

Tales of the Savannah

A collection of short stories.



AMKICH KARANJA

TALES OF THE SAVANNAH

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Tales of The Savannah

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DEDICATION

To all my Facebook readers, without whom we would never have a book.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I express my sincere gratitude for the overwhelming support and push from my readers across the world. The loyal readers and fans who have consistently enjoyed my write-ups and narratives. You have always been a constant driving force and a never-ending source of inspiration for my work.

To my friends, family and all those who have supported my writing and publishing journey, I am so grateful. May you all thrive forever.

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#1

Dear Prospective Sister-in-law



The elders spat saliva onto our necks and almost told us to go and fill the earth. It is common here for an elder to spit clear saliva unto your breast, neck or even palms as a special blessing. Sometimes, I am tempted to think that my grandfather was there when they said, “Go ye and multiply.”

Have you heard of the song *cheptab oret age?* (the daughter from another clan.) What would I gain by calling myself the self-imposed Duke of Savannah if I don't even implore the ladies from other communities to marry our young men? What?

Not that we do not love our own girls, no. They already know the dos and don'ts. It's you that I want to help. The stranger to our ways.

You see, young ladies from beyond the Savannah, we have the best men here. Men who go out of their way to buy a cow with the first batch of their college loan. Men who will take a mobile app loan just to buy a beautiful goat. Men who will marry you and ensure that every morning you wake up, there is a goat for you to milk for yourself and your children. Even if they spend the better part of life in these cities.

That is not even my point, our men are God fearing. You see, these, our ladies here in Savannah, they know their brothers. They know what will make them dump you so easily you won't believe and because they could be jealous of you, they won't tell you. Instead, they will wait for you to make these mistakes, get dumped and then laugh at you.

Since I am the Duke, and we want to walk the ways of our forefathers who insisted that the vine should spread, I'll warn you on a few things.

Even if you don't know our ways and you may not speak our language, there is no problem. I have got you covered.

The surest way to marry one of our young brothers is to stay away from criticizing what is dear to us. Some may look backward but those are the things that make us tick and feel like we are making our ancestors proud.

Dear prospective sister-in-law, never talk ill of the people who bathe in the river, about people who wash their clothes and hang them above a thorn by the river side. You will lose it! You don't know how therapeutic the bath is for us. Even if you met him at The University of Nairobi, even if he speaks less of our mouth and '*twangs*' his English like those from the nose, be warned, he will still bathe in the river. Be not deceived. In such cases, your best bet is to behave like bathrooms are bad things and rivers are the best things that ever happened.

Once in a while he may stop to greet his age mates along the road when he decides in one of those rare instances to take you for a walk around the village. If he is a braggart. There is a special type of company though. Those that became men with him the same time. Those guys rule his world. Actually, they are the ones who will approve your nomination and your eventual incorporation into his family. They will be there when dowry is being given. They will be there during the wedding and they will be introduced. The one who will speak on their behalf could be one you have never met. Maybe he won't meet the standards of your classy boyfriend's company but you will have no choice because they are the 'deep state.' That is *bakule* for you and you will have to call them *bakinei*.

Do not cringe in a show of displeasure if he grabs and eats the raw stomach of a goat otherwise known as "*book*" or when he cuts off a piece of liver dripping with blood and licks it without adding salt during those festive seasons when he takes you around the village. Smile my sister, be tolerant, he may just propose at that time. However, manage your expectations dear one for a proposal may not include going down on one knee.

Why am I telling you this? They just discovered oil, rubies and diamonds

somewhere in the Savannah. In a few years' time, every household will have electricity and perhaps an expensive machine parked outside. And many goats and cows. Then our children will study at Kabarnet High School and go to Cheparorwa University College. See your life! You don't want your kids to miss out on such opportunities!

When he wears the green and yellow vest, do not say wearing it is backward, you will not pop! You won't see the next market week in that relationship. Instead, say with a smile in your face that you have never seen such a nice vest before.

If they call you "*weeh*!" and not "*babe*", hang on. One day they will struggle and "*pepis*" will come out of their mouths! Isn't it better to have a person who cannot *babe* you but has a ranch to his name than a man who only sees goats on TV during the annual village goat auction?

Point is, don't insist that they put on a shirt if they walk around the compound the whole day in a bare chest. It's our way of life. That's how we beat the high day temperatures. I haven't said that the Savannah is too hot for your make up. What I have said is that it is just warm enough. With this kiss of the midday sun, your allergies and rashes will go away. They'll all disappear. Even the one that causes you to sneeze until you cry.

One day you will meet an elderly woman or perhaps one of his kinsmen. Be not offended if they ask him if you're his child and he will answer to the affirmative. This part of the world, a wife is referred to as a child. Not for the children's sake, not to demean but as a way of categorising you amongst the special, cared for and respected part of the society.

And many more things. Small but dear to us. We have not even talked about our key holders. Don't ask us what a European coin of nineteen ten is doing alongside our thirty-four keys and a pocket knife. Just organise yourself, focus and our sister in law you will be.

Welcome home. Start with the mandatory but healthy yet so bitter, herbal medicine in the morning. It is more of a ritual!

Foot notes

- a) *Cheptab oret age*- the daughter from a different clan; phrase from a song by Mwalimu Limo.
- b) *Ushamba*- lacking exposure.
- c) *Pepis*- distorted version of babe.
- d) *Weeh*- Word to mean you.
- e) *Twengs*- used to mean exaggerated pronunciation of a language.
- f) *Bakule*- The one you were initiated together.
- g) *Bakinei*- Wife to bakule.

#2

The Agent of Love



High school never ends. So says the people of the earlier times. The connection between the students and teachers stays forever. But that which stays alive is the experience amongst the students themselves. High school is a mix of trivia and difficulty coupled with the growth opportunity to make mistakes and learning in and out of class.

Speaking of experiences, if you do not know *Bunyore Girls*, then you do not even know *Butere Girls* let alone *Kaimosi Girls*. As well, you may not know *Kaaga Girls* and maybe closer home, *Lake Bogoria Girls*. We will stick to girls' schools for today.

While I left high school without a girlfriend, I earned my daily bread by doing love letters and poems for my hitherto needy classmates and some housemates who were distant relatives with the queen's language.

Back in high school, I ran a cartel of young boys who had girlfriends in all the big schools in this country. They did not have the proper English though. Most of them were sons of hoof eaters just like me, but then we were men. Consequently, men are supposed to be a brother's keeper. And if you wrote a letter to a school like Bunyore without the proper prepositions, transitive verbs, adjectival clauses of manner and question tags, your letter would be posted at the school notice board as an example of, '*How not to do a friendly letter.*'

That way, even your ancestors would be embarrassed.

So, 'the men' turned up in my room with pen, paper and coins enough for a loaf of bread- my wages for being a wordsmith. Not that they could not write letters themselves, they claimed I had a way with words. That my packaging sounded convincing and not too complicated. All you needed was to tell me the name of your girlfriend and I went to work. You won't

imagine the English that flowed into the blessed writing pad. Or was it called 'foolscap'? I used to work hard in the past. I was paid to write. I hope that one day I shall be paid again.

We cannot point out to names here because my letters won people wives. As well, this will paint me in a bad picture with my clients for I will have violated the client non-disclosure agreement. But every time I meet these guys on the street or even here in the Savannah, they are thankful enough to buy me a big soda, '*Madiaba*' as we call it here in Savannah.

For the ladies who went to high school in the wake of the new millennium, if you received a good letter from anyone who went to school with me, yet when you compare the English of that letter of those days and the English they speak now and the two don't tally, I got you. That was the work of my hands.

Preachers and motivational speakers, beware of naughty boys during your presentations. If you get to a school and especially a boy's school and you feel prompted to introduce your entire family even in their absence, go ahead, do it. But if you have a daughter in high school, just say the name of the school if you must. Don't mention her name. It could be safer these days though. I hear there is no more letter writing.

One preacher made that mistake some years back during one of those famous Christian weekend rallies. I know my classmates won't believe this but I will confess it all the same. I was a good listener in church. So, he said the name of his daughter and the school. And even the form. He was a proud father-this preacher. Usually, when I was not dozing during the sermon, I was busy drawing my grandfather's face in my notebook. On that day, I got something more interesting to do. Out of my idleness and trying to fight the spirit of sleeping in church, I copied everything he said including the verse he read and the name of his daughter. Then I wrote her a letter. Two weeks later, and voila! She replied.

Boys are supposed to be adventurous. Aren't they? And like all of us, preachers' girls too need some loving; don't they?

Actually, I don't even know that girl now. She must have forgotten about me too. She was a no-nonsense girl, I guess. Because she would only reply to say that she liked my English. Nothing more. That was enough to make any Savannah boy feel like he owned the world. What do we even call that?

For about two years, I prided myself in the existence of an imaginary girlfriend whom I had never been acquainted with and I have never met and might never meet in this lifetime. Though, sometimes I wish our paths could cross, even if just for a brief moment.

Communication is key in any relationship. The modern-day television mentors have repeatedly told us. The letter writing has been taken over by the short messaging through our phones.

There was some sort of conference in the village every time we came for the holidays. Every one of us in high school narrated their individual experiences of the previous term. While my grandmother narrated stories of the past, I also found time to entertain my friends at the grazing field.

Footnotes:

1. *Madiaba*- Name given to the 500ml Soda (A brand of soft drinks)

#3

Remembering Moi



Thursday 3rd February two thousand marked the beginning of a new life for me, the Savannah boy. I reported to Moi High School Kabarak at seven minutes past one in the afternoon. The gateman registered me as student number ninety-one. I had sharp eyes and I noticed that Sammy, my newest classmate, was ahead of me at number ninety.

I reported to the school as a result of a vision my mother had spoken of in the year 1993. She spoke of a place called Kabarak. And said she wanted me to go there. I did; some seven years later. My innocent mind told me it was somewhere in the sky. "*Barak*" in Savannah land is 'above.'

If there is a school that was at the heart of Mzee Moi then it was this school. Every student who went to Kabarak came out with a different trait of confidence. Unprecedented character and self-esteem, the height of Kilimanjaro. Our attitude as outstanding as Mzee's *rungu* would go. We were taught to always know that 'On Earth We Rise.'

It is not even possible to summarize our experiences at the great school in a single narration. Not today, because, how do I convince you people that Mzee Moi came to attend our morning assembly on several occasions? How do you even write about the experience of a president who had dinner at the school dining hall on more than three occasions? A man who would stop along the pavement and just say, "I can see you are becoming slenderer than the students from Sacho High, I'll slaughter a steer for you tomorrow for supper"

How do we eulogise a man who gave us the enviable opportunity to fellowship with him almost every single Sunday of our respective four years at school? Singing many hymns like '*Amazing Love*' and '*To God be the Glory*' together.

If I were to give you a pen and paper, would you describe how it felt for a Savannah boy, like me to see a whole lorry of shoes parked at the assembly ground then your name would be called out and all you had to do was to say your shoe size and off you went to class with a box of the most expensive school shoe then? I can't for words would fail me. Take your pen and paper because I won't write.

Mzee Moi taught us punctuality. Every time we woke up at 5am to run to class for morning studies, he was already leaving for work and he would be back at around ten in the night as we would be heading for the dormitories. One moment he would be in Nairobi, the next moment he would be issuing bibles to baptized students at the school swimming pool. This week he would be having guests from abroad speaking to students, the next Sunday a team from another university. It is here that we from the village saw a language lab for the first time. And maybe last. A school where comprehension passages are read over headphones. Not earphones. There is a difference.

When we were almost sitting for our final examination, Moi invited us, the form four class of 2003 to his house for dinner. His humility was overwhelming. He was arranging plastic chairs outside his house for us to sit on when we arrived and practically supervised our reception. He then told us visions of our future of how we would be great men and women in this country. He requested us to invite him to our weddings.

This was the day he told us the funny story of a man who would not turn up for a date because of heavy rains yet he had earlier promised to cross the oceans for the love of his life. This left us laughing at the empty lies we had used to woo the young girls. Our flattering of how they were the only 'bean' in our *githeri*. To date, I look back and laugh at the cheesiness of our pick-up lines.

How do we remember this great man? A man who allowed us to interact with the world. He brought almost every important person to Kabarak. From anywhere around the world. Nelson Mandela came to Moi High School Kabarak long before we arrived. Look at that.

Four years, of great experience. The reason we are who we are. Moi allowed us, the Savannah Boys and Girls to share a classroom with the children of the richest and most influential people in this country. He taught us the story of possibility. A great testimony of equality.

Footnotes

- a) *Barak*- up to mean over the sky
- b) *Mzee*- a senior male citizen
- c) *Githeri*- a mixture of maize and beans boiled to make a meal.

#4

Qualified to be buried



During my grandfather's time, amongst the Tugen people of the Savannah and largely the Kalenjin people, burial was only a preserve of the high and mighty. Most people never qualified to be buried. They only got to be disposed in designated places. Disposal sounds crass but there were always efforts to make the disposal fairly decent and respectful. In any case it was a ceremony.

Disposal would happen in the dead of the night and those tasked with carrying the dead to the forest for this ceremony had to be back before sunrise. Kalenjins bury their dead facing east and the same goes for the disposed bodies, which had to be placed facing east.

Respected elders would receive a proper burial. Burial here means a grave was dug. Since there were no coffins, a special cow skin was prepared and that would be used to wrap around the body of the deceased.

Whether it was a disposal or a burial, elders insisted that a dead person was buried with the head facing east. Whether male or female. The burial site would only be identified and prepared on the morning of the burial day.

Only men were permitted to dig a grave. Men in this context are adult males who have been circumcised in accordance to the Savannah culture. Even if one was 60 years old and yet uncircumcised, he would never go near a grave. Actually, he would not be allowed to attend a burial. The bereaved shaved their heads bald; and pregnant women and children, both boys and girls stayed away from a burial ceremony.

Interestingly, it was the sole responsibility of the first-born son to literally carry the body of his father on his shoulder to the grave. It may not seem to make sense now but it did then. Maybe that explains why every man longed for a first-born son. They knew a time would come when their energy would be needed.

In the case of the burial of a man of significant status, such as a king, men of his age set would assist his son in carrying his body. No songs were sung. During the wrapping of the body, a special milk calabash, full of fresh milk, and a snuff box were stashed. The Kalenjins held a strong belief in life after death. They said they would get hungry along the way, and hence the milk was meant to offer nourishment as they made the perilous journey to the other side. The people of Savannah had a saying, “*Mowendi chi ko tui kutit*”.

Elders were buried lying on their right side similar to the way one sleeps sideways. Not facing down nor outright upwards. It had to be at inclined position facing right. A fly whisk and his walking stick would be part of the burial artefacts.

To date, no female animal is slaughtered in a male funeral. Equally no male animal is slaughtered when a woman dies. Women were never buried. These days, they must be buried to the left-hand side of their husbands.

Bachelors were equally never buried. They hit the “evil forest” no matter their age. And they were never carried using bare hands. They took long sticks, crossed them below his body and towed him to the forest. Marriage was a basic achievement. Dying without a wife, meant no basic respect at your funeral. The hyenas had a field day.

Foot notes

1. “*Mowendi chi ko tui kutit*”- Nobody goes to the underworld hungry.
- 2.

#5

The Death of a King



I travelled tens of kilometres away from my workplace to visit my grandmother. She is old, tired and fairly sick.

She wakes up at three in the morning and begins to sing songs we have not heard her sing before. She talks to imaginary people. Once in a while she lets out an easy laugh. If you are not keen, you would think from afar that she is in the company of a number of people chatting away. Then, when you clear your throat as you approach her house, as a custom in the Savannah, she will default to her factory settings.

She will not accept that she was singing nor even saying anything. She will greet you silently and ask who you are. From there, she will begin to tell stories instantly. Very interesting to her and somewhat boring to you. She will laugh even when you think it is not funny. The setting of her stories is in the 1940s.

Her husband was born around 1905. He died in 2005. His identity card, just like old men of her time, read 1901-1920. But you see he was circumcised in 1928 after the anthrax outbreak in 1927 that hit the Savannah badly. People in the Savannah do not initiate anyone below 15. Mostly above 18 or there about.

I chose to travel midweek so that I could inform her that the man of her husband's age set had slept. She had immense respect for president Moi. Someone she had never come close to. But because he belonged to the age set of her late husband and amongst the last *Chumo* alive, she would refer to him as "our husband".

She did not appear shocked. Actually, she laughed and for a moment I thought she did not quite understand what I had told her. Then she told me she had not heard about it but she knew it. I asked her how she came to know of it.

She wiped one of her teary eyes and quietly replied, "I no longer have enough eyes but I saw the rainbow in the west on Monday morning, it is not normal, and the stars had begun to blink too much over the past one week. The male star at 2am. A respectable man was preparing to exit. I didn't know whom." She closed her statement by saying, "Anyway, it is our time to go! We are no longer useful here."

She is approximately 100 years of age.

My grandfather had once told me a story of how legends passed on. In the Savannah, grandpa would sit at the doorstep outside his hut and tell us that great leaders don't just die. They sleep. They rest.

My grandfather talked about his death years earlier. He was not even a sub chief. And on the day that he died. He asked his wife to leave the house because he wanted to die a decent death. He called for his sons and a few of us, the grandchildren. He refused to be taken to hospital and among many things that happened that night, he clenched on to his walking stick. We buried him with it.

The death of a legend does not just happen. The cows will know it. The goats will have it in the intestines. The birds and particularly the ones called "*Tiltilye*" will pay a visit to the homestead and make a sound. A unique one. Forget the Owl, it is not able to predict such an important death.

Some trees will shed their leaves in a pattern that is only understood by Kalenjin men.

Some bulls will fight and one of them will be badly hurt or will die. Then the lower eyelid of his people will tremble long before he feels anything. That's how men of the Savannah cry. We cry for kings earlier so that by the time they die, we will honour them with tearless eyes.

Grandmother has mourned a great man of their time. She bit her lips as she recalled how these same men fading away like candle in the wind, would jump four feet above the ground just the other day in the 1930s.

Go well elder and great leader of our land. A mark that will endure for generations has been left.

Foot notes:

- a) *Chumo* – One of the age set in Kalenjin Community.
- b) *Tiltilye*-a type of a bird; woodpecker

#6

SALAD



Do not be surprised that I was the only one in our class of forty-three pupils in class one who could construct a three-word sentence in English. In spite of such an achievement, I was unnoticed for the better part of my class one until some goons in our class dared to do otherwise.

They misled our class prefect to be part of a cartel that stole some cooking oil from the school kitchen. We called it *salad*, and was donated by the European Union. We also stole the *salad* containers to take them as a treasured container used to store maize flour or for honey harvesting. Over the years, *salad* has turned out to be something else as served in these hotels in our country. Completely unrelated to our idea of salad.

The wonder would be how a class one kid could plan and execute a cooking oil heist. However, class one boys of the nineties in our schools were the size of those in class seven today. They were giants.

They were not caught. But something more serious happened. While our teacher led us through reading the popular Mr Kamau's story of *Hallo Children*, the prefect broke into a stampede.

It did not start immediately. We saw him rise to his feet from his desk. When he stood up, two of his only shirt buttons flew in different directions. One actually hit the teacher's nose!

She was about to read, "Yesterday Tom lost his pencil!" so that we would imitate her by saying... "*estertay Tom losti his pensol!*"

No sooner had our class prefect begun to say, "*egischus me matam* (excuse me madam)" than things began. As a matter of fact, he did not get the chance to finish with, "*Mayai go out!* (May I go out)"

Hell broke loose. He vomited in class. The previous day, he had literally gulped the stolen cooking oil and when he went home, he found his grandmother preparing the famous African beer-*busaa*. He was loved. He was allowed to take a half a litre. The rest was not history. It was chemistry. Actually biology. Anaerobic respiration.

Make no mistake, *salad* was an accompaniment of yellow maize. We would later learn in our human and economic geography that yellow maize was actually fed to animals in developed countries. We have never complained. In any case, one of the biggest motivations that took us to school those days was that free food. It was good food. Even the peas and the beans. The best. Thus, the next time you across yellow maize somewhere, grind it and make some porridge. You will thank me later when we meet. It could be what you are missing in this life.

The prefect had won his position as a class prefect not by merit but by appearance, since he was an ex herds boy who had broken his voice in class one and the tallest of all. Some of our classmates from his village rumoured that he was married and that he sniffed tobacco. Do not question again how class one kids knew about marriage in the early 90s.

He ran out of the class and disappeared into a nearby bush. We laughed hysterically.

I was immediately sworn in as a temporary class prefect until our huge guy had been cleared to run back to class. He, however, never resurfaced. How could he? That class was full of girls and only about a dozen boys. We were a minority. The rest were too rough to be class prefects.

I ruled with wanton abandon. I wielded power. When the pupils made noise, I would go to the front of the class and shout, "*Ton shout laig an animol!*" I did not know what that meant. But all the Savannah kids in our class froze. I was respected. I was doing well by all means. I was seeing myself being the school head boy by class three but things happen to the contrary.

A girl whom I lost her fifty cent coin wrestled me in class on one fateful morning. Other girls cheered their team mate on. My boys took off as we were outnumbered. I cried then ran to the staffroom and tendered my resignation. I was unfit to hold public office.

Our class teacher came to ask us to appoint a new prefect. By this time, a new pupil had joined us. His father worked at the local government offices near our school. He was the one who collected levies every market day. His son lied to us that he was a policeman. We believed him anyway thus he was accorded additional respect. But he was a bully and would never allow you anywhere near his old tyres that served as toys in those years.

When the teacher, out of nowhere asked us to volunteer if one wanted to be a prefect, his hand and that of another red eyed and rough boy went up. We did not want the son of the policeman. So, we were undecided. The teacher allowed us to make a decision by the following day. We silently vowed to rig in our poor mate. The dirty fellow.

But things turned out different the next morning. The son of the fake policeman who was still new yet a brutal bully turned up with his pockets full of sweets. The sweets were called *toffee*. He would pass by your desk, allow you to feel the sweets and promise to give you two or three in the evening. This turned things the other way. The bully boy became our prefect in a landslide acclamation. Our fellow was ill-fated, dust everywhere.

We would also later see dust because as soon as his appointment as class prefect had happened, the bully disappeared. None of the boys in that class tasted *toffee*. All the girls did though. We lost it fair and square. There was no appeal. His leadership in that year made a few of us carry bruises to date. We were always fighting at every break time. Thank God, his father was moved to another town the following year. The son of a tax collector left.

Foot notes

1. Salad- type of liquid cooking oil which was mostly donated for in schools by European union.
2. "*estertay Tom losti his pensol!*"- Corrupted form of '*Yesterday Tom Lost his Pencil*'
3. "*egischus me matam* (excuse me madam)" - Corrupted form of '*excuse me madam*'
4. "*Mayaigo out!* (May I go out)"- Corrupted form of '*May I go out*'
5. Busaa- type of local brew made from fermented maize and millet flour.
6. "*Ton shout laig an animol!*"- Corrupted form of '*do not shout like an animal*'
7. Toffee- type of a candy made from butter and brown sugar.

#7

High School Love



Have you ever heard of Mogotio Girls' High School?

Mogotio Girls is a great school. Good is an understatement, it is a great school that has produced many great minds. In the early days, this school was called Samor Mixed Secondary School. Then it became Mogotio Girls' High School during which the boys were phased out. It is now a Girls' school with brilliant girls and amazing environment. So much for an introduction. The pride of our county and country at large.

My brother fell in love with one of the girls in this school some years back. I have many brothers. So, you may not succeed in guessing which one of the many. He was equally in a good boys' school. My brother was a tiny young man. His voice refused to break and therefore he spoke in soprano like most girls. He appeared to have feeble muscles and light fly weight. A characteristic slender physique. My brother was just my brother.

One evening, as my brother, a son of the Savannah was going around the school field, he overheard the teacher in charge of sports announce to a group of serious boys with a future in sports, that the following day, there was going to be a race to select three boys who would represent the school in Mogotio Girls. My brother only heard two things, "three boys" and "Mogotio Girls."

If this were a primary school composition, I would say that his heart skipped a beat and he could hear *du! du! du!* as if it was about to come out. His ears stood up like those of a rabbit. He couldn't believe what he had heard.

But then our family and athletics are two different things. Nobody in our family had ever gone past the zonal competitions in any sports activity. Maybe our father in 1965. He was a javelin thrower.

This boy made up his mind that he was going to prove that no human is limited. When he thought of his girlfriend in Form Three and the fact that he was in form four and had never run a single race, not even to represent his class, his heart beat faster.

Long story cut short. When they said get on your marks, my brother was on the line. People laughed. He was focused. By the time they said set and before that wooden plank with chalk was struck, son of our clan was already off. It was false start. He was warned. They were ten and the teacher wanted three.

When the race finally started, the boy closed his mouth like Bolt and sprinted towards the finish line. He was not seeing the line. He was seeing the girlfriend. Mogotio girls are beautiful girls. Anyone would run.

Long story shorter. He was seventh when they started and fourth when they finished. But he did something that nobody had ever done in our entire lineage for the last one hundred years; He fainted at the finish line.

When he woke up under the school shade and opened his eyes, he saw the games teacher. Then he shouted, "*Mogotio Girls!, I want!*" And he fainted again. I think this second fainting was fake.

The teacher was a good-hearted human being. He took our son to be in charge of the First Aid box. Unfortunately, the girl was not in school that day. She and her class had gone for a Mathematics contest. Again, she was not even aware that the young man was in love with her and had literally fainted just to be with her.

Our brother is yet to tell that girl, now a medical doctor, that she almost made our clan lose a valuable member.

This love will bring us wonders.

Foot Notes

1. "*Mogotio Girls!, I want!*"- Corrupted version of '*I want to go to Mogotio Girls.*'

#8

Savannah to the World



Sometimes we sit back and peer into the distant savanna past. The long thirsty trips to school at lower primary. The hunger pangs, the routes we took and the scorching sun that was characteristic of those Januarys. We were always dirty and stinky with sweat.

We hopped from one cow dung to another if only to cool our feet. We fought for the free food in school and would happily kick our containers after the meal.

Savanna break times in school would be eventful. And when we were not in school, we were looking after livestock. We were always busy.

And many other things that we did. From hunting to fighting and to brewing the traditional *busaa*. From inciting our dogs into fighting, to watching our rams move back three steps behind before they rammed onto each other's foreheads. We jumped in celebration every time ours won. And equally broke down when ours was beaten. The Savannah life was at its best.

While all these things happened, we were growing. We did not realise that we were already in class seven and that we needed to buy good shoes. It did not occur to us that soon we would be going to high school and would be forever separated from that kind of life that defined us.

Back home we lived in grass thatched houses. We used a flaming stick to illuminate the fireplace so that ugali would be cooked. No torch! There were no security lights and once in a while you would be sent out to pick a plate. The nights were deadly dark and were it not for the whips that our mothers had, none of us would have volunteered. In picking them, you had to dash out and back before the mythical "*Chemosi*" would catch up with you.

For a long time, we thought we were poor. For a long time, we thought we were living difficult lives. We pitied ourselves at the Savannah that even in the eyes of tourists who took photos of us and our donkeys when we came from the river, we saw pity. We saw a message of "poor you" from their looks.

Nevertheless, years later, we began to realize that poverty and suffering aside, we were just living differently. True, ours was just a humble way of life. Of leaking roof tops and rickety beds. Of no guaranteed meals nor school tours but we never complained. We did not even notice. We didn't see the desperation. We saw the difference. We noticed the gap. We read the silent language and we realised we were different and that, our being different, posed more disadvantages.

We slowly began to close the gap. We worked hard in school. Slowly, the description of the Savannah began to change. It continues to change. It will continue to change for the better.

Grass thatched roofs were replaced by corrugated iron sheets. Donkeys were replaced by tractors tanks. Radios began to speak in houses and cement became affordable. The people of the Savannah were making a difference. Thorns would no longer find their way into our feet. Life was improving.

There is a call to rise up and purpose to make a difference. No matter their starting point, the daughters and sons of Savannah are leaving a mark. Through their hard work and continuous effort, things will never be the same again.

Foot Note

1. *Busaa* – local brew made from fermented maize and millet flour.
2. *Chemosi*- A giant; a man-eating monster.

#9

A Drive Down to Savannah



In the year 2019, I drove a borrowed car alone from Nakuru towards my village. I was listening to music composed by some Gen z generation. That kind of music that partly sounds like a conversation, partly like a complaint and at the very least like a song. Songs had chorus but not the current ones. The current artists are hell bent on saying some words and repetitively doing so until somehow, they become famous.

There is an unproven theory that ninety-five percent of men driving borrowed cars will most likely offer a lift to a beautiful girl along the road. I support this. Why should you offer a lift to a fellow man who will ask you unnecessary questions that will puncture your ego? Questions like, "*If I give you 150k utanitafutia kama hii?*" or "I see fuel is on E, will this take you home?" Very uncomfortable questions those ones.

Carry a lady. About all of them do not care about the difference between a Nissan and a Toyota. They can't tell the fuel gauge from the odometer or even the thermometer! Even if you hit a pothole, they will not ask you to replace the "*sakamsopa*". That's the Savannah word for shock absorber.

Somewhere along that road towards my village, a beautiful girl stopped the borrowed car I was driving. I stopped and asked her to hop into the rear seat. She was going to Kabarak University.

Within no time, we were engaging in a chit-chat. She said she was a law student who sold clothes online and that I could follow her on Instagram if I wanted to sample the products. I had a defunct Instagram. I forgot the password but with my *On Earth We Rise* confidence, I was not going to give up that easily. I replied, Okeyyyy...! Like I was on prime-time TV news interview. Then I asked her another important silly question in my Savannah pronunciation, "So how did you start your online clothing line?"

I think she did not get the clothing line phrase well. So, she asked me to repeat the question. I took a dive. I retorted, "*Ulianzaje hii biashara?*" All s

this time drawing a "*sambusa*" on the borrowed car. By now, Hot 96 radio station was playing a song by Nasty C and Major Lazer. Good music from our time. I know my Second Junior Kotestes fans are on offside trap here.

After many "so like...mmmmhh...kinda...you know me and my dad... ", she told me she took all her old clothes to the dry cleaner. Plus, those which were not old but no longer fashionable to her, took pictures of them and shared them on Instagram. The rest was history. Business idea to anybody who has extra clothes.

If you have ever donated a shirt to a needy neighbour who 'feeds on that bottle' until he sleeps on the gutter, you will agree with me that sometimes you have had feelings of repossessing your shirt.

I met one gentleman whom I had given my shirt that I bought using HELB student loan sometime in campus. The shirt looked at me and I almost heard it say, "Take me back home." The once-beloved shirt was now a dirty and faded, a former shadow of itself. I can confirm that I was heartbroken.

I promised myself that, in the near future, if God blesses me with money to buy a new shirt, I will put my old, clean shirt online. If someone can't wash a shirt given to them for free, are they even grateful?

Alas! I did not take the lawyer's phone number. Her name was too short to be true by the Savannah standards. Ella.

Next time, offer a lift and do a meaningful interview. I didn't charge her. My grandfather advised that way from his experience of owning a Land rover 109 in the year 1962.

Foot Notes

1. *If I give you 150k utanitafutia kama hii?* – Would you get me a car like this if I was to give you 150 Ksh?
2. *Sakamsopa*- Shock absorber
3. *Ulianzaje hii biashara?* – How did you start this business?
4. *Sambusa*- Type of a pastries made from roll of wheat flour filled with ground meat parts and different spices. Can be made from cereals.

#10

When Christmas Eve was the Real Deal



Someone had suggested I play baby Jesus. My colour, however, betrayed me. Who would bring gold, frankincense and myrrh to a dark baby Jesus? I was slightly above ten kilograms at age nine. Very tiny and obviously malnourished.

We grew up when Christmas eve was the real deal. By 9 o'clock in those nights, while awaiting the birth of Christ, we would have made three trips to and from the three churches within our village trading centre. We called it town. We were wrong.

By that time my friend Lion, the boy who lifted an electricity pole single-handedly across a river when we were in class two, would have already smashed a rotten egg on the face of a boy from a nearby opposing village and ran into a crowd at the speed of light. The other boy's offence would possibly have been accusing one of our girls of looking ugly. Those days, nobody played with our girls. We carried huge clubs. The size half our lice filled hair.

These days, big football clubs carry us past midnight. We no longer go to church. Sad. To add on this, Lion unfortunately broke his two upper teeth during a fight after irreconcilable differences with some people. These days, he can't bite.

Lion, others and myself would move in silence. The church would be in wooden planks and we would prick the holy girls deep in prayer and others speaking in tongues with long sticks. I can't confirm but I am almost convinced we were working for the devil. We never came close to light. Our legs looked like old cassava branches. More or less like chewed sugar cane. We were dirty. But we wouldn't dare miss Christmas eve.

By that time, the first act would be over. Some boys would be seen rushing

out to prepare for the next act. That of the three wise men bringing gifts to baby Jesus. Sadly, our Herod of 1993 is a serious drunkard these days. Be wary of the roles you take up in skits.

Then we would rush to another church. Then another fight.

In those days, the nights would have begun with the sound of the church drum. My grandfather loathed the church drum with passion. That sound threw him into a bad mood. We never knew why but he would later explain that during his days as a young man, people lived quietly and cautiously. The only times drums were beaten or horns blown was when danger was looming. The enemy would pounce on you anytime.

It was important that every sound was well interpreted thus careless shouts were also discouraged. That is how the praise and worship team landed in problems with the old men again. Actually, one old man raised a ruckus and threatened to stop a church service because the noise was too loud and it was giving him bad memories.

When the white man landed with the gospel of Christ, most of the men of my grandfather's time strongly resisted. Those nights of going to witness the birth of Christ were fought for a long time. There was a time in the days when my grandmother was a girl where someone went around to claim that, a time was coming when the missionary would heap all the congregants into a lorry to be made a meal in a faraway land. For a whole five years, nobody went for those night rallies. Of course, it was a hoax.

That way, Christmas eve came to be what it was. Teenage boys and girls were less dramatic but hid in bushes for a reason our tender ages wouldn't comprehend. The unlucky ones would miss school the following year having gone the motherhood way. It would, however, surprise you the New Year's Day didn't come with much pomp and excitement like it is these days. We were not certain about how the year was changing.

#11

Who Bewitched Our Old Good Days?



The rains used to faithfully visit in mid-March and the butterflies would colour the sky in the mid-morning sun. A young calf would joyfully prance and raise her rear legs in unequalled triumph. They ran around their mothers and we watched in utmost admiration.

We would be busy separating the kids from the goats. This was always an emotional moment for the mother goats except for the heartless ones who rejected their new-borns. I have never found a biological explanation to this phenomenon but perhaps that is close to when some women throw away a new born baby. I am not certain.

The land was soft and the pasture was lush. Children were cautioned to be careful about the evening storms that would sway the trees sending everyone scampering for safety. It was a taboo to shelter under a tree and we were advised to run to the nearest house in case of rain. It did not matter whose house. It was said lightning was a living thing and it still is.

The Savannah people used to be good people and they would light the fire and get your daughter sour milk. You made a choice to sleep over and you were comfortable. Children belonged to the community. Girls walked home at night without the fear of harm except from the real hyenas. In those days, 'hyena' was simply that-Hyena.

All men the age of your father referred to all girls as their daughters; any girl. They did not ask for their "phone numbers" neither did they pick them from university for a "drink". The world was orderly.

The greatest excitement would be when mothers sent their children to go and weed a neighbour's farm. We went from morning till noon. And they brought porridge at around ten. Lunch was served around midday and occasionally late in the afternoon. We were not paid. It was a way of d

helping each other. The spirit of loving a neighbour as we loved ourselves. They would weed ours the following weekend. That was exemplary teamwork. I do not know what or who broke those bonds. Where did this brotherhood disappear to? Things change as time flies. The ways of our savanna were better.

A mother would go to the forest, chase a monkey and cut the tail then she would be escorted home by some elderly women and would cook for her the whole week. The women came in their large numbers with food and "tree top" juice. The new "monkey" would begin their life as a human being. Those days were better. When we believed in baboons turning to babies. Those were better days.

There would soon be "tea" for the baby and women made a circle singing a song that suggested that a baby was from God. It did not bother us how a baboon supposedly from a forest suddenly became God given. It was better that way though. The baby would cry all through while the song turned sweeter. Presents were brought in plenty; aunts brought a hen or two for the baby. Nobody sold them.

That was the great family life of then. Of sending an elder daughter with an empty milk bottle to the neighbour's house and the bottle came back full of milk. That was generosity before we started selling everything. Before people began minding their own business and those who try to borrow milk for the baby are given lectures.

Additionally, everyone began taking their wife by themselves to go and "chase the baboon." The women of these days being too busy to accompany anybody to the forest.

It was better when we waited. Those were the good young Savannah days. But what else can we say. The ways of our people are many but it's never too late to innovate and embrace change.

Our brotherhood was genuine. We were true to ourselves and respect stood for its true meaning. It is never too late to relate. Savanna people have a way of saying history repeats itself, "The shadow of a tree shall return," so they say.

#12

Hail Savannah School Days



In the midst of the blistering Savannah sun, those Januarys and Februarys of the early nineties made life at the Savannah School unbearable; terribly uninspiring.

The sound of the gong in the midst of the school quadrangle sent us on helter-skelter towards our homes. Those were the days when the yellow maize donated by European Union had not yet been delivered.

The sun would be hot and those who took the tarmac suffered more. There were mirages of water ahead. Some sights of flame would be seen about a hundred meters ahead like the earth was boiling some invisible intestines. We walked barefoot and we hopped from one cow dung to another. If only to cool our feet for a second or two.

Those of us who had paths marked by the tall milky green euphorbia found solace by walking under them. The sun, I remind you, would be terribly hot.

We rushed home. Some of the girls would find their food uncooked. It was still worth the stampede though. A few had to go and add a few spices. The most famous spice those days was salt. And maybe the canned and famed salad oil from the EU. God bless the EU.

However, there were bad days. Days when you arrived home and found your mother was nowhere to be found. The kitchen fire was off and the bucket that used to have the cooking flour was empty and rolled at the doorstep by a starving hen seeking food for her chicks.

We stared. Then stared again. The dead ash reminded us of the story of Job in the Bible. For a moment, you could hear the voice of Job's wife saying, "Curse God and die!"

A lump would form on the upper part of your esophagus. You would want to cry but then the tears would hang half way. It was as if there was no intercommunication between the tear glands and the eyes themselves. We swallowed hard and searched for that plastic *kasuku* container. We filled our stomachs with water. We did not mind the floating cockroaches. Such was life.

Back then, there were no phones. So, we were not able to call our mothers. We almost wanted to do to her what Job's wife advised. Unfortunately, one had to give up because she would either be away in the grasslands to herd the cows or had taken a sick child to the village herbalist. Sometimes, the white lady, *chepchumbinde*, who visited Savannah once a week to treat malnourished kids was five villages away. Mothers walked all the way, God bless the catholic medical missionaries.

Our lowest moments, however, were when we decided to be generous to invite our friends who came from afar and couldn't get home for lunch and be back by two o'clock in the afternoon. We would ask them to come for lunch with us only to be greeted by a disinterested, miserable dog and a dead fireplace.

Such were the trials of the Savannah. The teacher on duty would be waiting by the fence by 2pm. There were no school gates. Just some openings along the school fence. Sometimes you missed food and you stubbed your big toe on a stone on your way back to school. In spite of all the trouble, the teacher would still ask you to kneel in the sun. The dust had a special range of temperature. Scorching, to say the least.

Nonetheless, here we are. The boys and girls who struggled to read using a burning splint. We, who had to balance between doing school assignments, which were not many like these days, and bringing back the cows to the shed. We even had to milk the goats and cattle first, and when morning came, bread was never part of the menu. Sometimes we slept inside the granary and even under the granary with the sheep and goats. The warmth under the granary was unparalleled.

The good times were summed up by the days we spent nights in groups. Ten children or even as many as twenty from a whole village sharing cow skins as bedding while listening to narratives from our grandmothers who were the only ones who slept on a bed. An earthen bed.

Foot Notes

1. *Kasuku*- a type of a container normally used to pack cooking oil branded *Kasuku*.
2. *Chepchumbinde* – a white woman.

#13

Totalitarian Fathers of the Savannah



One evening when he arrived home, he placed his tools at the corner of their sitting room. A room that was neatly coated in mud. A stool or two at the sides of what defined a dining table for a father of the house. He placed his tools beside the ceremonial water pot. This pot had the coldest water and children were never permitted to touch the cup that was meant to draw water from that pot.

As was the custom, he would walk to the cow shed to confirm the number of cows, goats, sheep and even how the calves had been tied up. In Savannah, the height at which the rope that tied the calf was prescribed. Not too high and not too low. That night, his bull was missing. Doomsday!

The children of today would not believe but that meant that everyone in that house would spend the night outside in search of a missing bull or a he goat. Every member of the family except the last-born kids who were always favoured. Not even the mother of the family was spared. Sometimes a sheep gave birth in the bush and would accidentally be left behind in the bush. Disaster!

The totalitarian fathers of Savannah were nothing close to what the white man lied to you about Idi Amin Dada in that misleading movie about some raid on Entebbe! Those were jokes.

In the days of my grandfathers, a simple cough from an approaching father would send everyone scampering for safety. Children, these days, dare their father to kill them or threaten to kill themselves when a tour is not paid for them in school or if a new phone is not bought. Parents of those days would offer to skin you alive. Reminding you that they had ten other kids and losing you was nothing. These days we have invented something called depression. Such was life.

One afternoon at the village Square, a group of boys and girls played hide and seek, unaware of goats and sheep wandering away into a neighbour's farm. A passerby who neither knew the children nor what they were doing, just asked them to point at the nearest goat. There was none. The stranger mercilessly whipped the kids. The child belonged to the community. When they reported the stranger at home in the evening, a more ferocious whipping ensued.

I have heard of children who take their parents to the chief to be reprimanded on some wrong doing. I have heard teenagers confess to their parents that they smoke weed and many are the times that the parent would call in a pastor to exorcise the spirit of weed smoking. The fathers of those days, exorcized the demons themselves. They would leave you paralyzed for a few days if they found you answering a neighbour's wife badly.

Savannah mothers were too loyal. Taking time in the middle of the night to sneak to the kitchen to secretly prepare a meal and whisk it to the hiding place of her kids. Kids who would be hiding in a nearby bush. Just because a goat was missing. They risked a broken arm though. It did not matter who was on duty when the goat got lost. Collateral damage was a daily occurrence.

Parents and kids of these days eat from the same plate. Share the same glass to drink water. Women lend out the family wheelbarrow to a neighbour without consultation. In those days, no one else but the father was qualified to lend out a hammer. Leave alone the wheelbarrow.

Mothers these days can even shout at a man canning his son. In the days of my father, that was capital offence. It was the duty of a mother to go mute when the father was meting out punishment or simply encourage the father to "kill" the child. One of my friends walked seventeen kilometres to report to Form One while his father drove alone in a seven-seater taxi.

Sadly, hardly a generation later, we are now at the mercy of our children. Insulting us from the couches, throwing TV remote controls at us and clicking away into their bedrooms, blatantly refusing to take instructions. Children who ask us to apologize to them when we wrong them and, of

course, we, parents who get mad at friends when they tell us they met our daughters drunk and staggering. This is because we believe our kids can never drink, can never smoke and they do not know bad manners like other people's children. Except for the reminder that history repeats itself, we can only hope that one day we may relive the moments of the past.

Because truth be told these totalitarian fathers raised well-mannered children. We are proud that we were whipped to greatness. A big challenge to the fathers of these days and their big-headed children.

#14

Encounters with Spirits



In those days if you walked at night and passed by a graveyard or a purported cemetery, which were actually few those days, they said you would not fail to meet some evil spirit. The only way to know that you had just converged or you were about to meet some evil spirit is when your hair stood erect. The head would feel like it was bald and the hair seemed to depart from the scalp then cold sweat dropped down your armpits.

When we met in school the following day, people narrated horrific experiences about passing by a grave and seeing some two almost invisible people conversing and laughing as they warmed themselves over a mysterious fireplace.

Evil spirits traversed the villages of the Savannah by night. They lit the fire by the roadside or along a narrow dark and departed path. There were designated places we warned each other to avoid if we were getting late for home. Past eight o'clock in the night, a spirit would chase you. For a moment he would be behind you and the next moment he would be ahead of you. There were male and female spirits though. Scary and loud.

A Savannah boy shocked us one evening when he revealed to us that he had been late coming home and since he had to cross a river, he hurried to beat the darkness. Just as he was about to wade through the water, in the midst of the waking sounds of the crickets, believe you me, as he swore, his grandfather who had died years ago approached him from behind. He called out his name and asked him why he was so late in going home. He then escorted him and kept asking questions about how so and so was fairing on. He was dumbfounded yet he wanted to say something. But he couldn't.

Our friend arrived home and as he made his way to their compound, his grandfather just disappeared mysteriously. His tongue which had been too heavy and lazy to say anything felt light. His hair seemed to retreat back to the scalp. His legs became lighter. He wanted to give a wail but he decided otherwise.

Nobody believed his story but everybody believed ghosts were common as one crossed the river. The son of the Savannah, holds it to date that he met his grandfather. In his brown trench coat and khaki shorts. We believed.

One morning I walked into my grandfather speaking to some unseen people. When I coughed as is custom for any man, he went silent. Then he asked me if I had met them. I asked him who he referred to by them. He said he was just having a chat with his father moments before I walked in. That he had come to ask him to leave the living world of uncultured people who no longer understood and valued the prudent ways of the past and join him in a better underworld.

I laughed it off since his father had died when he was a young boy. Those days, as grandfather would narrate, people loved culture and they prayed to their unseen supreme being more often through sacrifices.

#15

The Savannah Nights



In the days of my grandfather, a rainy night would be the perfect time for the hyena to take a walk around the village. Once in a while it could pick on a confused flock of sheep. It was said that sheep were always eaten by hyenas because whenever they saw it, they started jumping up and down thinking they were running. No wonder any kid in the Savannah who lost livestock while herding would be mocked and referred to as a sheep.

During the night, the village went to sleep. In those days there was neither electricity nor solar energy and equally no vehicles. The village went quiet. Sometimes, two or more babies cried at night. When it was no mating seasons for the goats, the he-goats also went quiet.

Then the crickets ruled the airwaves. Except for a few dogs that barked to scare away a honey badger that had missed its way around the village or welcome a late coming alcoholic family man, all was entirely quiet.

Children who had messed during the day by letting the cows and goats astray were whipped way into the night. It was always an offence to punish a child by either a slap or a kick. Not even a punch. Maybe a pinch. The rod, however, ruled. Mothers used the ceremonial cane by the fireplace that was used to clean milk gourds to whip their children. It was never easy to go for a whole week unpunished. The rod was never spared and children rarely got spoiled.

Young kids who refused to eat were told that they would be thrown out into the dark night to be taken away into the forest by the man-eating monster-*chemosi*. It was also used to scare children into taking herbal medicine when they became of ill health. The whip ruled. Because herbal medicine is just herbal but bitter. You had to close your eyes and gulp it nonstop. In the Savannah, you cannot sip medicine; you drink.

It was a taboo to whistle at night. It is believed that evil spirits who were going by their business around the village having come from the underworld at sunset would be attracted by the whistle. Anybody who whistled was rebuked and shouted at. To date, nobody in the Savannah whistles at night. None. Not even in the current generation. Even those living in the diaspora cannot whistle at night.

A snake was never called by its name at night nor during the day. It would simply be referred to as the 'animal of the grass.'

Foot Notes

1. *Chemosi*- A giant, a man eating monster.

#16

Our Share of Somnambulists



There were times when we played past midnight or told stories past the normal time because the new moon was very bright. Sometimes we literally went out to play in the light of the new moon; such were the nights when hide and seek flourished. This is the time my grandmother said that a special type of dreamers walked out of the house in their dream and came back around four in the morning.

They never woke up no matter what happened when they were out. Strange it was!

In the days of my grandmother, some children would dream about a walk in the village square and they would literally go there. It would force people to lock the door by placing a huge stone against it or tying it with a very tight rope. They would still make their way out. Stranger than fiction.

One such unfortunate incident was that of a boy who went out in his dreams when my grandmother was around sixteen. Those days, children slept on the floor in tens. This boy, believed to have been possessed by that spirit of sleep walking and dreaming around the village, made a terrible mistake. He climbed a tree-while asleep. The tree branch broke and he woke up in his sleep. He collapsed and died of shock.

Most of those who woke up in this kind of dream died. Grandmother said this with little joy on her face. She seemed to lose herself into the distant past. We watched her wipe a tear that we could not tell its start. Whether it was because of the smoke from the fireplace or just a tear from the gloom of the past. Of a relative that died in his dreams, maybe a sister or a brother. Maybe a parent.

It was believed that the quiet of the night would be too appalling for the mind and heart to fathom. But the people of ancient sacred Savannah

believed a spirit killed them. During such nights when grandmother told us these stories, we would be too scared to sleep. We tried staying awake. Of course, until sleep took us away again.

Sometimes an old man would not be asleep, while tossing and turning in his bed, he would hear loud mows of cows and bulls. He would recognize from the sounds, the sound of his favourite bull that died in a fierce bull fight many years back. The noise would be too loud and the cattle seemed too many and filling his compound. He feared for the safety of his living cows and slowly he would stretch out of his bed to walk out to watch. As soon as he stepped out, everything went quiet. Pin drop silence. Only the sound of his sleeping cows chewing cud and crickets alternating their chirping sounds. He would go back to bed and the sounds would come back again.

Then he knew it was time to act. He would take out his snuff box and a few mouthfuls of his sacred honey wine. He would throw a few pieces of the snuff in the west and speak words of rebuke to the spirits of his cows haunting his sleep. While spitting raw milk eastwards, he implored his forefathers to pardon him. The spirits of the invisible cows would go silent. Such were the stories that froze our hearts. The spirit world as told by our grandmother. The nights of demons began at one to three in the morning.

#17

The Making of a Herdsman



Many years ago, when the world was healthy and bountiful, we sat with my grandfather watching the cows return from the fields. Six cows had just given birth.

The calves dashed to receive their mothers and I saw a smile from my grandfather's dark teeth. We loved seeing them raise their tails in the sky as they swung their waists! Their newly acquired hooves sent grass and soil flying in the air speaking of freshness around them.

We watched under that tree which had a beautiful stone that made a chair. I sat on it. He wore a green khaki short, checked shirt and a black coat. His pierced ears hung loosely close to his shoulder. One was folded upwards.

He had his portable small stool of honour complete with a handle made of goatskin. He asked me to separate the cows from their young ones so they could not suckle before being milked. I feared. I was too young to do that. He laughed again and hit me softly with his walking stick and implored, "Go! Go! Young man, you fear wealth?! Eh! "

He handed me his walking stick and said, "Go now, I have armed you! "

I hesitated, but his cheering and jeering pushed me to my feet. I rose to go. I was going towards this relaxed calf. Suddenly her head was raised and she looked at me in the eye. I swung the heavy borrowed stick. It jumped up and made a loud sound. I sped off to where he sat. He called me a coward but commended that first attempt. He touched my big head, smiled again and said he was happy I was finally healthy. In those days, children died of bad diseases. Some died of malnutrition. Back in school, you wouldn't miss a classmate with marasmus or kwashiorkor.

Grandfather wanted all the boys to grow into courageous men. He spoke of men being such kind of people who could protect the community and be serious investors.

He loved girls more. That made him jokingly refer to them as wealth.

#18

The Tales of Pierced Ears



Grandmother's stories were interesting and sweeter when told while her hand played effortlessly with her pierced ear. We stared and almost felt the sweetness. We also twisted our ears but we could not rival hers.

The ceremonial beautiful piercing was always a journey of pain at the start, she said in the midst of a smile. She explained how it was done progressively from a small hole to such an adorable beauty. Always cautious about details.

They placed a small piece of wood, then fairly bigger one, then a much bigger one and then the healing process was out of this world; unimaginable. Carrying huge placements for beauty sake and yet every girl wanted it. Nothing compared to whatever girls adore in this age.

This pain would one day pay off. At the village square while she would dance in accompanied rhythm, the boys that were my grandfather's age mates loved it. Every girl swung her ears that carried the bracelets and all the cowries. The ear tags moved in tandem with the songs they sang. And their mothers who sat straight legged on the grass at a distance smiled adoringly. It was beautiful

From hundreds or even thousands of people with pierced ears in those years, to almost one in every family in the current world, very soon, we may have to pay to see a living human with such kind of an ear. The things we took for granted.

Our children will tell tales they heard from us about this piece of elegance. A creation of the beauty pageants of the Savannah before confusion.

My grandmother is scanty with the detail about this ear piercing process. There seems to be something sacred about this kind of decoration. Nevertheless, you can still grab a chance to pose for a photo beside your grandma with this kind of ear.

Later, I would tell grandmother about the fact that most communities did the same, and she clarified that all humanity are children of the same father but different mothers.

It was unheard of to also find a man without a pierced and extended ear. A wise man in their time once rose to be a chief. But his ears were not pierced. He had been away for some time when his agemates had had their ears pierced. They called such a man *lakwait* loosely translated to “one with a child's ear”.

As with the removal of the front lower teeth, a gift would always come in handy for the child. It would always be a young female goat. In the days of my grandmother, the gap left with the removal of the teeth left spaces for inducing fluids in case a person became unconscious and would not be able to eat. A blood meal, herbs or milk would pass through this space.

Decorations then followed suit. The ear ornaments would hang loosely during a dance out in the village. The girls of those days loved men who jumped high heaving their ornaments up and down.

These days, the men who pierce their ears are frowned upon, so are those that plait their hair. Someone must have stereotyped this noble practice and given it a bad name. Yet, the earrings of these days no longer sway like in the past.

#19

Respect, the Savannah Way



In the days of my grandmother, women would voluntarily take a bow or go down on one knee to greet a group of men who would be having an evening drink. In those days, women were forbidden from taking any form of alcohol. It was unheard off.

Becoming a man was a great fete for the society and women would still go down on one knee to salute the newly graduated initiates with their phrase '*Chamgei Lagochu*' which means 'greetings my children'. This was done as a show of respect for both the young and old. A great virtue held in high esteem by the society of my grandfather.

To a modern-day woman and even a man, this would seem like slavery and backwardness. It would seem barbaric if the woman of today was asked to take a bow and make a sacred salutation.

But, the same men, right here in Savannah, have no problem going down on their knee to ask a woman for a hand in marriage in what the white man's culture calls it "proposing"

So, the white man told us it's backwards, deprives the woman of her dignity and almost sinful to kneel before a man for respect's sake.

Young girls approached their fathers and they bowed their heads. The men touched their heads as a sign of blessing. They would hardly greet them by hand. As for the boys, coupled with their salutation that was unique to the boys, they were never greeted by the forehead.

Men were expected to discipline their wives. But whenever it was done excessively, it attracted a disciplinary action. Elders insisted on discipline and not brutality. It was unheard of for a man to hurt a woman and shed blood. Cases of killings by partners was something that rarely happened.

Younger people respected those who were much older than them. Generational respect existed and this protocol would be followed by all. Women gave way for men to pass. Older kids had a responsibility to take care of their younger siblings.

The society was fairly more orderly than these days. Claims my grandmother.

Foot Notes

1. *Chamgei lagochu*- A kind of salutation used by elderly women when greeting any man who is circumcised and not the same age grade as her husband. It means *greetings, young men*.

#20

Psetim, a Classmate from another World



There were those classmates who had good handwriting. Those who knew how to draw a cow so well that you could tell the difference between a cow with more milk and one with less milk just by looking at the illustration. Psetim was one of them.

Girls loved the way he drew cows. Every girl in class took her exercise book to Psetim to be helped with the drawing exercises. He was never in shoes but somehow, they said he was handsome. Those of us who even worked hard to wear slippers to school never made it to the handsome boys' hall of fame.

In your primary school days, did you have such organised people who had a summary book? Complete with a topic written in red, subtopic in black and the rest of the notes in blue. Of course, with proper underlining of key words or "*maneno magumu*" in swahili.

Psetim was one of them. His was even more special. He knew each single of the fifty-two countries in Africa alongside their capital cities.

Personally, I just got to know recently that Bamako is actually the capital city of Antananarivo. Psetim could tell you. From Rabat to Bangui. Do not ask me where these ones are. I heard him list all of them including Abidjan and Windhoek.

Today, he does manual brick works. If this was a serious country, Psetim would be working abroad. In one of the Kenyan embassies in one of the fifty-two countries of this continent. I would have recommended him to be posted to Seychelles, the country name that cannot be pronounced well in any elementary Savannah school. There, his experience of walking barefoot would come in handy in those beautiful shores.

By the way, is Seychelles still in Africa? Let's keep confirming those island countries. One day, we might wake up and look for them in vain.

Foot Notes

1. *"maneno magumu"* - new vocabulary

#21

My Grandmother at 100



My grandmother could be 100. Or more. That means she has been around from as early as 1920. Those days when men who later became grandfathers before my grandfather became a grandfather had just returned from world War 1. In that year, the father of American Literature was long dead. Mark Twain died in 1910.

My grandmother was 8 years old when the Great Rift Valley earthquake of 1928 struck at 6.5 Richter scale. If you did not calculate the distance from the post office to the chief's camp in elementary Geography, do not even bother knowing who that Richter is. Just stick to religious studies.

She was a boisterous young girl when people were spoiling for a second world war. She walked long distances to watch a football match where my grandfather was a central midfielder. They played half naked; no, almost naked and girls cheered every time they raised their legs to kick the ball. There were neither shorts nor boxer shorts those days. Even without the attire, they were there for the game.

My grandmother was a great dancer during her years. Then she became a grown woman. Then a mother. She endured wife battering. Ran off to her motherland twice or thrice but still came back. Her mother was a Keiyo but she died. Funny thing, my grandmother has never known her real uncles. She does not know who was a brother or a sister to her mother. And it doesn't bother her. Life goes on.

She was a grandmother when the first woman in a dress appeared in the Savannah. She was there when the winding snake arrived, the tarmac road.

There were days she chased a cow until she held her by the tail. She carried loads of firewood. She smeared her house and gave birth to her babies in her house. Some made it some didn't. Some women her age never saw their first babies because the midwife arrived a little too late.

When maize arrived, she carried a sack of maize to a poor neighbour's house. There were no *posho* mills at the time. The grinding stone ruled before the hand mill arrived at a cost of 15 cents.

She went out to find a wife for her husband. The girl ran away after two days. She laughed at the fact that her husband had grown a bald head. The beautiful girl wanted a young man without a bald head for a husband. In that year, all her agetmates had married men with all their hair. She didn't want to be a statistic.

My grandmother was heartbroken.

She is now old, tired and narrate stories while lying on a bed at 11am. She tells me 11am is too early to wake up. And she spends less than half an hour out in the sun every day. My grandmother who lifted a sack of maize cannot lift a kettle to pour herself tea. She is not sick. Just old, and she laughs about this often.

Every time we discuss about her friends, she asks if they are still alive. Each story and event is narrated amidst laughter. Then she remembers a song the young men of her age jumped to. They were strong men. Men who jumped and the earth shook. Then age sent them away. Others went away because of disease. Others because they tried to stop a fight and they were accidentally hit on the wrong place. Others were poisoned while one or two of them were bitten by snake. Others by a hyena. Many died in war.

One after the other, the sound of the jump faded and they all lie down now. Each gathered to their fore fathers in the silence of eternity.

She pauses to wipe a tear and ease a running nose. I cannot tell if she is smiling or just peering into the distant past. She sings and I have to wait for her to finish. In the meantime, I count her wrinkles.

I challenge her to name her children in an ascending order. She cannot. She starts with her last born. Then laughs it off. Starts again, fails and starts again. I help her and we manage a complete line up in half an hour; thirty minutes to name eight kids.

#22

Savannah Schools' Chronicles



Back in the Savannah School, those days in the 90's, the staffroom was sacred. You never stepped there unless you were in big trouble or you were favoured by the teachers. There was no room for the average many.

Trouble meant you were late from class or you had laughed unknowingly in class. Or giggled. An untucked shirt was a capital offence those days. It was better to be in bare feet than to be in a wrong shoe.

You were dead meat if a girl shouted in the middle of the lesson, "Ah, Pkor! *Wacha kunisyiga!* Learn manners before manners learn on you"

Favour meant you were in spectacles, having a new dress or maybe your father worked as a prison wardern in Lodwar. Favour was rare and such pupils made it to the list of prefects.

The rest of us left school before we set foot in the staffroom. We did so when we went to collect our KCPE results. Did we even collect those results?

Nonetheless, every time we passed by the staffroom, we stole a glance at a certain earth globe. It was too precious to be brought to class. Our native character would tempt us to kick it just to confirm it wasn't a ball.

It would take me years to meet the globe again. I always said that when I grow up, I would buy myself one. So that I could "travel" the world from my house. From Yemen to Cooktown in Australia. From Bogota, Colombia to Bamako here at home, Mali. From Hobyo in Somalia to Morotai in Phillipines. Just by a mere turn of the globe.

There's also no denying that life was tough and fun back at Savannah School those days. Prefects would kick you and head teachers had long nails. A head teacher's pinch on your belly would feel like your duodenum was cut into six pieces. The pancreas for a moment halted all its secretions. A teacher in a woodwork class would whip you senseless for answering a question in English yet he had asked in vernacular. Thinking you were doing the right thing, you would land in trouble unawares.

Unlike the children of these days who carry water bottles to class, kids of those days wouldn't even yawn in class. You would be dead meat. You would be accused of pretending to understand everything to the point of showing the teacher that it was time for them to leave. If a teacher in 1990 told you that she would never want to see you in her class for the rest of the year then that was it. 1991 was the next time you would sit in her class. That didn't mean you wouldn't sit for her tests. You had to pass. But each time she came for the lesson, you met at the door on your way out. This would go on for a whole year, and your parent wouldn't know because you would 'die twice'. Trouble.

Female teachers were ever moody. Insulting big boys and reminding them that they did not get initiated to come and intimidate them. Some of the big boys would never kneel down at the command of a madam. It would take a backup of seven or more male teachers to wrestle down a fresh graduate from the bush.

Male teachers were ever dangerous. At some point, we could tell their moods based on which shirt they wore. They didn't have many. They would break your neck and you never let out a cry. You would be in a lesson and then suddenly cheers would fill the entire school. Looking through the open spaces that were meant to be windows, a teacher would be chasing a boy across the field. That boy would only come back to school the next term. But they were good teachers anyway. The Lord bless them.

There was comfort in numbers. Pupils walked barefoot all day long. It did not matter if your parent was a teacher or a policeman. You had to be like us. The majority. So, children of the "rich" left their affluence at the school fence and came into the school compound without shoes.

The biggest cartels of those days apart from the prefects were people whose parents owned shops. Shops that sold sweets called *Koo* and *Toffee*. All girls fell for the sons of shop owners because their pockets were always full of toffee or about sixty pieces of *Koo* sweets at any given time. So much so that their pockets were always swollen. In any case a shilling afforded you ten of them. So, these corrupt guys took all the girls. We, the sons of donkey owners, stared with red eyes.

Then there were the ball owners. Those were the deep state of the playground. The owner of the ball decided who played in his team. We were careful not to score against his team because any slight beating and he would pocket the polythene made ball and head home. So, in the course of the day, you had to be nice to him. So that by break time, he would include you in his team. The toffee tossing guys had their way in most cases. Corruption didn't start in this country the other day.

The cartels of those days though were the people who afforded a popular ball called "*Tanis*". We would later learn it was actually Tennis ball. The one that would bounce. That was a reserve of people who had 'soft skin'. Hard skinned people who saw water twice a month could never come close except when that ball strayed into thorns. That is when our services were needed. Because our bare feet were thorn resistant.

You may ask how. In those days we stepped on fresh cow dung and it would be insulated against any pricking. We walked on thorns just like Jesus walked on water. The cool kids of those days, just admired us like the biblical Simon Peter admired and even attempted to copy the Son of Man. He almost drowned.

But wasn't life good in Savannah Schools?

Foot Notes:

1. Ah, Pkor! *Wacha kunisyiga!* - Pkor, stop touching me.
- 2.

#23

Raja, Our Toyota 110



Once upon a time, in a blessed relationship year, Savannah recorded an affair involving a young man whose father had just bought a new Raja bicycle and the daughter of the area marriage-dispute solver. The girl wrote using both left and right hands, thus, she was a celebrity. She came to school in shoes on Monday and Friday. Such a dynasty!

One Saturday, the son of the African gentleman owning a black Raja stole the iron horse to make an impromptu visit to his girlfriend. She actually did not know she was his girlfriend but since the boy had once lent his pencil to the girl and she had patted him on the shoulder while saying thank you, the Savannah dude assumed the girl was madly in love with him.

At Games time, or during lunch hour, he would behave himself at the sight of the girl. He walked with manners and even periodically untucked his shirt to cover his torn shorts that had made two holes patched in green. It looked like traffic lights.

The son of the African gentleman was determined to win the girl. So, he timed his father and stole the key to the highly valued Raja bike. It had previously been cleaned, wiped and then locked.

For the late president Kibaki's generation of young people, bicycles used to be locked inside the bedroom a few years before you were born. As well, people who owned them were countable and respected. Maybe a number of teachers and policemen. The Hero bicycle was the Harrier of today and Raja was the Toyota 110. Raleigh was the BMW. It had insurance stickers dating back to 1979.

The Savannah son of an African gentleman got hold of the coveted and priced "Rotating Two" and his heart pounded just below the throat. He didn't believe it. He pictured himself passing by the home of the girl and pretending that he had not seen her. He would by then be using one hand and using another hand to shield himself from the hot sun.

Then he would wave to his girlfriend as he whizzed past her with his open shirt flying in the air as he rang the bell at the same time. He had planned to screech both the back and front brakes at once to bring the bike to a halt. As a result, dust would rent the air. He would then fly one of his legs above the cross bar in stylistic alighting. That would have been enough showcase to win the damsel.

But who is the devil? The devil is a liar.

A few kilometres before the girl's village, at the speed of a *dik-dik*, the boy took a dangerous turn while he slanted himself on one side and behold in front of him appeared a surprised Savannah cobra. It was minding its business while quickly crossing the dusty road. Have you seen a surprised cobra? No.

A surprised cobra raises its head, looks at you in the eye as it swells and flattens at the same time in readiness for attack.

Long story short, in a flash of an eyelid, as my teacher of English would say, the Raja, the Cobra and the boy headed in different directions.

We pulled him out of a thick thorny bush, thirty minutes later. The snake had been too shocked to attack. The boy was swollen in all the parts that were supposed to make him look handsome.

When his father saw his Raja, he asked to be taken to a shade and be given cold water. We almost lost him. The bike front wheel drew an eight. He could not believe he almost lost his bicycle for good.

When his eyes met those of his son, they both cried for different reasons. Thank God for swift and boisterous young men of the Savannah.

Foot Notes

1. *Dik-dik* – a small antelope in the genus *Madoqua* that is found in the bushlands of eastern and southern Africa.

#24

Assimilation of Boys



My grandfather pulled me aside when the heat of the sun was drawing the smallest and ugliest shadows of us. The cows could not take it anymore. They took leave to the Savannah shade and chewed away their cud. I envied them.

We sheltered at a nearby tree. He sat on his ceremonial stool, *Kicholong*, while I reached for a stable stone and placed my arrows between my knees and on one of my shoulders. He then began his speech as he periodically spat the crystal-clear saliva from the corner of his mouth. Three meters away.

"If a woman comes to your village and tags along a boy whose father is not known, and the woman falls in love with a man among you or gets married to one of you, you shall not question. Take the boy and the mother and assimilate them into your clan. When the time comes for the boy to be initiated into manhood, give him the rights to belong to your clan. He won't be original. We shall call him "*Lukwan* or *lukwanik*". He shall have his cows take the ear cut of the clan and he shall marry according to the clan rules. Beyond here no man can claim him.

If a small boy arrives in the Savannah and asks for a job as a herd's boy then grows up and never goes back to his people and his ways please you take him as one of you. He shall be given the rights to be part of the clan and marry as one of you. You shall accompany him as he marries and will never marry from your clan. They called such clan members, "*Rwakan*."

If your sister gets a child at home. A boy for that matter and the boy grows up and the sisters gets married off elsewhere and refuses to reveal the identity of the father of her son, and the son grows up to adulthood and gets initiated while at home. He shall belong to the clan. He will be given the

rights to cut the ears of his cows just like his uncles. The brothers of her sister. But he will not be an original clan member. He shall be called an "*Aisai*". As soon as he graduates from circumcision, no man can come to claim him as his father.

An original clan member shall be referred to as "*Innoti*"

So, you were either, *Lukwan*, *Rwagan*, *Aisai* or *Innoti*."

The sun was easing in its brutality and one by one the cows woke up and began to stretch.

"Have you heard me?" he asked.

I replied with a yes.

He then quickly instructed that I go after the bull which was heading in the direction of our neighbour's cows.

That way, everyone would belong to the community. Twins, even though, were frowned upon. Actually killed. A girl who gave birth before going through the requisite rites of passage was never allowed to get pregnant or even get a child. They would be asked to painfully hack their new born babies to death. It was believed that such children brought a bad omen to the family and was therefore taboo. Relatives would never marry. It was an abomination.

#25

Savannah Midwifery



All mothers are equal.

Not long ago, the internet went viral with a video of a woman purported to have given birth at the doorstep of a maternity and some negligence was noticed. Culturally, as a man, rushing to watch a video of a woman bringing life to the world would invite a cleansing ceremony.

"*Sokoran*" or a fool would be the name of a man who does that.

Because I believe in gossip and since gossipers run the world, whether male or female, I decided to bring it up in a conversation with my grandmother.

I told her that this world has turned out bad and mothers deliver along the road and at door steps because the government is not being responsible. She laughed.

She doesn't understand how the government works. Neither does she understand how the government and child bearing related. Her only idea of the government is the British *mkoloni*, Jomo Kenyatta and Moi. The rest she cannot relate. I try to explain that there is something called MCA and she tells me that is equal to headmen. What she cannot understand is how women are also MCAs. She wonders who cooks for their husbands when they are out there being MCA. She missed the Beijing tutorials. I laugh.

She says it is normal for children to be born anywhere any time. In the Savannah, what has changed is the mothers. No more teachings related to what happens when a mother delivers in public since these days people become women without "going anywhere." As to where "anywhere" is, is a story for another day and time.

In her days, women would move swiftly to protect and cordon off the scene. A hide or goatskin was immediately provided and laid for the mother to deliver on. Most women of her age had mid wife skills the difference was whether one had "good hands" or not. Children within the vicinity were chased in a technical manner. They would be sent to look for something that they would never find. By the time they returned, the baby was born, wrapped and carried home.

Men behaved as if they did not know what was going on going about their duties. By the time the baby was coming, the man would have long migrated to another wife's house to begin the 40 days of seclusion. Thus "*Kechut Koot*" (to go into the house) was the word that went around. How the mothers of today are on Whatsapp and cooking after two days of delivery irks my grandmother and makes her want to go away, to the next world.

The husband was banned from being seen around.

If he wanted to know whether it was a boy or a girl, the women made a special ululation to signify the arrival of a girl. They would say one "of the house" has been born if it was a girl. If it was a boy, it would be reported as "*nebo sang*" one who belonged to the world. So, a boy's place was the community and never the house.

Thus, without roadside births, we wouldn't have Kibor and J/Chebor. We would not have Kipkeror (One who blocks the road) nor Kipsang and J/Chesang (one born outside).

Kipketer is one born at the verandah. Don't ask me if traditional houses had verandahs. They did.

Some mothers gave birth while at the milking yard and "Keitany" arose, others while doing other duties within the holding yard. That's how Kibii and J/Chebii are here with us.

Hence the many names from across our great communities across East Africa with their contextual meanings.

#26

Season of the Bounty Harvest



Savannah is a blissful blessing when there is rain.

It is a cold freezing morning here in the Savannah. The rains have been busy elsewhere for the last two days but the dew holds. Men walk with their hands in pockets but real men have thrown their shirts atop a tree and are busy swinging their weapons to make hay while the sun shines. In the mind of a wise Savannah man, one day the rains will refuse to come and the grass will walk out on us.

Then the tortoise will find a place under the fence and go into deep sleep. This is since the tortoise is that animal who knows how to manage their peace of mind. They are indifferent. Nothing hurries a male tortoise while a female one has no feelings. She lays her eggs in their tens and leaves them for hatching. She never looks back. When the children grow up, they break ties and grow up the same way as their parents. No feelings.

The hyena remembers to rush back to his cave before dawn and loses confidence in his laughter.

The honey badger behaves like there was no last night. Like he never broke into someone's beehive and gave a sleepless night to the worker bees. The queen was unmoved though. Savannah.

Every household in Savannah has a new born calf and a few goat kids. This is because the goats have no problem giving birth in the dry season. They were browsers way before the internet hijacked the term.

All this because nature has a way of timing things. Humans try to rewrite nature but calves are born into bountifulness and sheep love life.

Milk and honey define Savannah.

Come now and hit the fireplace. We are roasting maize and there's nothing that beats this season.

#27

My Grandmother's Dowry



My grandfather got married when dowry was just around two Kenyan shillings only. I am not sure if it was two shillings or just twenty shillings. It couldn't have been more than that. Around 1946. At that age marriage was something else.

Halfway through the journey to go and gamble at my grandmother's hand in marriage, and while running in panic mode, his father paused to ask him, "Did you carry dowry money?"

My grandfather looked at his father in shock. "Which money?" he asked.

My grandfather was not honest about what he was told, but my grandmother would one day murmur something when he was shouted at by him. He asked him if he had repaid the twenty shillings his friend had paid for him at their home.

That night my grandmother slept at our neighbour's house. Her life was in danger for the sixty fifth time, I guess. The following morning, she sent emissaries to apologise for what he had told his husband. My grandfather carried nothing to his *Koito* but he won against eleven unlucky suitors. He arrived late but his father was a respected man. However, he had sworn he was not going to pay the twenty shillings for his son. Maybe the cows.

In those days, you could just be given a wife if your father was a respected person.

That was the first time my grandmother saw my grandfather. I know it doesn't make sense to people who were born after Museveni left the bush. The tall girl was just told to accompany the dark fairly short fellow to wherever he came from.

In those days, life was good or so I assume.

#28

The Savannah WhatsApp Groups



The only groups that had fun were the groups that were formed at our respective grandmothers' houses when we converged in the evening. Around 17 of us plus our grandmother to make 18. Both boys and girls slept on the floor on a cow's skin in no particular order. Cowards avoided the door. All, in a dark room with our eyes red from the smoke from the fireplace.

Grandma was the admin of our "WhatsApp group." If you wetted the skin accidentally, you had to 'left'. The next day you could not be admitted back. We all worked hard to make it to the next day because the stories told on that floor as the admin listened on her rubber bed, were *Churchill Show and Viusasa* combined. We sometimes laughed until our admin threw a warning. We giggled and discussed her in Swahili. She didn't understand. Not like today's admins; these ones expel members unannounced.

The stories would be lively from seven to eight in the night. Remember people take supper at grandma's way too early. It could be as early as six in the evening.

From there, members would mute slowly. Until the group went mute. With only admin talking to herself. She would wake up in the middle of the night to sniff her snuff then close her Lady Gay snuff box. Then sneeze profusely. Group members woke up temporarily. Talked to each other in dreams while chewing saliva then went back to sleep again.

Some of us woke up and asked a question but the group members ignored you until you replied to yourself. The admin would laugh at you. Then she would send a long-range missile of a spit! It landed anywhere. Even on us.

Foot Notes

1. *Churchill show*- An entertainment show run by Churchill
2. *Viusasa*- An entertainment platform owned by royal media services
3. *Admin*- An adminiostrator in this context the one responsible for managing the affairs of a Whatsapp Group.

#29

Savannah Herbalists



By the time I was fully grown, *Kogo* Targok Kapkachogo, the grandmother who treated me for a disease that almost resembled that of Kala-azar, and which almost killed me, had gone to be gathered with her forefathers. She did a good job. Very good and blessed job, God rest her soul in eternal comfort.

From God through her hands, she remains the reason I am around to date. There is something special and unique about these old people who give herbal medicine. They are deeply humble, hospitable and religious. They insist on you taking a cup of tea or a meal before you leave. The most stunning of them all is when they pick up a holy book to read the scripture and say a prayer.

The Savanna herbalists will treat you and speak to you so nicely that you will see yourself getting well with the first mug of the herbal concoction. You will long to get home and start boiling the herbs and see yourself healed.

A single look at you and they will tell that you have an enlarged liver or a troublesome spleen. They can literally smear away a nervous problem and drive away a morning sneeze in a record three days.

Herbalists do not charge a fee openly. I asked one of them and she told me it is taboo to charge for something you did not buy. It is handed over through generations. From one individual in a lineage to another. Not everybody is given the "hands" to heal in a family. I do not know how one qualifies.

Our mothers would take a quarter kilogram of sugar or a kilo of finger millet or even a live hen to them. If you did not have any, you took a few coins but you would not give openly. You would shake their hands and artistically leave the token as your hands separate in saying goodbye. They

would never check how much you gave them. I said never because they tuck it away around their waists or somewhere around their chests. I'm culturally not allowed to say where exactly.

Amazing people who render amazing services with little expectations. Just to see you healthy is their joy.

I do not know how they did this but some of these herbalists were just blessed. We heard they could make a woman get a baby girl if they had all along been getting boys. They also helped childless couples overcome the long wait. Such were the herbalists of Savannah.

This gift is passed from a generation to another in a process called *passing on the hand*. Because it takes a gift to do that and not just a way of learning. Not every child qualifies to get this. It takes years of one observing their child or even a grandchild. They have to be outstanding.

Sometimes we become ungrateful and never appreciate them. Some are labelled as witches because they wield a lot of healing power. Some of the church leaders discourage their congregation from visiting them.

But truth is, most know what they are doing and they are mostly legitimate.

Foot Notes

1. *Kogo- Grandma.*

#30

The Campus we Conquered



When we were in nursery school with my friend Marangi, the one I told you he paints everything except the sky, we thought people in class one had made it in life. We thought they knew things that could transform the world. We thought they had seen it all. In our own world, we thought they did not even fear lower clouds while looking after goats in Savannah. Sadly, when we got to class one, it was not the case. So was class three and even class seven

The first time we saw a living beautiful girl smoking a cigarette in campus, we froze. My friend from the valley almost asked us to close our eyes, we pray. We looked at her and when she looked at us, we looked away. We thought third year girls in campus had made it life only to learn that third year is just third year.

One day I might have enough ink and paper but nothing to write. Then I'll tell you about how we lived in Nyandarua 21 upstairs at the posh Buruburu hostels of Sic Donec. That is Egerton University for people who went to those universities where they burn old iron sheets during a strike.

We had Luhya neighbours next door. Those men looked successful in life. They played rugby, ate meat every day and above all, had two gas cookers and three electrical coils- one bought off the shelves and two Jua Kali made. You should have heard how loud they wailed every time Kenya Power blacked out while they were cooking ugali. One day, they were broke and their cooking gas had run out. Then power went out. They came to ask us if we could speak directly to President Moi- they wanted food aid. When power came back at two in the morning, they started cooking.

In the Savannah, all the cooking stops by half past seven latest. In my grandmother's house, an organized woman in her time, supper was always

ready by three in the evening. Thus, literally seeing people cook ugali at three in the morning, we needed counselling. What do you call a meal cooked at two in the morning and eaten at three in the morning? That was a culture shock.

I will not tell you the first time we saw a masculine young man, obviously from Bosongo or Sawagongo, emerge from a bathroom with his seeming masculine girlfriend. That girl had legs that my friend from the lower Savannah concluded if they were to be burned as charcoal, they would fill out three sacks and "*kichoki*" would still remain. How does a male and a female take bath in one bathroom? I think by this time, culture shock had convinced us that if the Son of Man were to return those days, we would make it to heaven. St. Peter would definitely pat our shoulders. More was to come though.

If I were a parent and I have my child in campus I would regularly go down on my knees seventeen times a day to pray for them.

Foot Notes

1. *Kichoki*- remains of unburnt wood from charcoal preparation process.

#31

Have your Cows First



One day when most of my classmates in standard seven were out on a tour to Maasai Mara many years ago, I had no option but to stay home and herd the cows.

Not that I did not like herding, no, my grandmother is my witness. There were days I would wake up at five in the morning just to soak my only school shirt and go back to the floor (we did not have a bed) just to fool my grandma that it rained in the night and the shirt would not dry. She was not amused because hygiene was not one of my priorities. That fact, she knew it but who was my grandfather, he did not mind. Off we went to the grazing fields with him on such days and that's how I missed school.

So, that afternoon my grandfather did not have what the millennials call "form". We wandered together saying nothing for long minutes, keeping quiet for long minutes and alternating whistles and shouting at bulls mounting cows the wrong way.

When we were done watering the herd, the afternoon heat would set in and all of them would go under huge acacia trees to chew cud.

My grandfather would place his "*Kicholong*" sacred stool on his head and doze off. That stool is only given to people who have gone to raids and subdued enemies threatening the peace of the community. Besides his silence, my grandfather was a legit fighter. He surely was.

When he woke up, he reached for his snuff box, took a sniff the length of rope that ties an errant bull during castration and asked for the first time why I had not gone to school that day. At 3pm.

I explained that most of my friends had gone for a trip and because my friends and I had not paid for it, we had to stay home.

He did not sympathize with me. He spit his crystal-clear saliva ten yards away and muttered, "Travel the world when you have your own cows."

Since an average Kalenjin man from the Savannah cannot sell a cow to pay a trip, I devised a better route. I forced an uncle who owned a tractor to teach me how to drive and ensured I passed all school exams that came my way. For six long years, I dreamt every night of driving myself around this country and yes, I have tried. Not with my own car but with my own driving license.

That's how I made a decision that when I grow up, I had to travel the world. We dreamt of going to Mombasa.

The first time we went to Mombasa, we did it carelessly and without knowledge. In the company of my four other Savannah folks we decided that since we were neither famous nor even the relatives of any popular politician, why would not we do something to boost our self-esteem?

We were taking tea at a local establishment. Local does not have to be a place where people take acrid, sweet things. It can also be a tea room. As long as it is local. We took tea and made the decision to go to Mombasa by bus on the next Friday. None of us had ever been to Mombasa.

We were still men and we believed in impromptu decisions. It was a Wednesday.

Friday 9pm found us in Nairobi. We took our boring supper at a squeezed hotel. One of us who had seen many tall buildings before told us it was over a hundred thousand per month to rent a space for boring food in Nairobi. We froze in shock.

We had decided to look for a place to sleep so as to board the morning bus. As we walked around at night in Nairobi looking for a place to sleep, we stumbled onto a group of buses hooting and roaring and releasing gas. They said it was the breaks. The same man in the group informed us.

A dirty fellow chewing weird stuff and with one cheek bulging like that of my goat forced us into a Mombasa bound bus with a funny name. Off we went to Mombasa. At ten in the night.

That was a long journey people. A very long journey more so with a baby that cried behind me all through the journey. That baby would disturb our country one day that it would take another handshake to calm him/her. I did not get to know whether it was boy or a girl.

#32

When my Grandpa was Angry



I did not say he was exceptional. In fact, he was not a role model. He had never been but he owned a Land Rover 109 and an ox- plough at some point in the life. Properties I am yet to own with all my admirable education and my excellent grasp of the English language. Pride comes before a fall, so they (haters) say.

When I tell you stories about him it does not mean he stood out. For being a one-woman-man born in his time and dying without a single child from a different woman was not an achievement. At least by the standards of his peers. My grandfather, as far as I can tell stayed faithful to his wife, all the days of his life.

He left fifteen or so years ago to be with his forefathers. His wife is still aging gracefully. To the glory of the almighty God. She is now a born again Christian.

My grandfather's ways of venting out anger and frustration were Partly, *tenjaras*, and half mostly entertaining.

Of course, we were too young to understand domestic feuds and tantrums. Nevertheless, in one of those scenarios that we watched from eighteen yards, my old man arrived home and issued a fifteen-minute warning to everyone to vacate his compound. JKUAT students should understand this better.

He then lit a huge fire. The size of that which, some king tossed innocent Meshack, Shadrack and Abednego. Then he grabbed a proud hen cat walking across his legs and tossed it into the blazing furnace. The innocent men came out alive but the poor chicken lost it. He ate it halfway.

Afterwards he dashed outside and swore in the name of his beautiful cow and kicked his door. It flew up.

Another tantrum was this day he arrived home and found that my grandmother had not swept the compound clean. He was a meticulous fellow that old man. A man of one wife born in 1905.

In his rage and fury, he swept the entire compound and dumped the whole litter into my grandmother's fire place. He then came out relieved took out his flute, blew a few tunes and then whistled away the remaining part of the evening. When she arrived, she emptied the jammed house without uttering a single word and cooked him a nice meal.

Those were two of the many other dramatic actions. However, in all his theatrical life and stunts, he neither hurt his wife nor planned to hack any of his children into pieces and stuff them into a sack to throw them in a mass grave somewhere. Never. He hit things and killed animals and then he recovered and life moved on.

He would even let all the calves suckle their mothers and there would be no milk for anybody. That was when he was mad. From there, he watched the calves dance due to the abundance of milk and he got relieved. His anger would fly away and he would be normal again.

Foot Notes

1. *Tenjaras* – Corrupted form for dangerous
2. *JKUAT*- Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology

#33

Is three in the Morning Jinxed?



Is three in the morning jinxed? As in, is it condemned unnecessarily? My grandfather told me that 3am is the most quiet and evil part of the night.

That a crime committed at this time of the night can easily succeed because it is somewhere between heavy sleep and morning. It is a time when cocks are not sure whether to crow or just to keep quiet and wait for a few minutes to four. Because four is a good number. Three sounds weird.

Are we just being unfair to 3am like the world has been unfair to the owl? Are we just being superstitious even after Christian missionaries died of malaria in their hundreds long before my grandmother was conceived while attempting to bring the gospel to us?

Almost all parts of the world even those that are notoriously Christian still do not entertain an owl visiting their compound. Both my grandfather and many Christians if not most, believe an owl visiting your compound is a sign of a bad omen. He was neither a Christian nor an atheist but he believed in life after death and some kind of resurrection.

My grandfather told me to never start a journey to a faraway land at 3am. That if I cannot be up at 2am to leave, I should be patient and start it at 4am. One of my cousins who had been hit by a runaway car at 3am sometime back would be admitted in hospital for weeks and when he came back, he told me that so many people die at 3am in the hospitals. I told him it was just a coincidence because even babies are born at 3am. He was not convinced. He went ahead to ask me if I read the story of Jesus being betrayed by Simon Peter at 3am. I kept quiet. That night, I just woke up, realized it's 3am and it was uncomfortably quiet at the Savannah. Two roosters tried to crow. No one responded. They went silent again.

My grandmother also said this was the time to converse with the underworld. To implore the gods to be kind to humanity. To ask the gods of rain to pour onto the land so that food could be bountiful. To implore them to grant good health and abundance of milk and honey in the land. Also, a moment to ask the gods to bless the enemies and change their hearts. In those days, the gods would never allow you to wish evil upon your enemy. No wonder, these days the prayerful people claim that this is the hour when God listens more.

#34

Cussons Imperial Leather



I miss the smell of Cussons Imperial Leather soap. For those born after the late President Moi retired, I am talking about soap. Soap, an actual soap and not those Mexican Soaps. Ladies and gentlemen, Cussons Imperial Leather was the real deal.

For you to get a nostalgic feeling, close your eyes and reminisce a moment where you opened your high school box and there sat at the corner were two such soaps, slightly spilt over Quencher Orange Juice and a half loaf of 'Makatiat' Bread or that Elliot or just Tosti. The yellow block Tosti. The bread crusts were sweeter than the bread itself.

If two people lived in a room and they bought a full loaf, it took an independent person to come and cut the bread into two. You kids of yesterday do not know how bread was shared precisely into two equal parts.

The reason for a third party was because anyone who offered to cut the bread into two, would carry the burden of eating the smaller portion. Nobody was willing to risk.

Then there were those people who asked for a pinch! Do you know how painful it is for someone to pinch your bread? You don't. You will not. You will never know. It is as painful as hitting your toe on a stone in the Savannah while chasing an errant goat and losing your toe nail.

Then, after the toe is almost healed, someone steps on it while scrambling for left over githeri at lunchtime in the Savannah school. Remember Savannah boys do not cry. The pain is arrested at the neck region. Just below the throat and you find yourself swallowing nothing and eyes getting red.

The wonder of the Imperial Leather was that the paper in the middle stuck so hard, that even when the soap was finished, the paper still remained. Do they still sell Imperial Leather? It has been 20 years since I used anything apart from bar soap. The last soap that was not bar soap was bought by my mother in 2001.

#35

Uncles



Once again ladies and gentlemen, it is that time of the year. The holiday seasons.

Back here in the Savannah uncles reign supreme though in silence and not as dramatic as the "*Senge*". That's the Savannah word for aunt.

To be clear from the onset, "uncle" in Savannah can only mean one thing. The brother to your mother or by extension, her male clansmen. Very highly respected people.

This holiday you will see them. If you are giving your daughter in marriage, uncles can never miss in the negotiation table. They must be there.

The daughter will walk to hug her uncles and cry on the shoulders of her most favourite uncle. The one who her mother praises every day at the fireplace or the one his name is proclaimed when a *sufuria* falls and the mother has to exclaim.

Uncles will also give gifts in a special way before anybody else. In most cases, something hairy. Maybe a goat, sheep or cow.

Uncles cannot queue for food. Your mother will lose her appetite and the neighbours will mock you for three years after that ceremony. She will throw tantrums as soon as the function is over. By the way uncles are not the brothers of your father. The brothers of your father are simply that; father.

If you intend to circumcise your son in December here in the Savannah, your uncles should have been aware by early June. It is important to know

that uncles are never given information via text or calls. You visit them. They are the custodians of blessings and they are the ones who will spit the blessed saliva on the initiate. They will be given VIP treatment throughout their stay and your father will be the holiest person before them. Fathers have problems.

In any function, the master of ceremony should know that uncles are not introduced. They introduce themselves. Give them the microphone. Don't tell them to stand where they are and raise their hands so that people can clap for them! Abomination. Tell them to come forward. An uncle must speak in every function lest your family becomes a laughing stock.

In the days of my grandfather, it was a whole ceremony. They would even sing a song and drink all night long. Their beer would have been brewed by an expert.

Uncles are superior they remain special and highly respected.

Foot Notes

1. *Senge* - Aunt
2. *Sufuria*- A cooking Pot

#36

Our Raw Delicacies



If you come from the Savannah and you were not recently born, then, you have eaten raw liver. Dripping in fresh warm blood. Most probably as well, you have taken foaming and partly evaporating goat blood.

Most importantly you have had your grandfather hand you a piece of the “*kitabu*” and you chewed the “leaflet” and swallowed the green fluid first before the main munch. The book is a part of goat's stomach. One of the four stomachs of a ruminant that looks like a book. Primary school agriculture taught us to cram the four stomachs as *Reuben*, *Rerimoi Of Africa*. Actually, *Rumen*, *Reticulum*, *Omasum* and *Abomasum*.

In those days we would be sitting around a hanging goat and grandfather would take us through a real biology lesson of the parts of the body as we waited for the fire to light properly. By this time, the half-cut calabash contained already solidified blood. If someone picked the blood solid, it swung in danger apparently. It looked like it was going to fall off. So, you had to rush it to your mouth directly. There were no bad livers nor a good liver. All were edible. These days, Savannah kids cannot even approach a dead goat. Let alone eating the liver.

There was a part reserved for the neighbours. In the days of my grandfather it would be perched atop a tree for any passerby to pick it. There was never a fear of poisoning. The women never ate certain parts. The head comprising the tongue was a preserve for the head of the family. If the father of the home was long dead, an elder would just be identified and the meat given to him. Women never slaughtered an animal.

Every time a baby was born, a goat was slaughtered after seven days for the mother to regain the lost energy and blood lost during birth. Every man worked hard to own a goat to slaughter when their wife was blessed with a baby.

Some of the meat that remained would be preserved in a special way. They would be cut into strips and hung above the fireplace. They could be eaten even after a month or more. We referred to them as *sirkenik*.

The whole slaughtering experience was an art. It needed an expert. As boys we learnt by observation so that we would do it when our time came. You had to be gentle on the skin lest you tore it. It had many other functions, thereafter, from making baby carriers to sleeping mats and ornaments.

Who took away our days of eating raw liver and drinking hot blood by the fireplace? How did we just stop drinking raw milk?

Foot Notes

1. *Kitabu*- Term used to refer to part of goat's stomach.
2. *Sirkenik*- Term used to refer to remains of meat which were cut into pieces and grounded for preservation through smoking and other traditional means.

#37

December or *Tisemba*?



Beneath the heart of every Savannah man is a silent countdown to December. We actually love to call it "*Tisemba*". Sounds a bit domestic. The month of song and dance and merry making, of girls being given off in marriage and dowry filling a proud man's compound. But most importantly, of boys becoming men and women fainting while cheering their sons to fight a good fight. Whatever that is.

Circumcision being the sacred and taboo subject that it is here in the Savannah and the broader Kalenjin community, we stop at that but not before I ask you to say a short prayer for that man scratching his head because his relationship with his teenage son has suddenly turned into that of North Korea and America. That of "I'll bring down this granary if it is not this year!"

You see, my grandfather cautioned me to be watchful of the times. To be keen on two things. Two things that should never surprise you. A wife "*entering the house*" when you have an empty granary or a boy breaking his voice and being able to tighten his bow and yet your granary has no corn or the kraal having no bull to be slaughtered for your in laws when they come and '*faint*' in celebration of their sister's son. It would be an embarrassment if a man can't feed his in-laws for a day.

You see these fifteen-year-old boys, one day you are sipping tea and telling your wife how you want to buy a new ox- plough the following year when suddenly they pop into the house and look you in the eye. Then shockingly points at the two of you and says, "*If it is not this year, find a place where you will live.*" Then, before you take a second sip, they have disappeared. At that time, your wife looks at you, does not make a comment, then clears the table and off she goes to the kitchen. Taboo subject.

This is the only time a boy is allowed to disrespect his father or let us just say, the disrespect is never challenged. Serious reality check. It is not easy being cleared to become a man. You must pop a round eye and turn them red. Savannah issues. Those threats are issued as early as June. But not everybody will notice this rift. It passes without notice for third parties, most of the times.

Thus, men of the Savannah, be watchful of the times. Be wary of a surprise. Because time flies and age catches up and sooner than later, your granary is under threat.

Foot Note

1. *Tisemba*- December
2. *Entering the house*- When a pregnant woman delivers and needs to have a house rest.
3. *Faint*- Pretend to faint.

#38

The merry in Savannah School



Anybody telling you that we went to school in our early Savannah days because we wanted to excel and be better people in the future would be lying to you. That was not a priority. In fact, we did not actually know why we were going to school. We only knew that it was that age of going to school. Period.

There were more important factors that took us to school in those days. Food. Well, I could be speaking for myself but I know we are many. Those of us who went to school in the early nineties. When the late President Moi would still do a quick march on a sample national holiday.

Had someone removed food and milk from school program, those classes would definitely have been empty. Maybe the children of madams would have all the lessons for themselves.

Anyway, were there any lessons in the first place? Especially in lower primary where we were taught in our first language. There were too many breaks and few lessons. No homework and more play. We played and played and fought often times. For food, sports, and admired the Savannah girls.

Teachers of those days enjoyed school life. Walking every single lesson with us. Teaching all the interesting songs and dancing those songs like they were the pupils themselves.

Those were the days. Days when everyone walked barefoot in exception of the teacher who wore yellow *Romario* rubber sport shoes and a contrasting green trouser. We all wanted to be teachers because we saw in them a successful human being. With shoes and two shirts! And a key holder with a matching belt. Those key holders with some spring and they were

metallic if you came from a rich family. Do not forget the knife too. I do not know what the knife was meant for. Have we forgotten the soda opener?

We cried when we were told we would not be going to school because we had to look after the goats while mama went to see the missionary who injected babies to heal from some disease that made baby bellies swollen. The white lady said it was malnutrition. I read it somewhere in my hospital card.

Again, it was boring to look after goats during weekdays. No kids to play with. No free lunch. And too many adults at the grazing field.

Who wanted to miss '*Maziwa ya Nyayo*' for all the school going children? I still do not know why that milk was sweeter than any other milk I have ever tasted.

After drinking the *Maziwa ya Nyayo*, we would run up and down singing, with jubilation;

*Tawala Kenya, Tawala
Rais Moi, Tawala Kenya, Tawala*

Loosely translated as *Reign Kenya, Reign, President Moi*
I am nostalgic of those old days.

Foot Notes

1. *Romario*- A brand of rubber shoes.

#39

Return from Raid



One night in the 50s my grandfather arrived home with a few cows smeared with blood. He had been away from home for a whole month. His wife could not explain about his whereabouts. Those days, men did not tell their wives where they were going nor when they would be back. Or let us put it this way, those days, women did not ask their men where they were going and when they would be back. This would change. Here we are.

When the bulls in the kraal gave an uncomfortable bellowing sound to signify the smell of blood, as seen when cows pass by a place where a cow was slaughtered, my grandmother, then a young wife, came out to find out what was happening.

In the thickness of the night's darkness, my grandfather warned her to stay indoors. She went back. Not even his children, now our fathers, could run to give him a hug. He was unclean.

He spent the night outside his compound several yards away from his other cows. In the morning, a group of old men arrived. They poured out libations and spewed out alcohol and milk in the direction of the rising sun and uttered words that distance would not allow anyone to hear. Sometimes a sentence began in a clear way but some wind blew or a he-goat made that irritating mating noise and the sentence faded into oblivion. No amount of head turning by curious on lookers would give away the elderly talk.

They waited.

Children were chased away and women watched from a distance. Men whose wives were expectant kept a safe distance but they seldom came around. Then the old men went on to dance to a few tunes soloed briefly and stopped without warning. They seemed to be addressing the rising sun.

Together with his raided herd, he was unclean when he arrived. They had to be cleansed. That is how my grandfather had a serious attachment to his cows. He asked to be buried where his raided herd had lived. He went down his grave with his hand clutching his ceremonial walking stick. He had earned it that day when he was cleansed and crowned.

The ancient ways of our Savannah people. The heritage of our fathers but it remained bare that it was unclean

#40

Our House-help



One blessed hot Savannah Friday afternoon in standard four, our teacher of English stormed into the class with a thick white chalk that had just been picked from a box of 'Someni School *Chalks*'. Some of you woke up the other day and saw white boards and marker pens. We will forgive you because you cannot even tell the difference between *John Deus*, *The Kasangas* and *Munishi*. We can assure you that they were not footballers.

Our teacher asked us to take out our books and write a composition about what she was already scribbling on the board from one end to another. That was when Lake Turkana was still called Lake Rudolf, at least according to our GHC female teacher, who smoked a "*kiko*" at break time. She taught us in mother tongue.

We looked at the title twice, then looked at the teacher and then, at each other. Blank! Our eyes eventually went to the roof and back. We could not start.

The title was, "Our House-help!"

House-help? None of us had an idea who or what a house-help was.

Luckily, while we pondered our next move, a sharp shrill filled the air. A huge snake was approaching our classroom and some girl from a different class had seen it.

We met the next Monday.

No composition titled Our House-help! We just wrote about The Snake Day.

Foot Notes

1. *John Deus, The Kasangas and Munishi*- Three different music bands and musicians.
2. GHC- Geography, History and Civic Studies.
3. *Kiko*- Used to refer to tobacco smoked through a wooden pipe named, *kiko*.

#41

The Goat Herders



I might look fine but I miss raw goat milk, squeezed directly into my mouth from its beautifully swollen and milk laden teat.

Once in a while, when the goat kicked, the milk strayed into our eyes. The warmth was heavenly. We licked our fingers and spat the fur away.

Growing up as a goat herder is not so much about herding. It was more about being attentive. This is because goats are aggressive. They move, and browse and find themselves further away from you if you were not that keen.

Goat herding is not about all the goats. It is about the leader. Goats always have the leader who always breaks a fence or heads fast to a neighbour's salt lick. You never get to notice the male goats unless it is the mating season and there is a little competition here and there. It is normal and it happens too in the human world. You never get to have a problem with your fellow herder until the girl you love gives him a wink. It hurts.

For all of us goat herders, who got into trouble with our parents for letting them trespass and ending up destroying the much treasured, though wilting crops. We always knew our enemies;- the female goat and more specifically the mother goat.

You see the "*subenwek*", the young females, were always preoccupied with walking right ahead of the male friends. They focused much on hygiene and etiquette rather than aggression for food. At lunch hour, they lay beside a younger he-goat and chewed cud in a manner that all pointed to seeking attention. A loud belch or a swollen cheek like they were on *khat*! Years later, we realized it may have been science and not just about goats alone.

This story might sound unfair, especially to the members of the other blessed gender. But every goat herder would agree with me. The mother goat, who in most cases was no longer caring about looks and conflict, was the first one to take the risk. They ran over fences, broke a horn, hit a stone and came home limping, others ran into our bad moods and we regrettably swerved one too heavy stone on the back of their necks. They felt pain and would stagger a moment before getting back to form. Some gave a short wail. Some died.

The night of their death would be a low moment for a passionate herder. A phase of life you never want to live. Not because of the near death beating at home but because, all night long, the kid goat would cry in wait of their mother and this broke our hearts because we felt we had committed murder-- Goat slaughter.

Over the years we grew up appreciating the role of motherhood. That it was never the wish of the mother goat to lead the flock but because the male goat had no one to breastfeed in the evening. To him, what mattered the most was to study the stars, and kick off the mating season when the time was ripe- sounds unfair.

Therefore, in the matter of the goat herder verses a town girl looking for a serious man to give you a surname, dear lady, take my advice and marry the goat herder.

We goat herders understand motherhood better than anyone else does. We understand the leadership position of the woman more than any other man out there does. Above all, we look beyond the behaviour of the stars. We love, care, and provide.

Hail the goat herder. Hail the boisterous men of Savannah.

Foot Notes

1. *Subenwek*- young female goat
2. *Khat*- Miraa

#42

Doomsday Fear



Back in the days here in the Savannah, someone scared us. We were told the world was supposed to end on the last day of the year 1999. Had we not fasted and avoided carrying weapons to that night's *kesha*, the 2000s kids filling our timelines and statuses with memes and *TikTok* challenges would not have seen the world. That day we were supposed to march upwards to zion. Respect us and our prayers.

Then God looked down from heaven and may have said, "Let me bring this generation even if I know they'll discover *Gengetone* music and ask *Okonkwo* foolish questions. My wrath shall surely be upon them and my anger shall force them to cover those mouths with a face mask". See the problems you have brought us!

You, meme experts never saw choirs that sang during Easter in full choir gowns starting every song with movements for about seven minutes until they got something called rhythm. You think rhythm was easy to get? Never, only people who carried their children on an inverted stool to the clinic could easily get rhythm. They were organised people.

Carrying your child on an inverted stool atop your *Raleigh* bicycle those days was something that would have made you trend on Instagram and Twitter for two days.

Then there was humming for another three minutes to make it ten minutes. The song had not yet started. Humming is closing your mouth as you sing the first stanza. Then you face heaven with the eyes of sympathy-I know it doesn't make sense.

I know one of my fans who has no idea what a meme is. I can't explain. I don't also know. But I see them every day.

Choirs before the year 2000 had conductors. Conductor had an oversized coat, red socks, sport shoes and *Romario*. How did we see the socks? The conductor had a 'don't touch' trouser. You, the millennials and Gen Z think you invented new trends. Forget it. Nothing is new under the sun.

Those days it was a real worry to be a sinner. People used to rush forward to get saved even before the pastor announced. Preachers were not smiling with sinners. In fact, one pastor as I had earlier told you found my grandmother in the middle of preparing the frothy old men's porridge. He prayed that they ripen with bitterness. Three days later, they ripened with bitterness. We poured two drums of the frothy drink. Very painful. That was like burning an *Mpesa* shop.

You had to know how to end a song but rhythm was technical around the time for chorus. Because soprano would suddenly stop and go like, "Seeeee...!" And Bass would come in like "Seeeeitani amewapotosya!" That is when you go back to rhythming. Humming again before stanza two began. This song made you sympathise with all the drunkards in the village.

There was no clapping when the song ended. But conductors were respected people. They were the lighters of pressure lamp during a *kesha*.

Foot Notes

1. *Kesha*- Overnight vigil to worship and praise
2. *TikTok*- Social Media App.
3. *Gengetone*- A brand of music.
4. *Okonkwo*- Name of a Musician
5. *Raleigh*- Brand of a bicycle
6. *Romario*- Brand of a sport shoes.
7. *Mpesa*- A mobile platform used to transact money.
8. Seeeeitani amewapotosya- The devil has mislead you.

Tales of the Savannah

Tales of the Savannah is an anthology of short stories from rural Baringo Kenya. It reminiscence of the past that is fast getting lost. It takes us back to the old rural life that has been taken away by technology and other social entrants. It seeks to inform the new generation of indigenous Knowledge through stories that entertain and teach.

This is the first of a series that the author seeks to bring to the readers at reasonable timelines.



Amkich Karanja is a teacher, indigenous story teller and a prolific social media writer who has an experience spanning over ten years. He currently teaches at Lake Bogoria Girls High School in Baringo County.

He is formally known as Kibet Cheruiyot but has adopted his pen name Amkich Karanja which doubles up as his popular brand name originating from a high school nickname.

Born in 1984, Amkich Karanja began his education at Emining Primary later proceeding to High School, University and currently a Biology and Agriculture teacher to the surprise of many who expect him to be a Literature Teacher. He is a powerful public speaker, a talent he uses as an events Master of Ceremonies.

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