would speak *Meukoh*, his native tongue. People scurried in various directions as though their homes were on fire. How on earth was he going to find Londu in this maze? Placing his travelling bag between his legs, he stood at the bus station arms across his broad chest, feeling like a fish out of water.

Suddenly, an idea crossed his mind. He decided to look for his tribesman in bars and nightclubs in the vicinity. He looked at his watch. It was 8:00pm. He

grabbed his bag, slung it across his shoulders, and walked into the city centre. The first night-club he arrived at was called *Biabia Nite Club*. It was full of *wolowoss*^{iv} on the lookout for clients. He went in, bought a bottle of *jobajo*,^v and sat on a vacant table next to the DJ. Skinny girls wearing see-through outfits were gyrating on the dance floor. Men and women chattered in French, a language that sounded like Chinese to Mbionyi. He had dropped French in secondary school when his arrogant teacher called him a *mbut*^{vi} when he had a “C” grade in his finals because he could not conjugate the verb *être*^{vii} in French.

He was still wondering how to find Londu as he watched the merrymakers hover around him.

“You want maboya for the nite, cheri coco? I am clean, no HIV.”^{viii}

Startled, Mbionyi got out of his daydream. A fair complexioned girl with abundant hair stood over him wriggling her semi-nude buttocks. She looked like a teenager.

“No, sista. I no di find woman. I di find my kontryman whe yi deh for dis town,”^{ix} Mbionyi responded looking straight into her blue eyes.

“Wheti be name for you kontryman”^x the young girl inquired.

“Londu. He comot for Meka village.”^{xi}

“You comot for Meka you self-self?”^{xii}

“Yes, I be Meka pikin mesef”^{xiii}

“I member say I sabi da Londu whe you de find’am.”^{xiv}

“Na true talk you de talk? So you sabi ma kontryman!”^{xv}

“Yes, Londu na taximan, no?”^{xvi}

“I no sabi de kana wok whe yi de wok, sista”^{xvii}

“Ah yo mba, eh! See me some man. You de find person whe you no sabi’am?”^{xviii}

"Sista, I comot for Bamenda just now, just now. I come na for find wok for here. Ma repe say if I reach mek I find Londu."^{xix}

"Bo, give man one jobajo, no. I go find Londu gi you."^{xx}

"Wheti you de shak no, sista?"^{xxi}

"No be daso 33 Export?"^{xxii}

Mbionyi bought her a bottle of 33 *Export* beer. She used her teeth as a beer opener, drank half of the bottle at a go, and slammed the bottle on the table in front of him.

"I de come my broda"^{xxiii}, she said and walked out of the nightclub, swaying from one side to the other like a model competing in a beauty contest.

She didn't tell Mbionyi where she was going. He thought she had gone for good. After an hour she reappeared in the company of a short heavily built man in his mid-thirties. He was clean-shaven and dressed in black leather trousers and jacket. His polished brown leather shoes and gold watch glittered in the dim lights of the nightclub.

"Na ya kontryman dis,"^{xxiv} the girl said, pointing at the newcomer.

"I am Londu. I hear you're looking for me?"

"Yes, I am Mbionyi. Glad to meet you, brother Londu. I come from Menka. I'm son of Ntoh Dah."

"Oh, nice to meet you," Londu said, stretching his right hand to greet Mbionyi.

"My father asked me to look for you when I get here."

"Ah, is that right? I have been to the village a couple of times but haven't met you."

"Yes, that's because I was away in college."

"I see. So what brings you to the nation's capital?"

"Job search, my brother. I have just graduated from college and need a job."

"Congratulations!" What did you study at college?"

“Plant science, I have a degree in plant science.”

“Great! Let’s go home,” Londu said, leading his tribesman out of the busy nightclub, after buying two beers for the young lady who had introduced him to Mbionyi.

The two young men were now sitting on a couch in Londu’s two-bedroom flat in the Madagascar neighbourhood. Mbionyi took a quick look at a leather bag sitting on a mahogany table in the north end of the room. It was full of small plastic bags containing some white powdery stuff. Foreign currencies lay pell-mell on the table: euro, pound, dollar, yen, naira, cedi, and rand.

“Do you want something to eat?” Londu asked.

“Yes, thanks brother. I am starving,” Mbionyi said, hardly believing the generosity of this man he was meeting for the first time.

Londu quickly prepared a bowl of *fufu*^{xxv} and fried *bunga*^{xxvi} while his visitor read a copy of the *Cameroon Post* weekly that lay on the centre table. When the meal was ready both men washed their hands and started attacking the lumps of food each with his five fingers.

“Massa, you cook like a woman! The food is so tasty!” Mbionyi said.

“Thank you,” Londu said, without lifting his head from the bowl of *fufu*.

“You said you’ve come to look for a job?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have money?”

“No, I don’t. I am fresh out of college. My father gave me just enough to pay my fare to Yaoundé,” Mbionyi said.

“You don’t have money, and yet you want a job? That’s impossible!” Londu said, laughing uproariously.

“What’s impossible?” Mbionyi asked.

“Getting a job here without money,” Londu said.

“I don’t understand,” Mbionyi said, shaking his clean-shaven head.

"Believe it or not, it takes money to get a job here," Londu said.

"Why?" Mbionyi asked.

"That's because you have to grease the palm of everyone that handles your job application file, including the *planton*. That's the way things are done here," Londu said.

"Who is *planton*?"

"The *planton* is the office messenger who transports files from office to office."

"Are you serious?"

"Oh yes!" Here in Yaoundé, the *planton* is the boss; he's even more important than the boss."

"*God forbid bad thing!*"^{xxvii} Mbionyi exclaimed.

"God is on vacation in Yaounde, my friend! It doesn't matter what kind of degree you have. You have to *tchoko*^{xxviii} if you want a job," Londu explained.

"I'm lost. I've spent four years working hard to earn a degree and you're telling me it doesn't matter? If a degree doesn't matter on the job market, what does?" Mbionyi asked, opening and closing his round mouth like a fish.

"Do you speak French?"

"No I don't."

"That makes things worse, my friend!" Londu added.

"Why?"

"Everyone here speaks French. This is the territory of francophones."

"So?"

"If you don't understand French, you're a *persona non grata* in this part of the country. They will call you *mon Bamenda*.^{xxix} Others will call you *Anglo*^{xxx} and poke fun at you," Londu said.

"Is that real?"

“Take it from me, my brother. The marriage between Francophones and Anglophones in Ngola^{xxxi} is one of convenience,” Londu said, falling asleep.

Mbionyi woke up the following day feeling stressed out. The question of having to give bribes in order to get a job had kept him wide awake all night. The language question frightened him even more.

“Use this to pay your taxi fare to the Public Service Ministry. I’m leaving for work.”

“Thank you very much, bro,” Mbionyi said, taking the 500 CFA francs banknote from Londu.

“My girlfriend will show you where to catch a taxi to the Ministry. She will be here in a few minutes,” Londu said leaving the house.

As soon as Londu was out of sight, Mbionyi jumped into his pair of khaki trousers, wore his marine blue long-sleeved shirt and black shoes, and accompanied the young woman that had come in and introduced herself as Clotide. He had been standing at the taxi rank for thirty minutes when a yellow taxi screeched to halt in front of him.

“Please, drop me at the Ministry of the Public Service”, he said to the driver.

“*Fils de chien! T’es malade?*”^{xxxii} the driver yelled at him, taking off.

Five other taxis went past him without stopping. He felt too humiliated to flag down a cab. The sixth one stopped.

“I am going to the Public Service Ministry, please drop there,” he said.

“*Anglo! Fiche-le camp, idiot! Va te faire porter par ta maman!*”^{xxxiii} the taxi driver hollered.

“What in the world is going on?” Mbionyi shouted to himself.

By reading the body language of the taxi drivers he concluded that they were hurling insults at him. He stared wide-eyed at taxis passing, wondering why they were not picking him up. Did they understand him? Were they

being spiteful? The word “Anglo” thrown at him by one of the taximen reminded of what Londu had told him. Crestfallen, he decided to walk five miles to the Ministry. The morning sun was getting hot and he was sweating profusely as he walked. If he had a job, he would forget this humiliation. As he wove his way through the rush-hour traffic, he dreamed of the day when he would own his own car. It would be an SUV, nothing more nothing less. He would show these bastards that he is a bachelors’ degree holder. He would buy himself a house too. Owning a house in the nation’s capital would be a dream come true. In his reverie, he covered the five miles without realizing it. The oval building of the Public Service Ministry stood in front of him. He walked straight into it.

“Good morning, Madam”, he said to a receptionist sitting at the information desk.

“*Monsieur, je ne comprends pas votre patois-là, hein!*”^{xxxiv} The coquettish young woman replied without looking at Mbionyi. She was busy applying lipstick on her bulbous lips.

“I beg your pardon?” Mbionyi said, looking straight into her green eyes.

“Ici c’est Yaoundé, you ya. Il faut parler français, monsieur. On ne parle que le français ici”,^{xxxv} the woman spoke at the top of her voice without taking her eyes off her mirror.

Mbionyi took a few steps backwards and walked quietly out of the office, feeling frustrated. Everyone around him spoke French. On his way out, he saw a door that was ajar. He walked through it and found himself in a large hall filled with people quarrelling over files. There were about fifty people in there, most of them men in their mid-twenties. He decided to approach one of the men.

“Good morning, sir.”

“*Quoi?*”^{xxxvi} the man responded looking at him as if he’d just landed from a strange planet.

"I said good morning, sir", Mbionyi repeated his greeting.

"*C'est un Biafraïsi,*"^{xxxvii} the man said, spitting in his face.

The whole hall burst out into thundering laughter.

Mbionyi had had it. He walked up to his aggressor who was dressed in faded blue jeans and a black shirt, grabbed him by the collar, lifted him off the ground, and threw him on the bare cement floor, *pwam!*

"Gentleman, I am not a dog! I am a human being like you! You don't treat me like dirt!" He said, looking at the hostile faces in the hall like a wounded lion.

The man that he had thrown down got up quickly and gave Mbionyi a kick in his private parts. He lost consciousness and fell to the ground. When he regained consciousness he found himself in a hospital ward at the *Hôpital central de Yaoundé.*^{xxxviii} Londu was sitting beside him on the bed where he was lying.

"My girlfriend informed me of the problem you had at the Ministry this morning. She said you were brought here in an ambulance when she called the police. Are you feeling better?" Londu asked.

"Yes, I'm feeling better," Mbionyi answered, showing his friend the injuries he'd sustained on his testicles as a result of the scuffle.

"I advise you to return to the village as soon as you get well," Londu said.

"Why?"

"I believe that your degree will be put to better use over there in Abakwa."

"You think so?" Mbionyi asked, tears welling in his bloodshot eyes.

"Yes. Don't waste your time here. It is a dead end for people like you who can't speak the French language."

"I see. So it is French or nothing."

Two weeks later, Mbionyi left the *Hôpital central.*

“Take this my friend and pay your way back home,” Londu said, giving him a 20,000 CFA francs banknote.

“Brother, I can’t thank you enough. May God repay your kindness tenfold,” Mbionyi said, taking the money.

“Good luck in your new job search! Remember that this city is a burial ground for educated people like you,” Londu said, waving his tribesman goodbye at the Tchatchou Motor Park in Melen.

Mbionyi arrived home the same day in the evening. His father had left for his cassava farm situated one hundred miles away from the village. Mbionyi entered into his room, threw his bag on the bed, and looked for one of the ropes his father had used in the past for tethering his goats. He made a noose at one end of the rope and tied the loose end to the rafter. Placing a chair right under the rope, he mounted it and inserted his head into the noose up to his neck and let go his body. There was no one at home to stop the suicide mission. When his father returned from his farm three days later a stench from his son’s room caught his attention. Opening the door, he found the inert body of the young man dangling from the roof. It was in a state of putrefaction. A note stuck out of the back pocket of his trousers. His father’s eyes were filled with tears as he read its contents:

Beloved father, I know you will never forgive me for doing this. This is no way to die but I couldn’t stand the humiliation any more. You sent me to school to earn a degree in order to fend for myself. You wanted me to look after you in your old age. Despite my hard work at school, I still cannot look after myself, let alone take care of you as you had hoped. I cannot speak French, therefore, I’m worthless. This country has disowned me. It has treated like an underclass

*human being. It has stolen my life. I am a victim
of circumstances. I love you Papa. Farewell.*