The African e-Journals Project has digitized full text of articles of eleven social science and humanities journals. This item is from the digital archive maintained by Michigan State University Library. Find more at:
http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/africanjournals/

Available through a partnership with

Scroll down to read the article.
Misconception
By Sefi Atta

People

Say I was hot-headed in my twenties, I don't ever remember being hot-headed. I only ever remember calling out to my voice, I could hear it; but I was sure it could not hear me. In my country, women are praised the more they surrender their right to protest. In the end they may die with nothing but selflessness to pass on to their daughters; a startling legacy, like tears down a parched throat. Wise daughters won't drink.

The first time I spoke to Niyi about marriage, I'd discovered my mother was scavenging our trash bags for my used sanitary towels and taking them to church for prayers. Her
That ended any father-son relationship they could have, would not give his blessings. Not until Uncle Fatayi persuaded about how this second marriage of his would have to work. "imagine allowing by the Pope!" Niyi was a divorced Catholic, so he always washing her hands, and another, "pretty thing like
would. But when I told her I wanted to marry Niyi she said they had madness in his family—oh yes. One of his aunt was
hadn't forgotten about his deception. Then it became about being loyal to my mother. After a while, it was really about
having other things to worry about, like work.
At the time, I was still working for Ministry of Justice, and supplementing my income with the odd business incorporation. After we got married, Niyi introduced me to some of his friends in banking, and I found a job in credit control. I was not prepared for my new environment, handling large sums of money within tight deadlines. On the one hand, I had hustlers from treasury pushing me to pass deals; on the other, management cautioning me to check credit lines. The treasury boys would come ten minutes to cut-off time, tallying exactly how much the bank would lose if I didn't make haste. I would get heartburn just from arguing with them. Everyone push you around. "You have to be tougher than this, old girl," he said. "Tell them to go to hell if they pressure you like this. You can't let
approved a deal with an insufficient credit line and management hauled me in for a reprimand.
After work I drove home crying. Niyi took one look at me. "You have to be tougher than this, old girl," he said. "Tell them to go to hell if they pressure you like this. You can't let people push you around."
"You don't know what they're like," I said.
He pulled my nose.
She looked at me as if I'd offered to strip. "Enough now. Ever feel lonely in here? Isn't the kitchen the loneliest room?"

Niyi swore he would never forget the time from which he still harbored grudges; against his ex-son, I would be the one to call his ex-wife, he was wary of everyone but her. Forty-five years later, he had bad arteries and her hands were as dry and shriveled as the meat she fried. Francis Abiola Da Cruz, Esquire. The first time we met he asked, "You're Sonny Taiwo's daughter?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Good breeding always shows," he said. "I'm a horse?"

"He's a horse," Niyi said. "An old nag."

He was one of those Senior Advocates of Nigeria, though he was now out of touch with the Law, and with reality. He would ask his sons to dial if he needed to make a phone call. He sat in the back seat of a car, always, even when one of his sons were driving. He would stop speaking to me after I challenged him on a point of law, and I would disagree with him just for the sake of it. I did not care much for him, but my brothers-in-law, I loved. They would all troop into my house, all four of them looking like Niyi with the same dark skin and thin nose, and I would kiss each of them feeling a rush of libido and motherliness as they greeted me, "Lara of Africa!", "Obirin Metal!", "Alaiye Mama!" It was like welcoming my husband four times over. I didn't even mind sitting with them as they scratched their groins and christened women's parts: her forwards, her backwards, her assets, her giblets. And about Sheri: "She's em, very talented, you know, Hyuh-Hyuh-Hyuh!"

I knew. They were petrified of women, though they denied it. "Who? Who's scared of chicks?" "Sneaking," I said. "Lying. Lying on your last breath. Then you cannot even face somebody to say a relationship is over? That is petrified."

"If you say so! Hyuh-Hyuh-Hyuh!" Scratch, scratch, scratch. Sometimes they brought girlfriends who disappeared by the next visit. Sometimes they played hide-and-seek games with them. I once asked, "Are you boys waiting to marry your mother, or what?" "Of course!" they answered, including Niyi. "Well, em," I said. "Don't you think you should drop your standards a little?" "No," they said, except Niyi.

Niyi bullied his brothers the same way he bullied me, but he could easily become vexed in the middle of our playing. Then he would call me aside and warn, "Better watch what you're saying. Next thing they'll be calling me Woman Lappa." I thought he was paranoid. I thought it was too bad. He was the very person who had encouraged me to be strong at work. It was like asking me to fly within specified parameters. I would have shouting fits about it and he would remain totally silent. He said he wasn't used to arguing that way.
The Da Cruz were one of those Lagos families, descendants of freed slaves from Brazil who once formed the cream of Lagos society. Unrelated to any of the Lagos Cruz, they considered themselves well-bred because their great-grandfather, Papa Cruz, was educated in England. In his time, Papa acquired a huge estate which survived the slum clearance that wiped out most of the Brazilian Quarter in Lagos. Some of the buildings now looked as if a giant fist had come down from heaven and punched them into the ground. Those that remained standing were rickety Latin-style houses with tall shutters and wrought iron balconies. Nothing had been done to improve the drainage system: gutters and pit latrines dating back to colonial times. They were occupied mostly by traders and market people.

Papa Cruz's only son, Niyi's grandfather, had twenty-six children by three different women who died before he did and there had been several documented court cases over his estate. Each faction of Cruz occupied separate pews in the church they attended. It reminded me of my mother's church: incense, white robes and chants. When the collection tray passed, they gave very little. Oil wealth hadn't touched their palms and civil service wages were paltry. The men tilted their noses heavenward, the women fanned their cleavages laden with gold and coral beads, their aso-oke reeked of camphor balls. Nothing had been done to improve the drainage system: gutters and pit latrines dating back to colonial times. They were occupied mostly by traders and market people.

Papa Cruz's only son, Niyi's grandfather, had twenty-six children by three different women who died before he did and there had been several documented court cases over his estate. Each faction of Cruz occupied separate pews in the church they attended. It reminded me of my mother's church: incense, white robes and chants. When the collection tray passed, they gave very little. Oil wealth hadn't touched their palms and civil service wages were paltry. The men tilted their noses heavenward, the women fanned their cleavages laden with gold and coral beads, their aso-oke reeked of camphor balls. Nothing had been done to improve the drainage system: gutters and pit latrines dating back to colonial times. They were occupied mostly by traders and market people.

It was an overload of duties, I thought. Sometimes self-imposed. Aramide, who lived with her in-laws for the first year of her marriage, complained that they were making a cook of her outside work. (Her in-laws were the formidable kind you had to kneel to greet.) Now she was working for an oil company and her husband, a pediatrician, was working at LUTH. They lived in an apartment provided by Aramide's employers, their good car was Aramide's car—people sneered at her husband because of this. Yet, Aramide left work each day, perspiring through traffic to get home in time to cook.

"I don't know why she's doing it," her husband once confided. "She's exhausting herself." But Aramide said she had to. "To make him feel like a man." "He feels it between his legs," I said. "You will learn," she said.

"Learn" was my cerebral passage to womanhood; wisdom, which came from truly accepting that I was less than my husband and being at peace with it; attaining a calmness of spirit. It was the expectation of calm that bothered me the most. How could I calmly defer to a man whose naked buttocks I'd seen? Touched? Obey him without choking on my humility, like a fish bone down my throat. Then whoever plucked it out would say, "Look! It's her humility. She choked on it. Now, she's dead."

It may have been my redemption, since my husband needed a wife he could pity, in peace. Later that night, he called me aside to say, "Why did you have to say that in front of my brothers?" "Well, why can't you ever get the drinks for once?" I answered, "Why can't you go to the kitchen? What will happen if you go? Will a snake bite your leg?"

He did not speak to me for two weeks and I contemplated leaving him for that alone. But you don't leave a man because he sulks, and I wanted a family and I'd seen how he grieved for his. I knew him down to his breath in the mornings. When we were not quarreling, I liked to watch...
him writhing to one whiskey-voiced woman or the other, like the one he called Sarah Vaughn. I could not tell one scat from another, but she said just about everything I wasn't prepared to, using ten words:

Sometimes I love you
Sometimes I hate you
But when I hate you
It's becau-au-au-ause I love you

Months later I got pregnant and shortly after had a miscarriage. I was at work when I felt the first contraction. By the time I arrived home, it was too late. I had passed a blood clot. I cried until I soaked my pillow. Nothing is worse than the loss of a child, even if the child is never born. If a child dies in your care, people understand that you feel responsible. If a child dies within you, they immediately try to absolve you: it is God's way, there is to be no mourning. You never understand why.

I got pregnant again. This time, the baby grew out of my womb and could have killed me had it not been for one smart doctor. I had to have an emergency operation. My doctor told us my chances of having a child after that were reduced. "But keep trying," he said. A year later, we still were. Niyi's relations began to press, "Is everything all right?" They looked at my stomach before looking at my face. Some scolded me outright. "What are you waiting for?" My mother invited me to her vigils. My father offered to send me abroad to see doctors. I asked why they harassed women this way? We were greater than our wombs, greater than the sum of our body parts. Aramide suggested I tried fertility drugs. Didn't I know? Everyone was taking them. They were? "Of course," she said. "One year and nothing is happening? Six months, even."

"Six months!"

She began to name a few women. One who didn't have children. Another who had two, but both were girls. One who did it to trap a man. Where did they get the drugs? "Doctors," she said. Infertility specialists? Um, she didn't know, but they treated infertility all the same. Where did the doctors find these drugs? Black market, she said, or something.

Multiple births, laparoscopies, drug cycles. She gave me details, asked, if I wanted a telephone number. I only wanted to be left alone, I said. At least my husband had a son of his own. No one could accuse me of ending their lineage.

I never once doubted that I would become a mother. Not once. I just didn't know when it would happen, and was not interested in being a guinea pig until then; not after I'd seen what my mother put herself through as the mother of an only child—native medicine, modern medicine, it was all the same.

Two more years passed and we were still trying. I agreed to see a gynecologist who specialized in infertility. Niyi made the appointment and I stuffed my head under a pillow as he spoke to the receptionist, but he refused to use a fake name. "It's not a VD clinic," he said. We arrived there and saw the amount of cars parked on the street, walked in and I saw that some of the women were as old as my mother. I was one of the few with a man by her side. The infertility specialist arrived on hour later, chin up, stomach forward. He grunted in response to our greetings. I ducked a little like the other women. Didn't even know why.GR