

# EBULUE

Chiedozie Udeze



## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **A SON IS BORN**

It was a normal year for many in Neni. The seasons came as they ought: the dry season first before the rains. In Obi-uno Umudioka community, men and women rose early in the morning to make daily trips to their farms, baskets on heads, hoes hanging from shoulders. The farms were prepared: soil shaped as heaps, seeds sown in each, waiting for the rains. In the evenings, smoke rose with chatter from many huts as banter filled the air and food filled stomachs.

However, that year something spectacular happened in the Udeze family. On Nkwo market day, the thirteenth day of the third month of the year, Eyisi Udeze and his wife Nwaezuonu, welcomed a baby boy, the third child of the family. After nine months of expecting, of watching his third wife's stomach grow, and after hours of waiting at the door of the hut where the midwife urged his wife to be strong and push, Eyisi Udeze heard the screams of a child and was filled with great joy. His face broke into a big smile when he was told that his child was a boy, an heir to carry on his family name. When he finally held his child, he prayed to the Almighty Chineke who had given him such a blessing. He prayed to his ancestors, that his hands that carried this living child would not bury him.

The Udeze family had experienced several cases of child mortality. Nwaezuonu, had herself lost seven children before this child was born. The deaths were not peculiar at the time as there were no hospitals, births were carried out by local midwives and sick children were tended to by traditional herbalists. These were effective to some extent but the people were unable to find the reasons why such repeated deaths happened. Sadly, Eyisi Udeze and his wives were victims too.

Chineke answered Eyisi Udeze's prayers. His son grew strong and healthy. According to tradition, the Udeze baby was named at the ndichie, the family ancestral centre. Members of both families were gathered. After prayers, an excited Eyisi Udeze gave his child two names. The first was "Okonkwo" because he was born on Nkwo market day. The second was "Ozoekwe" because the child was born after his father was given the ozo title. More prayers to Chineke and the gods of the land followed as well as prayers for the baby with nzu. It was years later, when he was baptised at St. John's Catholic Church that he took on "Raphael" as his baptismal name.

The oldest member of the family took the kolanut and broke it. He placed it in his right hand and offered prayers for the person who had gathered them. He welcomed the ancestors to eat out of the kola and said prayers for the newborn.

“Ihe dī mma onye n’achö, ö ga-afü ya.” Whatever good the child seeks, he will find.

“Ise!” everyone responded.

“Ozoekwe will grow old like me; old enough to break kola, strong enough to chew kola even with withering gums.”

“Ise!” everyone chorused amidst chuckles, for how could weak gums chew kola. He went on to pray for everyone present, that as they chuckled, laughter would never depart from their lips.

A thunderous “Ise!” filled the room as the broken kola was passed around from the eldest member of the gathering to the youngest.

Soon, a gourd of palmwine appeared, frothing and hissing at the mouth. It was poured into small calabashes which were passed around till everyone had one.

“May this child fill our lives with so much joy, the way palmwine fills the mouth with so much sweetness,” one man prayed.

“Ise!”

Like the naming ceremony, kolanut breaking plays a unique role in Igbo tradition. It is that silent observer during festivities. It is present during the naming of a child; it is there when death closes every eye in eternal sleep. The kolanut is present when two individuals begin their journey as a couple and there when the journey ends. It is used as an informal way of tracing seniority in a gathering as it is presented in order of seniority. During Ozoekwe’s naming ceremony, it was used to shower the newborn with prayers. Along with the prayers, laughter and goodwill filled the room. These prayers would follow Ozoekwe for the rest of his life.

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