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The Great Beyond

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THE GREAT BEYOND

Author: Cyprian Ekwensi (1921-)

Type of plot: Sketch, fantasy

Time of plot: The late 1960's or the early 1970's

Locale: Lagos, Nigeria

First published: 1975

Principal characters:

IKOLO, the dead man

JOKEH, his wife

THE WELL-FED PASTOR

LITTLE RAIFU, a fourteen-year-old son of an undertaker

THE PATEY STREET TRADER, who owes Ikolo money

The Story

The story opens with the funeral of Ikolo, a jovial, convivial man who had predicted that on the day of his funeral he would return "if only to have his last laugh." In Lagos, Nigeria, the length of a funeral procession usually tells "the sort of man who had died." However, although Ikolo was quite popular and was known and appreciated for delighting in making people laugh, his funeral procession is unusually short. Everything about the funeral and the day on which it occurs is strange and ominous: the dreary rain, the "disturbed" singing, the disorganized procession, the general lack of coordination, and the rather awkward, irreverent atmosphere, all of which are noted by the onlookers who line the procession route.

The hearse bearers lead the bare-bones procession, attended only by a small familial group of mourners consisting of Ikolo's mother-in-law, aunts, uncles, sisters, and nephews. Over the combined din of the unsynchronized singing, the mourners' weeping, and the grinding wheels of the hearse, a strange noise arises. At first the sound is barely audible to anyone except Ikolo's mother-in-law but later is loud enough to be heard by others, particularly the hearse bearers, who soon determine that the now thunderous knocking sound is coming from inside the sealed coffin. The mourners are stopped cold in their tracks by a muffled voice, calling out the name of the dead man's wife, Jokeh, asking her to open the casket. Shocked at the now distinctly violent knocking from within the coffin, the panic-stricken hearse bearers drop the casket and flee as if possessed, as do the rest of the mourners and onlookers. Even the pastor momentarily forgets his duty and dashes off, then returns, mortified. He runs frantically from house to house, seeking help in opening the coffin. Little Raifu, the brave fourteen-year-old son and apprentice of his father, an undertaker, offers the pastor tools with which to pry open the coffin. They manage to open the coffin, revealing the cherubic-faced Ikolo, who sits up, decked out in his favorite forty-pound suit, and calls for his grieving, frightened wife who stands rooted before her husband's coffin.

More than one half hour later, Jokeh lurches forward suddenly and carefully lays her husband down in the coffin, and as if to ensure certainty, she nails down the coffin lid for the burial. With bewildering certainty, she acknowledges that she has understood her husband's wordless message and his clear instructions that were otherwise inaudible to the confused pastor who had been standing beside her the entire time. What did Jokeh hear that nobody else could hear? How could they "hear" when they all committed the cowardly, irreverent act of running away? Even the pastor who stuck around did so reluctantly, out of duty, having first indulged his "instinct of self-preservation" like everyone else.

Two weeks later, Jokeh visits a trader, a stranger whom she had never seen before. How she knew exactly where to go and whom to ask for remains a mystery. Emboldened by the transforming power often believed to come from an encounter with spirits from the Great Beyond, Jokeh confidently confronts the Patey Street trader, who tries to dismiss her attempt to execute her dead husband's instructions to collect forty-five pounds, ten shillings, two and a half pence, a debt owed him that he was to have collected on the day he died. Carrying the money carefully wrapped in the folds of her garment, she heads for the pastor's house and tells him that the money is to be distributed as alms on a Friday to the poor and needy, according to her husband's wishes. His faith rattled to the core and befuddled by Jokeh's transformation and ability to hear what he himself could not despite "his daily devotion to the Great Beyond," the pastor recognizes the mystery of the great power of the Great Beyond and the important message of repentance and atonement from one who has experienced it firsthand and returned to tell it to a devoted wife.

Themes and Meanings

Like many of Cyprian Ekwensi's works, "The Great Beyond" deals with Nigerian city dwellers, the stock-in-trade characters of most of his novels and short stories. As its title implies, the story is about the city dwellers' preoccupation with and response to death and dying and the questions of existence and mortality that often surface during the funerals of others. In "The Great Beyond," Ekwensi takes up the themes of death, the occult, and clairvoyance, weaving folk belief with humor and irony in a way that neither questions the validity of the folk beliefs about death and the afterlife nor ridicules the characters' belief system. He simply poses the questions of life and death and the idea of the hereafter in an amusingly serious way through characterization. For example, Ekwensi casts Ikolo, the dead protagonist, as a jesting, carefree, life-loving sort whose death affords both his less-than-pious wife and the well-fed pastor an invaluable opportunity not only to broach the serious metaphysical and theological questions about the meaning of existence and the nature of the great beyond but also to attempt to make some sense of good and evil and repentance.

Throughout the story, Ekwensi is able to maintain an undercurrent of seriousness by the very nature of the subject matter and still sustain a humorous tone throughout the story, albeit with his moral finger wagging. However, unlike the sometimes heavy-handed moralizing for which he has come under much criticism in his major works,

Ekwensi frames the story's moral subtly in the final exchange between Jokeh and the pastor who, ironically, is the one of the two that has to ponder the question of morality and the essence of his own calling as a "preparer" of souls.

Style and Technique

Although Ekwensi has come under much criticism for what some consider his lack of skilled craftsmanship and unrefined prose style, his reputation as one of Nigeria's most prolific popular fiction writers has never been disputed. A self-styled writer for the masses, Ekwensi makes no apologies for the simplicity of plot that characterizes his stories, particularly as his shorter novels and a number of his short stories are directed toward a younger audience. Like his novels, the fifteen short stories in *Restless City and Christmas Gold, with Other Stories* (1975), including "The Great Beyond," have a moral bent.

"The Great Beyond" is written in simple, straightforward English, typical of Ekwensi's journalistic style. Told in the third person, the story laces humor with pathos and irony, especially evident in the characterization of the hearse bearers who, lacking the pastor's somewhat shaky sense of duty, wear their "instinct of self-preservation" on their sleeves. They form a humorous but pathetic bunch as they scramble into nearby buildings for cover when the corpse knocks from inside the coffin.

The pastor's lack of understanding of metaphysics serves as the most glaring example of disconnectedness from an environment in which belief in the coexistence of the supernatural and natural worlds is commonplace and the dead are believed to have the ability to traverse both worlds. It is ironic that Jokeh, the wife of the dead man—not the pastor—gives some meaning and clarity to these folk beliefs. It is also ironic that Jokeh, the once frightened and grieving but now empowered widow, pushes Ikolo back into the coffin and nails it shut, in preparation for his strange burial. Ekwensi's behold-the-way-of-the-world message—illustrated through the irony of the shortness of the funeral procession of the man who made a life of laughing and making others laugh—is suggested through much of the action of the story.

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