

JOHN KILAKA: THE AMAZING TREE

A PICTURE BOOK FROM TANZANIA



Text and Illustration: John Kilaka

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SYNOPSIS

The land is dry, the juicy fruits on the tree are too high up for the animals to reach. Even strong elephant and tall giraffe cannot help. Then bunny has an idea: Maybe wise tortoise could help. Good idea. But stop – this task is for the big ones. Elephant, Giraffe and Lion, however, come back empty-handed each time ...

The famous Tanzanian Tingatinga artist John Kilaka has retold and illustrated this traditional African story.

THE AUTHOR

John Kilaka was born in the southwest of Tanzania in 1966. As a child he loved to draw on the blackboard at school; which angered the teacher for two reasons – he was distracting his classmates and using up the school's precious supply of chalk.

At the age of twenty he moved to Dar es Salaam where he studied the art of Tingatinga painting with Peter Martin. Today John Kilaka is now one of the most important representants of Tingatinga art. He has published three picture books with the Swiss Publisher Baobab Books, all of them have been translated into many languages.

John has not only been collecting stories from Tanzania but travelled throughout Africa and Europe and participated in many story telling programs. »The Amazing Tree« comes from the Fipa tribe in southwest Tanzania, where John Kilaka was born. He recorded the story in 2007. It was translated from the Fipa language into Kiswahili, and from Kiswahili into English, before it was finally edited and translated into German by Baobab Books in Switzerland. The original edition was published in Switzerland in 2009.

AWARDS

Peter Pan Prize 2011, IBBY Sweden, Nominated for the Rattenfänger Literature Award 2010, Germany, Selected for Beste 7, Deutschlandfunk 2009, Germany

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JOHN KILAKA: THE AMAZING TREE (DER WUNDERBARE BAUM)

SAMPLE TRANSLATION

1

Long time ago, when the animals had just begun to live together, there came a season when no rain fell. The earth was dry, and famine spread. The animals did not have enough food. In the middle of this dry land, there stood an amazing tree. Its fruits were ripe and juicy; but as hard as the animals shook the tree, the fruits did not fall.

2

»How can we get these fruits?« the hungry animals asked one another.
»I have an idea,« said Rabbit. »I will go ask wise Tortoise who will know what to do.«
»Excellent idea,« the other animals agreed. »But you are too small to go. You will just forget what wise Tortoise tells you. The big animals will go!«
So it was Elephant and Buffalo who went to find wise Tortoise.

3

It took some time to reach Tortoise's home, but at last Elephant and Buffalo arrived.
»Please help us, wise Tortoise,« they said. »We are very hungry. We have a tree with fruit that would feed us all, but the fruits will not drop. What should we do to get the fruits?«
»Ah, yes, I know that tree. You can only get its fruits if you call the tree by its name. I see you are very hungry, so I will tell you the tree's name. Listen carefully, Elephant. You are big enough to remember this. The name of the tree is Ntungulu meng'enyé.«
»Thank you very much, wise Tortoise. Let's get back, our friends are waiting for us!« said Elephant and Buffalo; and they set off for home with the tree's name.

4

But on the way home, Elephant stumbled and fell. Now, when an elephant falls, it is not easy for him to get up. By the time Elephant was on his feet again, he had forgotten the name of the tree.
»Do you remember the tree's name?« he asked Buffalo. »Me?« said Buffalo. »I don't remember! You are the one wise Tortoise told to listen carefully. How come you are asking me?«
»I did listen carefully,« said Elephant. »But when I fell, I forgot the name.«

5

When Elephant and Buffalo returned home without the important name. The other animals were very disappointed to hear that Elephant had forgotten the tree's name! »How could you forget something so important?«
You can imagine how upset the animals were. Now they sent Rhino, Giraffe, and Zebra.

6

»We are very sorry for disturbing again, but Elephant and Buffalo forgot the name. Please tell it to us again.«
»They forgot such a simple name? How could that be?« said Tortoise. »Well, I will tell it to you again then. But this time I suggest you sing it all the way home so you don't forget it. The tree's name is Ntungulu meng'enyé.«
»Thank you very much,« said Rhino, Giraffe, and Zebra. And so they set off toward home.

7

As wise Tortoise had suggested, they all sang 'Ntungulu meng'enyé, ntungulu meng'enyé' to themselves as they walked home. But then Giraffe caught sight of a few nice green leaves. »I am so hungry, wait a minute while I eat these,« she told others.



»There is no time for that!« said Zebra.

And just like that, they had all stopped singing the name. By the time Giraffe had finished the leaves, none of them could remember it. And so Rhino, Giraffe, and Zebra returned home without the important name.

«We can't believe this!« said the other animals. »How could all three of you forget this name?« They were very angry.

»Now Lion and Leopard will go to and ask wise Tortoise.«

8

»Please forgive us for disturbing you again, wise Tortoise. Our friends all forgot the name; but we will not forget it, we promised“, said Lion.

»How could they all forget?« said Tortoise. »This name is not so difficult.« He was feeling a bit impatient now. »Well, I will tell you the name again. When you are under the tree, you say Ntungulu meng'enyé and the fruits will start dropping down.«

»That is all?« said Lion and Leopard. »Let us go then, before we forget it.« And they dashed off towards home. »Thank you, wise Tortoise,« they called after them and dashed off.

9

On the way home, Lion suddenly froze. He heard something rustling in the bush. Lion, the old hunter, turned off the path and vanished into the grassland following the sound. But he could not find anything, so he returned to the path and they continued on their journey. »Hey Leopard, you remember that name, don't you? I seem to have forgotten it,« said Lion.

»You startled me so much that I forgot it,« said Leopard. »Why did you let yourself get distracted?« Well, they had no choice but to go back without the important name.

10

And so Lion and Leopard returned home without the important name.

Now the small animals became very angry. »You big animals are no help at all! First you would not let Rabbit go, because she is too small. Then you all go and came back with nothing. And meanwhile we are starving! We tell you – this time Rabbit will go!«

There was nothing much the big animals could say, and everyone agreed to send Rabbit.

11

Rabbit reached Tortoise's house and knocked on the door.

»Come in, please,« said Tortoise, a little surprised.

»Excuse me for disturbing you. I have come for the name because those who came before forgot it back,« said Rabbit.

»They all forgot?« said Tortoise a little impatiently. »And now it is you, little Rabbit. Will you remember the name?«

»I will,« said Rabbit.

»All right, my friend, but this is the last time. If you forget, then do not send anyone else,« said Tortoise. »When you get to the tree, you simply say Ntungulu meng'enyé, and the tree will drop its fruits.«

»That's all?« said Rabbit. »I can't believe they all forgot it!«

»Neither can I,« said Tortoise.

12

When Rabbit got home, her friends were weak with hunger.

»I've brought the name of the tree!« said Rabbit. »Now stand aside, once we say the name, the fruits will fall like rain and you could get hurt.«

»Stop talking and call the name!« said the big animals, who didn't believe that Rabbit could remember it. So Rabbit called Ntungulu meng'enyé! Ntungulu meng'enyé! And the fruits started falling like rain. Uwaaaaaa!

13



What a feast! The animals ate as much as they could; and when they wanted more, Rabbit called again 'Ntungulu meng'enye'!, and more fruits fell from the tree. The big animals thanked Rabbit: »We have learned a lesson,« they said. »We should have trusted you in the first place! Now we know that everyone is important here, no matter if they are big or small.« And from then on, the animals always had enough to eat.

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