

## FEATURE STORY

### MBUKE THE GOAT HERDER

It was nine o'clock one June Morning. The air nippy, the horizon moist and usually unclear for this part of the year. Fela village where Mbuke grew up was about fifteen kilometers from Smith Sound, which is a tongue of water extending south from Lake Victoria. The locals prefer to call it Lake Nyanza. He was standing on top of a huge rocky outcrop near his home. Smith Sound was seen to be partially covered with mist. As he descended these huge boulders, the resident guinea - pigs ran helter skelter while Chuwa the herding dog barked incessantly. Mbuke, the Sukuma boy looked bigger for his fifteen years of age. He smarted a rice straw hat embellished with guinea - fowl feathers. But instead of a long stick and a spear favoured by herders, he had a catapult. He had managed to shoot a guinea - pig which Chuwa was now holding between his teeth. Chuwa relished guinea - pig meat and a haunch of boiled maize - meal called "Bugali" which was also relished by the Mwanaweja family to which Mbuke belonged. Chuwa was still licking Mbuke's shoes made out of old motorcar tyres and popularly called the "Katambuga" or bush thrashers. So called because the tyre sandals are tough enough to resist prickly thorns, spiky pebbles and hot sand especially during the long summer months when cattle herders travel up to twenty kilometers in search of pastures. Chuwa came back from home after delivering the guinea - pig to Mbuke's elder brother

Jienze Mwanaweja. However upon his return Chuwa found Mbuke at the foot of the same huge boulders and rocky outcrops from where they had hunted the guinea - pig. Mbuke had his straw hat in his hand and black and white guinea - fowl feathers that decorated his cap were loosened and just about to fall off. In fact one of the feathers was already on the ground. Chuwa smelled the feather and thought that Mbuke might have downed the fowl, but as often the tricky fowl must have escaped. Soon Chuwa changed his temper; barked, barked and barked. Ran in circles around the base of the outcrop and smelled everything in sight. Chuwa had not realized that Mbuke was still hanging around the same spot trying to figure out about their missing goat herd. Mbuke was frightened and nervous. What would Jienze say about the missing goats?. Should Mbuke go home to report the matter and face the music? Mbuke was more and more confused, frightened -----!!! His legs had no strength or spark in them.

"You Mbuke, what are you up to at this time of the day without your goats? That huge python which ate my herding dog was at this particular spot three days ago. Be careful. This same python has eaten three goats as well in the past two years" announced Mbuke's elderly neighbour Mzee Choyoyo. Mbuke wondered whether this python had scared away the goats. Or whether as Mzee Choyoyo cautioned, one of his goats could have been gobbled up by the python. In any case, he scurried back home, fetched

his panga and spear and with the help of Chuwa started to look for the missing goats. At this juncture he met Mzee Choyoyo again as the latter was just entering his homestead.

"I warned you earlier about the python, Dear Mbuke" shouted Mzee Choyoyo in excitement. "Now I see you with the panga and spear. Did the python attack one of your goats?" inquired Mzee Choyoyo as he doffed his white cotton turban. He was wearing a black and a white checked loin cloth which hid a pair of khaki shorts. His newly purchased "Katambuga" sandals still glittering black. While around his neck, he wore the traditional triangular white glass bead together with the inherited snail - shell pental, both of which contrasted well with his dark - brown chest colour..

"I must go in search of the lost goats. Chuwa will help me sniff our way to the strayed goats. I hope they did not meet that legendary python you warned me about. Mzee Choyoyo, you are a kind and a hospitable Sukuma. You are an angel. Please promise me you will not tell my father about the missing goats" urged Mbuke respectfully. He further enticed Mzee Choyoyo with a promise of marrying Choyoyo's only daughter Kurwa. Suddenly Mzee Choyoyo laughed showing his toothless gums. "You must first grow up, dear Mbuke. Then know how to herd goats and have enough cattle for the bride price" declared Mzee Choyoyo. Mbuke wondered why Mzee Choyoyo mentioned about cattle for bride - price. He owned a goodly herd of eleven hundred Zebu cattle. He was one of the richest

men in the village. Also being a staunch Roman Catholic, he could not marry a second wife. Neither had he any marriageable sons or grandsons who may require the cattle for bride price. "I shall arrange for the dowry as long as you give your blessing, Dear Choyoyo" pleaded Mbuke. "But you must tell me why do you need so many cattle. We are short of pastures. What is more you do not have sons or grandsons to graze these beasts away from home" continued Mbuke. To this Mzee Choyoyo reminded Mbuke to cut short his conversation and hurry to search for the strayed goats. After another futile search for nearly an hour, a traveler on a bicycle told Mbuke of a strayed goat herd on top of rocky boulders a kilometer towards the Smith Sound but near another village called Misungwi. He warned of passing lorry drivers who many steal the animals. Eventually Mbuke and Chuwa arrived at the spot where the animals were. However it was surrounded by a shallow marsh due to the heavy rains earlier in the year. "But how did these naughty goats manage to tread through the marsh and get on top of the hill for the nibble?" pondered Mbuke. Eventually Mbuke found some well placed half covered chain of rocks over which the goats would have managed to travel. Mbuke began to carefully hop over the stones to release the besieged goats. Funny enough the goats had forgotten their original path and hence were stranded on the rocky island outcrop surrounded by the marsh. The goats were browsing nonchalantly, unaware that they were trapped on the spot where the notorious python often dwelled.

However about three meters before coming to the foot of the outcrop both Mbuke and Chuwa were just about to step on dry ground.

But both thrust backwards in a lightening. That huge and legenday python emrged from water and dived back splashing the marsh water several meters around. The python did this ritual several times and scared Mbuke backwards to his original starting point. But Chuwa though angry and barking, seemed to be magnetically attracted towards the python. Mbuke yelled and yelled and yelled for Chuwa to come back to him. But never. Chuwa angry and barking went nearer and nearer to the mighty python who managed to hit Chuwa with his tail that made Chuwa unconscious. The python began to gobble in Chuwa by the hind legs. Without any resistance from Chuwa. In the meantime. Several villagers had gathered around to witness the drama. They were also armed with pangas and spears. But at this juncture turned up a retired veterinary guard called Mzee Paulo Masanja as if to fulfill the dictum a stitch in time saves nine!. Bald headed, with a fringe of fuzzy snow white hair, he raised his Greener shot gun and ordered all others to stay back. He cocked an Alphamax buck shot and fired well below the neck of the python. Suddenly the python fell into the water, rose out, fell again, rose out once more and finally began to settle on the marsh which was red with the blood of the dying reptile.

At long last the legendary python was dead. Te villagers ran foreword to rescue Chuwa out of the dead

python's mouth. They forced open the mouth and pulled out Chuwa. But Chuwa had died of strong bashings from the python. Mbuke was stunned and speechless. Large tears rolled down his eyes. He loved Chuwa immensely. For the past four years, he had seen Chuwa grow from a rabbit – sized pup into thirty-five kilos of a herding dog. A fine beast and a finer friend gone forever. Chuwa dried away his tears and requested the villagers to help him ferry out the beleaguered goats. When back at the village it was late evening. The sky was pale red and cattle with their tinkling neck bells were gracefully entering their bomas for the long awaited evening rest. The local ladies similarly were coming back for their last round with pails of water gracefully poised on their heads. Every-body was talking about the dead python and Mbuke was the local celebrity for the time being. Mzee Choyoyo was the first one to greet and embrace Mbuke. "Here is my daughter Kurwa for you. You are young but grown up as well. And together you both may grow up into husband and wife. Do not worry about the bride price. I will send you the bill once I am in heaven "insisted Mzee Choyoyo.

Mbuke's brother Jienze and father Mzee Mwanaweja nodded approvingly while Mbuke gazed and gazed at Kurwa. He gave an impression of wanting to speak but was speechless. The big tears rolled down from his beady eyes once more. With an approving smile, he warmly shook hands with Kurwa and retired for the day. Mzee Manaweja ordered a steer to be slaughtered the following day and purchased four hundred litres of local brew called "Kangara" to mark the end

of the python and beginning of the Mbukes.

Mbuke was up at the crack of dawn and found Jienze making arrangement for the goat herd to be fed near home on maize stubble and bran. The cattle herd save that one steer Mzee Mwanaweja promised for the feast was also on its way for the early morning bite. In the mean time Juma Kashinde a Moslem butcher from Misungwi had arrived and was entrusted the steer for slaughtering. The ladies of Mwanaweja household were busy cooking rice. By nine o'clock Fela village elders had already occupied all the three - legged wooden stools that were arranged for the guests. Mbuke greeted the group cordially and then introduced them to the legendary python. The reptile's head was positioned on the spike of Mbuke's spear. The spear was then positioned vertically on the ground facing the guests. Mbuke also laid his panga and his straw hat at the foot of the spear. All the guests stood up in disghust to view that mighty big head of the python and congratulated Mzee Paulo Masanja for killing the culprit. Mbuke's father Mzee Mwanaweja ordered the locally brewed kangara to be served in his favourite calabashes decorated externally with deeply coloured beads and shells. According to the prevailing tradition the first calabash was offered to Mzee Paulo Masanja. He stood up, received the calabash and took in a sip. He then poured rest of the drink on the head of the

python as a gesture of thanks giving. The second calabash went to Mzee Choyoyo, the third to Mzee Mwanaweja, the fourth to Jienze, the fifth to Mbuke and till the last guest received his fill. Through Mbuke would be age - barred in normal circumstances to partake with the drink, exception was made for him to join the group. Towards the end of the fourth round arrived ladies with mounds of rice and chopped roasted beef. Kurwa was the center of attraction as she handed out to the seated guests rice and chopped roast beef on plastic plates.

Mbuke's face lit up, his beady eyes sparkling as Kurwa handed him the plate. "Great to see things are working out so well" muttered Mbuke softly. Kurwa winked approvingly as she continued to hand out more food. More and more calabashes filled with kangara arrived to cater for the late arriving guests. At this juncture Mzee Mwanaweja requested Mzee Choyoyo to name the bride price. He initially declined. But after a lengthy persuasion, he agreed the price to be two adult bulls and eighteen heifers. However he would not collect the animals for himself. That was his contribution to Mbuke and Kurwa as a nucleus of their future herd while they struggled to grow up into fully fledged man and wife!!!!.

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