

## CHARACTERS

**AZARO**, the story's narrator; an abiku, or a spirit child who has never lost ties with the spirit world, named after Lazarus, of the New Testament

**DAD**, an idealistic load-carrier who wants the best for his family and the community. He suffers greatly for this, eventually becoming a boxer and a politician

**MUM**, works very hard selling anything she can get her hands on for the family. She cares for her family deeply and constantly gives up food and security for her family and their ideals

**MADAME KOTO**, proprietress of a local bar. She has a liking for Azaro, though at times is convinced he brings bad luck. She starts out as a well-meaning woman, trying to get along with everyone else. However, as the story progresses, she becomes richer, siding with the political party of the rich, and is often accused of witchcraft.

**JEREMIAH** the Photographer, a young artist who brings the village to the rest of the world and the rest of the world to the village.

## PLOT

Shortly after birth, it became clear that Azaro was a spirit child. He had vivid dreams, which foretold the future and he could see spirits interacting with the living. The spirits called to him and caused him to leave his body for a time, which caused his parents to think he was dead. He woke up in his own coffin and his parents found they could not afford the spiritual ceremony to cut his obvious connection with the spirit world.

Azaro grew and learned more about his "gift." He ran out of his compound (forcing his mother and father to follow) just before it went up in flames. Priestesses who saw his true power abducted him. Azaro made a narrow escape, only to end up in the house of a police officer whose dead son tried to take over his body. He desperately called out (psychically) to his mother, who rescued him.

In their new compound, Azaro's parents threw a feast to celebrate his return. It quickly grew out of control and Azaro's father went far into debt to pay for the party. Creditors began harassing the family. His father beat several of them badly and became known as a "troublemaker" to the landlord. His mother became very sick and almost died from fever; a local bar owner, Madame Koto, helped revive her. Azaro found himself routinely distracted by spirits, who would lure him into the woods and get him lost. His visions were powerful.

Azaro spent much time with Madame Koto at the bar. She considered him lucky because of his spirit connection. Azaro's parents struggled to make ends meet; the family didn't eat well. In fact, Azaro would often rely on Madame Koto to feed him. The creditors came and took away their furniture until Azaro's father could pay his debts. The landlord grew more hostile towards the family.

One day Madame Koto hung a magical ornament (a fetish) above the doorway of the bar and almost immediately, strange customers began to fill the establishment. Azaro saw misshapen figures, blind men and half-man, half-animal spirits in the bar. One night, a group closed in on him and carried him out in a sack. He escaped by cutting a hole and running away. On the way back, he was plagued by visions and became lost. In the morning he found his way home and was beaten by his angry father. Azaro came down with malaria and it took him several days to recover.

When Azaro was feeling better and back at the bar, he saw a similar group of spirits intermingling with the living. He realized that the fetish above the door was attracting them. Azaro took it and fled into the night, with many of the angry spirits in pursuit. After a long chase, he lost them and buried the fetish far into the forest.

The political season opened with rival parties of the rich and poor making promises out of loudspeakers mounted on vans. The party of the rich gave out powdered milk, which turned out to be tainted and made everyone sick. When the van returned later, the villagers attacked it and beat the men inside. The van was burned and became a "landmark" in the village. The local photographer managed to take pictures of the incident and had them published in an international paper, making him momentarily famous. It also made him a target of the politicians. They sent men to find him and he had to "go underground." Political thugs became more prevalent in the village. Azaro's mother was harassed at the marketplace because she supported the "wrong" political party. The photographer returned to Azaro's house beaten, but otherwise unhurt.

Azaro wandered into the city one day and was shocked to see his father working under backbreaking conditions. He carried huge bags of salt and cement and was shamed when he saw his son watching him.

Madame Koto updated her bar and became a supporter of the party of the rich. More thugs began to frequent the bar and they harassed her “regular” clients. Powerful men of the party arrived and Madame Koto hired prostitutes to appease them. Azaro’s father was thrown out the door one night because he threatened several of the thugs to a fight after arguing about politics. The clientele changed again at the bar and Madame Koto had added a gramophone (record player), which terrified Azaro. The rainy season caused a downpour, which lasted for two weeks. Houses flooded and collapsed; Azaro’s home leaked badly.

One night while Azaro’s father was arguing about politics with some prostitutes, Azaro was visited by a three-headed spirit. This spirit wanted Azaro to follow him to the spirit world. Azaro refused and the spirit became angry, saying a more powerful spirit would return for him. Meanwhile, Azaro’s father was prodded to fight by five thugs in the bar and he managed to beat them all, but told Azaro that they would never return to Madame Koto’s.

Azaro was then tricked by spirits into breaking the window of a magical blind man in the village. He followed Azaro home and his parents became angry. Azaro’s father beat him so badly, that Azaro let himself finally be led by the three-headed spirit to the spirit world. He saw visions and places and finally came to the point of no return. He also saw his parents try and wake him, but he was too angry to care. Herbalists eventually brought him back to his parents

Azaro’s father started training to become a boxer. Azaro’s father became obsessed and worked less and less. The family’s money problems became worse. One night, while Azaro was out watching his father train, a man that called himself the Yellow Jaguar challenged him. After a long and grueling fight, in which Azaro’s father had to change his tactics many times (and take a severe beating in the process), the Yellow Jaguar fell back in defeat. He had been a ghost from the spirit world. Azaro’s father took almost a week to recover. His nickname now was Black Tyger.

Madame Koto’s bar was updated again for electricity. It was a new thing for the villagers to see, since many of them had never seen a light bulb. She also bought herself a car, raised prices and opened another bar on the other side of town. Azaro met a friend named Ade who is an abiku like him. Thugs began hassling Black Tyger and brought a huge man named Green Leopard to fight him. Azaro’s father sent him to bet all their money on himself and then he came out for the fight. Black Tyger started out pummeling his opponent, but the Green Leopard would not fall. Then the Green Leopard returned the beating. Finally, the Black Tyger prevailed and the Green Leopard was carried away. Azaro’s family made a good deal of money on the bet. Azaro’s father spent days in a coma fighting spirits in his head. When he awoke, he had a passion for politics. He planned to run for office; his first constituency was a group of beggars. He threw a party, which again turned into a disaster when food ran scarce.

Azaro’s father had a final fight at Madame Koto’s with a spirit man in a white suit. Again, he had Azaro make a huge bet and the thugs lined up to bet against him. The fight was brutal; Azaro’s father was beaten to within an inch of his life. A man in the crowd kept distracting him until Azaro and Ade pushed him away. Then Azaro’s father pulled the suit off the “man” and the crowd recoiled when they saw how inhuman he looked. The Black Tyger knocked his opponent out of the ring and made it back to his home to collapse. Azaro’s father went on to fight the forces of evil in his dreams and eventually he defeated them. He awoke three days later and spoke of a new day beginning. Azaro felt peace for the first time in months.

## MAJOR THEMATIC CONCERNS

### Existence

- the human condition is painful
- it is easy to lose one’s place in the world, to be disconnected from life (symbol: abiku)
- we are all on a spiritual journey for purpose and meaning; the journey is more important than the destination (which may be unrealizable) (symbol: famished road)

### Morality

- spiritual values are more important than materialistic values
- personal loyalty is the measure of morality

- one must confront evil in this world; to do nothing is to be complicit

### Politics

- politics is violent and zero sum
- politics is corrupt and unlikely to enact positive change
- the wealthy exploit the poor

### Alienation

- the world pulls people apart, not together
- the world is frightening and absurd
- we must find some solidarity with others amidst the chaos