

# SWALLOW

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

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EFUNSETAN ANIWURA

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MASOBE

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## Author's Note

The first time I heard the name Efunsetan Aniwura, it was being screamed in a play on NTA (Nigerian Television Authority) Ibadan. A stage play written by Akinwunmi Isola that was adapted for television. This was the early eighties, and in those days NTA Ibadan had a wide array of indigenous shows. Next to Baba Sala (Moses Olanya), Ishow Pepper (Isola Ogunsola) theatre troupe was my favourite. Every Sunday afternoon, myself and my siblings will sit in front of our coloured TV and watch the different shows. Efunsetan Aniwura played by Felicia Ogunsola, was one of the most memorable acting that I ever saw. I still remember how exciting it was to watch a woman owning it and fighting back. I also remember the annoyance I felt each time I watched her portrayal; even as a child I knew no one could be as totally dark and cruel as they made her.

I eventually got to read the play for my grandfather during one of my holidays in Abeokuta. By this time the Efunsetan Aniwura played by Felicia Ogunsola on television, had left an indelible mark on me.

Sometime in 2016, during my research into Yoruba Queer History, I stumbled across the name again. Turns out Efunsetan was actually a historical figure, not just a caricature trussed up for entertainment. She lived through most of the slave taking wars that happened in the south-west of present day Nigeria and had been a powerful woman in her own right.

Efunporonye Osintinubu is also another powerful woman that lived through this period (1800s-1900s). Unlike Efunsetan,

her story was not televised, but she featured heavily in the oral history told to me by my great-grandmother. A much admired woman who fought colonialists in Lagos until she was banished and forcefully removed to Abeokuta, where she spent the rest of her days protecting women, and was so powerful she was made the first Iyalode of Abeokuta, the same way Efunsetan was the first Iyalode of Ibadan.

It tickled me no end that these women grew up in the same city of Abeokuta before their search for fortune and adventure led them to other cities. Armed with my knowledge of the role slave taking and colonialism played in the erasure of women from public life, especially in the Yoruba States of South-West Nigeria, and how they fought back, I combed through histories written by women and oral histories (including Ifa histories of Yoruba city-states accumulated over centuries and encoded in the Ifa Divination system).

One of the tenets that has guided my writing is Toni Morrison's wisdom: "If there's a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, you must write it." And this is why I decided to re-imagine and fictionalise these phenomenal women in a book that is worthy of their legacy.

**SWALLOW**

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS  
Efunsetan Aniwura

**1820-1840**

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# PART 1

## RITES OF PASSAGE

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# 1

## Ìyá Alàró

Èfúnṣetán sat in the courtyard, staring into space, her mind empty of thoughts. Oil lamps flickered in the distance, and once in a while, whispers and muted laughter were gifted to her by the air as lovers cavorted in the adjoining cocoyam and plantain garden; their feet squelching mud from one compound to another.

Palmwine had been in abundance all week. Her neighbours, cousins, and distant relatives had returned to Abeokuta to celebrate her marriage rites with their gifts and contributions. In the past, she would have been as tipsy as they were—she enjoyed the soothing high she got from palmwine almost as much as the thrill of meeting her lovers under the cover of darkness—but tonight marked the end of life as Èfúnṣetán had known it. There will be no more secret meetings at the night market at Òsièlè, neither will there be whispers of bodies twinning in Baba Šaléwá’s orchard, the one that runs from Ìkijà to Ìtókú.

Since the outbreak of war, and declaration of curfew between sunset and sunrise by the Ògbóni, lovers had to stick closer to home, providing grist for the gossip mill. Tonight, she had no interest in who was following who, to where, to do what. By sunset tomorrow, she will be married, and by the new moon, she will leave her luxurious, almost decadent life in Abeokuta for the wilds of Ibadan, the city of seven hills, pestilence and bandits.

“I knew I would find you here.”

Ẹfúnṣetán's head whipped towards the direction of the voice and found her grandmother, Ìyá Alàró, emerging from the darkness. She was holding an oil lamp aloft with one hand and carrying a small stool in the other. Ẹfúnṣetán sprang up and relieved her of both.

“E kàalé, Ìyá.”

Instead of responding to her greetings, Ìyá Alàró sat on the stool facing away from her, then she shifted around until they were seated so closely their knees almost touched.

Ẹfúnṣetán swallowed an impatient sigh at her grandmother's theatrics. She was about saying something caustic when she met Ìyá Alàró's eyes; eyes that stared through her into her soul. She swallowed her words and looked away.

“Why are you not in bed, Ìyá?”

“Old age.” Ìyá Alàró blinked rapidly and rubbed the back of her neck. “Old age and a troubling dream I have had almost every night for the past two weeks.” She paused, weighing her words. “I have observed your night wanderings and been tempted to join you in sitting out here.”

She looked up once again, eyes trained on the silhouette of the Olúmọ hills in the distance. She shivered and drew her woolen shawl tighter. “The skies are dark, the air cold and sharp, one can only hope that the rains will come soon. That Ọya would look upon us with benevolence and bring ease to our lives on this plane.”

Ẹfúnṣetán laughed at the mention of the Ọ̀sà. “Ah, Ìyá, you're asking for Ọya's kindness when you know she does as she pleases.” She scanned the skies, the clouds were dark and heavy. “I worry that it will rain tomorrow.”

Ìyá's smile widened, her eyes twinkled with amusement. “It will not. I have sent for Là̀dounpé, he will hold the rain.” She reached for Ẹfúnṣetán's hand and grasped it gently. “Ẹfun, I have some things to say and I want you to listen carefully. I have already given Rẹ̀mílẹ̀kún instructions, so she will know what to do.”

Remilekun was Iya's llori. She has been running her household even before Efunsetan was born.

"By the time you complete your marriage rites tomorrow, I will be dead."

Efunsetan shivered.

"Actually I am not sure of when or how." Dreadful words tumbled out of Iya's mouth. "But I know that this body will be emptied of its soul and I will be joining the ancestors. I have consulted Orunmila. I was advised to accept my fate and put my affairs in order. They insist that I have lived a long and fulfilled life, and I should be grateful the Irunmole are even bothering to tell me anything."

Efunsetan tried to control her shivers, and failed. Iya took both hands in hers and sat with her in quietude until her shivers subsided.

What Iya was telling her was not so unusual. Elders were known to inform their family members about their deaths. Her own great-grandfather had made the same announcement a week before he died, but, Efunsetan had always assumed that Iya would live forever. The grandmother she knew and loved had never been sick a single day. She went about her aro business with the same dedication she applied during her years as an itinerant trader along the west coast, a business that Efunsetan's mother was now running. Iya was known to take and dump lovers as often as she threw parties, for the heck of it! How could someone so alive, whose touch was so warm, be on the verge of death?

Tears sprang to her eyes, but she didn't let them fall. She plastered a big smile on her face. It was not yet time to mourn. Perhaps the foretelling of death would pass as another flight of fancy. Iya had an imagination and a habit for casting herself as a tragic hero in one of her stories.

Iya rubbed her palm gently over Efunsetan's hands.

"Death is another stage of life, you should not mourn me too much."

In a flash of anger Èfúnṣetán pulled her hands out of her grandmother's and shifted her knees away from her. "Why have you decided to die on the day of my happiness? Why can't you wait until after I've left for Ibadan? What difference would a day or two make? Honestly I think this your pronouncement is typical, self-centred. You had to ruin—" Èfun swallowed the rest of her words when she realised how selfish she sounded.

Death was not something her clan discussed with levity, neither did they take it too hard. Life is a continuum and on the scale of importance, Ìyá's impending death was a weightier issue than her marriage.

Ìyá drew Èfúnṣetán into her arms and comforted her as she sobbed into her blouse.

"Do you think it's easy telling you something like this? You need to gird yourself. Your father is at the war-front and your mother will not be able to make it for the celebrations. I have already sent word to my ẹgbẹ, they will be here tomorrow to support you and ensure things run smoothly."

Èfúnṣetán used the edge of her wrapper to wipe her face and sat back on the stool. She wrestled with the feeling that Ìyá Alàró was choosing to ruin her wedding instead of postponing her death, despite the fact that she understood how ridiculous that sounded.

"The situation is out of my control, there are other forces involved. . ."

As Ìyá Alàró took another dramatic pause, Èfúnṣetán realised that she was doing it to soften the dreadful words she was saying.

"Your brother, Kúmúyílò has done something terrible."

Èfúnṣetán snapped out of her funk. She felt the stirrings of anger. Anger was an emotion she was quite familiar with. It had saved her from falling into the sheer pathos of living. It gave her something real to hold on to and Kúmúyílò had mastered the craft of enraging her especially since he'd started schooling in that cursed missionary school in Lagos. They'd sent off a quiet, well-mannered young man at the beginning of the school year and by

the end of his first term he'd turned into an angry teenager who threw tantrums at will.

“What has he done this time, Ìyá?”

Ìyá shook her head, “I do not know but he has set some things in motion. You will have to forgive him, he's your only brother.”

Her three days insomnia caught up with her at that moment; her shoulders slumped, and all she wanted was the sweet embrace of sleep, but Ìyá Alàró wasn't done with her.

“Now,” Ìyá's voice took on a businesslike tone, “about my oil-palm farms in Ibadan and some of my rice farms along the Ògùn river. . .”

Eḡúnṣetán jolted out of her fatigue. If nothing else, she had learned from the women in her lineage that land ownership was the gateway to wealth, to securing their future generations, their freedom. Eḡúnṣetán was a second-generation Òyó refugee. Before they came to Šòḡeké's Abeokuta, there had been displacement, kidnapping, and so much sadness within the family. They had lost their place and power after the demise of Òyó Empire, and for what seemed like years, had fled from enemies who would annihilate them. Her people had to dig deep to make new lives for themselves, and it was up to her to continue that legacy and claim new spaces, so that they would never find themselves homeless again.

“You already gave me some farmland, so did Màámí.”

“Ehn, I know, but this dying that is happening tomorrow, what can we do about it? I was hoping to give you your share after you have proven yourself a shrewd business woman but. . .” She spread her hands helplessly.

Eḡúnṣetán said nothing. The possible death of the woman who had raised her from childhood into adolescence before handing her back to her mother to be trained in trade and diplomacy was not something she wished to consider further.

Ìyá grabbed her hands again. “As I was saying, Rẹ̀mílẹ̀kún knows the size and location of all my farmlands. I have also sent

a message to Olúyẹ̀dun, my grandfather's brother's son, who is presently the Baálè of that blighted village of thieves and cutthroats that call themselves warlords. His grandfather was the one that helped secure our lands after we fled from Òyó. . .” She trailed off, her eyes looking into the space beyond Ẹfun's shoulders. “I still don't know why you chose that wild place instead of joining your mother to trade in Port-Novo—”

“Ìyá!” Ẹfun chided her grandmother. “I thought that you have been convinced that this is a good business venture. Ahn ahn, aren't you the one who loaned me money to start up over there? Ibadan looks promising.”

“Yes, it is a promising city of cutthroats and criminals.” Ìyá sucked her teeth. “All they do is wage war on innocent people and sell them to slavers.”

“We would have been overrun by the Fulani if not for them!” Ẹfunsetán insisted. She smiled and softened her tone, “I want to be a part of something new, like you Ìyá. When your parents brought you here wasn't Abeokuta just a hamlet with a few people who had escaped from European slave traders and sought refuge with Sòdeké? Aren't you proud of what Abeokuta has become? A state with its own army, fleet of barges, and a thriving economy. We even have our own missionaries now.”

Ìyá sighed in the manner she had taken to doing whenever Europeans or missionaries were mentioned.

“Ehn ehn, about money.” She changed the subject. “Remember the kente cloth I bought from the Gold Coast? And my jewellery? I have divided it into three different portmanteaus, one for Àtóké and the young ones, one for you, and the last one for your brother—” She frowned. “Ẹfun, honestly why did your father insist that the boy must go to the white man to learn more book? He knows how to read and write. What is the purpose of more and more books? See those Sàró that have even learnt all the book in the world, see how they look down their noses at us, is that what they want to turn my grandchild to?”