



UCHEOMA
ONWUTUEBE

ISE!

INCANTATIONS AND
LIBATIONS

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Incantations and libations

Ucheoma Onwutuebe

1. A child leaves home
2. Childbirth
3. My brother has erred me
4. God of the harvest
5. A beseechment
6. War song

A Child Leaves Home

As you set forth

To traverse

The dark and wild regions

Of this green earth

Child,

We seal upon your forehead

The mark of our clan

The mark that makes us invincible

In wartime

Your head

Shall never fall

In battle

Your back

Shall never be overthrown in a fight

We anoint your tongue

With the gift of gab

They which hear your voice

Must comply

We plant in your hands

The power of enterprise

Begin a season with an ear of corn

And end it with a barnful of grains

On your feet

We pronounce speed

And surety of steps

As you run miles

And leap over walls

Child

If you chance upon loss-

The loss of love

The loss of fortune or

The loss of friends-

May your heart

Be sturdy enough

To bear it alone

In the absence of your mother's bosom

Where you could have

Lain upon

Your weary head

When you chance upon pain

(for surely it will come)

May your mind not snap

Like a broomstick

In the hands of a child

May your sanity be preserved

And stashed in the untouchable regions of your soul

Where neither moth nor termite can find

May he

Who is mightier than you

Not challenge you to battle

Serve him with wit and cunning

Until you become

A strong nation yourself

Serendipity

Shall be your cloud by day and good fortune

The fires that warm you by night

When you dash your feet
Against a rock
May that rock turn to gold

Your tents
Will not be stretched
Amongst the hapless
And the foolhardy
Shall not be your companion

Go into the dark and wild
Regions of this green earth
Knowing that you are
Child of your mother
And offspring of your father

Child Birth

Look! Our sister has brought forth a girl! Hear neighbors, it is a girl child! Here is some Rose powder for your neck. When they ask you why you are so white, tell them a girl is born. Do not stop grandmother's joyful ululations. A girl too is worth all the noise.

Run to the market square. Tell the town crier to sound his drum in the seven corners of our clan. For a girl is born...and a girl is a precious thing.

Gather the best tubers of yam, kindle the fire. Bring down the stockfish hiding in the eaves. Slaughter that bleating goat. Let us make the best of pepper soups.

But what shall we call her? We are tired of half-baked names, names that do not bear the full weight of her importance; lazy names that do not immortalize the tangible joy we feel at this moment. Give her a well thought-out name. Give her a name that emblazons the mind, a name that would make the simple minded bite their tongue.

And we would protect her fiercely. Never again would a fist be raised to blacken her eyes. Our eyes have been bruised for hers to remain unharmed. We were the last generation of women to suffer abuse.

Oh Heavens, help us to teach her to leave when it gets violent; teach her to walk away when it gets manipulative.

May she be provoked to intellectual heights. May she read till she spews knowledge like her mother tongue.

Women are givers, we are taught to be so. May she give, give genuinely, but not out of undue expectations nor out of naivety that she finds herself empty and bereft. May she give only to experience the lifting grace of liberality.

May she not be likened lesser than her male counterparts. May her genitals not be *raison d' être* for mediocrity and passivity. May her gender not enslave her to lesser efforts at life and douse her zeal for greatness.

Grant her fortitude to weather the uncertainties of life; not to wilt in the face of conflict; Give to her a voice to speak up for the truths she holds dear, the truths that our hearts have been too paralyzed to spill.

Give her eyes that shine like steel to wade off predators.
Give her eyes warmth in the time of love.

Teach her to be kind, but may she learn that she does not
hold cure to everyone's ailment.

Oh do not give her more than she can handle. We know
that we do not hold sway in all the affairs of life; we do
not know how to stir away all tragedies, but help us
create a safer world for her. A world that would call
abusers to book rather than blame her for circumstances
beyond her control.

Look upon her with favor. Suffer her to love herself first
rather than seek abroad that which she can give herself.

Dear Heavens, bless this child.

My Brother Has Erred Me

O_{lisa}

My brother has erred me

He has wrested from me

That which belongs to me

He has snatched away from me

That which I got

From the sweat of my brows

And from the tilling away

Of my soil

I took the matter

To the men of our clan

But my brother's voice
Was louder than mine

I took it to the chiefs and elders
But his affluence
Won justice to his side

In shame and sorrow
I walked the streets
And they that dwell in the streets said to me

Take your case to the witch doctor
Ask him to bring a plague
Upon your brother's dwelling

Take it to the witch with a hunchback
Whose shrine is planted

In the evil forest

Amongst the dead

In exchange of a fowl

And a handful of cowries

Your brother will be

Visited upon

By the madness of rabid dogs

Complete with the itchings

Of invisible ticks

Or simply

Take away

The breath of life

From his fat nostrils

But I asked myself

What shall it profit me

If my flesh and blood
Roves the market squares
Butt naked

What do I gain
If the voice of mourning
Goes forth from his tents

Shall I be enriched
If his wife is widowed
And his offsprings
Beg bread in the streets

A kind man
Does not divine
Corruption upon his brother

A brother ought to be

Keeper of affairs

Of his kin

Olisa

All I ask

Is that you prick his conscience

With needle-sharp thoughts

Bring him deep sighings in the day

And may he toss in his bed at night

Till he comes

To make peace

With his brother

God of the Harvest

As we plant these fields

May we rip a barnful

As these grains of wheat

Fall to the ground to die

May they beget

And beget

May that which nibbles and eats

Before harvest time

Not come close to our crops

May the neighbors' beasts

Remain tethered

May they not chew

The tender tendrils

Of our yams

And when the harvest comes

In time and plentiful

May the heft of our tubers

Be too much for one man to lift

He shall call upon his neighbor

Saying,

Help me bear the burden of my harvest

When the harvest comes

Sure and steady

May our shock of grains

Break asunder the measuring scales

And we shall be a conduit of supply

To the needy one

We shall be a channel of abundance
To the poor and widowed
We shall not store up in barns
To eat alone
Our neighbors will find food
In times of need
The oppressed widow
Shall not swallow her spittle in hunger

A Beseechment

I arise before the crack of morning

To implore you, Chukwu

To evoke your blessings upon this day

Bless us and our wives with fecundity

And together we shall sire

Strong sons and daughters

May the expectant woman

Birth her child into the world

Bouncing and alive

May her breath not be seized from her in labor

Bless our sons

The strength of our youth

With vigor and a rippling of muscles

May they learn wisdom

And not be found in the congregation of fools

May they know

That the rod of correction

Strikes their back for their good

Bless our daughters

The pride of our years

May they not fall

Into the waiting arms of marauders

Teach their tongues wit

And their arms strength

Bless our farmlands

May their yield in harvest time

Bless our plantations

May the palm tree flow with wine

And may the tappers gourd always be full

Bless those who owe us

That they may return that which was lent them

Bless our creditors

That they be patient with us

Bless the soil on which we tread upon

Bless the sun that sends down its rays on us

Bless the rain that falls softly on our backs

Bless our flesh and bones

May sickness not lodge its claws

In our marrows

Bless us Chukwu

May we spend our days in glee

And our nights in peace and quiet

War song

May the sound

Of our marching feet

Battle-ready and bloodthirsty

Discomfit those mere mortals

Discomfit them as a man

Caught naked suddenly

Who crouches and scampers around

To find a piece of cloth

To cover his exposed groins

But finds nothing in his search

May our enemies

Quake before us

As one suddenly visited upon

By epileptic spirits

May their neck snap in our hands

Like dry twigs in harmattan mornings

When we torch their tents of thatch

May it burn to a conflagration

Our spoils of war shall come in heaps

Male servants and maidens

Gold, silver and ivories

Their kings shall bow before us

As mere men

Their anointed princes

Shall we take home as captives

When we return
With the loots of war
We will not find our tents empty
Our children
Our women
And the aged whom we left behind
Shall meet us at the townsqaure
With songs of victory
Conferring on us new titles
And feting our necks
With the garlands of warlords

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