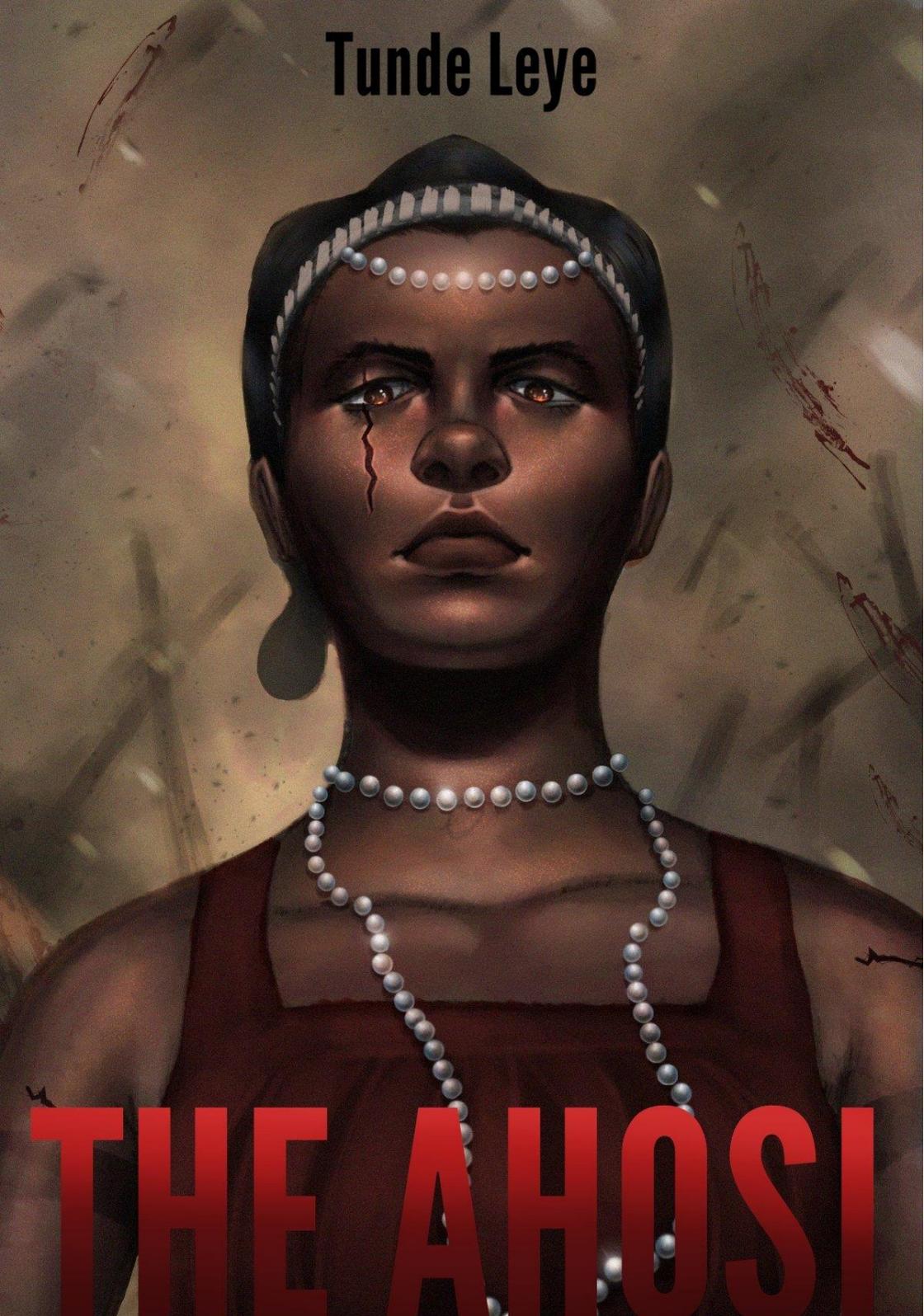


Tunde Leye



THE AHOSI

The

Ahosi

By Tunde Leye



“Charge!”

The commander’s voice rang like a bell above the thumping of the drums in the clear afternoon. We sprang from our crouching position like thunderbolts from the hand of Xevioso, all three hundred of us moving as one. We reached our objective after a short sprint. I felt like Gu, the god of war himself was running with me as the blood raced through my veins and the hair on the back of my neck stood. I was one of the first to reach the wall and without breaking a stride, I leapt onto it. A sharp pain shot through my hands as I found a hold in the wall lined with acacia thorns. I heard someone to my left howl in pain. I could not show any weakness. Weakness would be noted, whether by the enemy or our commander. And whether I landed in the hands of the enemy or we were victorious after the battle, such weakness meant death. So I did not flinch as I scaled the wall even though I bled from different places.

Below, I could see the enemy waving their clubs, ready for us. Fear surged through me. I had never actually killed a man. In the brief moment that I hesitated, Nanisca and two others jumped ahead of me into the battle. There was no way I was going to let Nanisca best me. The fear evaporated and gave way to the rage I had been trained to bring forth in moments like this. I leapt forward, unsheathing my blade mid-air. A man rushed to the spot I was going to land, waving his club. Catching the reflection of the sun, my blade gleamed and whistled through the air. The man’s body was headless as my feet touched the floor. Finally, I was an Ahosi. I had killed my first man.

I do not remember the rest of the battle. It was the final rites in our initiation into the Ahosi of the Kingdom of Dahomey, after five years of gruelling training. The people called us Mino, their mothers, but no man would ever mount any of

us and no child would ever come out of our wombs. I liked it that way. I hated the weakness that childbirth brought to my own mother and other mothers I had seen. I had made up my mind early that I would never be weak like that, ever. When the men had disgraced themselves against the Egbas six years ago and our great king Gezo was nearly captured by those scar-faced Yoruba, it had been up to the six hundred strong Ahosi who were his personal bodyguard to save him. King Gezo in his wisdom had seen that we are braver and fiercer than the men and the Ahosi are now six thousand strong. We have vowed to get revenge for our king against those effeminate Egbas. I cannot wait to hold an Egba head in my hands.

The battle was over and we were victorious over the captives. We stood in the middle of the square, panting as the drums kept rolling and the people cheered. Our commander ordered us to move forward. I marched the two captives I had taken before our king. In my hands, I held two heads. My blood stained blade was clenched between my teeth. Presently, we stood before the king. He sat on his sacred stool, under his huge umbrella. On his feet were the royal sandals he had taken off the evil King Adandozan when he wrested the kingdom from him. Two priestesses in spotless white wrappers stood in front of him holding a perforated clay pot. It was said that in the pot there was water from the sacred grove at Oueme. Along with the buffalo and two birds on a tree, they formed King Gezo's sacred symbols. On his right sat the Migan and on his left the Mehu, the principal chiefs. All around him, the other chiefs in colourful dresses sat on lesser stools, a white man in their midst. I had heard that the white men came

and went in giant boats from a place even the greatest crocodile could not swim to.

This was the closest I had ever been to our lord and I quivered with excitement. By right, he was the husband to all the Ahosi and was the only man allowed to mount us. Anyone he chose to so take was honoured by the gods indeed for the king was the representative of the gods on earth. I felt a quaking on my insides with desire. I did not feel ashamed as I would have if an ordinary man aroused such feelings in me.

There were three women between Nanisca and I. I chuckled through gritted teeth. She had not performed as well as I did. She had only one captive but held two heads in her hands as well. Our eyes met and I gloated silently. She glared at me and then looked away, fixing her gaze on the king. Most of the other girls had not managed to capture anyone alive. Almost all held at least one head in their hands. The weaklings that did not have a captive or a head had been separated from us. If they were lucky, they would be put to work producing palm oil for the king. Our commander finished her address to the king and he turned and whispered something to the white man. Then he pointed at me. My heart almost leapt out of my mouth. But he pointed at Nanisca too. My friend Nawi too had done very well and he pointed at her. That was three of us. Not so special anymore. I felt my spirit dampen a little.

Suddenly, a loud bell began to ring. It could only mean one thing. Seh Dong Hong Beh, was coming. The drums went silent even as men and women fled quickly from the arena to a safe distance. Her fame was great in the city and in the field, and no man dared to cross her path. I had seen her only once before at the commencement of our training. I remembered the fire in her eyes from

that encounter. It was said that she could spit fire like Xevioso and that Gu, was her lover. For someone like her, even the king could not mount her, only a god could attempt such a thing. She stopped in front of each of us that the king had pointed out and tapped us on the shoulder. We instinctively followed her. She led us up towards the king and after a few steps, she suddenly fell on the ground and began to crawl forward with her elbows. We followed her lead. Thankfully, our uniforms had sleeves so I did not feel the pain in my elbows too much. We stopped a within a stone's throw of the king.

"Rise, my brave Ahosi," he commanded.

We jumped to our feet as one. Seh Dong looked at us and scowled. "And why do you still have these novice blades with you?"

I unclenched my teeth and my blade fell to the ground. The king sprang from his stool like a leopard pouncing on its prey and produced three new blades as if out of thin air. These ones were different from the ones we just dropped. It was only the elite of the Ahosi that wielded it and it was said to be specially prepared with the powerful juju of the king's own kpojito, the most powerful priestess in the land. We had also heard that these blades were so potent that one swing would cut a man in half. Seh Dong handed out one blade each to the three of us.

"Our king wants the white man to see the power of our Ahosi and the sharpness of our blade. Now prove yourselves worthy of wielding these blades," she said and then signalled us to turn around. Our captives had been carried bound in special baskets and were stood up behind us. I beamed with pride as I was the only one with two captives. "Now show the white man what your blades can do.

Send these ones with a message of Dahomey's power to the ancestors," she ordered.

I fought down the instinct to close my eyes and swung my blade with both hands. The sword lived up to its reputation and cut right through the man. As if accepting the sacrifice of blood, the gods opened the heaven and a light rain fell.

Possession of these blades meant we were the vanguard of the Ahosi. It also meant that we were given command of our company. Again, I bested Nanisca and was given overall command of the company. Nanisca was to command the right and Nawi the left as my deputies. Now stripped of our warrior clothes, Nawi looked almost ordinary. She was the daughter of a Whydah chief by his Ketu slave. She had learnt her mother's Yoruba tongue. I had in turn learnt the language from her so we could gossip in peace. She had had a normal childhood, destined to marry some minor official, but then her father died on a slave raid in the hands of the Mahi. His principal wife quickly swung into action as soon as they received the news. Her mother was sold to the white men, never to be seen again and her sisters began to die of poisoning. Nawi refused to eat any food at home and went around Whydah, appealing to her father's friends for help but they all feared her stepmother too much and turned her away. Her stepmother was the daughter of the powerful Chacha of Whydah and it was he who sold Nawi's mother. The Chacha was the wealthiest trader in Dahomey and was also the king's personal friend. No one wanted to get into her stepmother's bad books. So she had fled to the Abomey and begged to be taken into the Ahosi. It was the only way she could escape their reach. She privately told me

she hoped that Whydah would rebel or give the king a reason to sack it one day. She would personally lead the charge and exact revenge on the town and its nobles. She would bring the king the head of the Chacha.

"They captured an Egba spy in the palace. The Egbas know of our plan to attack now and will be prepared," I announced to the young women who were gathered around me. There were about twenty of them and none of us was older than twenty. We were discussing the news that we would be marching to Abeokuta at dawn.

"I cannot wait to hold some Egba heads in my hands, with their foolish face markings," Nanisca said and spat. The other girls cheered and howled.

"I would call the attack off for now if I was the king. The elders said the Egbas were caught unawares when we attacked them six years ago and yet they still managed to defeat our army. We must not underestimate them," Nawi said.

"And why should the great Gezo do that? Is he a coward? Does he fear the ugly Yoruba scum? Did he not defeat the Oyo horse three times? Why should the conqueror of the Oyo be afraid of the little Egba? Did he have Ahosi in that battle where the men shamelessly gave way? Or are you a coward Nawi?" Nanisca responded.

I saw anger flicker in Nawi's eyes but it was gone so quickly I was not quite sure it was ever there. It appeared Nanisaca noticed it too as she stood up and put some distance between herself and Nawi.

"You know these Whydah people; they are not as brave as we true Abomey people, so Nawi can..." Like a flash, Nawi was upon the speaker, a girl who was

always eager to please Nanisca. We formed a circle around them and more girls gathered to watch the fight. They lunged for each other's throats and grappled. The girl was bigger than Nawi and lifted her off the ground easily, grinning. She thought the fight was over but Nawi swung her legs around and she lost her balance while holding Nawi up. That was all Nawi needed. As the girl staggered, Nawi landed on the floor and in the same movement used her legs to sweep the girl off her feet. Quick as a cat, she sat astride the girl, pinned her arms to her sides with her knees and began to stuff her mouth with earth.

"That is enough," our commander shouted. Nanisca was by her side. She had gone to call the commander when it was clear her girl was losing. The commander glared at me. "You were here and let this happen? Do you think you are just girls? You are now Ahosi and will act with the necessary dignity. I see you are not fully ready for command. I will be commanding this company tomorrow. We march at dawn but this will be dealt with when we return from battle". From the corner of my eye, I caught Nanisca gloating.

*****+ + + + + + + +*****

All the sacrifices completed, we marched out at dawn. Unlike other armies that made noise and chanted as they moved, Ahosi moved as quietly as a snake on a rock. We simply came out of nowhere and struck when you least expected it. We avoided the main roads and went through the lush forest paths. This was not anything to us; part of our training required us to survive in the dense jungle with nothing but a blade for five days. On the way, we sacked two villages and two farm settlements loyal to the Egbas as revenge for the two villages loyal to us they had sacked six years ago. We took no captives and made sure no one escaped. I proved myself in those battles, increasing my body count to ten. We

camped in one of the farms on the first night. Around the campfires, veteran Ahosi shared war stories with the younger women. Our commander was telling us about the legend of Agontime.

"As the battle raged," she said, "we ran out of bullets first. Then many began to fall. Agontime killed so many Egba that day that her blade became dull with the blood it had caused to flow. The Egba thought she was done for." She paused for effect. "Then she began to bite off their necks with only her teeth!"

We all shrieked and cheered. The drink so generously supplied by our king flowed. That night, after everyone else was asleep, Nawi and I lay awake, staring at the stars.

"You know the real end of Agontime's story?" she asked.

"Of course. She eventually fell in the battle after killing a hundred men. The Egbas have not come back near Abomey since that time because of her valour."

"That is what they told us. But do you want to know what really happened?" she said in her usual solemn manner.

"You have come again Nawi. Okay tell me, what really happened?"

"She was captured by the Egba. I have heard she now lives as the slave wife of an Egba chief."

"Never! Which man can tame such a powerful Ahosi?" I asked louder than I meant to. Someone stirred close to us and Nawi hushed me.

"If I am ever captured, I will not become my mother. I will be no man's slave wife," Nawi said with finality. Another person would have called her a coward

for voicing the possibility of defeat but I was wiser. She turned and fell asleep without bidding me goodnight.

As the light faded on the second day of our march, Abeokuta appeared on the horizon. By midnight, we stood before the acacia filled moat that formed the city's first line of defence. The walls rose far higher than the walls of Abomey and a great rock rose in the background, a shadow darker than the rest of the shadows that made up the moonlit night. It was a big city, bigger than I had imagined a city could be. None of these would be a problem for us. More people simply meant more heads and more captives. Taking such a great city would cause great songs to be written about us.

The Egbas were clearly expecting us. All the farms we had passed were empty of people, livestock and even produce. They meant to starve us while they cowered behind their walls, the cowardly Egba. I looked around my own company. I couldn't see far even with the moonlight but I saw that Nanisca and Nawi, easily recognizable with their commander cowrie adorned caps similar to the one I had on. They were as ready as I was with their rifles already in hand, poised like a snake ready to deliver deadly venom into unsuspecting prey. Just two nights ago, we were having a petty quarrel. Now, we were about to take a city no one had ever taken before, the city under a rock. Seh Dong's command pierced the darkness and the war drums echoed it. We stormed the wall.

We sat in the dust, stripped of our uniforms and weapons. The battle had been fought fiercely and raged non-stop for two days. We fought until our bullets

were exhausted and our guns jammed. But the Egba kept coming. We cut them down with our blades until our blades became dull and bounced off as clubs off a tree. Yet there was no end to the Egba who poured out to fight us. Many of them fought as cowards, shooting at us from vantage places behind hills and mounds rather than come out to fight as men. I saw the great Seh Dong fall to the fire of one such coward. I tried to use my teeth to fight as the legendary Agontime before me had done, but I was not the stuff of legend. I found myself captured by the enemy after exhaustion finally wore me down. I must have increased my kill count to over a fifty men. But no one would sing songs about this feat, for in spite of my valour, we were defeated. All that was left of the six thousand Ahosi that left Abomey four days earlier was a number not larger than my company of two hundred and eighty. I wondered if we would become the enemy in some mock battle to graduate their own soldiers in the days to come.

*****++++*****

We were herded into a large courtyard. The men shoved us roughly and every time one of them touched me, I cringed. How dare any man touch me, an Ahosi? The gates were locked and we were left alone. There was no guard in sight, but I was certain we were being watched from crevices in the hills that surrounded the courtyard. A familiar voice called my name. I turned around and saw Nanisca. I never thought the day would come when I would be glad to see her. I rushed to her and there I saw Nawi and our commander crouching. We forgot about our predicament for a moment and held each other, glad to have set eyes on friends again. All over the courtyard, such scenes were playing out. In no time, we had gathered into groups.

"I am hungry," Nanisca said.

"Do they intend to starve us to death? They should have killed us on the battlefield," I added.

"That would have been a more befitting death to Ahosi," Nanisca said.

"I listened closely to their chatter as we they held us outside," Nawi chipped in. She was always very attentive. "Their dialect is different from the Yoruba I know, but I pieced together what they plan to do with us," she continued. She had our rapt attention now.

"They plan to sell most of us to Ijebu slave traders and select some to be slave wives to their chiefs."

"I would rather die than have any of these Egba filth with their scarred faces mount me," I declared.

The gate opened and heavily armed men entered the courtyard. Behind them, some women carried huge calabashes of raw foodstuff, firewood and cooking utensils on their heads and dumped it before us. One of the men stepped forward and spoke in our own tongue. "This is your food. In Abeokuta, no man cooks for women, so you will cook your own food if you want to eat."

"Ahosi do not cook," a voice from amongst us said. We picked up the cry and began to chant defiantly "Ahosi do not cook." We kept this up for a while, raising our voices and our spirits along with it. As the chant died down, we realized the Egbas had left and locked the gate. One by one, we sat down as the hunger of not eating for two days finally showed the futility of our protests. Nawi was the first to approach the foodstuff. I followed and went about setting up a fire. From

the surrounding hills, we heard mocking laughter, amplified by the echoes from the rocks. I gritted my teeth in anger.

*****+ + + +*****

I did not want to sleep. But a full belly, coupled with the exhaustion did not help my resolve and I succumbed to sleep shortly after eating. It was later I realised it was a clever plan. Perhaps the Egbas knew we would have resisted if we were not sleeping. A commotion woke me up and I reached for my blade instinctively before it dawned on me where I was. Strong arms picked me up by my arms and legs and carried me off in spite of my struggles. I tried to scream but they stuffed my mouth and each time I tried, I swallowed more cloth until I gave up. I was afraid they were going to sacrifice me to their gods like we did to prisoners at our own Annual Huetanu. I decided I was not going to go like a coward, like those men who thrashed around as if it would change their fate. The first light of day was just appearing and I could see my surroundings better. I looked around. Nawi and Nanisca seemed destined to share my fate as they were here amongst the ten of us I counted. They bound my feet, removed my gag and dumped me on the floor. We had been brought into a different, smaller courtyard. There was no priest in sight.

Suddenly we heard drumming and voices singing. Men began to run around, setting down stools. Maybe we were about to see their king before we met our end. The drumming got louder until they reached us and we saw richly dressed men dancing, accompanied by a retinue of women with beautifully plaited hair. Their aso-oke was beautiful. The men sat down and began to discuss. Clearly we were the topic of their deliberations as they pointed in our direction intermittently. I saw Nawi cock her head to the side to hear what they were

saying better. The dialect sounded strange to me and I could not make out any meaning. Nawi translated what she could as they spoke. These were the chiefs who would share us out as wives amongst themselves. The rest in the other courtyard would be taken to the Ijebus. I was ashamed that I felt relief at the news that I would not be sold. Where was my pride?

One of the women stepped forward. Her own clothes were simple adire and she was bent over, with the demeanour of one who did a lot of sturdy work. I had seen enough slaves in Abomey to tell that she was one from the way she averted her eyes, bent her head and walked like she did not want to be seen. She was carrying a huge gourd and as she poured it out for the men, the smell of fresh palmwine filled the air. My throat felt even drier as I watched them drink.

"Agontime," one of the older Ahosi shouted.

The woman's head shot up involuntarily as she heard her name called. She looked around as if she was in a dream.

I could not believe my eyes. My eyes met Nawi's and she smiled a sad knowing smile.

I saw tears fill the eyes of our commander as she recognized the woman as well. The commander braced herself and shouted the Ahosi command to advance.

It was almost as if something was unlocked in the woman that stood before the Egba chiefs. Her head shot up again, and this time, she straightened and threw the gourd of palmwine away. Her eyes became drawn together, ferocious. Crouching, she sprang forward and began to race towards the wall of the courtyard. When she got there, she fell on one knee and aimed a gun only she

could see. With each imaginary shot, she recoiled and then fell flat, crawling forward on her elbows rapidly. Two Egba guards ran up to her and she made a gesture like she dropped her gun and then lunged at one of the men, ripping out his throat with her teeth. The second man tackled her and they fell to the ground in a heap, grappling and rolling around. Within moments, she was on top of him and unsheathed an imaginary blade and began to stab the man repeatedly. As suddenly as she had started, she stopped and got up from the man. She looked even older than she had done initially and her eyes had lost their ferocity. A shot rang out and she fell where she stood.

*****++++*****