

The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives

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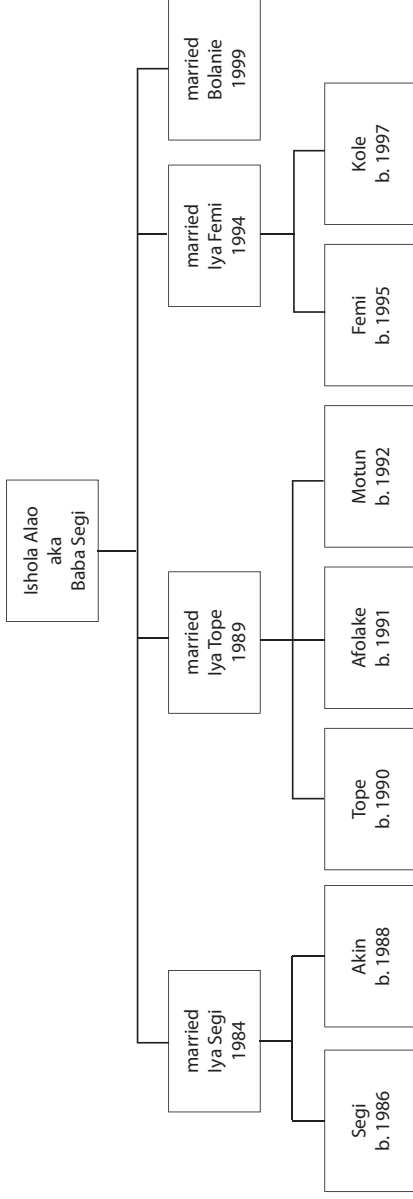
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The Alao Family



Bellyache

WHEN BABA SEGI AWOKE with a bellyache for the sixth day in a row, he knew it was time to do something drastic about his fourth wife's childlessness. He was sure the pain wasn't caused by hunger or trapped gas; it was from the build-up of months and months of worry. A grunt escaped from the woman lying next to him. He glanced sideways and saw that his leg had stapled Iya Tope, his second wife, to the bed. He observed the jerky rise and fall of her bosom but he didn't move to ease her discomfort. His thoughts returned to Bolanle and his stomach tightened again. Then and there, he decided to pay Teacher a visit. He would get there at sunrise so Teacher would know it was no ordinary stop over.

As soon as his driver parked the pick-up truck by the gutter that circled Ayikara, Baba Segi flung open the passenger door and re-inflated his large frame. Without a word or a backward glance at his driver, he dashed down a narrow alleyway. If his eyes hadn't been entirely fixed

on Teacher's shack, he might have noticed that his driver had scrambled after him. Baba Segi stepped aside to make room for the schoolchildren on their daily pilgrimage. These children went to great pains to bid Teacher good morning, just to see him steam up the louvres with his response. 'God mourning,' the smoky-eyed sage hummed. The children waved happily and toddled off to school. Baba Segi shook his head. If their parents ever discovered that they had strayed from the dusty road that led to wisdom, stepped wide-legged over spluttering gutters and shifted between random buildings, those children would be in grave trouble. Teacher's shack was in Ayikara and Ayikara was not a place for children.

It wasn't a specific place but when you asked for directions, people looked away from their twirling wrists. There were three reasons for this. First, absolutely no one wanted to admit to knowing where it was, in case their neighbours were listening. Second, Ayikara didn't have distinct boundaries. Last, Ayikara was more than four or five parallel streets laced by lasciviousness: it was a spirit. The dark buildings were full of women whose faces glowed under ultraviolet lights. These women lived for other women's men. They cooked for them. Drank with them. Fought over them. Fucked them. Nursed them. Slapped them and loved them. And when the longing love caused made them ill, they surrendered their lives and died for them.

Teacher's shack, with its shiny glass windows and gleaming shot glasses, was sandwiched between two brothels. Mostly, the skimpily dressed women brought their clients to drink the shack-made whisky, but on

certain days they would get to the door and retrace their steps. These were the days when men glared at them through squinted eyes – the days that men came to meet men, to talk about women and the evil that they did.

These meetings were not pre-arranged; they just happened when two or three men were gathered. They started with one man lamenting his travails with a quarrelsome wife. As more men ducked through the doorframe, solutions were proffered: what worked wonders; what didn't work; what was worth trying; and what, if the man concerned wasn't careful, would eventually kill him.

Every man had his say but Teacher always had the last word. He was impressive; there was no doubt about it. Even as the men sat curling at the ears from the heat, enveloped by the miasma of both human and animal waste, Teacher would busy himself with his windows without breaking a bead of sweat. Gradually his eyes would smoke up and become teary. Only then would he speak, and only in the Queen's English.

Baba Segi was first warned about Ayikara when he was a young apprentice but the cautioner was female and unconvincing. Besides, he had just moved to Ibadan and his innocence had become a burden, the very kind Ayikara women helped to relieve. Four wives and seven children on, he'd grown weary of the stench and his visits had dwindled to once or twice a month. Still, these men had helped him through his darkest days.

Sixteen years before, when he was an impatient twenty-six-year-old husband, Baba Segi had sat with Teacher and two other men to discuss a predicament that was

similar to the one he was in now. He had been eager for his sick mother to see the fruit of his loins but his wife's menstruation persisted. Teacher had suggested that he visit a herbalist and Iya Segi had lapped up the dark green powder her husband sprinkled on her palm. The medicine worked swiftly. Baba Segi cried with both grief and gladness at his mother's burial, six weeks after the birth of his daughter, Segi.

The door of the shack stood ajar so Baba Segi entered the small room. He frowned. It annoyed him that Bolanle was the reason he had come, when just two years before, he had boasted of his conquest: how Bolanle was tight as a bottleneck, how he pounded her until she was cross-eyed; and how she took the length of his manhood on her back – splayed out and submissive. He didn't quite know how he would tell the men that all his pounding had proved futile.

Inside the shack, Baba Segi was confronted with the same men who had pumped his hand when he first announced his intentions to marry Bolanle. They were talking to Teacher at a table by the window so Baba Segi dragged a stool over and joined them. They asked him what had brought him there so early in the morning and he told them of the agony that Bolanle's barrenness caused him. Teacher closed his eyes and shook his head while Olaopa, whose lips were perpetually browned from kola nut, let out a long breath. Although he also had four wives, he couldn't help remembering how the 'educated wife' affair had overshadowed his own libidinal feats. None of *his* wives knew which end of a pencil to set to paper.

‘Baba Segi, I think you should *drag* her to a medicine man if she doesn’t follow you. You are the husband and she is a mere wife, and the fourth one at that! If you drag her by the hair, she’ll follow you anywhere, I swear it!’ Atanda licked his forefinger and pointed it in the direction of his maker. Even as he pinched a half-smoked stick of Captain Black from a tattered snuffbox, the expression on his face was unforgiving.

‘Atanda! You want to land Baba Segi in jail? Who would dare to *drag* a *graduate*? When she opens her mouth and English begins to pour from it like heated palm oil, the corporals will be so captivated, they will throw our friend behind bars!’ Olaopa was a retired police sergeant and he knew, more than anyone else, that domestic violence was widely perceived as a waste of police resources.

‘You are quite right, Olaopa.’ Baba Segi saw right through him. ‘Besides, these educated types were fed on cow’s milk. We, as you know, didn’t have that luxury. We suckled our mothers’ breasts. If I lift my hand to her, the next thing I know, I could be conversing with Eledumare. No, we must never manhandle our women. Especially not someone like you, Olaopa, slight as you are.’

More men had ducked through the low doorframe, into the crowded room. Everyone chuckled.

‘Yes, but whose wife’s belly is as flat as a pauper’s footstool? I may be slight but I get the job done.’ Olaopa was a sore loser.

‘Thank you for returning our mouths to the matter at hand, my friend.’ Baba Segi thrust the back of his head in Olaopa’s direction and turned to the other men present. They stared back at him with sympathy in their eyes. An

old night guard scratched away at the print on his T-shirt. It said ‘2001 is my year of increase’.

‘Why are you running skelter-helter, Baba Segi?’ Teacher’s voice rang through the silence. The sunlight ripped through the torn mosquito net, hit a glass and shone a halo on the wall near his head. ‘You are running from post to pillar when the answer is there in front of your face. Since the woman is educated, she will only listen to people from the world she knows. The place to take her is the hospital.’

By the time Baba Segi arrived at his workshop, his shop assistants were waiting by the giant padlock. Their greetings were met with a dismissive grunt and they swapped knowing glances. It was going to be one of those days when Baba Segi would sit stone-faced in the back room with his head held up by his fist. Baba Segi knew it, too. He sat at his desk, reached into a drawer and brought out the photograph Bolanle had pressed into his palm the day they met. As he thumbed away the film of dust on it, he thought how much her personality had changed, how she’d slowly lost her meekness and become full of quiet boldness, how discord had followed her into his home and made his other wives restless.

He remembered the day when he first met her. She’d accompanied her friend, Yemisi, to his building materials store. Yemisi did small building contracts for the married men she screwed; Baba Segi issued her the over-inflated invoices she requested, and the goods. It was all part of the business.

‘Just double all the prices,’ Yemisi urged.

Baba Segi had noted Bolanle’s embarrassment and was greatly relieved when Yemisi rushed outdoors to take a call on her mobile phone. Within moments, she came back into the store and announced that she had urgent business to attend to. Bolanle offered to wait for her in Baba Segi’s store.

After she left, there was a brief stillness and Baba Segi had taken the opportunity to let his eyes lick her unpainted fingernails, her lean face, her dark, plump lips, and her eyes. Every blink was slow and comely. He became suddenly aware that he was inhaling the air that came from her and she was swallowing his. The gods have sent her to me, he thought as his eyes rested on Bolanle’s bosom.

‘Now that you and your friend have finished university, are you going to marry a man who will look after you?’ he asked.

‘When I find one,’ she replied.

It didn’t seem like an opening for a middle-aged man with three wives and a home full of children, but he took it as one. He watched as Bolanle dipped her hand into her bag and brought out a tattered novel.

‘Am I not an entertaining host?’

Bolanle snapped the book shut.

‘Tell me when you alone will come this way again,’ he whispered quietly.

Bolanle fixed her eyes on the desk between them.

‘Come tomorrow, come the day after. Anytime I see you again, I will know the gods have favoured me.’ Even he was surprised by his brazenness but he sensed her vulnerability.

‘And will your wives not come and drive me out with a broom?’

‘My wives do not visit my workplace. Your friend should have told you that. Why would they? They are taken care of; they have no reason to trouble me.’ Baba Segi felt an overwhelming urge to reach across the table and touch her but he hid his fists under the desk.

That was how it started. She came the next day, and then the next, and then every weekday until he had to bask in palm wine at weekends to make time pass quickly. He couldn’t wait to have her, to show her off as his own. He wanted to be the envy of all his peers. True enough, many did not hide their resentment. They told him he was a fool to marry a graduate, that she was only after his money, that she didn’t really love him and would leave him for a younger, educated man, after she got what she came for. Baba Segi laughed in their faces until eventually, they came to terms with their own inadequacies.

At five, Baba Segi called Taju, his driver, and told him to start the engine of the pick-up. His mind was made up. He would speak to Bolanle that night. It was Tuesday and he would be spending the night with her anyway. He flopped into the passenger’s seat and stroked his hairless chin all the way home.

Taju honked twice as he drove into the large compound. The entire household poured out of different rooms to welcome their benefactor. Baba Segi’s three sons lay prostrate, their torsos curled upwards like mats rearing their edges. The daughters knelt before him. From the

eldest child to the youngest, he called them by their names: Segi and Akin, a daughter before a son, from his first wife; Tope, Afolake and Motun, three girls born eleven months apart, from the second; and Femi and Kole, sons smugly birthed by Iya Femi, his third wife. Baba Segi looked lovingly into the faces of the older children and pinched the cheeks of the younger ones. He made each child feel extraordinary.

Midway to the sitting room, Baba Segi paused at the bogus archway, as if it had suddenly occurred to him that the children couldn't have delivered themselves. Then, like he always did, he swung round and turned to his wives. And with unabashed flirtatiousness, he greeted them: 'Iya Segi. Iya Tope. Iya Femi. Bolanle.' Each woman curtsied, proud to be defined by her first-born child, except Bolanle, who was *iya* to none.

The greetings done with, Baba Segi raised his arms so his *agbada* could be prised off by Iya Segi's deft fingers. She did the same with his *buba* and Baba Segi stumbled into the sitting area in his trousers and his vest, his eyes leading the way to his luxurious armchair. He stood with his back to it and, as always, he collapsed into it as if he had been struck by death. He tore at his watch and pulled it off his wrist.

Before he placed it on the wooden stool beside him, Iya Segi had put her hand out to receive it. He smiled the way he always did. 'Iya Segi, wife of my youth. Would I have breath if I had not married you?'

Iya Segi paused and turned to him. 'May your breath be long, my lord. Where would *I* be if not for *you*?'

They were ritually joined in this reciprocal admiration

until Iya Femi's bogus coughing interrupted them. The third wife could never stomach their display of old-fashioned affection. Besides, if any form of favouritism didn't involve her or her children, she was quick to register her disapproval.

Iya Segi brought a long wooden stool and placed it in front of her husband while her daughter, Segi, measuring her every step, carried in a bowl of hand-washing water. After steeping his hands in the bowl, Baba Segi dried them with the towel that was draped over his daughter's arm. He pulled the stool towards his crotch and proceeded to demolish the mountain of *amala*, morsel by morsel, catching every string of *ewedu* that dripped down his wrist with his tongue.

At the sound of a familiar melody, the children jostled for space in front of the TV and sang along to the theme tune of *Afowofa*, their favourite soap opera:

Talaka nwa paki
Olowo nwon'resi
Igbi aye nyi o
Ko s'eni to m'ola

The impoverished search for cassava flour
While the rich consume rice by the measuring bowl
The tide of the earth turns
No one knows tomorrow.

Like all good soap operas, it ended on a cliff-hanger that sent the children into a frenzy of cushion-slapping and teeth-kissing. Baba Segi chuckled. 'Tope, Motun, Afolake,

Femi, Kole,' he summoned, 'come and share the tripe your father left on his plate for you.'

The children assembled at his feet and tore at the tripe until they'd all wrenched a piece for themselves. Kole swallowed his portion in one piece and started hankering for his sister's.

'Iya Femi, Kole is as thin as an old man's cane. Why are you not feeding my son?' There was far too much concern in Baba Segi's voice for anyone to take him seriously.

'I feed him but the food disappears as soon as it reaches his belly. That boy would eat this entire house if you let him.'

'Then cook him this house. And when he has eaten that, serve him the neighbour's too. My children must eat their fill. It won't do for them to look like beggars when their father works so hard to keep the skin of their bellies taut. My Kole must grow big and strong so he can marry many wives and bear many children. Is that not so, Kole?'

'Yes Baba. I want to be just like you!'

Everyone laughed at Kole's precociousness so no one heard Iya Femi whisper 'God forbid' under her breath.

Desperate to return to the centre of attention, Baba Segi leaned onto one buttock and let out an explosive fart. The children looked at one another and giggled. Iya Segi, deadpan, inched towards him and asked if he needed some cold water to calm his stomach. Iya Tope stared unblinking at the TV while Iya Femi pinched her nostrils and turned her lips down at the corners. Bolanle, who had been wishing away Baba Segi's visit to her bedroom that night, shifted a little closer to Iya Tope's armchair. Iya Tope saw her and moved to the centre of her seat, as if to

make room for the younger wife. Iya Femi sneered at the gesture from across the room.

Only Baba Segi's armchair faced the TV directly; his wives (except Bolanle who hadn't earned her right to an armchair) kept their seats at the angle their husband insisted on. Baba Segi liked to observe their facial expressions – how widely they smiled after watching comedy sketches, how many tears they shed when they were gripped by agonising dramas. The wives, knowing they were being watched, stared at the screen, never swivelling to look Baba Segi smack in the face.

As the show came to an end, everyone prepared themselves for the last ritual of the evening: the communal watching of the seven o'clock news. Before the newscaster even opened her mouth, it was obvious that she was a little off balance. She blinked several times in quick succession and a lump moved up and down her throat as she spoke:

A forty-year-old man named by the police as James Jerome has been detained after the plastic bag he was carrying was found to contain what medical experts have identified as three pre-term fetuses.

In April, the police launched a nationwide appeal for any information on the spate of ritual murders. In the last year alone, the bodies of eighteen women have been recovered, all with fatal wounds to their pelvic region. The police are confident that Mr Jerome's arrest will lead to the arraignment of the entire gang. Mr Jerome used to work at the University College Hospital, Ibadan, as a mortuary attendant.

*

Halfway into her final paragraph, a short clip of James Jerome on a bench, handcuffed and dabbing a head wound, appeared on the screen. He didn't look at all remorseful, just annoyed with himself. Arranged on a piece of white cloth before him were three bloodstained foetuses – all head with scrawny little bodies. They seemed to come alive each time a strong wind lifted flakes of dry blood.

Iya Segi yanked her head-tie off her head and flung it across the room yelling, 'Why? Why kill innocent children?' Iya Tope gripped her belly as if she were experiencing labour pains and Iya Femi, who proclaimed Jesus as her lord and saviour, didn't sound at all like a believer. She pointed at the spot where James Jerome's face had been and cursed, 'May you not miss your way to Hell! May sleep possess you on the day Mercy is passing! May you leave your front door open on the day Death is on the prowl!'

The children huddled closer together and concluded that the news had induced maternal madness. But their father too sat transfixed. Not caring that they might anger their mothers, the children looked to Bolanle with pleading eyes. Bolanle's lips trembled and a steady stream of tears trickled down her cheeks. After a few minutes, she got up and fled the room.

Baba Segi felt his stomach growling and made to grab the bowl of hand-wash water. He missed the bowl completely and covered the cream-coloured rug with his undigested supper. Iya Segi and Iya Tope ran to his side and fluttered around him like harried hens. They lifted Baba Segi by his arms, guided him to his bedroom and covered him with a light sheet, leaving Iya Femi to salvage the rug with soapy water and Dettol.

Later that night, Baba Segi staggered down the wide corridor that the wives' bedrooms were cut from. Like he always did, he caressed Iya Segi's door on the right, touched the knob on Iya Tope's door on the left. He listened for voices at Iya Femi's door and finally paused at the threshold of Bolanle's room. He didn't knock; he just pushed the door open with his toe and brightened the room with the corridor light.

He wanted to see how much Bolanle had prepared herself for him. He wanted to know if she had covered her nakedness with a cloth, like the other wives did, or if she was wearing those accursed pyjamas. His eyes caught the pink sleeves so he let out a short, sharp breath through flared nostrils. He often wondered why a woman would want to go to bed dressed like a man but he never mentioned it, lest he appeared uncivilised.

Bolanle sat up in bed. Pretending to be startled, she rubbed her eyes and turned to acknowledge the looming silhouette by her bedroom door. Baba Segi's large form was curled inwards like a boxing glove. He reached for the doorframe and rapped it with his fingernails. 'Where did you read that a wife should leave the room when her husband is ailing?' he asked, as if Bolanle's education meant her every action was dictated by a manual. He didn't come in, nor did he close the door. He wanted every ghost that stalked the corridor to bear witness to her unseemliness.

'Like everyone else, I was sickened by what I saw.' She threw her feet over the side of her bed and tightened a wrapper over her pyjama top.

‘What do you know about what you saw? A woman cannot know the weight of a child until she has carried one in her womb.’

Bolanle was determined to deny him the pleasure of hurting her feelings. She lifted the bowl from her bedside table and pushed it towards his face so he got a full view of the rich oxblood clay. Baba Segi glanced at the bowl and winced. Bolanle threw a handful of nuts into her mouth to conceal her satisfaction.

Baba Segi marched to her side and flopped onto the bed. ‘Tonight, I have come to *talk*, Bolanle.’ His weight made the sprung mattress uneven. ‘Yes, I have come to talk about the matter that threatens to turn us into enemies.’

‘I am listening, Baba Segi. I do not want to be your enemy,’ Bolanle said, relieved that sex wasn’t on the cards.

‘Your barrenness brings shame upon me. And I am sure that you, as well, are saddened by it. Every time I have suggested that we consult herbalists and prophets, you have called them conmen and rubbished their powers. Well...’ He inhaled deeply and raised his eyebrows. ‘I have thought long and hard about it and I think we should go to hospital to talk to a doctor.’ He paused, expecting Bolanle to reject his proposal but she just stared ahead, mindlessly throwing nuts into her mouth. ‘Tomorrow at 6 a.m., then.’ With this, he hoisted himself onto his feet using the bedpost for support and prayed that morning would wake them well.