

## BLESSED BY THE RHINOCEROS

Rain had not fallen over the land for months. The bush was dead: a brown, lifeless mass, highlighted here and there by a lifeless greyness. The grass was bleached pale gold and was brittle tinder waiting for the tiniest spark to ignite it and give birth to a bushfire.

The ground was iron-hard. The smallest pebbles were cruel to the bare soles of our feet. It was so hot that wearing boots was dangerous, because the sun heated the leather, causing our skin to blister inside.

Our bodies were covered in sweat. We were tormented by tsetse flies which hung around our eyes, our nostrils, our ears and our mouths. A silver mist of shimmering heat covered the land, forming a barely visible curtain between us and the dead bush. There were no birds in the sky, no clouds, and even the slow-flowing river which we could see through gaps in the dense bush appeared harsh and uninviting.

Our heads were burdened with heavy cardboard boxes filled with magical equipment – canned food and other necessities of modern life. We also carried tools – picks, shovels and hammers. We were like silent zombies, moving through the bush. We were no longer talking to each other, although we were close friends – James Myombo, Peter Kiambe and I. While we were walking in single file, I noticed something moving in the heat-veiled bush. It was huge, grey, monstrous and barely visible, but presence did not trouble my dulled mind. I didn't even bother telling my friends about it. I didn't know what it was, and at that moment, I didn't care.

I just carried on, following my two tall companions, the hot breath rasping in my mouth, my tongue dry with thirst. All of a sudden, there was what felt like a sudden rain shower – a hot, stinking gush of liquid that soaked us from head to foot. We were startled, but our reactions were slow. We paused and looked around for the source of the deluge, and then, as fear invaded our hearts, we turned and moved on, hastily this time, hardly comprehending what had happened.

When we reached the place where the rest of our companions were preparing food, excitement erupted among all the African people present. Some hugged us, some shook our hands, and one man ran his hand through my wet hair.

'Do you realize what has happened to you?' asked the man whom we all recognized as our leader, Josiah Mporombo.

'No', I heard myself answer. 'What made us so wet?'

'Just listen to him – the stupid, ignorant, Christian fool!' cried Mporombo, laughing aloud at my ignorance. 'You don't know much about wild animals, do you? Let me tell you, son of a stupid hippopotamus cow, you and your friends have been blessed by the gods. What happened to you happens only once in a generation. You were urinated on by a rhinoceros! This means that you are all blessed by the ancestral spirits and by all the gods.'

'Yes, this is indeed so,' said the oldest member of our group, a soft-spoken man called Masungira Chiumbo. 'The three of you are going to be famous throughout the land, throughout the world. You must remember this day in days to come.'

This is how I was introduced to one of the strangest African beliefs. I learned for the first time that many African tribes, untainted by Western civilization, believe that if you walk through the bush and a rhinoceros drenches you with its urine, it is a sure sign that you are specially favoured and blessed by the gods.

In olden days, when Zulu kings sent great trading expeditions across the interior to trade with other tribes and with the Portuguese in Delagoa Bay, it was regarded as a very good sign if the expedition encountered two mating rhinoceros. It was especially lucky for an expedition to see two white rhinoceros.

It was also regarded as good luck for a raiding party to encounter a rhinoceros while setting out on a cattle-raid. It was a sign that the raiders would return with cattle, although a few would be killed or injured during the raid.

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