

Out of Africa

Former Burnaby resident writes a book detailing voodoo rituals and spells

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Phillip Koko Ijoma will never forget the sound as long as he lives – the sound of severed heads being thrown into a grave, thudding against the coffin. The grave was dug in the floor of a dark room lit by two oil lanterns. More than a dozen men crowded into the room, their faces half-concealed in the flickering light. All was silent at that hour of midnight, except the haunting calls of owls in the darkness outside.

Ijoma's father, the chief of his Nigerian village, had died. The death was kept a secret while the elders killed half a dozen men and brought their heads back for the secret initiation ceremony into the next world. These men's spirits would accompany the chief as servants in his afterlife. Murmuring incantations over the heads, which were stacked in a woven basket, the priest appeared in a trance. The heads were then taken, one by one, and thrown into the grave. The coffin, of polished ebony embellished with precious stones, was fastened shut with lion's teeth.

Ijoma's grandfather was a voodoo high priest. Ijoma, a prince in the Ekpenyong-Ana family, was an initiate of various fraternal and secret organizations. His family was steeped in the black magic of Africa. His first out-of-body experience occurred when he was 10 at his grandfather's funeral. Ijoma recalls that an unknown force knocked him to the ground and he remained in a coma for eight days. During that time, Ijoma recalls, his spirit travelled elsewhere. "It was as if the gods were leading me to some sort of knowledge of their existence," he said, adding that, during the out-of-body experience, the gods gave him knowledge of certain spells.

Steeped, as a child, in the practice of voodoo, Ijoma, a former Burnaby resident who now lives in New Westminster, recently wrote a book about his experiences. *Visions from the Dark World* is about a fictitious Nigerian man whose adventures are based on Ijoma's encounters with voodoo rituals, spells and visions. From fathers killing sons and wives for spell sacrifices to spirit possession and trance visits in dark realms, the book takes one on a surreal, sometimes gruesome, journey into a very different world.

Ijoma writes in depth about the secret traditional ceremonies, offering a rare and mystifying look into his culture. He writes about entities that inhabit other places and he writes about things that most of us would have a hard time believing ever happened.

“These stories may sound incredible, but they are true,” says Ijoma. “A guy went crazy and shot the chief, but the chief was protected under a spell and nothing happened. The chief laughed. I saw it.” Africans are aware of these sorts of things. The knowledge exists, but people don’t know about it. “Things happen like in the Bible where Jesus walks on water. People believe he did, but not a lot of people try it.”

“In writing the book, I wanted to share the culture, expose the rituals and show that there are repercussions for doing evil. This is the culture of my people. There is a whole world out there doing things that people here can’t really comprehend.”

When Ijoma thinks back on his life, he’s travelled a long distance – figuratively and literally – from his African village of thatched-roof houses to being a computer network specialist in New Westminster.

Ijoma, who has a master’s degree in criminal justice from the University of Nebraska, was lucky. When he was growing up, education was beginning to make its way into the far-flung villages. Ijoma went to primary school in his village and then received a scholarship to go to high school in the city. That changed his life.

He wanted to broaden his horizons as much as he could, so he applied to university in the United States. There, his sister introduced him to Christianity. “My sister became a Pentecostal and saw in a vision that our family needed to stop being involved in voodoo and move on with Christ. What we did with the voodoo was pure evil; there was no doubt about it. Through a rational way of thinking, I realized that what we were doing was wrong. In the United States, I could see how people reasoned and discussed other ideas. People in the Nigerian villages have a certain mindset; their thinking is confined to a certain way of doing things.”

Choosing to be a Christian meant Ijoma gave up power. Chieftains rotate through the village families. Chiefs are worshipped as gods. “When the chieftain rotates back to my family, I’ll reject it,” says Ijoma, who does not return to his village because he doesn’t want to be part of the rituals.

Visions from the Dark World is available at Barnes and Noble, www.1stbooks.com and www.amazon.com