

# THE REVOLT OF THE HEIRESS

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If you are familiar with Côte d'Ivoire, this West African country, sweet land of cocoa, home to elephants, and bordered to the south by the Atlantic Ocean, you should have probably heard of the famous Baoulé people. Located in the centre of the Ivorian territory and belonging to the large Akan ethnic group, the Baoulé people, originally from Ghana, are distinguished by their rich culture, exemplary organisation, and an atypical history whose fabulous episodes never cease to enchant the nightly talks organised in every moonlight's evening.

Fleeing a fratricidal war of succession, the people that will later be known as Baoulé were led up to Côte d'Ivoire from the Ghanaian Empire by their Queen, the famous Abla Pokou. Pursued by their enemies and on the verge of being overtaken by the men of the bellicose Itsa – who assassinated Dakon, the brother of the young leader Abla Pokou – these people who sought a safe exile unfortunately, found themselves before the deadly and agitated waters of the Comoé River.

How to cross this torrent and escape the enemy? The Queen stood puzzled. She had to choose between the risk of drowning for her people and the ruthless sword of the enemy. She turned to the old diviner who consulted the spirits of the river. In exchange for their

help, the spirits required a great sacrifice: a human life! A boy! Heart bruised by the worst pains that only a mother can feel, Abla Pokou consented to sacrifice her own son, the only one she had and who was still, an infant. She threw him into the water, and as the boy disappeared into the depths of the river, a line of hippopotamus, whose black backs set one after the other appeared, forming a miraculous bridge connecting the two sides of the river, enabling the people of Abla Pokou to cross.

Once on the other side, the Queen burst into tears as she cried out, “*Bâ wouli*” which in the Ashanti language means, *the child is dead*. The exiled people bore the name Baoulé since, in memory of the sacrificed child to whom they owed their salvation. If it began with the courageous mother Abla, the history of the famous Pokou family has known an episode no less inspiring that today it is advisable to exhume from the dust of oblivion in which it has so long and so unfairly been buried.

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It all started on a calm and gloomy morning. The sun was rising quite pale above the houses and palaces that made up the Baoulé kingdom. Timidly, she stuck her head out of the horizon with faint rays, as if to reflect all the coldness and despair that had reigned over this village for decades. Sakassou was indeed no longer the same. Since the departure of Queen Abla Pokou, the village had become arid and sad. Plants only grew in places and the harvest seasons no longer offered their former beauties and fruits. Even the rooster no longer had the strength to stand up proudly and do his traditional *coco riko* that woke up the whole village. Everything in

this community seemed to have returned over the years to a general state of indolence. But what really happened to this once thriving and glorious tribe?

The day had barely risen, Adjua Pokou, the last great-granddaughter of Abla Pokou had just woken up, still lying on her mat, thinking about her day. This one would not be much different from all the others. Today, it was the turn of the women of her family to cook and take care of the King. Grumpy villain and torturer, he was as outcast as his father. Just to think of the idea that she should be at his service today was repugnant.

Adjua Pokou suddenly stood up proudly in front of the hut. She was a beautiful young girl with a flawless black complexion. From the top of her admirable height, she was only 17 years old. Outside, her mother and aunts had not waited for her to start the service. The pots were on the fire, and her cousins were already on their way to clean up the royal court. Adjua approached the group of women.

“Hello mother and aunts,” she said, sitting down next to them.

“Hello Adjua,” the women replied.

Her mother immediately continued, “Adjua, hurry up, take a shower and join the others at the royal court. We must avoid the wrath of the King and his guard.”

“Understood mother.”

Adjua quickly washed and dressed up before setting out for the royal court. Passing through the small forest between the village from the royal court, she admired the parched landscape and the few animals that remained there... She walked towards a hill at the top of which she could proudly see the majestic castle of King N’Zué with its massive gold gate. Few kilometres away, in the middle

of what was once a lush forest, you could hear the rumble of this monstrous warehouse, which gave off black smoke day and night. The smoke gradually polluted the pure and fresh air.

After the death of the Queen Abla Pokou, the succession to the throne was carried out normally, (in accordance with the matrilineal system for which the people had opted centuries earlier) until the fourth generation, where the sad fate of the people was repeated ... The great-grandfather of the current King had led a bloody revolt, overthrew the legitimate king and imposed a detestable regime of tyranny that his lineage had diligently worked to perpetuate to the detriment of the great Baoulé people. Since then, he, his guard and his descendants spread terror and selfishly captured the kingdom's wealth and common heritage. The current King had received from the latter a fetish which gave them strength and power, and which helped them to maintain several people in their service.

The people worked for him: the men were assigned to his palace, his factories and his royal guard, and the women took turns to cook or to clean his quarters. Those who could cultivate the fields had to deposit the harvest in the kingdom. Additionally, the King endorsed the establishment of three chemical processing factories in the village. They occupied a large part of the space, polluting the air, river and soil. The King considered women as inferior beings and that the people made a mistake in entrusting their fate to this woman, Abla Pokou. All women had to take care of him, the great King.

Arriving at the castle, Adjua met her cousins and immediately joined them for the service. King N'Zi, made his way into the large living room where they were working. He held a vial of caiman skin in his right hand. He stopped at the entrance to the living room, swept his gaze as if to intimidate those present and to verify that no

one was seeing him. Then he hurried to a door hidden by a black curtain. It led straight to the shrine, where he kept his fetish. He closed the door behind him. Adjua, curious, followed him and listened at the door.

In a loud voice, he addressed the big fetish: *“Here I am! I am the only one, the grand master! The one who sows terror and reigns with an iron fist over Sakassou! Ah! Ah! Ah! The men are at my feet. And the women are even lower under my feet! Oh fetish, I want you to keep giving me power, power so great that I and my offspring can keep them forever under our yoke. I give you this blood of the most beautiful ram in my flock to express my gratitude to you.”*

He turned and walked to the door.

Adjua who was hidden behind the door hurried back to her task. She was so outraged and vowed not to let this situation continue. In the evening, sitting on a mat, the young woman told her mother what she saw in the King’s palace.

“Mother, my heart is broken. Why are our people suffering so much? Why are the women of the kingdom voiceless? Why do our fathers have to work so hard if it is to donate all the profit of their hard labours to this wicked King? Our brothers and sisters are dying of hunger every day while the King and his family live in luxury, unpunished corruption and with undeserved honours.”

Then, more resolutely, Adjua added, “Mother, we must act. We should walk in the footsteps of our ancestor Abla Pokou. A courageous woman who saved her people by offering what she had most dear. We must do something.”

Her mother, who had been listening intently spoke, “As you know my daughter, we come from a line of noble warriors. So

do not think that we have done nothing to change things and restore the grandeur of our tribe. All our attempts have been unsuccessful so far.”

“I understand. But trust me mother, there is still something that can be done. If we cannot change everything all at once, I know it is the sum of small actions that make great things to happen.”

“So, what do you suggest, my daughter?”

Adjua stood up and replied with a determined and fixed expression, “A revolt!”

Although she was at first reluctant to approve such an idea, the young girl’s mother decided to rely on her daughter’s confidence as Adjua explained her plan.

“We’ll organise the revolt with the women of the kingdom. They are less watched, and the King underestimates their power. Mother, you will talk to the older women while I talk to the younger ones.”

“Alright, Ajua. I will try my best. Let us meet tomorrow night behind the primary school.”

All the women secretly gathered at the appointed venue the following night.

Affoué the soothsayer of the village spoke, “To dethrone him, we must withdraw his fetish, his custody, and his property, without which, he is nothing. I will initiate the warriors who want to embark on this quest. They will have the necessary elements.”

Adjua was the first volunteer, followed by two other young girls, Ahou and Mienmo. Two days later, their initiation began. Affoué introduced her three disciples to the mysteries of the spiritual world which helped the great warriors of old to win battles: the Mli that granted a disappearing ability, the power of fire and the N’Zué, that of water.

At the end of the endowing ceremony, she gave them a last piece of advice, “Dear young girls, you have been endowed with the great powers that will help you fight the King and, we hope, defeat him. Work with unity of mind and action. Be courageous and stay focused whatever happens. The fate of our people relies on the light of your spirit, the strength of your youthfulness and the steadfastness of your noble hearts.”

Turning to Adjua she said, “Adjua, I admire your courage. You remind me of our ancestor. Lead your friends and deliver our people. May the ancestors be with you.”

“Thank you, Grandma Affoué, for all your advice,” the young women replied. “We will wait until the evening to get into the royal palace.”

That night, the three young Amazons, armed with poisoned arrows, waited behind the palace wall for most of the guards to fall asleep. Only ten of them stayed awake to patrol. Adjua recalled the strategy of the operation, “Remember sisters, here is the plan. We will use the Mli technique to move around, appear and disappear in the kingdom. As soon as we get in, Ahou and Mienmo, you will break into the guard dormitory, and blow the magic sleep powder. And the guards once awakened will no longer be under the yoke of submission by which the King has bewitched them. We will then tackle the other ten, enter the kingdom, destroy the sanctuary and finally face the King.”

Ahou and Mienmo nodded and did as Adjua had indicated. Once in the guards’ dormitory, the two young women blew the magic sleep powder and they all fell asleep immediately except one guard who was returning from the bathroom. He saw them and had only time to scream before sucking in the powder and collapsing. The other guards were on alert and headed for the dormitory. Meanwhile,

Adjua headed for the shrine to destroy it. When the King came out, dressed in his black mantle, he saw the commotion in the courtyard as well as Adjua who had entered the living room. He felt in danger, and with his magical powers, metamorphosed himself into a big black eagle flying over the room, crying loudly. Adjua immediately fired his poisoned arrows at the big bird, but the King was far too fast. She hissed to call her friends for help. Ahou and Mienmo ran to the rescue of their companion.

Once in the large living room, they saw the great eagle spitting fire and sulphur in the direction of Adjua. Her friends, who had arrived, launched fiery attacks on the great eagle. The latter turned and filled with fury, swooped down on the two young women. Adjua took the opportunity to slip behind the great curtain and enter the sanctuary. She found a room with red lights and big black curtains. Animal skulls on both sides and ostrich feathers on the ground. In front of her, at the back of the room, was the great fetish. He was about six feet tall and was carved from wood. He was the most unsightly and scary creature she had ever seen – he had the head of a warthog with snakes all around and his mouth wide open with the body of a monkey. She was seized with fear but remembered the plight of her people. Courageously, she used her fire power to set the room on fire, before stepping out.

The King saw the fire bursting before his eyes and uttered a terrified loud cry. He tried to fly towards the shrine, but fell to the ground. He had just lost much of his powers. He got up with great difficulty, full of dizziness.

“No, no, that can’t be possible!” he exclaimed. “You are just children, poor, and girls on top of that. How did you do this? No, it’s impossible, I remain the King of kings forever, and my reign will not end like this.”



The brave Adjua and her friends shot arrows at the same time. The King fell crashing to the ground, regaining his original form. Mortally pierced in several places of his body, the tyrant sobbed painfully.

“No, no,” he whispered in distress.

“It is impossible! No, that cannot be true,” he said and after three consecutive sobs, the King died.

Adjua and her friends rejoiced. They went out and broke the news to the others in the yard. The sun had already risen, and the guards were waking up from their long slumber. Their eyes opened and they wondered what they were doing there. The guards carried the young heroines to the village where everyone was waiting for them.

They marched through the streets of the kingdom and stopped at the public square. The village sage spoke, “I am incredibly happy for your courage, and I realise what young people can do to change things. The succession will be well assured. Dear villagers, I suggest that we leave the leadership of this village to the younger generation. Since Adjua, the worthy descendant of our illustrious Queen Pokou, has shown the way, may she preside over the destinies of our kingdom.”

Everyone nodded without hesitation.

Adjua replied, “I am honoured by the privilege you are giving me. Youth is indeed the lifeblood of our community. We will give back our village a colour of hope and restore it to its former glory.”

Under the leadership of Adjua, important reforms were made to the management of the public good, ranging from the dismantling of factories polluting the ecosystem to the installation of processing units for local products to creating financial

autonomy and selling the crops, through the practice of large-scale animal husbandry and environmental sanitation. Each family was empowered to be self sufficient.

Adjua's mother was immensely proud of her daughter who, like her ancestor Abla Pokou, had shown courage to save her people.