

Displaced

Salawu Olajide
October 21, 2022



Her mpande glows deep blue against her chest, but all he sees is a creamy colored shell dangling from a thin rope around her neck.

How was it possible that in this place he was considered Mwami when he had to depend on others to discern the realm beyond that which was visible to the ordinary? Where she is from the Ulanyika – he who owns the land – is all powerful, nothing is hidden from him. Here, this man who sits before her, is entirely at her mercy.

She was brought to this place against her will. A stranger who has risen way above her station and yet is still considered a slave. They call her, mukaintu sakata mwimwini – a husbandless woman who has somehow defied expectation by accumulating great wealth. Namusa – the mother of kindness. A healer. But she is more than a healer. She heals because she sees.

She was taken from her people at a young age, not long initiated into womanhood but already betrothed. As the raids on their lands had increased in number and intensity, she remembered her mother telling her that it was taboo for one of them to die in a strange land. “We would have to appease the ancestors if that happened,” her mother had said in her soothing, gentle way, as her fingers weaved the thick, tight curls of her hair and formed plaits. *Why then had they abandoned her?* Months, and then years, had gone by. Puzzlement had turned into a grudging resignation to continue roaming this new land like the cattle that had been taken along with her. And then, as her powers increased, she was consumed by thoughts of revenge.

Her husband, not the one she had lost but the one she had gained and then lost, was a revered hunter. His hut was adorned by the heads, tusks, and horns of great animals. It still is. The people among whom she lives, had tried to take these items away from her when he died, arguing that, as a slave, she was not entitled to them. This man, the Mwami, had dissuaded his people. He had insisted

that, because she had nothing and nobody, she should be allowed her husband's trophies.

She keeps her husband's adornments on her roof as a reminder to those around her and an inspiration for his son who was born many moons after she was brought here. Two harvests had passed before she reaped her own. Her husband, the hunter who had captured her, was not a patient man and had found other places to sow his seed. She had been relieved that she did not have to endure him alone.

She smiles as she thinks of her son, remembering how she had handed him a tincture of fatty poisonous bulembi to smear on his spear for his inaugural hunting expedition. "I honor you with the hide of my first kill," he had said ceremoniously when he returned, handing her the soft, shiny, Lechwe hide that she still wears today. He has already added many of his own trophies to their huts.

The Mwami relaxes a little when she smiles. "Are you well?" he asks intimately. The words are unexpected. Momentarily disarming. She is a seasoned traveler and had she allowed herself, she would speak to him of national matters; his land is at the crossroads of two major trade routes, and he must decide which, if any, of the gun toting foreigners, to align with. She could give him her opinion of their neighbor's strengths and weaknesses and maybe even offer suggestions for how his society can function better, but instead, she nods imperceptibly at his question, afraid that anything more would cause her unrest and influence her decision one way or the other.

The Mwami is a formidable figure at the best of times. His dark skin shimmers, slightly illuminated by the fire flickering in the middle of the round hut. A shadow on the smooth wall mirrors the single taut horn that emerges from the center of his shaved head. His body is embellished with many charms; a Duiker's horn around his neck to garner loyalty, a chinda placed on an anklet to help him disappear should his enemies appear, tattoos filled with the sap of many trees. And yet, he needs her. Still, he calls for her to come to him in the dead of night while his people sleep, because he cannot let them see that she, a stranger, is more powerful than the diviners who have always lived among them.

"Does anything specific trouble you, Mwami?" she asks in her customary manner. She knows that, as always, he will not give much away. He anticipates that she will determine his precise needs, is confident in this knowledge. "I can collect my inkidi" she offers, "see what there is to see." She knows that if she does divination, she may have to obscure the truth. He shakes his head slowly, fatigued. He has ruled on many cases at court today, the last hearing coinciding with the setting of the sun. His advisers bring constant news of disquiet in the nations surrounding them and he has lost many followers to rumors of possible raids. Besides, they are not alone. Although he trusts the man standing guard outside this hut, the man who silently beckons her to follow him on nights like these, even a Mwami can never guarantee discretion.

They settle into the familiarity of their routine. He sits serenely on his stool, drawing deeply from his ornate, lengthy pipe of tobacco as she kneels on the hard floor pulping the musano with her grinding stone. Green juices seep out of crushed leaves, mix with fine powders and create a paste. The ndongola bubbles gently in a clay pot, a white mist hovering above it. The space between them is silent. Expectant.

She had drawn the ndongola from the pools inside the caves that nobody else dares to enter. As she'd scooped the hot clear liquid with her insupa and carefully poured it into her clay pot, the pungent fumes arising from the pools had intoxicated her. They had engulfed her and formed hazy images, telling her the story of what was to come. Two armies at loggerheads. Many lives, both human and otherwise displaced. The Mwami, cornered.

The memories of those images conjure up a distinct sense of unease. Dark spots start to obscure her sight. Her breath becomes shallow as everything within her seems to slow down. She closes her eyes and feels herself sinking deeper into the abyss. *She must remain in the present.* A single bright light pierces through the darkness. She clings on to it, wills it to draw her back. Steadying herself with a gulp of air, she opens her eyes and focuses on the task at hand.

She hasn't always had this gift of premonitions. It came to her while her belly grew. Prodding her as her son kicked so that she could not ignore it. At first, the prodding had been gentle. She would find herself daydreaming as she collected water or placed her pot on the fire to cook. Her daydreams would be so vivid that she would respond audibly to those that spoke to her in them. They did not last long and often she would be roused from the trance by someone nudging her or calling urgently to her, her entire being having paused. Her face, an impenetrable mask. Soon enough the dreams began to come at night, intrusive and clamoring for attention. She would awaken disorientated, expecting to be among her people before realizing that they had only been visiting. Already an outsider, she began to elicit suspicion. Nobody trusts that which they do not understand.

Her husband had died on one of his hunting trips. His death coincided with the intensification of her visions. As her belly had grown rounder and more difficult to ignore, this man, the Mwami, had sent for her and offered her a place in his household. She had told him that although he was great friends with her husband, she did not deem herself worthy. A slave with no owner, she could not be compelled to marry and since she had no people with whom he could negotiate, her word was final. It would have been easy to accept his offer and gain his protection, but she could not. The *mzimu*, her spirit guides, would not allow it.

She looks up at him now. Boldly meeting his stare. Knowing that he still wants her.

"It is time," she says, motioning for him to sit up. "Will you be able to adhere?" she asks.

He is generally a disciplined man. Known for his sober, methodical ways. His many charms keep him ceaselessly alert. He has an intimate knowledge of the inherent danger of disregarding the plethora of rules and instructions that are delivered with each new dose of medicine. Her question is a matter of protocol.

She places one hand against his smooth, hard chest, the other holds a blade with which she swiftly makes a clean incision just above his left nipple. Blood trickles slowly from the wound but he does not flinch. His eyes are fixed on hers, trusting.

His people trust her now as well. They trust her because she helps them. No, not trust. Rely. They rely on her. They come to her when they are sick, when they need protection and when they want to accumulate great wealth. They come to her because she has accumulated great wealth. They see her cattle and the vibrant hides that she wears. They hear her ivory bangles cracking against each other as she moves and see the glint of her sons' sharp arrowheads made not from dull, grey, local iron but from luminous red copper only obtainable in the north. Her intricately woven baskets from the south.

They come to her now forgetting that they had not come when she needed them most.

She had given birth alone and afraid. Her *mzimu* had appeared to her in a dream and told her it was time. They had warned her that her Cholve would not be allowed to enter the world here in this strange land so she'd stolen away in the middle of the night, the pain coming harder and more frequently until she could bear it no more and had to push. The full moon had illuminated his slippery body when he emerged, wild animals had scampered away, alarmed by his insistent cry. A

shiver had coursed through her as she'd mustered up her energy and wrapped the boy in bark cloth. She'd returned to no ceremony. Instinct was her only guide to motherhood. She had washed and massaged her son before tending to her own ravaged body.

Her eyes well up as she remembers the years she spent trying to feed Cholwe before she began to realize that her husband's trophies were more than just ornaments. They were an inheritance.

She had come back to her hut one evening exhausted from tilling the land. Her hoe had needed tightening and the task took far longer than it should have. Her son had sat contented on her back, carefully shielded from the burning sun, occasionally being swung around to suckle. Every time she would straighten up from being hunched over, her back would protest. She had walked back home wearily, arriving just as the trees became silhouettes against the burnt orange sky, long after the other mothers had laid their children down and begun to prepare the evening meal for their husbands. Outside her hut had been a man patiently awaiting her. A trader from the east. "I come to ease your burden," he had said, offering her a brand-new hoe for one of her husband's precious hides. She had opted to procure some shells instead and vowed never to work the land herself again.

It was, in the end, her son, who would show her gift to the villagers. He would run home to her after a fall from a tree and she would know, instinctively, how to heal him. One year he was afflicted by the shivers and night sweats that so many children succumb to during the time of the rains. She had been guided by her *mzimu* to collect musano and shown how to use it until her son had gone from being limp and listless to holding down his food and then scrambling away to play again.

As news of her son's recovery spread, mothers began to bring their children to her, offering her objects as payment and when she healed their children, they would quietly suggest that she help their children's fathers to be better hunters, blacksmiths, or fishermen. The more brazen ones would even ask her to bind their husbands to them. More and more people came until she spent all her time healing and gathering musano and less time sitting with her son. She had, in the beginning, hesitated to help these people. Why should she, when they only really saw her when they needed her? But in the end her *mzimu* had spoken to her insistently as she slept, urging her to bide her time.

She looks up at the Mwami as she begins to make the second incision above his right nipple. His eyes search hers, confused by her tears. He winces as she cuts far more deeply than she normally would. The blood oozes out. "Apologies Mwami" she says, as she lifts the muzhangwa that had been soaking in the ndongola and carefully places them on each incision, "it is a cold night." The softened bark strips will ease the bleeding. Meanwhile, she considers the mixture that she has already ground. Her untied bark cloth reveals many tiny pouches of leaves, twigs, bones, and powders laid out flat, in full view of him. She fingers the different items, casting an eye over the Mwami, considering her options. She has never used her musano to control, coerce or conquer but she could. He, of course, has no idea what any of these items actually do. His gift is brute force, not gentle intuition, and he will use it against anyone who dares to defy him.

She had collected the musano on a bright night while the Mwami's orchestra played, and the people gathered to drink and dance. Her *mzimu* had been prodding her sharply for many moons. Entreating her to act and prepare herself for what was coming. They had led her to the bush and there she had carefully plucked the leaves that glowed blue, a guide for her discerning eye. All night she'd worked to appease her *mzimu* and when she'd returned at the break of dawn, she'd found her son sitting outside her hut. Eyes eagerly welcoming her. He could barely wait for her to place her cloth full of musano down before he said the words that she had been dreading.

"Mother," Cholwe had exclaimed, his chest puffed up in what could only be pride, "I have found the

young woman who gladdens my heart.”

She had silently cursed her *mzimu* for showing her so much and yet leaving this most vital detail out. Summoning a smile, she congratulated him. The irony was not lost on her. When he had come to her seeking to abandon the herding of her cattle to follow in his father’s footsteps as an initiate into the guild of hunters, she had known that the moment would mark him and create an unbreakable bond with his peers. Indeed, it was the head hunter who had stood for him during the marriage negotiations. His prowess as a hunter trumping his status as slave stock.

This then was the final line in the sand. The definitive sign that they were not the same. This was the only home he had ever known. She had hoped for a time she would be his home because, according to tradition, he belonged to her, he would not be tarnished by these people among whom she lived. Like her, he would continue to wait for their people to rescue them.

She could see now how impossible it would have been for them to remain cocooned. In truth, she had lost her grip on him as soon as he began to crawl. She would untie her bark cloth after a long day working and he would wriggle himself free. Scurrying away fervently before her hands could react. Sometimes he would do this outside her hut and she could see from the corners of her eyes the people among whom she lived stifling their laughter at her efforts to contain him. Mocking her.

And so here she was alone, yet again. Knowing that just as her own people were finally coming this way, her son had become one of the others. A stranger.

She realized, just then, what she had to do. Picking the final ingredient in her mix she placed the paste slowly along the line of each incision, filling the wounds and sealing all their fates.

Mwanabibi Sikamo is a Zambian storyteller and filmmaker exploring the real and imagined lives of Africans past and present. Her fiction is steeped in the magical tradition of indigenous folk lore. She is currently writing her first novel.