The First Woman

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Nsuuta shook her head the way grownups surrender to a manipulative child. ‘How does one start the story of our original state?’

"From the beginning."

Nsuuta reached for Kirabo’s hand and entwined it with hers, "In the beginning…"

"Kin you were our eyes." for Kirabo, storytelling etiquette had to be observed.

"… humans were mere residents of the earth. We did not own it, we did not rule it; we shared it equally with plants, insects, birds and animals. But then one day, our ancients realised they could be more – they could own the earth and reign over it. Do you know what they did?"

"No."
"They made up stories."

"Stories?" Kirabo had imagined war.

"Yes, stories that justified our dominion. First, they came up with Kintu and made him the first human on earth. And what does being the first mean?"

"Winner and leader. Oh, and owner."

"Exactly. The first son is heir. The first-born has power. Even the first wife wields power. Here I Buganda we created Kintu who married Nnambi and they brought all plants and creatures to earth from heaven. Europeans claimed their god created everything and then gave them the earth to name, and rule. There are similar stories around the world that justify human dominion. Humans gave themselves so much power that they can destroy the world if they wish."

"Destroy the earth, how?"

"When I was young, there were wild fruits, vegetables, yams and other plants all over this place. But they no longer exist because people cleared miles and miles all the land to make way for shambas of cash crops brought over by the Europeans. Thousands and thousands of plant species replaced by two plants – coffee and cotton. Soon, little animals and insects that lived in the soil will disappear too."

"Kdto," Kirabo clicked. Put like that, humans were despicable.

"As a result of these stories, we grabbed territory – *this hill is mine … that plain is ours*. Creatures which could not fight back were tamed and those that resisted were hunted down.' Nsuuta sighed catastrophe. 'But then one day male ancients said, W*omen, Stop. You can't join in.*"

"Why?"

"*Why* is where we'll start next time." Nsuuta stood up.

"You can't stop there, Nsuuta; it's going to kill me. It's like giving water to a thirsty person but taking it away when they've only had a tiny sip."

"Go home; I am exhausted."

"I come back tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow is too soon. I need to rest."

"When then?"

"In three, four days. Now go, or I'll forget the rest of the story."

After eating, Nsuuta put the food wraps away while Kirabo washed the plates behind the kitchen. Then Kirabo sat down and waited.

"Where did we stop yesterday?" Nsuuta asked.

"When women were prohibited from grabbing land and animals."

"Oh yes, that was because the ancients had told another story – that women were not of land."

"Women not of land, how?"

"Ancients saw the universe as divided into four realms. Bring me the pencil on top of the bookshelf," Nsuuta pointed above Kirabo's head towards the bookshelf, "and the kasuku exercise book. I'll show you."

She opened the exercise book to a fresh page, placed it on the floor and drew a cross compass. "The first realm was heaven," she wrote, *Heaven* where North would be. "Then *Underworld*," she placed it at the South point, "then *Sea*," she placed it at the West point, "and finally**,** *Land***,**" she placed it on the East point. "That's the ancient compass."

Kirabo stared at the compass. It made better sense than the one pinned on the wall of her classroom. She was tempted to say, *But you are not really blind, Nsuuta.* But she swallowed it.

"Heaven was the world of the gods, yes?"

"Yes."

"The underworld is where the dead begin a new life – yes?"

"Yes."

"If land belonged to man; what is left?"

"The sea."

"Ah haa. The sea, the ancients claimed, was woman's realm."

"Whaat? Women belonged in water?"

"And if they did, they couldn't share in land wealth, could they? *If you want property,* they told women ancients, *go back to your sea and grab to your heart's content.*"

"Yii yii, even when they saw baby girls born the same as boys?"

"They claimed that the very first woman rose out of the sea while the first man emerged from earth."

"But that is not true. Nnambi was Gulu's daughter. She came from heaven."

"Gulu was her father; but who was her mother?"

"She did not have a mother, only a father and brothers."

"See? They had found a hole in their first story of Kintu and Nnambi and filled it. Now, Nnambi got a mother. A woman that, apparently, rose from the sea. Her name, Nnamazzi. In fact, Nnamazzi was said to have brought all water bodies on land."

"What? I've never heard of her."

"Because this story was buried." When Kirabo did not respond Nsuuta carried on. "Apparently, Nnamazzi was so magnificent that when Gulu saw her he was mesmerised. She gave him a lot of sons including Walumbe, the bringer of death, and Kayikuuzi the burrower, but only one daughter, Nnambi. Then one day, after years and years of being together, Nnamazzi, without provocation, without explanation, got up and went back to the sea. And she never came back. Gulu was so heartbroken, he never remarried. He brought up his children on his own. So if the first woman came from the sea and returned to it, women belonged there."

"I like Nnamazzi. I like that I came out of her."

"Focus, Kirabo; she is a story. A story which aggravated our situation. They used her to link our original state to the sea. You don't realise, but ancients had such an irrational fear for the nature of women that they would try anything to keep them under control. They supported this story by pointing to the sea. Apparently, both women and the sea were baffling, changeful: today they're this, tomorrow they're that."

"How was the sea changeful?"

"Water has no shape, it can be this, it can be that, depending on where it flows. The sea is inconstant, it cannot be tamed, it doesn't yield to human cultivation, it cannot be owned; you can't draw borders on the ocean. To the ancients, women belonged with the sea like in marriage."

Kirabo gnashed her teeth because ancients, especially Ganda males, were just too dumb for life. "And to them land belonged with men?"

"Land was tame. It did as it was told. They tilled it, dropped seeds into it and a few months later they harvested. They demarcated and owned it."

"Like in marriage?"

"Exactly."

"And that's how women were stopped from owning land wealth?"

"Stories have such power you can't imagine. That one turned women into migrants on land. Since then, women have been rootless – moved not just across place but clans, tribes, nations even races. Here in Buganda, they sold mainly girls and women into slavery to the Arabs. They were considered rootless."

Kirabo's chest rose and fell, rose and fell. She imagined women cast into the sea –

swimming, drowning, fighting sharks, building houses under the sea, being swallowed by whales, then women being sold to Arabs, being brutalised in Buwarab and her complaints paled. She burst out, "But could they not see that women had no gills or fins?"

"Don’t make me say the obvious, Kirabo," Nsuuta was getting impatient, "Besides, the world is blind. Life is too rich for the eye to see everything we look at. You think you can see but right now you’re blind."

Kirabo looked at Nsuuta’s eyes.

"Yes Kirabo," Nsuuta answered the question in her mind. "I only started to see what I had looked at all my life after I lost my sight."

Kirabo closed her eyes as if it would stop Nsuuta from listening to her thoughts.

"When our ancients looked at women,’ Nsuuta continued, ‘they saw something else."

"What did they see?"

"Water *in* women. Women *in* water. Think, Kirabo: how many of our stories link women to water?"

"Hmm…" Kirabo hummed her memory into action. She had been paralysed by the idea of women learning to live in water. An idea occurred to her and she snapped her fingers,"Like River Mayanja? A woman gave birth to it. Oh, and those twin rivers, what are they called?

"Ssezibwa and Bwanda?"

"Yes. A pregnant woman was travelling when birth pains started. She squatted on the roadside but instead of a child, water came out. It split in two. One flowed to the east, the other to the west and formed two rivers. Oh," Kirabo’s memory had woken up. "Most water

bodies – wells, spas, streams – belong to women spirits. Goddess Nnalubaale owns Lake Victoria. Goddess Nnankya owns that stream in Grandfather's land. Goddess Nnambaale owns our well."

"Because, as ancients claimed, Nnamazzi brought all the water on land."

"Eh." Kirabo marvelled.

"So, your grandfather's family owns most of the land in Nattetta, but does it claim Stream Nnankya or Nnambaale the well where we collect water?"

"No."

"Because they can't contain it."

"Oh, I've just remembered a big one. This is big Nsuuta, huge," Kirabo held her hands above her head to show its hugeness. "I swear ancients used this story to make women belong in water."

"Tell me."

"Mijinni."

"Mijinni?"

"Don't you know mijinni, Nsuuta?"

Nsuuta shook her head.

"Tsk, Mijinni are female spirits which live in rivers, wells, lakes or seas. In daytime, they stay in water. But at night they creep out. And when they come out, they turn into real

women to tempt men. There are a lot of them in Jinja, they creep out of the Nile. They are beautiful, I mean, killer beautiful. When men see them, they can't help falling in love because they seem quiet, gentle and restful. A man says, *Yii maama, your beauty is going to kill me right now if I can't be with you.* But once he takes her to his home, *ba ppa,* what happens?"

"Tell me."

"She turns into a terrifying creature and tortures him."

"Really?" Nsuuta's face shone.

"One time, a man took a mujinni home like that. She kept saying to him, *My friend, maybe this is too rushed; maybe we should get to know each other first,* but did the man listen?"

"No."

"That night, when the man got up to turn the light out, she said, *I'll do it*, and stretched her arm across the room and snuffed out the flame. Then in the dark, she commenced to torture the man, nonstop, throughout the night. She had arms like an octopus. They were everywhere. In the morning, the man woke up on a crag in the middle of Lake Victoria; bruised and broken."

Nsuuta gasped happily.

"Don't ever go to Mombasa, I've warned you; it's crawling with mijinni."

"Oh?"

"You can tell a mujinni from a real woman."

"How?"

"A mujinni has icy hands and feet."

"Thanks for the warning. Wait there," Nsuuta stood up and retrieved a book from the top shelf. It bulged with paper cuttings stuffed between the pages. She removed the cuttings and gave them to Kirabo. Some were images of mermaids, some were pictures of ancient ships with a woman's bust as a bow figurehead. The figureheads had their breasts exposed to the sea.

"Eh," Kirabo realised, "But these white people: their ancients thought the sea loved women's breasts? But what model of foolishness is this?"

"Ancient sailors thought they were trespassing on water because it was not their realm. So, they used images of women to pacify the sea."

"That is stupid."

"At first, they tied real women to the bow."

Kirabo gasped. "You lie, Nsuuta," And thanked the gods that she was not white, not born those dark days. She came to another image and exclaimed, "Ayayayaya."

"What?"

"This one is serious, Nsuuta."

"What is written on the picture?"

"Ah, The Sirens and U … I can't say that word … by William E-t-t-y."

"What's in the picture?"

"Three naked women… 'are those dead humans behind them? Nsuuta, there are bones and skulls all over the place: I think the women have killed and eaten them."

"Killed what?"

"Men. Now, a storm is bringing another ship full of men. The women are singing and dancing, glorying in the terror of the men.' She giggled. 'Oh my father, this is serious. On the ship, the sailors are struggling with the storm to steer the boat away from the women. But this huge idiot wants to reach out for the women's breasts. The sailors are struggling with him too.' She looks at Nsuuta. 'Poor Zungu women ancients. They must have suffered. Their men thought they were maneaters?"

"You have no idea, Kirabo."

"Tsk," she riffled through other images, then stopped. "Look at these stupid ones."

"Who?"

"Five men are kneeling before a woman. I think she's just emerged out of the sea because her hair is dripping and the men are pleading, or are they worshipping her?"

"They still do."

"Oh, this one looks like us."

"That's Yemaya. She protected slaves as they were trafficked across the seas."

"Oh," Kirabo paused as she imagined being trafficked across the seas. "At least she was not an evil story if she protected our people." Nsuuta did not respond. "I wonder what ancients

saw when they looked at women."

"I think that in their buziba mind, the unconscious one, women were two things at once – aquatic and terrestrial. Human but fish, beautiful but grotesque, exciting but frightening, nurturing but malevolent. Today they're this shape; tomorrow they've shifted into something quite different – dubious, slippery, secretive and mysterious; what do you do with that?"

Kirabo shook her head, I don't know.

"Either you tame or drive them back into the sea."

"Tame them? Like animals?"

"Indeed, like for animals, men started to raid other societies for women. I am sure animals were laughing; look how humans are treating each other over property."

"So it's true?"

"What is true?"

"Giibwa said that our men raided Ssoga women because Ganda women were ugly."

"Nsuuta's eyes darted sightlessly. As if she had not meant her story to get too close to recent history."

"Forget Giibwa. Your family never raided anyone. Put the cuttings back in the book and return it to the shelf, exactly where it was.' When Kirabo was done, Nsuuta said,' Now go home. I need to rest. Tomorrow, I'll tell you how they got rid of our original state and women shrunk."

Kirabo ran out of Nsuuta's house, forgetting to use the back door.