



Song of the Heart

Adapted from a
Yoruba Folktale



Long ago, near the Nigerian coast, a Yoruba family lived in a farming village. Dayo, the eldest son, tended the yam field with his father. Lara wove colorful cloth to sell with her mother. But Tobi, the youngest son, loved to sing and play his dundun drum.

“Music doesn’t put food on the table,” Tobi’s father said.

“But, Father, music makes my heart sing,” said Tobi. “I want to be a musician.”

“You will have a difficult life wandering the land. You are no musician. You are a farm boy.”

Tobi’s mother said, “Most musicians play in the court of an *oba*, and they come from musical families. It is a position passed from father to son.”

“Our farm is not good enough for you?” asked his father, sounding hurt and angry.

Tobi said respectfully, “You have worked hard on this farm, Father. But we have troubles here, too. Like the droughts. Maybe music can help the family.”

His father shook his head. “This is just foolish.”

“I believe I can succeed. Let me prove it.”

The next day, Tobi packed for his journey. His family urged him to stay and work on the farm. He worried about the future, but he was also hopeful and eager.

Tobi’s mother hugged him tightly and whispered, “I understand that you have to follow your dream.”

“*O da bo*. I love you!” he called to his family. They sadly watched him go.

In the first village, Tobi played and sang in the streets. He earned some food and a place to sleep. Then he moved on.

After a while, Tobi lost count of the many villages he visited. Although people danced to his music, he grew tired and lonely, and worry gnawed at him. Maybe his father was right, he thought. He was running out of food and money. Should he give up and go home?

One day, he walked until the sun was high, then rested under a mahogany tree. He was far from the next village, and he felt heavy with sadness. To lift his spirits, he played a lively beat on his drum.

Suddenly, Tobi stopped. He thought he heard music in the distance. He kept drumming, and the music played again.

Tobi followed the sound. Along the river, he found a young man playing a flute.

“*Ekaabo*,” said the man.

“Who are you?” asked Tobi.

“I am Ayo. A traveling musician, like you.”

“I want nothing more than to perform,” Tobi said. “But so far, I feel that I’m failing.”

“You have good rhythm,” said Ayo. “And there is strength in teamwork. Maybe our meeting was meant to be.”

Ayo taught Tobi the ancient songs of Nigeria’s noble obas and myths passed down through the ages. Ayo said Tobi’s drumming was the heartbeat of their songs. Their voices worked in harmony, and they grew as close as brothers.

In each village, Tobi played his dundun with more passion and skill. Soon they were known throughout the land. Tobi was happy, but he longed to see his family.



Often he and Ayo walked many miles, only to reach a village where people had little food to share.

One day, Tobi heard news from his village. There was another drought, and the crops had suffered. His heart lurched as he worried about his family.

Tobi and Ayo came to a city where the oba's palace sat high on a hill. A plan formed in Tobi's mind.

"Ayo," he said, "Some musicians find favor with the oba and play at court."

Ayo grunted. "The oba's musicians are arrogant. They have musical ancestors. We are not privileged."

"But if we prove our worth, we will no longer struggle just to eat. And we can help our families."

"My family is in the next world," said Ayo, as he looked up to the sky. "The plague took them all years ago. I am alone, except for you." Then he said with sadness, "After all this time together, do you want to part?"

Tobi's stomach churned at the thought of playing without Ayo. The oba was known to be demanding. Tobi said, "Please, my friend, come with me to the palace. If my plan does not succeed, we will continue on our path."

"If you want to try to meet the oba, you go. I will play in the market," replied Ayo.

The next day, Tobi alone took his drum to the gates of the oba's palace. People danced and gave him money. At noon, two drummers in fine robes walked through the gates. One of them sneered, "Go home. We are the oba's musicians, like our fathers before us."

Later, Tobi told Ayo about the other musicians. "See?" Ayo said. "We are not welcome in a royal court!"

"I want to keep trying," said Tobi. "Come with me."

"No, I am sorry," said Ayo. "I will wait for you for two weeks, but then I must move on to the next village."

Every day, Tobi played at the palace gates. When the court musicians went by, they ignored him. He wondered if their music was truly superior.

At the end of two weeks, Tobi performed in front of the palace until he thought he would drop. As the sun set, he sighed and hung his head. Then he heard a voice say, "Don't give up yet. You have good rhythm." It was Ayo.

Tobi looked up. "It was lonely playing without you, my friend," he said. "Yes, there is strength in teamwork,"

smiled Ayo. "How about one more song?"

Our favorite one about our great Creator?"

This time, they played for no audience but themselves. Carried away by their own hypnotic rhythm, they didn't notice a man standing nearby as they joyfully sang the final notes.

"The oba wishes you to play for him," said the man.

With wide eyes, they followed the man into the palace and bowed before the oba. Tobi thought he was in a dream. But they played and sang with all their hearts. People danced and clapped. Even the court musicians listened with surprise. Yet the king sat in calm silence. They finished and bowed again, their hands shaking.

Then the oba's face lit up with a smile. He opened his arms wide and declared, "My kingdom needs your music. It is refreshing and original. Serve in my court and you will be richly rewarded."

Tobi's heart soared and Ayo's eyes beamed. Quickly, Tobi sent for his family. When he saw them, he hugged them tightly and felt their frail bones. The oba invited them to enjoy a feast. A sacred festival was held, and Tobi and Ayo joined others in a magnificent performance.

Under the stars, Tobi's father said, "I see that your music brings joy to many. I am sorry for doubting you."

Tobi smiled and said, "You were right. It was difficult. But all is well, because I followed the song in my heart."

