

MALLAM SILE

By Mohammed Naseehu Ali

He was popularly known as *mai tea*, or the tea seller. His shop was situated right in the navel of Zongo Street—a stone’s throw from the chief’s assembly shed and adjacent to the kiosk where Mansa BBC, the town gossip, sold her provisions. Along with fried eggs and white butter bread, Mallam Sile carried all kinds of beverages: regular black tea, Japanese green tea, Milo, Bournvita, cocoa drink, instant coffee. But on Zongo Street all hot beverages were referred to just as tea, and it was common, therefore, to hear people say, “Mallam Sile, may I have a mug of cocoa tea?” or “Sile, may I have a cup of coffee tea?”

The tea shop had no windows. It was built of *wawa*, a cheap wood easily infested by termites. The floor was uncemented, and heaps of dust rose in the air whenever a customer walked in. Sile protected his merchandise from the dust by keeping everything in plastic bags. An enormous wooden “chop box,” the top of which he used as a serving table, covered most of the space in the shop. There was a tall chair behind the chop box for Sile, but he never used it, preferring instead to stand on his feet even when the shop was empty. There were also three benches that were meant to be used only by those who bought tea, though the idle gossips who crowded the shop and never spent any money occupied the seats most of the time.

Old Sile had an irrational fear of being electrocuted and so he’d never tapped electricity into his shack, as was usually done on Zongo Street. Instead, he used kerosene lanterns, three of which hung from the low wooden ceiling. Sile kept a small radio in the shop, and whenever he had no customers he listened, in meditative silence, to the English programs on GBC 2, as though he understood what was being said. Mallam Sile was fluent only in his northern Sisaala tongue, though he understood Hausa—the language of the street’s inhabitants—and spoke just enough pidgin to be able to conduct his business.

The mornings were usually slow for the tea seller, as a majority of the street folks preferred the traditional breakfast of *kókó da mása*, or corn porridge with rice cake. But, come evening, the shop was crowded with the street's young men and women, who gossiped and talked about the “laytes’ neus” in town. Some came to the shop just to meet their loved ones. During the shop's peak hours—from eight in the evening until around midnight—one could hardly hear oneself talk because of the boisterous chattering that went on. But anytime Mallam Sile opened his mouth to add to a conversation people would say, “Shut up, Sile, what do you know about this?” or “Close your beak, Sile, who told you that?” The tea seller learned to swallow his words, and eventually spoke only when he was engaged in a transaction with a customer. But nothing said or even whispered in the shop escaped his sharp ears.

Mallam Sile was a loner, without kin on the street or anywhere else in the city. He was born in Nanpugu, a small border town in the north. He left home at age sixteen, and, all by himself, journeyed more than nine hundred miles in a cow truck to find work down south in Kumasi—the capital city of Ghana's gold-rich Ashanti region.

Within a week of his arrival in the city, Sile landed a job as a house servant. Although his monthly wages were meagre, he sent a portion of them home to his ailing parents, who lived like paupers in their drought-stricken village. Even so, Sile's efforts were not enough to save his parents from the claws of Death, who took them away in their sleep one night. They were found clinging tightly to each other, as if one of them had seen what was coming and had grabbed onto the other so that they could go together.

The young Sile received the news of his parents' death with mixed emotions. He was sad to lose them, of course, but he saw it as a well-deserved rest for them, as they both had been ill and bedridden for many months. Though Sile didn't travel up north to attend their funeral, he sent money for a decent burial. With his parents deceased, Sile suddenly found himself with more money in his hands. He quit his house-servant job and found another, selling iced *kenkey* in Kumasi's central market. Sile kept every pesewa he earned, and two years later he was able to use his savings to open a tea business. It was the first of such establishments on Zongo Street, and would remain the only one for many years to come.

Mallam Sile was short—so short, in fact, that many claimed he was a Pygmy. He stood exactly five feet one inch tall. Although he didn't have the broad, flat nose, poorly developed chin, and round head of the Pygmies, he was stout and hairy all over, as they were. A childhood illness that had caused Sile's vision to deteriorate had continued to plague him throughout his adult life. Yet he refused to go to the hospital and condemned any form of medication, traditional or Western. "God is the one who brings illness, and he is the only true healer"—this was Sile's simple, if rather mystical, explanation.

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Sile's small face was covered with a thick, long beard. The wrinkles on his dark forehead and the moistness of his soft, squinted eyes gave him the appearance of a sage, one who had lived through and conquered many adversities in his life. His smile, which stretched from one wrinkled cheek to the other, baring his kola-stained teeth, radiated strength, wisdom, and self-confidence.

Sile wore the same outfit every day: a white polyester djellabah and its matching *wando*, a loose pair of slacks that tied with strings at the waist. He had eight of these

suits, and wore a different one each day of the week. Also, his head was perpetually shaved, and he was never without his white embroidered Mecca hat—worn by highly devout Muslims as a reflection of their submission to Allah. Like most of the street’s dwellers, Sile owned just one pair of slippers at a time, and replaced them only when they were worn out beyond repair. An unusual birth defect that caused the tea seller to grow an additional toe on each foot had made it impossible for him to find footwear that fit him properly; special slippers were made for him by Anaba the cobbler, who used discarded car tires for the soles of the shoes he made. The rascals of Zongo Street, led by Samadu, the street’s most notorious bully, poked at Sile’s feet and his slippers, which they called *kalabilwala*, a nonsensical term that no one could understand, let alone translate.

At forty-six, Mallam Sile was still a virgin. He routinely made passes at the divorcées and widows who came to his shop, but none showed any interest in him whatsoever. “What would I do with a dwarf?” the women would ask, feeling ashamed of having had passes made at them by Sile. A couple of them seemed receptive to tea seller Sile’s advances, but everyone knew that they were flirting with him only in order to get free tea.

Eventually, Sile resigned himself to his lack of success with women. He was convinced that he would die a virgin. Yet late at night, after all the customers, idlers, and rumormongers had left the shop to seek refuge in their shanties and on their bug-ridden grass mattresses, Sile could be heard singing love songs, hoping that a woman somewhere would respond to his passionate cries:

***{: .break one} ** A beautiful woman, they say, Is like an elephant’s meat. And only the man with the sharpest knife Can cut through. That’s what they say. Young girl, I have no knife, I am not a hunter of meat, And I am not savage. I am only looking for love. This is what I say. Up north where I am from, Young girls are not what they are here. Up north where I am from, People don’t judge you by your knife. They look at the size of your heart. Young girl, I don’t know what you look like. I don’t know where to look for you. I don’t even know who you are, young girl. All I know is: my heart is aching. Oh, oh, oh! My heart is aching for you. ***

Sile’s voice rang with melancholy when he sang his songs. But still the rascals derided him. “When are you going to give up, Sile?” they would say. “Can’t you see that no woman would marry you?”

“I have given up on them long, long ago,” he would reply. “But I am never going to give up on myself!”

“You keep fooling yourself,” they told him, laughing.

The rascals’ mocking didn’t end there. Knowing that Mallam Sile couldn’t see properly, they often used fake or banned cedi notes to purchase tea from him at night. The tea seller pinned the useless bills to the walls of his shop as if they were good-luck charms. He believed that it was hunger—and not mischief—that had led the rascals to cheat him. And, since he considered it inhuman to refuse a hungry person food, Mallam Sile allowed them to get away with their frauds.

To cool off the hot tea for his customers, Sile poured the contents of one mug into another, raising one over the other. The rascals would push Sile in the middle of this process, causing the hot liquid to spill all over his arms. The tea seller was never angered by such pranks. He merely grinned and, without saying a word, wiped off the spilled tea and continued to serve his customers. And when the rascals blew out the lanterns in the shop, so as to steal bread and Milo while he was trying to rekindle the light, Sile accepted that, too. He managed to rid his heart of any ill feelings. He would wave his short arms to anyone who walked past his shop, and shout, by way of greeting, “How are the heavens with you, boy?” Sile called everyone “boy,” including women and older people, and he hardly ever uttered a sentence without referring to the heavens.

He prided himself on his hard work, and smiled whenever he looked in the mirror and saw his dwarfish body and ailing eyes, two abnormalities that he had learned to love. A few months before the death of his parents, he had come to the conclusion that if Allah had made him any differently he would not have been Mallam Sile—and Mallam Sile was an individual whom Sile’s heart, mind, and spirit had come to accept and respect. This created within him a peace that made it possible for him not only to tolerate the rascals’ ill treatment but also to forgive them. Though in their eyes Sile was only a buffoon.

One sunny afternoon during the dry season, Mallam Sile was seen atop the roof of his shack with hammers, saws, pliers, and all kinds of building tools. He lingered there all day long like a stray monkey, and by dusk he had dismantled all the aluminum roofing sheets that had once sheltered him and his business. He resumed work early the

following morning, and by about one-thirty, before *azafar*, the first of the two afternoon prayers, Sile had no place to call either home or tea shop—he had demolished the shack down to its dusty floor.

At three-thirty, after *la-asar*, the second afternoon worship, Mallam Sile moved his personal belongings and all his tea paraphernalia to a room in the servants' quarters of the chief's palace. The room had been arranged for him by the chief's wazir, or right-hand man, who was sympathetic to the tea seller.

During the next two days, Mallam Sile ordered plywood and planks of *odum*, a wood superior to the *wawa* used for the old shop. He also ordered a few bags of cement and truckloads of sand and stones, and immediately began building a new shack, much bigger than the first.

The street folks were shocked by Sile's new building—they wondered where he had got the money to embark on such an enterprise. Sile was rumored to be constructing a mini-market store to compete with Alhaji Saifa, the owner of the street's provision store. (And though the tea seller denied the rumor, it rapidly spread up and down the street, eventually creating bad blood between Sile and Alhaji Saifa.)

It took three days for Mallam Sile to complete work on the new shop's foundation, and an additional three weeks for him to erect the wooden walls and the aluminum roofing sheets. While Sile was busy at work, passersby would call out, "How is the provision store coming?" or "*Mai tea*, how is the mansion coming?" Sile would reply simply, "It is coming well, boy. It will be completed soon, *Inshallah*." He would grin his usual wide grin and wave his short hairy arms, and then return to his work.

Meanwhile, as the days and weeks passed, the street folks grew impatient and somewhat angry at the closing of Sile's shop. The nearest tea shack was three hundred metres away, on Zeriky Road—and not only that but the owner of the shack, Abongo, was generally abhorred. And for good reason. Abongo, also a northerner, was quite unfriendly even to his loyal customers. He maintained a rigid no-credit policy, and made customers pay him even before they were served. No one was an exception to this policy—even if he or she was dying of hunger. And, unlike Sile, Abongo didn't tolerate idlers or loud conversation in his shop. If a customer persisted in chatting, Abongo reached for the customer's mug, poured the contents in a plastic basin, and refunded his

money. He then chased the customer out of the shop, brandishing his bullwhip and cursing after him, “If your mama and papa never teach you manners, I’ll teach you some! I’ll sew those careless lips of yours together, you bastard son of a bastard woman!”

As soon as work on the shop was completed, Sile left for his home town. Soon afterward, yet another rumor surfaced: it was said that the tea seller had travelled up north in search of “black medicine” for his bad eyesight.

Sile finally returned one Friday evening, some six weeks after he’d begun work on the shop, flanked by a stern woman who looked to be in her late thirties and was three times larger than the tea seller. The woman, whose name was Abeeba, turned out to be Mallam Sile’s wife. She was tall and massive, with a face as gloomy as that of someone mourning a dead relative. Like her husband, Abeeba said very little to people in or out of the shop. She, too, grinned and waved her huge arms whenever she greeted people, though, unlike the tea seller, she seemed to have something harder lurking behind her cheerful smile. Abeeba carried herself with the grace and confidence of a lioness, and covered her head and part of her face with an Islamic veil, a practice that had been dropped by most of the married women on Zongo Street.

The rascals asked Sile, when they ran into him at the market, “From where did you get this elephant? Better not get on her bad side; she’ll sit on you till you sink into the ground.” To this, the tea seller did not say a word.

Exactly one week after Sile’s return from his village, he and his wife opened the doors of the new shop to their customers. Among the most talked-about features were the smooth concrete floor and the bright gas lantern that illuminated every corner. In a small wooden box behind the counter, Sile and his wife burned *tularen mayu*, or witches’ lavender, a strong yet sweet-smelling incense that doubled as a jinx repellent—to drive bad spirits away from the establishment.

On the first night, the tea shop was so crowded that some customers couldn’t find a seat, even with the twelve new metal folding chairs that Sile had bought. The patrons sang songs of praise to the variety of food on the new menu, which included meat pies, brown bread, custard, and Tom Brown, an imported grain porridge. Some of the patrons even went so far as to thank Sile and his wife for relieving them of “Abongo’s

nastiness.” But wise old Sile, who was as familiar with the street folks’ cynicism as he was with the palms of his hands, merely nodded and grinned his sheepish grin. He knew that, despite their praise, and despite the smiles they flashed his way, some customers were at that very moment thinking of ways to cheat him.

While Sile prepared the tea and food, Abeeba served and collected the money. Prior to the shop’s reopening, Abeeba had tried to convince her husband that they, too, should adopt Abongo’s no-credit policy. Sile had quickly frowned upon the idea, claiming that it was inhumane to do such a thing.

The tea seller and his wife debated the matter for three days before they came to a compromise. They agreed to extend credit, but only in special cases and also on condition that the debtor swear by the Koran to pay on time; if a debtor didn’t make a payment, he or she would not be given any credit in the future. But, even with the new policy in place, it wasn’t long before some of the customers reverted to their old habits and began skipping payments. Then an encounter between Abeeba and one of the defaulters changed everything.

What took place was this: Samadu, the pugnacious sixteen-year-old whose fame had reached every corner of the city, was the tough guy of Zongo Street. He was of medium height, muscular, and a natural-born athlete. For nine months running, no one in the neighborhood had managed to put Samadu’s back to the ground in the haphazard wrestling contests held beside the central market’s latrine. Samadu’s “power” was such that parents paid him to protect their children from other bullies at school. He was also known for having tortured and even killed the livestock of the adults who denounced him. If they didn’t have pets or domestic animals, he harassed their children for several days until he was appeased with cash or goods. Some parents won Samadu’s friendship for their children by bribing him with gifts of money, food, or clothing.

Samadu, of course, was deeply in debt to Mallam Sile—he owed him eighty cedis, about four dollars. Early one Tuesday morning, Mallam Sile’s wife showed up at Samadu’s house to collect the money. Abeeba had tried to collect the debt amicably, but after her third futile attempt she had suggested to Sile that they use force to persuade the boy to pay. Sile had responded by telling his wife, “Stay out of that boy’s way—he is dangerous. If he has decided not to pay, let him keep it. He will be the loser in the end.”

“But, Mallam, it is an insult what he is doing,” Abeeba argued. “I think people to whom we have been generous should only be generous in return. I am getting fed up with their ways, and the sooner the folks here know that even the toad gets sick of filling his belly with the same dirty pond water every day, the better!” Though Sile wasn’t sure what his wife meant, he let the matter drop.

When Abeeba arrived at Samadu’s house, a number of housewives and young women were busily doing their morning chores in and around the compound—some sweeping and stirring up dust, others fetching water from the tap in the compound’s center or lighting up charcoal pots to warm the food left over from the previous night. Abeeba greeted them politely and asked to be shown to the tough guy’s door. The women tried to turn Abeeba away, as they feared that Samadu would humiliate her in some way. But Abeeba insisted that she had important business with him, and so the housewives reluctantly directed her to Samadu’s room, which, like all the young men’s rooms, was situated just outside the main compound.

The usual tactic that the street’s teen-age boys used when fighting girls or women was to strip them of the wrapper around their waist, knowing that they would be reluctant to continue fighting half-naked. But Abeeba had heard young boys in the shop discussing Samadu’s bullying ways and had come prepared for anything. She wore a sleeveless shirt and a pair of tight-fitting khaki shorts, and, for the first time ever, she had left her veil at home.

“You rogue! If you call yourself a man, come out and pay your debt!” Abeeba shouted, as she pounded on Samadu’s door.

“Who do you think you are, ruining my sleep because of some useless eighty cedis?” Samadu screamed from inside.

“The money may be useless, but it is certainly worthier than you, and that’s why you haven’t been able to pay, you rubbish heap of a man!” Abeeba’s voice was coarse and full of menace. The veins on her neck stood out, like those of the *juju* fighters at the annual wrestling contest. Her eyes moved rapidly inside her head, as though she were having a fit of some sort.

One of the onlookers, a famished-looking housewife, pleaded with the tea seller's wife, "Go back to your house, woman. Don't fight him, he will disgrace you in public." Another woman in the background added, "What kind of a woman thinks she can fight a man? Be careful, oh!"

Abeeba didn't pay any attention to the women's admonitions. Just then, a loud bang was heard inside the room. The door swung open, and Samadu stormed out, his face red with anger. "No one gets away with insulting me. No one!" he shouted. There was a line of dried drool on his right cheek, and whitish mucus had gathered in the corners of his eyes. "You ugly elephant-woman. After I am done with you today, you'll learn a lesson or two about why women don't grow beards!"

"Ha, you teach me a lesson? You?" Abeeba said. "I, too, will educate you about the need to have money in your pocket before you flag the candy man!" With this, she lunged at Samadu.

The women placed their palms on their breasts, and their bodies shook with dread. "Where are the men on the street? Come and separate the fight, oh! Men, come out, oh!" they shouted. The children in the compound, though freshly aroused from sleep, hopped about excitedly, as if they were watching a ritual. Half of them called out, "*Piri pirin-pi!*," while the other half responded, "*Wein son!*," as they chanted and cheered for Samadu.

Samadu knew immediately that if he engaged Abeeba in a wrestling match she would use her bulky mass to force him to the ground. His strategy, therefore, was to throw punches and kicks from a safe distance, thereby avoiding close contact. But Abeeba was a lot quicker than he imagined, and she managed to dodge the first five punches he threw. He threw a sixth punch, and missed. He stumbled over his own foot when he tried to connect the seventh, and landed inches from Abeeba. With blinding quickness, she seized him by the sleeping wrapper tied around his neck and began to punch him. The exuberant crowd was hushed by this unexpected turn of events.

But Samadu wasn't heralded as the street's tough guy for nothing. He threw a sharp jab at Abeeba's stomach and succeeded in releasing himself from her grip by deftly undoing the knot of his sleeping cloth. He was topless now, clad only in a pair of corduroy knickers. He danced on his feet, swung his arms, and moved his torso from

side to side, the way true boxers do. The crowd got excited again and picked up the fight song, “*Piri pirin-pi, Wein son! Piri pirin-pi, Wein son!*” Some among them shouted “Ali! Ali! Ali!” as Samadu danced and pranced, carefully avoiding Abeeba, who watched his movements with the keenness of a hungry lioness.

The women in the crowd went from holding their breasts to slapping their massive thighs. They jumped about nervously, moving their bodies in rhythm to the chants. The boys booed Abeeba, calling her all sorts of names for the beasts of the jungle. “Destroy that elephant!” they shouted.

The harder the crowd cheered for Samadu, the fancier his footwork became. He finally threw a punch that landed on Abeeba’s left shoulder, though she seemed completely unfazed and continued to chase him around the small circle created by the spectators. When Samadu next threw his fist, Abeeba anticipated it. She dodged, then grabbed his wrist and twisted his arm with such force that he let out a high-pitched cry: “*Wayyo Allah!*” The crowd gasped as the tough guy attempted to extricate himself from Abeeba’s grip. He tightened all the muscles in his body and craned his neck. But her strength was just too much for him.

The crowd booed, “Wooh, ugly rhinoceros.” Then, in a sudden, swift motion, Abeeba lifted the tough guy off the ground, raised him above her head (the crowd booed louder), and dumped him back down like a sack of rice. She then jumped on top of him and began to whack him violently.

The women, now frantic, shouted, “Where are the men in this house?” Men, come out, oh! There is a fight!”

A handful of men came running to the scene, followed by many more a few minutes later.

Meanwhile, with each punch Abeeba asked, “Where is our money?”

“I don’t have it, and wouldn’t pay even if I did!” Samadu responded. The men drew nearer and tried to pull Abeeba off, but her grip on Samadu’s waistband was too firm. The men pleaded with Abeeba to let go. “I will not release him until he pays us back our money!” she shouted. “And if he doesn’t I’ll drag his ass all the way to the Zongo police station.”

On hearing this, an elderly man who lived in Samadu's compound ran inside the house; he returned a few minutes later with eighty cedis, which he placed in the palm of Abeebe's free hand. With one hand gripping Samadu's waistband, she used the fingers of the other to flip and count the money. Once she was sure the amount was right, she released the boy, giving him a mean, hard look as she left. The crowd watched silently, mouths agape, as though they had just witnessed something from a cinema reel.

Mallam Sile was still engaged in his morning *zikhr*, or meditation, when Abeebe returned to the shack. He, of course, had no inkling of what had taken place. Later, when Abeebe told him that Samadu had paid the money he owed, the tea seller, though surprised, didn't think to ask how this had happened. In his naïveté, he concluded that Samadu had finally been entered by the love and fear of God. Abeebe's news therefore confirmed Mallam Sile's long-standing belief that every man was capable of goodness, just as he was capable of evil.

The tea seller's belief was further solidified when he ran into Samadu a fortnight later. The tough guy greeted him politely, something he had never done before. When Mallam Sile related this to his wife, she restrained herself from telling him the truth. Abeebe knew that Sile would be quite displeased with her methods. Just a week ago, he had spoken to her about the pointlessness of using fire to put out fire, of how it "worsens rather than extinguishes the original flame." Abeebe prayed that no one else would tell her husband about her duel with Samadu, although the entire city seemed to know about it by now. Tough guys from other neighborhoods came to the tea shop just to steal a glance at the woman who had conquered the tough guy of Zongo Street.

Then one night during the fasting month of Ramadan, some two months after the fight, a voice in Mallam Sile's head asked, "Why is everyone calling my wife 'the man checker'? How come people I give credit to suddenly pay me on time? Why am I being treated with such respect, even by the worst and most stubborn rascals on the street?" Sile was lying in bed with his wife when these questions came to him. But, in his usual fashion, he didn't try to answer them. Instead, he drew in a deep breath and began to pray. He smiled and thanked Allahu-Raheemu, the Merciful One, for curing the street folks of the prejudice they had nursed against him for so long. Mallam Sile also thanked Allah for giving his neighbors the will and the courage to finally accept him just as he was created. He flashed a grin in the darkness and moved closer to his

slumbering wife. He buried his small body in her massive, protective frame and soon fell into a deep, dreamless sleep. ♦

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