Learn English Through Stories

G Series

G31

Adapted and modified by

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Contents

1. The Bride Price

Buchi Emecheta

CHAPTER FIVE
Traditions

Ibuza was on the western side of the River Niger. Its inhabitants were Ibos and followed all the Ibo traditions. Even those who left their village to work in the white men's world took their traditions with them. According to these traditions, Ma Blackie spent nine months in her special mourning hut. Then a new hut was built for her and she became Okonkwo's fourth wife.

Ma earned a little money by clever buying and selling. With Ezekiel's savings she bought oil. She sold it to the white man, who took it back to England and made it into soap. Then she bought the white man's soap and sold it to her people.

As the months passed, she became prouder than ever of her children. Aku-nna was now almost fifteen. She was an intelligent girl, with the promise of beauty in her large, gentle eyes and smooth skin. Nna-nndo too was growing fast and doing well. The fact that both children were at school caused some jealousy in Okonkwo's family. The other wives did not mind too much about Nna-nndo. After all, he was a boy. Also, in his lifetime Ezekiel had paid a few shillings every week to the Church Friendly Society. This meant that after his death the Society paid for his son's education up to the age of fifteen. So nobody, not even Okonkwo, could take Nna-nndo away from school.

'How clever of my brother,' thought Okonkwo, 'to provide for his son in this way. Why didn't I think of that for my sons?'

But Okonkwo's sons, Iloba and Osenekwu, had no use for book-learning.

'School,' they said, 'is no use to a free man. School is a place to send your slaves.'

That was another tradition. In the old days, when the white men first started their Christian schools, the local free men had no use for them. They sent their slaves to school to please the white men, while their own free-born sons stayed at home and followed the old traditions. Later events showed, however, that it was these educated slaves who got the top jobs. The sons and

grandsons of these 'slave' families were now so rich and powerful that they seemed to command the respect of everyone.

'Why do you let your brother's children go to school?' demanded Okonkwo's eldest son, Iloba. He was twenty years old, and was a farmer, working hard to buy himself a wife.

'The Friendly Society pays for Nna-nndo,' said his father.

'Very well. But the girl - Aku-nna - why waste money on her?'

'It's not my money that is wasted,' answered Okonkwo. 'Her mother pays for her education. And Aku-nna won't be going to college. She has only a few more months of school.' He laughed loudly. His sons looked puzzled. 'You don't understand,' said Okonkwo. 'Don't you know that I hope to become a chief, an Obi?'

To become an Obi a man had to offer a large, expensive gift to the gods. Then he received the red hat which was the mark of a chief, and there were days of celebration. Indeed, in the old days a slave was put to death to celebrate this great event. It all cost a great deal of money.

'Well, what has that to do with Aku-nna?' Iloba asked.

'Aku-nna and your sister Ogugua will get married at about the same time. Their bride prices will come to me, and these days, people pay more for educated girls.'

Now his sons understood. 'So Aku-nna's name will come true,' they thought. 'She will truly become a "father's wealth". Unfortunately, her own father did not live to enjoy this wealth. But not to worry - Okonkwo is almost a father to her now.' They smiled at their father's cleverness. 'He needed money in order to become an Obi,' they thought. 'Aku-nna's bride price will provide that money. She will marry a rich man, and make us rich too.'

They walked silently to the hut of their mother, Ngbeke, who was Okonkwo's first wife. At the door Iloba said, 'It's happening everywhere these days. Didn't you hear, the local doctor is getting married to a girl whose parents are asking for two hundred pounds for her.'

'Two hundred pounds? What's so special about her?' demanded Osenekwu.

'She's a hospital nurse. That's all. People who've seen her say that she's not particularly beautiful. But they say the doctor loves her.'

'Perhaps, but that is a lot of money to pay for an ordinary woman,' his brother answered. He thought for a moment and added, 'I hope we get plenty of money for Aku-nna.'

They both laughed as they bent their tall bodies to go through the low doorway into their mother's hut.

Ngbeke looked at her sons sharply. 'What have you two and your father been talking about?' she demanded.

'It is talk between men,' replied seventeen-year-old Osenekwu importantly. 'Ogugua, our sister, please bring our food!'

'Ogugua is filling my pipe for me,' their mother said shortly.

In fact, Ogugua was doing nothing. She was sitting combing her hair and listening to every word. She took the big pipe and began to fill it. She lit it with a burning stick from the fire and handed it to her mother. Ngbeke took a big mouthful of smoke before she spoke again.

'So my sons are so grown up that I can no longer share their thoughts?' she demanded. She laughed bitterly, showing her black teeth, which were the result of years of smoking. 'Well, I will tell you something. I am Okonkwo's first wife, and I say that he's making a big mistake.' He's wrong to expect so much from his brother's daughter.'

Iloba cried, 'But Mother, Aku-nna is like a daughter to him now. In fact, according to our law and tradition she is his daughter now.'

'Be quiet and eat your yams, my son,' replied his mother. 'You know nothing.'

'Aku-nna is going to marry a rich man,' said Osenekwu. 'She'll make us all rich.'

'Be quiet!' said his mother. 'What rich man is she going to marry? The son of a slave, who teaches at her school? Can you be sure that her mother will not keep the bride price for herself? You forget that her mother was married in the church. She was educated by the white men and she knows their laws. Oh, you forget many things, my sons.'

Ngbeke's sons did not understand. What was she talking about? Surely Ma Blackie was not taking advantage of their father, just to educate her own children?

Iloba shouted, 'My father will have that bride price! No one else can use the money!'

'What about Nna-nndo?' said his mother. 'A few days ago Ma Blackie told me that she wanted him to go to college. How will she pay for that? The white man's law will be on her side if she demands her daughter's bride price to pay for her son's education. So you had better tell your father to stop dreaming about bride prices. Who will want her anyway? She'll never have children; she's too small and thin. And she's not even a woman yet! Look at your sister - she's the same age, and she's a real woman. You could marry her off tomorrow! That Aku-nna will come to no good, I tell you. She and her mother are too proud.'

Ngbeke's sons stared. They did not see the jealousy in their mother's eyes. 'She could be right,' they thought. 'It's true. Aku-nna is different. She's not allowed to play rough games in the moonlight, or to join in the dancing at Christmas. She's too soft and quiet. And that teacher is always lending her books! Yes, perhaps Mother is right. Here she is, nearly fifteen, still at school and not yet ready for marriage. What kind of girl is that?'

'Mother,' said Iloba aloud, 'do you think she might be an ogbanje, a "living dead"?'

His mother was glad. Her sons had not noticed her jealousy. Ngbeke did not like Ma Blackie and was very jealous of her. She did not mind Okonkwo's two younger wives, because they respected and obeyed her. But Ma Blackie was handsome and intelligent and proud. However, Ngbeke had to hide her true feelings from her sons.

'Yes, I'm sure Aku-nna is an ogbanje,' she said. 'She's too quiet. I must speak to her mother about it tomorrow. An ogbanje doesn't belong in this world. They all die young, usually at the birth of their first child. They have to die young, because their friends in the other world call them back. I'm glad that none of my daughters is an ogbanje.'

'Can't we save her, Mother?' asked Iloba. He was frightened now. Although he was only twenty, he had seen many young girls die in childbirth. Their deaths were always very painful, and he did not want his little cousin Aku-nna to die like that.

'Perhaps,' said Ngbeke, 'if you have a good medicine man. It all costs a lot of money. That is what her mother should be doing. And she should certainly not let Aku-nna talk to the son of Ofulue!'

'Chike Ofulue?' cried Iloba in horror. 'The school teacher? But he's the son of slaves, Mother, and he knows it. Chike is only Aku-nna's teacher. She has to talk to him, because she's his student. But she can't be interested in him, she really can't!'

'If she is, I will kill her,' said Osenekwu softly.

All this time Ogugua had been listening quietly. Aku-nna was her friend, as well as her cousin. She could not accuse her mother of jealousy; that was not respectful. But she did her best.

'Chike likes Aku-nna,' she said, 'But that's only because she's eager to learn and he wants to help her. He knows he's from a slave family. He was born here and knows our customs. He's sure to marry a girl from another slave family, not the daughter of a free family from Ibuza. Brothers, there's no need to worry.'

'There is no smoke without fire, my children,' said Ngbeke.

'It's just talk, Mother,' said Ogugua. 'How could a quiet girl like that interest a clever man like Chike, a teacher - and a slave?'

'Perhaps you're right,' said her mother. 'But don't forget that Chike's family have money. And money buys a lot these days...'

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'No smoke without fire,' Ngbeke had said, and she was right. Chike Ofulue was falling in love with his fifteen-year-old student. He was helpless to stop himself. He had never seen a girl so unsure of herself, so afraid of her own people.

The school in Ibuza where Chike taught was a church as well. It was a long, white building, with round windows and a roof covered in leaves.

When they had started coming to this school a year ago, the first thing that Aku-nna and her brother had noticed was the size of the boys. Most of them were young men. There were only three girls in the whole school, and Aku-nna was the oldest of them. On that first day she had felt very lost and shy, and had almost jumped when she heard a voice saying 'hello' behind her.

She had turned to find the teacher behind her, and had said, shyly, 'Good morning, sir.'

'What do you think of our school?' he had asked her. 'I expect it seems very different from your school in Lagos.'

He was right, but she had been too shy to answer. She just smiled politely.

Before school began on that first day, there had been a short service. Afterwards, the white man in the white suit, who was in charge of the church, spoke to them all. His name was Father Osborne, and he came from England. But he was certainly not speaking English. Then Aku-nna caught a few words, and she realized that this big, kind man with the sun-burned face was trying to speak Ibo, her own language. He welcomed them all to school after the holidays and hoped they would all work hard. He hoped all their families were well. 'Please give my personal greetings and best wishes to everyone,' he said. The whole school clapped and cheered. Father Osborne's Ibo was a little odd, but he had said the right thing, after all.

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After a year, Aku-nna and Nna-nndo had become used to Ibuza. At school they learned the white man's ways. Then they came home to the countless, unchanging traditions of their own people. They were trapped, like two helpless little fish, between the two sets of traditions.

One thing Aku-nna knew for certain. Her mother no longer had any time for her: she was too busy with her business and her new husband. Aku-nna was a very unimportant member of a large and busy family. She was a quiet and lonely girl. But to Chike Ofulue she was becoming very special indeed.

CHAPTER SIX
The Slaves

'In the sight of God, we are all the same.' That was what Father Osborne said, and that was what all good Christians believed. But in the eyes of his own people Chike still belonged to a family who had once been slaves, and no free man would allow a slave to marry his daughter.

None of this worried Chike much. He was handsome, and the local girls pretended not to know that he was from a slave family. After all, his family had produced many rich and successful men. In fact, he looked down on the local girls. They were not good enough for an educated man like him. He enjoyed himself with them, but he did not respect them.

Chike's parents knew about his adventures with local girls, but did not try to stop him. He had the money and the freedom to choose his own pleasures. So Chike was surprised when one day his father called him into his sitting-room for a talk.

It was a big, comfortable room with leather armchairs and a lot of family photographs on the walls. Chike's father, Ofulue, had been a teacher too. He had four wives, all from nearby towns, and he had enjoyed a comfortable, successful life. The people of Ibuza never forgave him for this and never, for example, allowed him to become a chief.

'When the son of a slave becomes a chief,' the free men said, 'then we know that the end is near!'

Ofulue was amused by it all. He did not want the people of Ibuza to do anything for him. He was a wealthy man and his children had important jobs in the schools and the hospitals.

Now Ofulue spoke seriously to Chike.

'I knew Aku-nna's father well. I would not like a son of mine to bring shame on his daughter. I saw the way you were looking at her in church. Everybody noticed it. I beg you not to harm that girl.'

Chike was surprised. He thought that he had succeeded in hiding his feelings. He said: 'I care for her. She is so alone. But I could never harm her.'

Ofulue looked hard at his son. 'You will have to study hard if you want to get to university this year.'

Chike felt angry. 'How could my father say such a hurtful thing?' he thought. 'He knows perfectly well that I passed all my examinations, but they still did not give me a scholarship.' That had hurt Chike terribly at the time. He still felt upset about it - why was his father reminding him now?

'Clearly they did not think I was good enough for a scholarship,' he said bitterly.

'Perhaps it's because you want to study sociology,' said his father. 'Perhaps the examiners have never heard of it. What can you do with a sociology degree? Can't you study something different, like law?'

Chike stared at the photographs on the walls. Each showed a successful member of the Ofulue family. 'So he wants me to be a doctor, or a lawyer or an engineer,' he thought. 'It's OK to talk about "my son the doctor", or "my son the lawyer", or "my son the engineer". But who can talk proudly of "my son the sociologist"?'

He said aloud, 'I don't want to change, Father. Sociology is very useful.'

'Then try again this year. Don't worry if they don't give you a scholarship. I'll pay for you to go away to university.'

Chike was beginning to understand. 'So Father wants me to leave Ibuza,' he thought.

Ofulue had never paid for higher education for any of his children, simply because there were too many of them. To be fair to all his wives, he had given every child the chance to take School Certificate. After that, each child was on his - or her - own. Girls were not particularly encouraged, but no one said no to them - if they won a scholarship. No scholarship, no education. Obviously Ofulue was very worried about Chike's relationship with Aku-nna, if he was willing to send Chike to university without a scholarship. Chike felt angry again.

'Surely she must be married one day?' he demanded.

His father looked at him very hard. 'Yes, of course - but not to you. You will leave that girl alone!' he said sharply. 'Now go!'

Chike did not sleep at all that night.

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They say that forbidden fruit tastes sweet. Because Aku-nna was forbidden, Chike wanted her more than ever. Aku-nna too had been warned about Chike, but she did not understand what her family was warning her against. She did not know the history of 'slave' families. Although, under the white man's law, nobody could own a person as a slave now, people did not forget which families had been slaves in the old days. But nobody had explained to Aku-nna what it meant to be from a 'slave' or a 'free' family.

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Chike tried hard to prepare his students for their examinations. The day after his meeting with his father, he spoke to Aku-nna as little as possible. But that day Aku-nna seemed slow and stupid, and could not answer any of Chike's questions. In the end he became angry.

'What's the matter with you, Aku-nna?' he demanded. 'Didn't you do your homework?'

'She didn't have time,' said a boy behind her. 'She was with her boyfriends.' The boys all laughed. Aku-nna burst into tears and the boys laughed louder than ever.

'Who said that?' Chike asked angrily. A boy stood up. 'You should be ashamed of yourself,' said Chike. All the boys looked uncomfortable. 'Aku-nna, you may go,' said Chike gently. 'Now, everyone - open your books at page eleven.'

Aku-nna rushed blindly out of the room. What was the matter with her? She did not know. She sat down heavily under a big orange tree at the end of the school field, and cried and cried. Tears poured down her face like rain water. She let them flow. It was quiet and private under the orange tree. She watched two little birds feeding their babies. They looked so happy together. 'I am alone,' she thought. 'There is nobody I can talk to.'

In the distance the school bell rang, but that was in another world. Aku-nna was alone in her private world of tears and loneliness.

'Aku-nna, you need your certificate, don't you?' said a gentle voice.

She looked up and saw Chike standing over her. 'If you fail your examination, your family won't let you take it again.'

Aku-nna could not answer. She just looked up at his anxious face, then down at his neat white shoes. Tears filled her eyes again. Chike sat down beside her

under the orange tree. He said, 'I will help you to pass your examination before I leave this horrible place.'

'Leave? Where are you going?' The anxiety in her voice showed how much she cared.

'University,' he said. He took her hand, and rather roughly he pulled her to her feet.

As she stood up, she felt a pain in her back. Her legs felt weak and she felt strangely cold, although it was a warm day.

'Do you want me to go?' he asked.

She shook her head. She did not want to seem badly brought up. So how could she tell him how she felt about him? Tears filled her eyes again.

'Why are you so sad?' said Chike kindly. 'Why do you cry so much? I'd like to make you cry with happiness! Come now, we must go back to school.' Then he stopped, and looked sharply at Aku-nna. 'Child, you're bleeding! There's blood on your dress.'

She turned round quickly and saw the blood. At first she thought that she had hurt herself. Then she realized what was happening to her. She had heard the women talk about this bleeding. When they were bleeding like this, women were 'unclean' and for those few days each month, there were a lot of things they were not allowed to do.

'So now I am a woman too,' she thought. 'I can be married. Any man can cut a piece of my hair, and carry me away.' That was the tradition. That piece of hair made the girl his, for ever.

Suddenly the pain became more violent, and she felt deeply ashamed. She wanted to run away from Chike. How could she let him see her like this?

Chike came nearer. He did not care if anyone saw them. He wanted to marry this girl, even if he had to break all the laws of his people. He held her tightly. 'Is this the first time?' he asked.

'Yes,' she whispered.

They stood there for a long time. Neither of them wanted to go. Then the pain came again.

'Sit down and wait here,' he said. 'I'll get you something.'

She obeyed. 'Of course, Chike knows all about such things,' she thought. 'He has sisters of his own, after all. But how can I keep my secret? If Okonkwo finds out about this, he will want me to marry at once, because he wants my bride price. But I want to stay at school and get my certificate. What can I do?'

Chike returned with a glass of water and two white tablets. He gave her his big wool jacket that he wore on cold mornings. Then, as she took the tablets, he said, 'Can you keep quiet about this? Don't tell anyone till after the exam.'

'How can I hide it?' she asked. 'I sleep in the same hut as my mother; she's sure to notice.'

'My brother is a doctor. I know what white women use. Go home now. I'll tell your brother that you have a headache. And please make sure that your dress is covered by that jacket.' He added, 'I love you,' and walked away.

'I must hurry home,' thought Aku-nna, 'before anyone sees me.' The tablets helped the pain in her back, but she still felt very conscious of the blood on her dress.

Her mother's hut was a mile from the school. By the time she got there, her head was aching and she felt sick. There was a little water in the pot, and she washed herself with it.

'My brother will be angry when he comes home and finds the pot empty,' she thought. But she felt too ill to care. She lay down and fell into a troubled sleep.

'Aku-nna!' Her brother was calling. 'What's the matter with you this time? You're always ill.' He went to the water pot. It was a hot afternoon and he was thirsty. But the pot was empty.

'This pot was almost full this morning. What's happened to it?'

'Perhaps Ma drank it,' said Aku-nna.

'Liar! If you think I'm going to go to the stream just for you, you're mistaken. What did you do with the water, anyway?'

She did not reply, and he did not insist on an answer. Then he went out to borrow some water from a neighbour. Aku-nna was glad to see him go. She fell asleep again.

Later her cousin Ogugua came into the hut. 'What's the matter? Have you forgotten that we promised to meet our mothers and help them to carry their shopping home?'

'I'm not well,' said Aku-nna. 'Please carry some of my mother's things for her.'

Ogugua filled a lamp with oil and lit it. In the soft yellow light she studied her cousin's face.

'It's a headache, isn't it? Your eyes are very red. Don't worry, I'll carry your mother's shopping for her.'

Aku-nna did not lie down again. 'Ma will be home soon,' she thought. Then she heard a gentle knock at the door.

It was Chike. He sat down beside her and put his arm around her.

'What shall we do?' he asked her.

'Tell my people that you want to marry me,' she whispered.

'How can I?' he demanded. 'Haven't you heard that my father is the son of a slave?'

'Don't say that,' said Aku-nna. 'There is no other person for me in this world, Chike...'

He started kissing her, the way the white men did in films. Aku-nna had read about kissing in True Love Stories. She found that she did not particularly enjoy it, but Chike obviously did. 'You will always be mine,' he whispered in her ear.

'What will he do next?' she thought anxiously. She stood up. 'My mother will be home soon,' she said.

Just then they heard voices outside the hut. Chike waited to welcome Ma Blackie and Nna-nndo home.

'Aku-nna felt ill in school,' he explained. 'So I came to see how she was. Look, I've brought her this bottle of headache tablets. I hope she'll be better soon.'

Ma Blackie said, 'She'll be back at school tomorrow.' She gave him a long, hard look that said, 'Be careful!'

'Good night,' said Chike. Ma Blackie answered, but Aku-nna did not. So many things had happened to her in one day, so many things that she did not understand.

2. Grammar Page

Unit 31 — have to and must

A

I **have to** do something = it is necessary to do it, I am obliged to do it:

- You can't turn right here. You **have to turn** left.
- I **have to wear** glasses for reading.
- Robert can't come out with us this evening. He **has to work** late.
- Last week Tina broke her arm and **had to go** to hospital.
- I haven't **had to go** to the doctor for ages.

We use **do/does/did** in questions and negative sentences (for the present and past simple):

- What **do** I **have to do** to get a new driving licence? (*not* What have I to do?)
- Karen **doesn't have to work** Saturdays. (*not* Karen hasn't to)
- '**Did** you **have to wait** a long time for a bus?' 'No, only ten minutes.'

You can say **I'll have to** ..., **I'm going to have to** ..., **I might have to** ..., **I may have to** ...:

- They can't repair my computer, so I'**ll have to buy** a new one. *or* ... I'**m going to have to buy** a new one.
- We **might have to change** our plans. *or* We **may have to change** ... (= it's possible that we will have to change them)

B

Must is similar to **have to**. You can say:

- It's later than I thought. I **must go**. *or* I **have to go**.

You can use **must** or **have to** when you give your own opinion (for example, to say what *you* think is necessary, or to recommend someone to do something):

- I haven't spoken to Sue for ages. I **must phone** her. / I **have to phone** her. (= I say this is necessary)
- Mark is a really nice person. You **must meet** him. / You **have to meet** him. (= I recommend this)

We use **have to** (*not usually* **must**) to say what someone is *obliged* to do. This is a *fact*, not the speaker's own opinion:

- I **have to work** from 8.30 to 5.30 every day. (a fact, not an opinion)
- Jane **has to travel** a lot for her work.

But we use **must** in written rules and instructions:

- Applications for the job **must be received** by 18 May.
- Seat belts **must be worn**.

We use **had to** (*not* **must**) to talk about the past:

- I went to the meeting yesterday, but I **had** to leave early. (*not* I must)

C

Mustn't and **don't have to** are completely different:

You **mustn't** do something = *don't* do it:

- You **must keep** this a secret. You **mustn't tell** anyone. (= don't tell anyone)
- I promised I would be on time. I **mustn't be** late. (= I must be on time)

You **don't have to** do something = you don't need to do it (but you can if you want):

- You **don't have to come** with me. I can go alone.
- I **don't have to be** at the meeting, but I'm going anyway.

D

You can use **have got to** instead of **have to**. You can say:

- I'**ve got to** work tomorrow. *or* I **have to** work tomorrow.
- When **has** Helen **got to** go? *or* When **does** Helen **have to** go?