

THE ACCIDENTAL APPRENTICE

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Some people are destined to greatness, defying the odds regardless of circumstances. This was the case of Mayi Dembele from Kona, a small village in Sahel's heart. She did not cry when she was born. At six months, she already walked, and two years later, she talked better than many adults. Growing up in a typical outback village, surrounded by adobe constructions and vernacular architecture, she and her ten siblings received an education respectful of customary practices and traditions.

Mayi was bright and intelligent, so much so that her parents, who believed that children were better off working, did not hesitate to send her to public school. Mayi was also inquisitive, and communication technologies fascinated her. Her first passion had been her father's radio, the tiny wonder that spoke and made music. When cellphones made it to Kona in the late 2000's, she spent all her free time stalking the fortunate owners who could make calls from anywhere they wanted. At 11, Mayi already felt like a grown-up. Her mother trusted her to prepare the sauce for dinner, and soon, she would be allowed to go to the market by herself. Adulthood was around the corner; nonetheless, fetching water like younger children was still one of Mayi's favourite duties. Every morning, before school, she would hit the laterite streets with her yellow

canister in her hand. The red earth and pebbles always crunched under her flip-flops marking the rhythm of her journey. At the water station, the pump set the beat to which Mayi and her friends, Celestine, Djelika and Nantoma, filled their containers. When the water flow stopped, conversations would start. Gossip, arguments, debates, Mayi relished it all, as outside of the classroom, these were her best sources of information. One conversation in particular profoundly impacted her.

“My cousin in Dobokoro is dead,” Nantoma shared.

“Your cousin? The one who was in our class?”

“Yes.”

“Djiiiiii! What happened to her?”

“My mother said that she was pregnant and that she died during childbirth.”

“Wait, but she was our age. How could she get pregnant?”

Mayi asked, bemused.

“I don’t know, but she was,” Nantoma replied.

“Do you think it could happen to us too? That we too could get pregnant and die?”

Mayi was dumbfounded by the possibility. One day, she, too, would be expecting a child. What would happen then?

“Do you know how one gets pregnant?” Mayi asked Celestine, the oldest of the group.

“All I know is that men are involved.”

“Men? But babies grow in women’s bellies.”

“Hey! Leave that alone. The one time I asked my mother about it, she almost beat me up,” said Djelika.

“Don’t talk! Never ask questions! This drives me mad! Everything is forbidden. We cannot stop bad things from happening to us if we are kept in the dark. If something affects us, we should be able to talk about it,” Mayi insisted.

“That’s right,” Nantoma agreed. “It would be nice to be able to ask questions and get answers sometimes. To have someone to turn to when we doubt, someone who helps when we need to take our own decisions.”

“No girl should ever end up like Nantoma’s cousin. I really believe that the solution can only come from us,” said Celestine in a decisive tone.

“The solution can only come from us.” Those words would echo in Mayi’s mind all her life.

Growing older, Mayi fully grasped the sad truth about women’s condition in her village. Every time one of her friends stopped coming to school, every time she had to give up her lessons and homework to help her mother, she remembered that she could not slack. She needed to learn as much as she could if one day she wanted to bring change for women around her. With every out-of-wedlock pregnancy scandal, Mayi’s determination to inform and educate young girls grew stronger, driving her to attend nursing school and study modern medicine. This was for her the first step to equip herself intellectually to one day flush injustice away. Mayi’s tenacity and curiosity were frowned upon in the village. Yet, these very character traits led her to the most incredible encounter.

One night, as she was musing in the compound yard, looking at the stars, she heard human voices mingling with the noises of the fauna. Curious, Mayi came out of the courtyard and saw a queue of men wearing dark cloaks covered with mirrors and bones walking away. She recognised without ever having seen them the Dakan Initiates, men versed in occult sciences.

They knew all the secrets of the outback and were likely on their way to a ceremony. Their procession moved towards the village's outskirts, and Mayi followed them surreptitiously to the backwaters. There, without fear, she listened to their prayers and observed the sacred rites. Her thirst for knowledge did not yield to the fear of breaking taboos. Taking in all she could, Mayi did not leave the scene before they had finished, and the last Initiate disappeared into the darkness. As she walked back, someone was waiting for her with a burning gaze setting the night ablaze.

"It is late to venture out into the bush alone. Aren't you afraid?" Caught red-handed, Mayi froze for a moment before replying, "I am a Dembele from Kona. I am not afraid of anything."

"Clearly, you don't know what happens to women caught spying on the Initiates?" She knew but deflected.

"Who are you?"

"I am Tata. Dembele, you have broken an immemorial law. What do you have to say in your defense?"

"Nothing. I broke a taboo because I wanted to know, to understand. Curiosity might be my downfall. Still, I don't regret what I did. Do not worry. I have no intention of blabbing about what I learned tonight or revealing your secrets. It was enough for me to understand that a woman can attend a sacred event without being struck by lightning on the spot. All that matters is not to get caught."

"Dembele, you are guilty. You must pay for your offenses. What should your sentence be?"

"I don't know, Tata. I am at your mercy."

"Dembele, I don't wish to punish you. I appreciate and value your courage and determination. However, what you have witnessed is for the eyes and ears of the Initiates only. Therefore, I cannot just let you walk away. The only acceptable reparation is for you to

become a Dakan Novice. What do you say? Are you ready to learn the secrets of Life and the Outback?”

For the second time that evening, Mayi was at a loss for words. Tata’s offer was unexpected but certainly not one that she could let go of. Taking a deeper breath, she solemnly answered, “I would be honoured.”

“Very well. Come back tomorrow at the same time with a hoe.”

“I’ll be here.”

As promised, the following night, Mayi met Tata at the exact same place and time with the requested object. There were no greetings between them, just an order.

“Dig!”

“Where?”

Her question was met with silence, so Mayi simply dug right where she was standing. She put all her might in shovelling dirt away because she had the intuition that half-hearted efforts would not be rewarded. And in any case, she had been given an unbelievable opportunity. She was not about to let it slip through her fingers.

Mayi dug for hours under Tata’s silent scrutiny, who remained entirely still until dawn when he finally released her from her task. “Leave now and come back tonight,” was all he said.

Three nights in a row, Mayi returned to dig. And every time Tata did nothing more than instructing her to start or stop. The fourth night, Mayi was exhausted. She barely had enough strength to hold the hoe anymore. Therefore, when she hit something hard, she gave up her tool and tried to release it with her hands instead. It took her a moment to identify that the roundish object buried in front of her was a human skull.

Horrified by what she had unearthed, she scurried away from the hole she excavated.

“Those are the remains of a woman who was sacrificed here a long time ago. There are many more bodies scattered around, reminders of a time when women were mere offerings.”

Mayi was petrified, unable to move or speak. How foolish of her to believe that she could break out of the norm. Alone in the dark, she was about to pay for her temerity with her life.

“Are you scared?” Tata asked. “Do you still want to become a Novice?” Mayi was shivering, torn between the desire to flee and the desire to overcome fate. This was a decisive moment, and no matter what, she could not cower away. So, she did the only thing that made sense to her. She stood tall, squared her shoulders, and looked straight at Tata.

“I will not fear the past or long-forgotten practices. If then women were offerings, today they can be Novices. I will become one with your help. I am standing here because I want to better understand the world around me and what nature has put at our disposal. If you are fair, you will teach me.”

“Dembele, you have stepped on the path of knowledge. You have accepted to look at what came before but focus on what is ahead. Tonight your education starts.”

That was how Mayi started following Tata’s teaching. Every full moon, she went to the backwaters to memorise primeval stories and be educated on Sahelian millennia-old philosophies and moral codes. She also learned about traditional medicine and how to

recognise and use healing plants. She studied trees, bushes and flowers. She picked petals, bark and leaves to prepare concoctions.

Mayi was a devoted Novice, opening her mind to a new world of spirituality and wisdom. Yet, Tata alone could not quench her thirst for cognition. Mayi relied as well on her nursing school and its modern training. Besides, she heavily explored the internet with a cellphone given to her by a cousin living abroad. Her favourite website was Exonet because it only published vetted facts and was almost misinformation-free. Painstakingly, Mayi built her own brand-new thinking system with all the knowledge she accumulated. She honed it for five years until one day, Tata instructed her to meet at the termite mound by the backwaters.

“Dembele, since the beginning of our journey together, you have listened, and you have obeyed. You made yours my teaching and brought it to new heights. You are now ready to stand on your own. Your education as a Novice is done.”

This announcement made Mayi profoundly happy and proud. Her hard work was finally rewarded.

“It is time for you to grow into your own truth and give back to your community. You must take the oath to devote yourself, body and soul to become a Dakan Apprentice.”

Mayi knew the words. She had waited a long time to say them.

“I willingly enter the apprenticeship. I accept the bond between me, my people and our land. I will not leave them for longer than the moon needs to show the same face. I swear to serve my community and put all my forces and mind into being a worthy Apprentice,” Mayi vowed.

“Mayi Dembele, you are now an Apprentice. I trust that you will never disappoint me as you are wise and mighty beyond your age. I first witnessed it all these years ago, when you looked right into my eyes and answered me with confidence and poise. This was an extraordinary feat. Even among the Initiates, not all can hear me, much less see me. There is strength in you, and I am honoured to see it every day.”

Mayi was honoured with her new status, and she took her oath very seriously. Now that she was an Apprentice, she felt a greater sense of responsibility, and advancing in Dakan gave her confidence to use her medical knowledge. She had never forgotten that: *The solution can only come from us*. And now, she was ready.

“Tata, I am an Apprentice and a state registered nurse. I have been helping those around me with my medical abilities, but I want to do more. I want my voice to reach further.”

“How would you do that?”

“I want to use the internet to teach young people about their health, particularly girls. I do not want to see any more of them waste their lives because of unwanted pregnancies or venereal diseases. I want women to have a safe space where they can get information and not fear judgment.”

“I hear what you say, but how do you plan to reach women who do not have a phone or a computer?”

“I have it all planned. First, I will convince those in my audience to relay the questions and answers to those who need them. Second, we will set up a fund to subsidise the purchase of telephones for girls and women who don’t have one.”

“If you achieve your goals, you will mix tradition and

modernity. My teaching will possibly reach the farthest corners of the world.”

“And not just traditional medicine, but everything I learned from you. From the importance of the holy to human and fraternal values. My voice will flow and tell how spirituality and reason are not enemies and how ancestral truths have their place in an increasingly technological world.”

With her idea in the ether, Mayi took a few days to get her plan underway. She started alone, rallying her friends who rallied theirs. Every day she posted short videos in the local language and gave health advice.

Soon she was joined by a midwife from the neighbouring village. Together, they contacted the administration to get permission to offer remote consultations and support their fundraising project. At the same time, the women in the network actively shared their experiences and knowledge. From discussions about health, sexuality and pregnancy, members moved on to conversations about markets, gardening, household finances and politics.

Within a few weeks, women from the surrounding villages joined the group. The fundraising also took off, allowing almost all women in the region to get a phone to access the exonet. Mayi was living her best life. She had a meaningful mission and a fulfilling job. Thanks to her consultations, she helped the community and earned a salary for the first time. The platform’s success was her pride and joy, but it took all her time, and she had less time to spend with Tata, which stalled her apprenticeship. Yet, the latter always showed her unfailing support.

“You’re really bringing the change you’ve always wanted. I have to say it’s a great source of pride to see you moving forward like this. You still have a long way to go to finish your initiation and achieve your goals, but my teaching is already bearing fruits.”

“Yes, we have reached so many people that the health of the villagers has improved significantly. For example, we have convinced many heads of households that even girls who have had a child out of wedlock deserve protection and education. This gave us a bit of notoriety, and we gained the support of the authorities. They offered to build us a training centre. They will give us a plot near the backwaters. Many grumpy old men are opposed to the project, but it is in vain. The village chief has already agreed.”

“Mayi, the villagers should stay away from the backwaters.”

“I know, but the project is already well underway. Plus, the piece of land is not directly by the backwaters. Don’t worry. It will be alright.”

“Some things shouldn’t be changed, and sometimes progress costs more than you are willing to pay. Mayi, again, no one should touch the backwaters.”

This was the last time Tata admonished Mayi. The centre’s construction started, and a week later, the body of water was no more. To prevent potential flooding, the engineers had decided to drain the pond. When Mayi learned the news, she ran as fast as she could, her lungs about to explode. She only stopped heartbroken at the dried backwaters. Filled with a cold terror, she called: “Tata!” No one answered.

“Tata? Tata? Talk to me.” Mayi called for hours, but Tata remained silent and never answered again. The fetish was no more. During the digging, an excavator’s blows had broken the statue that tethered Tata to the physical world. The ignorant construction workers did not know the implications of their actions. Afraid of being cursed, they had called a marabout to deal with the debris in secret.

When all was said and done, they simply resumed the Training Centre. Mayi never knew what exactly happened. As an Apprentice, she was not initiated to the secret of Tata’s physical form. She had only ever interacted with its human incarnation that had also vanished, leaving her an Apprentice without a Master. Mayi carried the wound of losing her mentor for the rest of her life. She felt that she had lost Tata for being too conceited and careless. Although she could not fix her mistake, the fetish’s teaching remained with her forever. And true to herself, Mayi continued her mission to help and educate using modern and traditional intelligence.