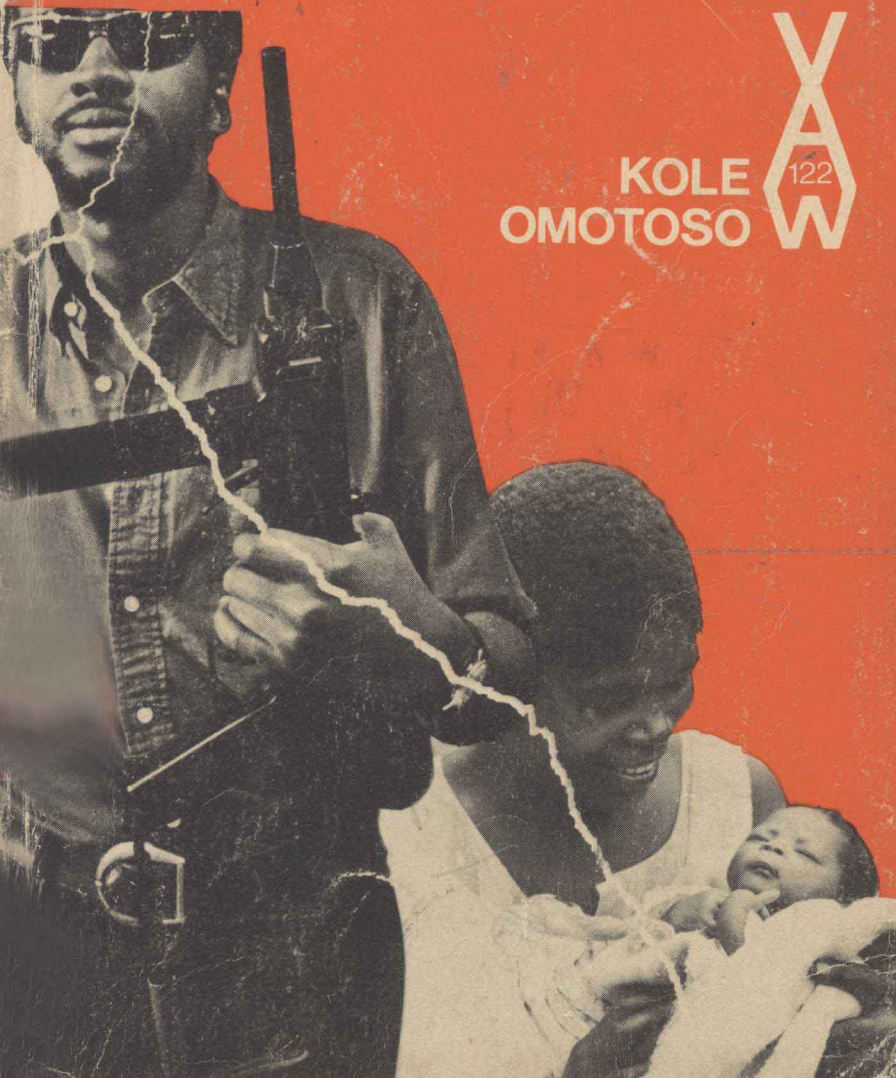


# the combat

KOLE  
OMOTOSO



# *The Combat*

*KOLE OMOTOSO*



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AFRICAN WRITERS SERIES

122

The Combat

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*to the memory of Chris Okigbo*

St. Foix asked the gentleman next to him to sit farther away.

‘Why so, sir?’ the gentleman asked.

‘Because, sir, you smell.’

‘That sir, is an insult. My seconds will wait on you, and you must fight me.’

‘I will fight if you insist, but I don’t see how that will mend the matter,’ St. Foix answered. ‘If you kill me I shall smell too. If I kill you you will smell, if possible, worse than you do at present.’

*The Book of Duels*: Philip Rush  
(Harrap, London, 1964)



*Monday*

# I

The drum signal of Radio Nigeria woke Chuku Debe at 5.30 a.m. Chuku hissed, turned round while the wooden bed creaked violently under his bulk, covered his head with his coverlet and closed his eyes. But he could not sleep again. From the other room he heard his friend, Ojo Dada, get up and prepare to go to his place of work. Chuku got up. He lit the candle which was stuck into a hole at the head of the bed. Outside the harmattan haze wrapped itself coily around the half darkness. Chuku went out of his room and with the toes of his right foot he began to feel his way to the ladder by which they usually climbed upstairs. His toes hit a pile of bricklayer's utensils and he winced: that was not a good sign – to hit the toes of the right foot against anything so early in the morning.

His feet found the rungs of the ladder and he descended to the ground floor of their four-roomed building. He collected the bucket and went to the well. When he got to the well he saw that Ojo had left some water for him. He emptied the water into his bucket and carried it to the bamboo bathroom. Chuku took off his wrapper and spread it to cover the entrance to the bathroom. His hand delved into a corner, and brought out a sponge, he tucked a piece of Lux soap into it. He picked up an enamel cup and half-filled it with some water from the bucket. He lifted the cup to his head and allowed its content to drip slowly down his thick hair, onto his face, down the knots of muscle of his chest.

It was cold. The dry coldness of the January harmattan. But this did not bother Chuku. One cold water bath a day keeps the harmattan winds away! When he had poured a couple more ~~more~~ cups of water over his head, he ~~scrubbed~~ <sup>scrubbed</sup> his body with the sponge. He poured more water over his body and used his hands to wash off the soap. He put the sponge back in its corner. His soap and sponge were usually on the right-hand side of the bathroom, while Ojo's were on the left-hand side. He put the

cup down on one of the stones of the bathroom and lifted the bucket of water. He emptied all the water over his head. He remembered too late that there was some mud in the bottom of the bucket; it tumbled over his head and over his body. He swore and put the bucket down. He then brushed his hair with his hands to get the mud off his head. After doing his head he started brushing off the mud on his chest and down his stomach and thighs. He took the wrapper and wrapped it around his body. The wrapper would not only absorb all the water on his body but also clean off whatever mud was left on his body.

He put the cup inside the bucket and went back towards the house. The darkness was already lifting now. Those who had been to morning prayers at the nearby Apostolic Church were returning. The redifusion box which they had had fixed onto the front of the house when he and Ojo had moved into it was rounding off the morning prayers for its listeners. Chuku entered the house. He climbed the ladder and went up to his room. The candle was askew, its yellow flame already licking the edge of the head of the bed. Chuku stood it upright. He put his now sodden wrapper on the bed. He began to dress; his pants, his singlet – it had large black patches of dirt under the armpits – then his khaki pair of trousers; over it he put a green dansiki which was torn on the shoulders. He bent down and began to search for his pair of tyre-soled slippers; unfortunately he had kicked them far under the bed the night before and now the tip of his fingers barely touched the nearest of them. He bent low and put his head under the bed. He reached for the slippers and dragged them out and put them on. He picked up a thick plastic comb and put it into his hair, vigorously he combed and combed. When he was satisfied, he put the comb on the broken-down easy chair. Now he used his hand to smooth and press down his hair. By the time he had finished all this, it was already daylight. He lifted the pillow and took some money from under it. He put this inside his trouser pocket, then he closed the door and went down the ladder.

The redifusion was now giving the news summary in Nigerian languages. Chuku felt his left trouser pocket; he then put his left hand into the same pocket. He had forgotten the ignition key. He returned to the house and ran up the ladder. He pushed the door open and threw the pillow to the foot of the bed. He

picked up the ignition key, and put out the candle which he had left burning. He descended the ladder again wondering if there was anything else he had forgotten. He went out of the house locking the door after him.

He walked the almost hundred yards from the house to the street – Arakale Road – thinking of his plans for the day. He got to the black Morris Minor and opened the front door on the driver's side. He took out a rag, formerly of a yellow colour now almost completely covered with black filth, and with this he started to clean the car. When he had finished, he put the rag back inside the coverless glove compartment. He sat behind the wheel and inserted the ignition key, putting his slippered right foot on the accelerator. He turned the ignition key and the car coughed, surging forward as if it would bolt out of control. Chuku shifted his left foot to the brake pedal, then he shifted the floor gear-stick to neutral and tried again. This time there was a continuous whining. He stepped on the accelerator and behind the small car a cloud of smoke issued from the mud-covered silencer. Chuku kept his foot on the accelerator for another minute. Satisfied at last that the car had warmed up, he switched off the engine.

He got out of the car again and went to the stall of the akara seller. He bought a loaf of bread (a sixpenny loaf; a three-penny loaf would make his stomach roar) and twelve akara balls for sixpence. The woman offered him a seat but Chuku did not take it. He took his bread and akara and returned to his taxi. He opened the left-hand back door and sat down to his breakfast. He cut the bread into four almost equal parts; he slit each part again in two through the middle; then he inserted two akara balls and closed the two halves on the akara. This was his sandwich – first page bread, second page akara, and third page bread; or simply akara in hard-back.

When he had finished his meal, he signalled to the Hausa tea boy, who had been watching him intently for the past twenty minutes. The boy came up to him with his steaming kettle of tea. He produced a glass cup, thick with muck and for this reason almost opaque. He held the kettle in his right hand and the glass in the left tilting the spout of the kettle into the glass and allowing the yellow liquid to cascade into the glass. When the glass was almost full to the brim, he put down the kettle and brought out another glass. Then he started to pour

the contents of the first glass cup first into one, and then into the other, of the two glasses. Satisfied that the tea was now ready for drinking he offered it to Chuku who took the glass. He blew some vapour on to the surface of the glass and drank the tea in one go. The boy stood where he was, waiting, knowing that Chuku needed more than one glass of tea after his breakfast. The tea boy went through all the motions <sup>over and over</sup> again of filling the glass and gave it to Chuku. Chuku took his time over this second cup. He had opened the door of the back of the car and had stretched one of his legs out on the ground. He leapt out and shouted at the news-vendor who was rushing through the traffic of market women on their way to the morning market at Mosalasi. The news-vendor dodged a push cart and came up to Chuku. He was shouting:

‘Coup d’etat in Lagos. Akintola is dead! Sardauna is dead!! The soldiers have taken over!!!’

‘Make I see one paper,’ Chuku said and the boy gave him a copy of the *Morning Post*. Chuku started to look at the pictures; then he turned to the back pages to see what the tips for the next Saturday’s U.K. games were like. Too late the impatient news-vendor realized that this man was not likely to buy any of his papers. He pulled the paper from the big hands of Chuku. The pages came apart in two halves torn right through, one half in Chuku’s hands, the other in the bewildered hands of the news-vendor.

‘Wetin dey do you?’ Chuku asked tossing the half in his hand to the now weeping news-vendor.

‘You must pay for this!’ the vendor started shouting.

‘Okay,’ said Chuku, delving his hand into his trouser pocket. ‘I no wan wahala for Monday morning.’

He threw two pennies to the boy who hastily picked them up and ran off. He had gone about five yards when he remembered that he had not even left the torn paper for Chuku. He made to turn back but Chuku waved him away.

\*

Having finished his row with the news-vendor, Chuku shifted his bulk behind the wheel and turned the ignition key. He revved and looked towards the tea boy who was now shouting out at him. He had not been paid.

‘Tomorrow, I go gif you!’

With that Chuku was on his way. A cloud of dust followed him as he drove down Arakele Road in the town of Akure. He turned left into Iworokogbasa Lane and increased the pressure of his foot on the accelerator. He slowed down at the other end of the lane, making sure there was no traffic from the Oba’s Market direction. He drove slowly past the front of the Oba’s palace. Somebody shouted taxi but Chuku did not stop. He was not going to do any work this morning. He had to have some repairs done on the car; the brakes were loose, and then he had no spare tyre, the one he had having burst its tube months ago. He had given enough in bribes to policemen to get the tyre patched and the brakes fixed ten times over. Now he was tired of giving bribes. He was going to carry out these repairs this morning before he started to take fares. There were more shouts of taxi in front of the post-office. Chuku was tempted to take just one load, but he changed his mind and pulled up near the traffic policeman. When it was his turn, Chuku turned right towards Bourdillon Road. He was going to the place where his friend Ojo Dada worked.

The Texaco Oil Company hardly has any petrol stations left in Nigeria these days. Their petrol stations have been abandoned to weeds and straying mad men. Bankruptcy? Nobody knows. When Nigeria started to produce its own petrol, this old associate in the sale of petrol had to go. In Akure, as in other towns, Texaco used to have petrol stations. The one in Akure was in a rather central part of the town; it was situated on the right-hand side of the upper part of Bourdillon Road adjacent to the Armel’s Coach station. On the other side of the road almost, opposite the Texaco petrol station, was the CMS Bookshop with its two large archways emphasizing its predilection for religious books. The bookshop was called something else these days but nobody remembered the new name. It was CMS Bookshop. And CMS Bookshop it had remained.

This Texaco petrol station had been deserted years before. The small glass office was now empty except for a few jerry cans belonging to Ojo Dada. The window-glass had been smashed. The U-turning used by cars and lorries calling for petrol would have been overgrown with weeds like the other stations all over the country but for the intervention of Ojo. Ojo was sitting on a long plank bench when Chuku turned into the petrol station and

pulled up near what used to be one of the petrol pumps. Chuku shifted the gear stick to first and got out of the car.

‘o D, wetin you dey do?’

‘Can’t you see I yam reading?’

Chuku laughed and took the butt of a cigarette from behind his left ear. He went and sat beside Ojo on the bench. Ojo paid no attention to Chuku. He was reading from the abridged edition of *Lamb’s Tales from Shakespeare* the story of Romeo and Juliet. Chuku lit his cigarette and puffed smoke into his friend’s small eyes. Ojo did not turn away from his book. He said:

‘You illiterate! You stark illiterate, do you know what is called Romeo and Juliet?’

Chuku didn’t reply immediately.

‘Of course, you wouldn’t know.’

‘o D, I think say you sabbe book pass man wey dey patch tyre like you dey do here.’

‘That is the problem with this country,’ Ojo said closing the book. ‘As soon as you or me or the man next there can write his name, he thinks that he must never use his hands to work. He must use his brain. Instead of his brawn. And how many of us have the required brain?’

Chuku smoked the last straw of his cigarette and threw away the ashes. He had a way of smoking, using the sides of his thumb and index finger as filter tips for the last straw of tobacco. He rubbed his hands together and said:

‘Okay, o D, I concur. Dis no be time for speak English grammar. I get work for you.’

‘Can I help you?’

‘I get tyre wey done burst. I wan make you patch am.’

‘Bring it then.’

Chuku stood up and went to the boot of the taxi. He lifted the boot cover, which was tied with a piece of rubber to the rear-guard, its catch being slack. From the boot, Chuku brought out a much patched inner tube. Then he took out a threadbare tyre on a mud-caked tyre rim. Carrying these, one in each hand, he dumped them at Ojo’s feet.

‘You should put them on my head!’ Ojo said.

‘o D, abi you no sleep well today?’

Ojo looked at his friend and said: ‘Don’t you hear what has just happened?’

‘What?’

‘There has been another coup just now.’

‘That na my business?’ Chuku asked laughing.

Ojo became suddenly solemn. He said: ‘God forgive you your apathy.’

He got off the bench and picked up the inner tube. He found the valve hole and pulled out the valve; he blew into it until he was out of breath and the tyre was inflated enough to show where the air leaked. He began to run his hand over the much scarred surface of the inner tube. He would pause from one patch to another, his sensitive small hand waiting for the little whiff of leaking air from the tube. Not feeling it, he would shift his hand on over the inner tube. When he had done this twice over and had not succeeded in locating a leak, he brought out the engine pump. He inserted the length of twine at the end of which was a handle. With this he got the engine started. He switched on the air-pumping device and inserted the end to the valve end of the inner tube. The tube rapidly filled up. Ojo switched off the engine. He covered the valve end of the tube and tightened the cover with a wrench. He put the tube down and went to get a large open six-inch-deep tray made of wood. He filled this with water; he got the tube and began to submerge parts of the inner tube in the water in the tray. He shifted the tube round in the water. Soon there was a series of bubbles. He heaved a sigh.

‘You find am?’ Chuku asked leaning over Ojo’s shoulder.

‘Yes.’

Chuku went and sat on the bench again. He picked up the book Ojo had been reading. He leafed through the pages looking at the illustrations, then he put it down in anger.

‘Book, book, book,’ he muttered, a note of disapproval in his whisper.

He turned to his taxi and saw a little boy looking through one of the windows into the car. He must have been about nine years old. Chuku did not like small boys looking into his taxi. For all he knew they might be thieves. He shouted at the boy: ‘Hey, you get out of dere.’

Ojo looked up from his work and said sternly:

‘Leave the boy alone.’

‘Tell am say make he no touse my taxi,’ Chuku answered.

Ojo did not say anything. He returned to his work. The boy stopped to look at the two men. Then he continued to look inside the taxi. Chuku got up and rushed towards the boy



intending to snatch him by the arm and throw him as far as possible away from his taxi.

Ojo got up and called: 'Chuku!'

Chuku stopped and looked at his friend. He turned round and faced Ojo. The two of them were like two buildings: Ojo being the model, and Chuku the huge independence-building, finished product.

'Muscles and no brain,' Ojo said and went back to his work again.

'Who be dat boy anyway?' Chuku asked going to sit down.

'He is my friend. His name is Isaac. His parents are dead. He lives with his grandfather. Or used to live with him, but he ran away from the old man because he was being made to go to the farm every day instead of going to school. Isaac, come here!'

The boy who had been called came up shyly to Ojo and stood by his side.

'Give your greetings to my friend Chuku.'

'Good morning sir,' Isaac said turning to Chuku.

Chuku looked him up and down. He was so thin and skinny. Chuku did not answer the greeting. Instead he said:

'Your grandfather no dey give you food?'

'Who says the cat isn't as big as the dog 'cos it starves?!'' Ojo asked.

~~Chuku made no answer. He was still looking at Isaac.~~ Ojo continued working on the patching. Isaac went back to the back of the car and was immediately forgotten by the men.

Isaac sat down, his back to the rear-guard of the taxi. He turned out his pockets. They held some quantity of gari. This he emptied into a small calabash cup. He shook the calabash cup and the gari collected in the middle. He began to pick out the dirt which had got into it. Then he saw that if he continued he was likely to end up with no gari at all, for there was a grain of gari for each little speck of dirt. He forgot about picking out the dirt. He went over to the tap at the side of the road and filled the calabash cup with water. He took the filled cup carefully back to the rear-guard of the car. He sat the cup down propping it against three stones, and sat himself down by it, spreading out his legs to either side of the cup of gari. Out of his breast pocket he brought a small knot of paper. He opened it carefully to reveal some grains of salt. He patted the salt and put the paper down beside the cup of gari. He licked the four fingers of