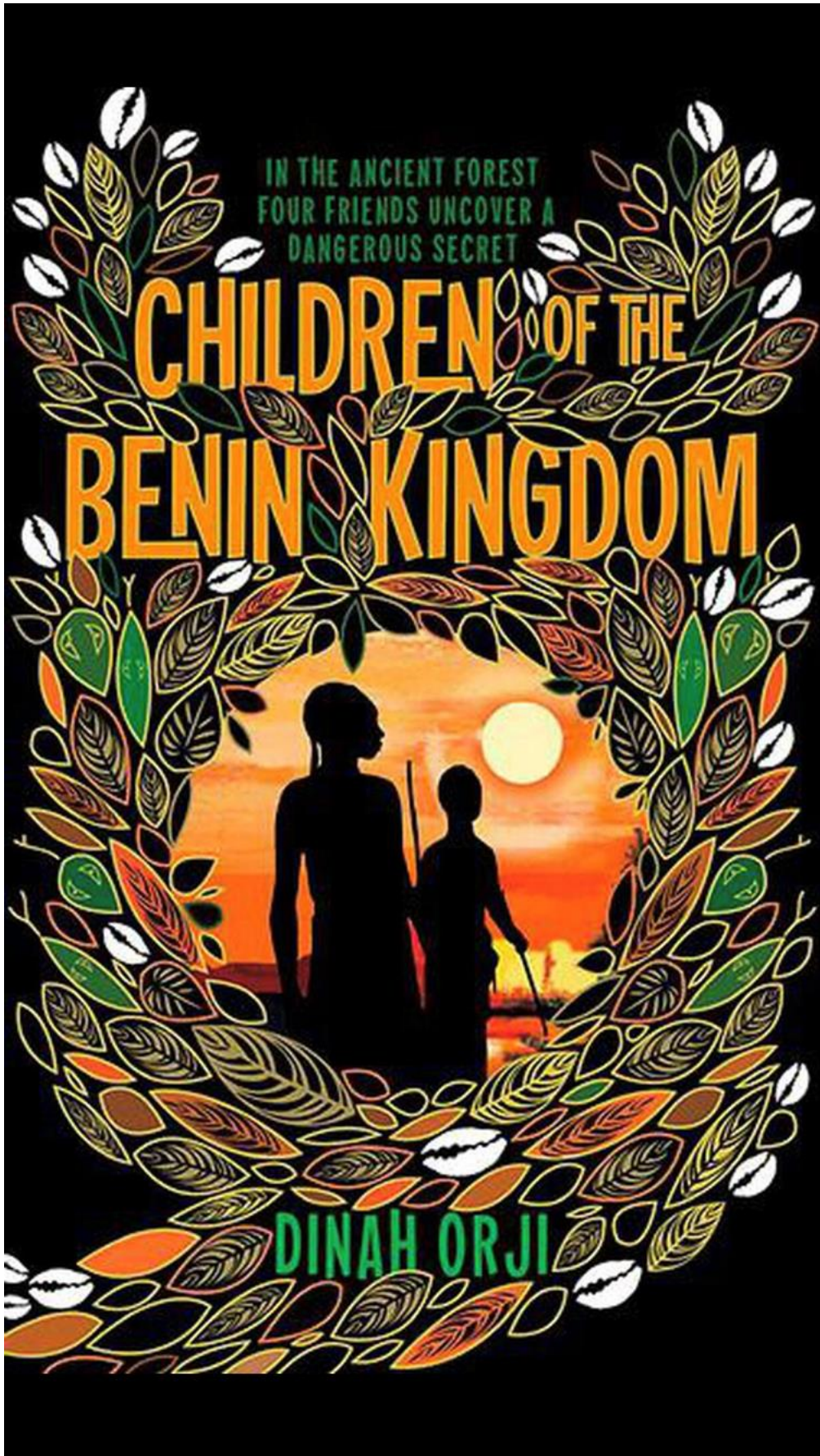
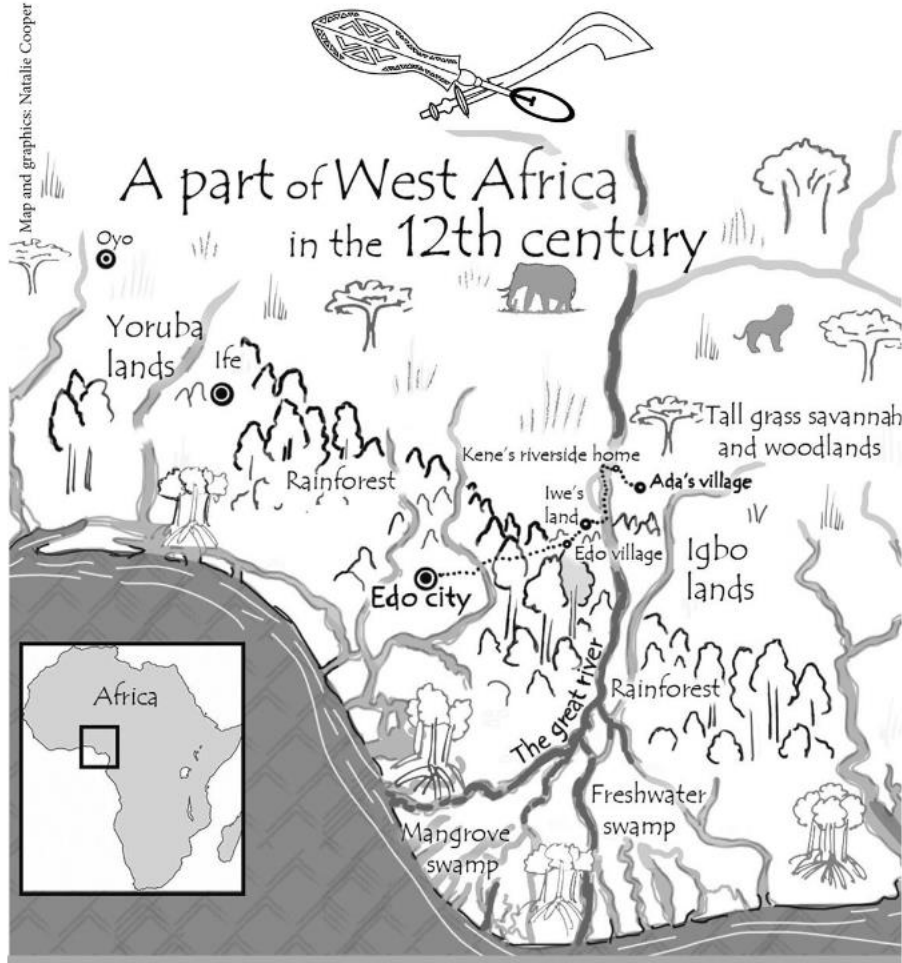


IN THE ANCIENT FOREST
FOUR FRIENDS UNCOVER A
DANGEROUS SECRET

CHILDREN OF THE BENIN KINGDOM

DINAH ORJI





Notes:

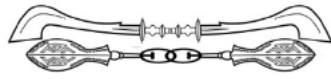
- The dotted line shows the journey taken by Ada and her friends
- The distance from Ada's village to Kene's riverside home is a full day's walk across open country

Pronouncing the names in The Children of the Benin Kingdom



- Ada** – pronounced *a-da*
Ginika – pronounced *ji-nee-kah*
Eze – pronounced *eht-zeh*
Akele – pronounced *ar-kay-lay*
Mbe – pronounced *mm-bey*
Ujo – pronounced *oo-jor*
Chika – pronounced *chee-ka*
Kene – pronounced *keh-ne*
Madu – pronounced *mah-doo*
Iwe – pronounced *ee-weh*
Amaka – pronounced *ah-ma-ka*
Nosa – pronounced *no-sa*
Itohan – pronounced *ee-to-han*
Uche – pronounced *ooh-chay*
Osawe – pronounced *oh-sah-vey*
Obiro – *oh-bee-row*
Efe – pronounced *eh-feh*
Amenze – pronounced *ah-men-zay*

Prologue



The Benin Kingdom, 12th century...

Akele hid from sight, sheltering beneath the wall at the city's edge. She gathered her shawl around her shoulders.

It didn't matter that she was a queen. The palace was no longer safe for her.

Ahead stretched open farmland, barely visible through the night rain. And beyond that, the great forest.

"Protect me now, Ogun," she whispered to the god. "And protect my unborn child."

Then she set off, stumbling into the dark.

Her foot slipped in the mud and the rain stung in her eyes, but she kept moving.

The rainforest was her only hope.

Chapter One



A visit from Mama Ginika

Ada was hunting. Above her in the tree the grey bird hadn't even noticed. It was perched on the branch, rubbing its beak and ruffling its feathers. Ada was so nimble that she had climbed all the way up, until she was just an arms-length away.

And she had long arms. Long legs too.

Ada was only ten years old, but already she was the best climber in the village, everyone said it.

She reached out – stealthy as a leopard –
closer... closer...

Then suddenly the bird was gone, flitting away with an angry chatter.

“Next time the leopard will get you!” Ada yelled. And then she grabbed the branch and let herself swing.

“ **W** hat is she doing now?” Mama Ginika tutted.

The old woman watched Ada dangling from the tree at the end of Papa Eze’s crop garden, with her toes scuffing the dirt.

Papa Eze didn’t look up from his work.

He was preparing a mixture of leaves in water, carefully folding, pressing and pulling them apart.

“She’s climbing,” he said.

Mama Ginika crossed her arms.

“Well I can see that Papa, but why?”

“She likes climbing. And she’s good at it. That branch she’s on – she can keep hanging there longer than any of the others.”

Mama Ginika shook her head.

“That girl needs a mother.”

Papa Eze poured the green liquid into a gourd.

“Drink this when you get home,” he said gently. “It has a bitter taste. But you will soon feel well again.”

“Thank you,” said Mama Ginika. She gave him a cowrie shell.

“There is no need,” said Papa Eze, pushing the shell back into her hand.

Then he looked at his daughter, still dangling.

“Why do you think she needs a mother?”

“It is not a criticism,” replied Mama Ginika. “You have done a good job Eze, a very good job to bring her up on your own. But can she cook?”

“Cook? We manage,” he said. “And she’s still learning... ”

“She needs to learn quickly. Think about it Eze, if she can’t cook, how will she look after a family?”

Papa Eze snorted.

“I’m teaching her plant lore. Tree, plant,

and herb medicine. The sacred ways of the forest.”

Mama Ginika looked down at a bundle of leaves around Eze’s feet.

“The ways of the forest... of course that is a good thing Papa, of course it is. We need your skills.”

“I have helped many sick people.”

“Yes. But... ”

She placed a hand on his shoulder.

“She must fit in with the others. Send her to me and I will teach her, just like I taught my own daughters.”

Papa Eze watched the old woman as she walked away. She picked her way between the neatly planted rows of okra seedlings with her walking stick and stopped to speak with Ada.

The little girl dropped down from her tree, greeted Mama Ginika politely, then skipped alongside the old woman to the edge of the village.

And Papa Eze watched his daughter and ran

his fingers through his greying beard.

He had done his best, but he knew that he couldn't teach her everything.

That evening Papa Eze and Ada walked down to the river below the village. Sometimes they came here, just the two of them, to watch the sun set.

Along the way, Papa Eze knelt down to look at a small plant growing beside the path.

“Well this is a surprise. Look daughter, see? Golden-leaf. One day, this will be a beautiful tree. It has never grown here before.”

Ada leaned forward, hands on her knees.

“Is it good?”

“Oh yes, it is a blessing. Leaves for ailments of the stomach, sticks for cleaning teeth... it has many uses. I've wanted some golden-leaf bark for a while.”

He straightened up. “But not this one. Not yet. We must give it a chance to grow tall and strong.”

“And we take just what we need, no more,”
said Ada.

“Exactly so.”

They walked on.

“Daughter, do you like Mama Ginika?”

“Oh yes, she’s nice. She’s very old isn’t
she?”

“Very old. And I think maybe she needs
some help at her home sometimes.”

Ada thought about it.

“Could I help her?”

“That would be kind. She has been unwell
recently, but sometimes sickness isn’t just in
the body, it is in the spirit. Perhaps she needs
to spend more time with younger people.”

By now they had come to the river’s edge
and Ada paddled her feet in the water.

“Mama Ginika is very wise,” said Papa. “You
will learn many things from her, just as she
once learned from her mother, and all her
ancestors past.”

Ada nodded and watched as a tiny fish
swam over her toes.

Then she looked up.

“Papa... I want to ask you something.”

“Yes?”

“Do I have ancestors?”

Eze raised his eyebrows in surprise and for a moment he was lost for words. He laughed.

“You? Of course you do! Dear child, everybody has ancestors.”

“Yes Papa – but I have seen you talk to your ancestors in the shrine, asking for advice. And sometimes we offer the palm wine together.”

“That’s right. We do.”

“But... but they are not my ancestors though. We never talk to my ancestors.”

Papa Eze held out his hand.

“Come,” he said. “I want to show you something.”

Papa Eze led Ada through the breadfruit trees behind the village, then turned away from the path. He knelt down beside his daughter and pointed.

“Do you see that stone? The flat one?”

“Yes.”

The stone was the colour of amber, lying half buried among the tree roots.

“That belongs to your ancestors.”

Ada looked at the stone, and Papa Eze felt her uncertainty.

“I know. We have no carved figures here... it is not a shrine, but your ancestors are watching you still. They are always watching. Watching and protecting. When you were a baby, when I found you, they asked me to put that stone there for you.”

Ada nodded. Now she knew what to tell her friends, next time they asked. The stone belonged to her ancestors...

Then Papa Eze put his arm around her shoulder.

“Come, my daughter. It is time to sleep.”

As they walked home he thought: soon I will have to tell her.

Papa Eze's first wife and only son had died many years ago, stricken by fever. That had been a terrible time.

Long ago now – how long exactly he couldn't remember.

After that he had buried his sadness in his work, and in his study of plants.

He had started taking longer and longer walks, venturing further away from the village in search of new cures and new knowledge, and he became known in the land around for his skill with the healing properties of plants.

But on feast days, when everyone gathered in the village, people would ask him why he didn't take new wives.

Eze would just smile and say he had other things to think about.

“When the time is right. It is up to the gods.”

The villagers would shake their heads, but Eze was kind and generous with his herb lore remedies so they let him be.

And maybe he was right.

Because one day, Eze found Ada.

He had ventured south, to the very edge of the great forest, following the graceful, grazing duiker. He was searching for a certain tree – he knew its bark to be a powerful cure.

Setting off early, he had taken his stick and his bag for carrying whatever he gathered. Over his shoulder he'd slung his knife for cutting branches and stripping bark.

Now, ahead of him, was a tangled path into the forest.

Eze went in search of something rare – and he come back with something precious.

A baby.

Eze had come walking into the village – through the thatched round houses where he was now one of the elders – holding the infant wrapped in his cloth bag.

“She is a blessed child,” he'd told his curious neighbours. “I found her alone and unprotected. But in all that forest no wild animal had harmed her. No snake, no leopard,

not even a biting insect. The ancestors were watching over this child. Now we must do the same.”

And because Eze was an elder and much loved by all his neighbours, and known for his kindness, they all agreed and accepted what he said. After all, the child must have powerful ancestors to have survived alone in the forest. They would not want to anger them!

The child would be raised as one of theirs and called Ada.

But the truth about what Eze had really found in the rainforest – what he had really seen that morning – he never told to anybody.

He decided it would be safer for the child if he kept that a secret.

There would be time later, he thought. One day, when Ada was grown up, he could tell her where she really came from.