

ALI
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BY
ALI ABDULKADIR



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DEDICATION

In memory of Saeed

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INTRODUCTION

With the foothills of the Ethiopian escarpment as a point of departure, the Kikatu spread northwards along the Red Sea coast, eastwards right up to the tip of the Horn of Africa, and swing sharply south along the eastern coast of the Indian Ocean to reach the savanna planes of East Africa. Unconcerned with borders and immigration rules, they roam at will in search of water and grazing for their herds, the backbone of which is the camel. Besides livestock, their worldly possessions are confined to portable collapsible homes meagre enough to be carried on the back of a camel. These are the Kikatu nomads, one face of the state of Kikatuland.

The other is modern and urban, situated mostly along coastal areas and inhabited by their cousins, the city elites and the majority urban population. Different lifestyles have created a gaping divide between the two. Rain and fodder are the primary preoccupations of the nomads; coping with the demands of running a modern state, however imperfectly, is the constant concern of the majority. Nomads stick to tradition, however outmoded, and resist change; the majority looks down on anything rustic. The two wear different types of clothes. It reflects different attitudes to life.

Nothing illustrates it more than the attitude to citizenship. City-dwellers had left discrimination behind in the bush; nomads got stuck with it. Socially organized into tribes, the Kikatu boast a common ancestor and stop just short of ancestor worship. The system fosters unfettered individual freedom,

except in the interest of a tiny minority, the Cobblers, defeated in war in ancient times and consigned to servitude: free cobbling service for all-comers, no marriage into the victors, no property rights. Times are now changing, however. Runti, the Chief, openly refers to the love relationship between her daughter, heir to the Chieftom, and the Cobbler J.

In the epic struggle between the Cobbler and traditionalists, at least half the population sides with the Cobbler, a sure sign that discriminatory citizenship was well and truly on its way out. Not many cobblers were around to benefit. They were always an endangered species.

Runti deliberately mounts J's trial so he could establish that he had some rights. Slaves by definition had none. Not only was he able to prove his right for self-defense, but also won the right for equality of all before the law. Slavery denies any such right. The Minister exploits the issue for his own purposes and drops it once he gets confronted with the President's naked hostility. The newly appointed Chief-of Staff Ado puts its priority status as "below the radar." In its heyday, Cobbler Senior minced no words: "We're slaves, Son," he told the young man.

In that final kikatuu meeting under the Boabab tree, it was on J that the Minister called to speak on behalf of his people, not only because he symbolized the uprising led by mother nature to bring nomadism to an end, but also because he was recognized as a leader in his own right. Things were different a generation before when his father silently submitted to lashing at the hands of one potentate because J had thrashed the man's son.

CHAPTER ONE

The Kikatu, the last of the nomads and on the verge of extinction, had reached the outer fringes of Sablana in the great Horn of Africa plains. Preceded by a whiff of urine and dung, their skeletal frames etched against the night darkness, they herded thousands of camels, sheep and goats into a new frontier. Load camels brought up the rear carrying portable homes. Lean and tall men wore a shin-long brown calico sheet around their waists; women made it into a knot at the shoulder, tucked it at the midriff and let it flow down to their ankles, leaving their breasts visible at the flanks.

It had rained the day before. Subdued by the unfamiliar climate, feet deep in mud, they waded through puddles of murky water. Naked toddlers sniffed against the mild breeze, clung to their mothers' skirts; men paused frequently to strop axes for the slaughter ahead. Sheep and goats bleated, aware of good times ahead. Having run down a once-green Halis to the ground, the Kikatu were about to lay siege to the virgin plains of Sablana. They had now reached its outer fringes. Runti, the chief, and her nineteen year-old daughter Hodon, both on horseback, brought up the rear.

"Ideas are like the breeze. Blow them in, don't force them in," they heard J say.

Omer laughed aloud.

Kikatu men kept quiet if they could not scream. The women heard them with ease. Physically, the men shared pencil-thin

beards, matching moustaches and the build of athletes.

“What do those two have in common?” Runti asked, looking sideways at the younger woman.

Hodon’s peal carried far in the early morning: “They’re both devilishly handsome.”

Runti took a moment to reflect: “The cobbler’s not of our world; Omer is, but would like to escape.”

Omer, the one Kikatu wearing a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, was the barter man; J, the cobbler, the only man on horseback.

“What about him?”

She meant the absentee camel lord, Adoonyo, on camelback just ahead. Of considerable wealth and matching girth, he was dressed in a large-size jallabia struggling to conceal a mountain of a paunch. They nicknamed him Double-chins. A city type himself, he heartily reciprocated his people’s disdain.

“Halt!” barked Kurtin, son of Deria, next in power only to the chief.

It was relayed through the crowd. Children scurried ahead, livestock cared not a hoot, and women paused to breast-feed their young. Short of temper at the best of times, Kurtin, sweating at the armpits, scowled, lashing a bush. It promised to be a hot day. A hawkish nose above a receding chin itched, and a pair of gimlet eyes peered at the ranks behind.

“Bonanza,” Kurtin told himself, but said: “Remember, timber, charcoal, firewood.” It was relayed to the outer reaches of the multitude.

“The prize?” enquired a voice in the crowd.

It was taken up a thousand times. Men whistled, bellowed, and screamed. Kurtin raised an axe, clenched a fist. “Two choice she-camels for the first fifty trees.”

With a forefinger he traced the scar across his forehead. Raising their axes in unison, the Kikatu beamed. In the late afternoon Sablana nestled in cool shadows, undecided raindrops swayed in the wind, and the undergrowth quietly sucked the northerly breeze. Birds watched in alarm; antelopes stood

motionless wagging white tails; squirrels stared at the men in calico and streaked away. Dividing the men into gangs of sixty each, Kurtin said, "Not a tree standing between here and the hole where the sun hides at night."

For a man of his considerable weight, his voice sounded distinctly reedy. The Kikatu roared, raised a thousand axes, slipped and slithered, but finally stampeded into the bush. Perched on treetops and secured by loops of rope by the midriff, they went to work. Kurtin put his scowl in place. Axes raised, brought smack down; the thud of a keen blade sinking into flesh, breaking bone; trees swaying, crashing, and the Kikatu crying in triumph, spitting fruit they had snatched from midair. They went back again, hacking, splitting, slicing, their white teeth flashing in the midday sun. Livestock browsed, chewed, and farted. Overhead huge flocks of birds took to the air shrieking and flapping, and soared away.

Water jugs perched on their heads, slender women weaved between rows of men dripping sweat, grunting, heaving and pausing to get a firmer grip on axe handles. Offering water on the one hand they waved the other, cooed, ululated and dispensed smiles. Kurtin made the rounds to encourage, patting greasy shoulders. He came upon a man who had just escaped a falling acacia. The man, open-mouthed, stared at the mighty trunk. His mates hacked away. With a sigh, he studied the cutting edge of his axe.

"What's the matter?"

"Nearly killed me."

"How many have you done?"

"Twenty."

Kurtin looked up. Secured by a loop, a man methodically swung an axe, lopping off branches, hacking lumps off the top of the stem, sliding down to the middle, hacking some more. He'd eventually come to chop the trunk for firewood. "Not bad, not bad at all," Kurtin smiled approvingly.

He walked away to make the rounds till dusk. Calling for

attention for the second time that day Kurtin watched weary but hopeful men make a circle around him.

“A record for the Kikatu,” he said, inviting Double-chins to join him. The man lumbered forward.

“Kikatu!” The cry and the axes went up together.

Standing in their midst, Kurtin raised a full leather bag and poured milk on top of his head, showing yellow teeth. It signalled the beginning of festivities. Two camels were led forward.

“Dodi are the winners,” Kurtin announced.

Pandemonium broke out. The winners stepped forward to claim their prize. It was dancing time. The crowd roared into the night.

“Now for charcoal,” Kurtin announced next morning, addressing men who had had little sleep since they arrived in Sablana.

“A camel for the first fifty sacks,” he offered.

His men purred. Double-chins heaved his way to the front. “I make it two.”

They went wild, and never turned back in their rush into the woodland. Setting it on fire, they kept stoking it with grass and splinters of wood until the trees crashed down ablaze. After a cooling period of two days in sand pits prepared for the purpose, the Kikatu collected crisp charcoal for Double-chins to sell in the cities up north. The second prize-giving ceremony took place at midnight. They burned charcoal. Smoke clouds billowed, the slaughter of sheep began in earnest and the birds took flight into the unknown. Two men hoisted Kurtin up their shoulders. Munching meat, he looked down at the faces in the circle of flames.

“Dodi win again,” he proclaimed, waving both hands above his head, riding in triumph between rows of adoring tribesmen happy that he had led them to Sablana.

Kurtin’s opportunity had arrived: laying Sablana waste in the interest of a business partnership with Double-chins, the man from the city. The Kikatu screamed as the message was

relayed through the lines. Once again, Double-chins stepped forward to give the prize. The Dodi were jubilant for the second time in two days.

Two rows of men and women faced each other, clapping, singing, hopping and pouring milk all over their bodies in the height of Kikatu delirium while, in the far distance, on the vast track of cleared land, older women diligently erected their homes – collapsible igloo-shaped thatch huts made of an upright beam of falcon’s claw acacia in the middle, supporting a cage of smaller props curving down to the ground and covered by bark shreds woven into thatch and leather ribbons. Happiness was here after the depredation of Halis. With milk galore and browsing plentiful, the Kikatu poured buckets of milk into the sand after having extracted a little butter for gravy.

Under a cloudy sky in an open space on the second night after their arrival, the young gathered in their hundreds. A perennial feature of the social scene, it was devoted to swapping tales, reciting poetry and singing. Omer took the stage as the major-domo, surveying the young faces surrounding him on all sides, sitting on bare earth. Kurtin was on his feet.

“Glory, that’s what I’ll talk about, the glory of the Kikatu, their pride, their place under the sun. To illustrate, I’ll take the last campaign to show we’re the best. Nothing like us!”

Raptly, the audience looked up at the stocky man rhapsodizing beneath the stars. “No interruptions,” Kurtin said at one stage.

“No interruptions,” Omer assured him.

“Dusk saw the culmination of weeks of preparations, as battalions of young men put the horses through their paces in preparation for the battle the following day. No ordinary horses these: the grey and chestnut Kehilan, deep-chested and powerful, standing up to fifteen hands, short heads with broad foreheads; the bay Seglawi known for refinement and almost feminine elegance with their fine bones, and faces slightly longer than the Kehilan; the legendary Abeyan, more than fourteen hands

and built to hit hard and run fast.

Swift, courageous and intelligent, they could be trusted to bring havoc to an opponent, mainly because they never knew how to retreat. In a treeless plane outside the settlement the men massaged their charges from poll to knee: throat latch, shoulder, chest, arm, elbow, forearm first and the withers, the back, girth, abdomen and thigh crooning, cuddling, coaxing the horses to eat barley mixed with water.

Subsequently, they'd fit their horses with body shields. Made of camel skin and soaked in water just before battle, they covered the horse's neck, throat, chest, forearms and abdomen. Trained to take initiatives by getting as close as possible to a target, rearing on their hind legs and hitting both forelegs on the opponent while protecting their riders, they swerved away along the battle-line.

"One more time," rasped supervisors as practice continued through the night with young men changing horses in mid-flight, riding for just a moment before tucking themselves belly up between chest and thighs, legs clinging to abdomen.

Omer shot up: "Not a word of truth in it. In fact, we were caught napping. In a surprise attack we did not stand a chance. Total defeat. Forced to move out, we were also forbidden to own horses."

"I won't be interrupted."

"An exception was reluctantly made for the chief's immediate family. Kurtin has it all wrong," Omer sneered.

The meeting erupted. Kurtin's jaw dropped. It was unheard of; Omer had broken an unspoken rule. Assumptions touching Kikatu glory were not questioned.

"What happened to the horses Kurtin was so lyrical about?" asked someone.

"Gored to death under their riders," Omer replied.

Kurtin exploded. "Is that the way to train the young, casting doubt on Kikatu prowess? I'll take you before the court."

Kurtin charged out of the meeting, taking a few with him.

“Kurtin’s right! Kurtin right! Kurtin right!” chanted the crowd.

He returned. “Omer is denying Kikatu glory because he’s not pure Kikatu.”

Kurtin paused. “His mother is you-know-who.” Maryam was Robleh’s wife, the first councillor.

The party broke up in name-calling and a few fistfights. Elsewhere, young men sought out maidens to partner in a dancing marathon.

Piles of wood bound by sisal rope and leather belts behind thorn fences meant that the Kikatu had settled for the foreseeable future. Woodland had given way to shack. Separate pens for older camels, separate ones for smaller ones, separate pens for older sheep and goats, smaller ones for kids and ewes and, in the middle of it all, the family home.

“Dancing time, dancing time!” they announced in the early evening, calling on mothers to let the girls go.

Mothers happily obliged. The nuptials season was here. Livestock, content in newfound food security, gurgled. Maidens looked for young men sporting painted pink hair, signifying readiness for marriage. Children frolicked in murky puddles, and the stars twinkled. Drums boomed in the open space. Asha, nicknamed Giraffe for being the tallest girl in her generation and, at nineteen, a stunner, began to swirl in the midst of a circle of young men and women. Drumbeats gathered tempo. A young man stepped forward to circle around her revolving figure. The rest clapped and stomped in time with the couple’s every move. Asha and her partner drew closer, then parted only to tiptoe towards each other again, this time almost embracing. Boom! Boom! Boom!

Hands on hips, the two faced each other and, at first, slowly shook shoulders, the left first and then the right, their necks craning and retreating, long hair flowing down to Asha’s pelvis. The beat picked up. Shoulders quivered in unison to keep time with necks craning sideways, hips now swaying, hands

outstretched, and fingers tracing music on space. In time, the floor filled with singing revellers keeping time with the boom of the burning drum. The floor suddenly cleared.

“Asha, Asha! Asha”

Hands outstretched, swaying sideways, the bare-footed Giraffe swirled, turned, stomped, stood on one foot, raised the other, and threw her head back in ecstasy, a feat that few could match. The crowd went wild. Asha weaved, leaned against the wind, and, with her lower body quite still, shook both shoulders in tune with the rhythm and tempo of the song and the boom-boom of the drum. Bowing low to sweep a wealth of hair down to her ankles, she stood erect to receive the rapturous ovation that, by the sparkling look on her face, could only be her just due.

Next day Runti arrived on her white stallion in the company of her daughter, heir to the Kikatu chiefdom, riding Hamar, a chestnut colt. The spit image of the older woman, jet black hair, large almond eyes, the waist of a wasp and a large bust, Hodon was just a whisker shorter than the Giraffe. Happiness is contagious. Smiling expansively at the elders who had awaited her arrival since dawn, Runti turned to her daughter.

“I just love them all,” she said.

Hodon knew it was from the heart. Legions of Kikatu sat cheek by jowl in the early morning in one of the most important events in their calendar, Cobwebs Day. Clearing the cobwebs, they called it. An invitation to confess and get cleansed, the occasion took a set format. Upon the arrival of the chief, the crowd stood, raising hands above their heads in silent prayer broken only by the bleating of livestock about to be led to the grazing fields nearby and the cacophony of little shepherds trying to impose some sort of order. The camel parade followed. Moulding in the first rains, a new cover by the second, riding the desert storms, sweet breath of rain titillating their nostrils, nothing fazed the camels.

“Round them up,” Kurtin called as the prospective husband of Hodon. He had the right to parade the Kikatu’s most valuable

patronage before the crowds. Camels sanctified marriage, certified death, sealed agreement and served as currency.

Two assistants answered the call to fetch their gear for the long journey ahead. Camels were on tenterhooks, pricking their tiny ears. For the Kikatu, the occasion was a parade of tribal prowess. With a pair of wooden milk bowls Kurtin's assistants milked the first she-camel simultaneously; a quick caress, a long hand stroke and the warm froth topped their wooden bowls. The Kikatu roared.

"That's it," one of the assistants said and they were on their way, singing the departure song, elated that their charges would soon fall in step. This was Kurtin's dream world. They watched the camels undulate, making invisible waves in the air, double nostrils shut tight, padding their way west.

"Would anyone want to speak?" Robleh asked.

The Kikatu had devised a relay system that facilitated communication. Though time-consuming, it made sure that everyone was heard properly. While the chief waited for a response, her daughter took the opportunity to complain.

"Surely there must be a better..."

"That's enough, child."

They had been virtually at war among themselves for most of the past year. It was time for healing, time for reconciliation. Runti was about to preside over the great love-fest. Of course, the camel's parade had had a benign effect on everyone, including Runti.

"Mom, you know they're going to be at it again."

"Nonsense, Hodon. Now you keep quiet."

Hodon wanted to laugh, but wouldn't dare.

"In fact, as soon as the grass turns yellow."

"Want me to throw you out of the party?"

Robleh came by the platform. "We're ready to begin," he said, turning in Hodon's direction.

"Kikatu at their best."

Hodon gaped. He must have overheard.

“I didn’t mean...,” she began to plead.

“I see you’ve some shame left in you,” Runti swiftly delivered.

Robleh stood up to face the crowd: “Who’s going to begin? Remember, the first among you to get up gets the best blessings of our ancestors.”

Almost simultaneously, two bearded individuals stood up and walked stoutly towards each other to the thunderous ovation of the crowd. Stepping over people’s heads, they marched forward. Women ululated, and they still marched. More ululation and hand-clapping pierced the sky. Finally, they were in each other’s arms hugging and kissing foreheads, with tears pouring down their faces. The crowd stood up in salute. Mortal enemies, these two; their two sub-tribes had fought pitched battles for the best part of the past two years. Now it was all over.

Robleh himself welcomed them to the chief’s circle. Runti nodded graciously to bestow her special greeting, clasping each extended hand, a mark of singular respect. The crowd roared. Shaking hands with the councillors, it occurred to the two dignitaries that they had been here before, actually as recently as the last rains. No matter; this was tradition at work. The next two worthies took the stage, for more to follow. At dusk, Robleh was able to report that the Kikatu were now at peace with themselves and the rest of the world. The sight of well-fed livestock back from graze, shepherds happily ambling behind, and the promise of rain at night crowned the day.

Half a dozen middle-aged men squatted on bare sand at night to join a young couple in marriage. The principals’ presence was not required; tribal sanction was. Rigidly formal and structured, these encounters, though brief, engaged tribal pride and reflected allegiances. Proceedings opened with the suitor’s side.

“We are here to ask for the hand of your eldest daughter in marriage for our son,” intoned their eldest.

His opposite number replied: “We’re honoured that such an illustrious sub-tribe such as yours has seen it fit to ask for the

hand of our daughter in marriage. However, your record as in-laws has not been the happiest.”

The suitors’ heads dropped. They knew what the man was talking about. One of their men had married the year before only to divorce forthwith without just cause, according to the testimony of all, including his own family.

“We’re prepared to make amends.”

“Only then shall we consider your present request.”

The Kikatu took divorce seriously, and the suitors knew it. “We need a break,” they said. It did not take long. “Our man goes back to his wife, this time for good.” The deal was clinched there and then.

The next day, the wedding procession wound its way through the narrow dirt alleys of Sablana with the bridegroom at the head, flanked by two men of his age group and, behind them, rows and rows of young men parading their best on their way to the festivals scheduled to take place in front of the bridegroom’s. It all began with a bonfire, and the young tore the night apart to revolve around the fire, with maidens to join, and a recitation of the bridegroom’s sterling qualities laced with rosy prognostications of the future of his offspring, inevitably male. Neither was the bride forgotten. Ecumenisms began with her social standing, beauty and proven husbandry. Her grace in adversity was particularly underlined. She could be trusted to hunker down in hard times, and if her mother’s record was any guide, she was bound to rear exemplary children. What more could anyone want? Capping it all with the slaughter of sheep, they sat down for the first feast in years. They had seen no meat since Halis, which they had just left, had turned desert two years before. Experience had taught them a few lessons; one of them was not to gorge themselves after prolonged malnourishment. Ever so delicately, they took small morsels between thumb and fingers and washed them down with small sips of fresh milk. The wedding was yet another excuse for a dance. Boom! Boom! Boom! The drum reigned until the small hours of the morning.

Happiness is contagious. Runti smiled expansively at the sight of so many under the baobab tree. Courthouse, community centre and water reservoir, it was the fulcrum of Kikatu society. Nothing serious was undertaken except under its towering height. They burned charcoal. Fires crackled. Smoke columns billowed, and the birds took flight into the unknown. The Kikatu revelled in shedding blood, the ultimate proof that all was well with the tribe: time to bore the waterhole. The script followed ancient tradition, beginning with the sound of the horn at dawn to signify the approach of the chief, followed a step behind by the councillors and the four butchers swinging a fat sheep belly up by its four legs. They faced south.

Runti circled a wand around the spear stuck into the exact spot where the well was to be; the councillors led the massed Kikatu in prayer. Eyes searched the sky, necks fell back, backs arched; they never saw the sheep butchered, only heard it bleat in agony. It was bad luck to watch this particular sheep die. Picks, shovels and iron bars went to work. Before long they had dug a seven-foot hole criss-crossed by four wooden planks for them to stand on as they heaved up more and more bucketfuls of earth tied to sisal ropes from below. Shovels dug deeper into the ground; they pressed sturdy acacia logs against the walls of the hole. Water splashed onto the mouth of the waterhole. The Kikatu, with the exception of the chief, fell flat on their faces in silent prayer. Runti smiled. All's well with the tribe, she thought, and the wand brushed Robleh on the shoulder for him to stand up first, a traditional mark of esteem for the Kikatu institutional memory. Robleh invited the crowd to rise: "On your feet, Kikatu!"

Before long, thousands of men and women were on their feet as the word reached them at different intervals, for all to see four drenched but smiling men scramble out of the water hole. The Kikatu had secured one lifeline: water. The other was grazing.

You'd expect them to burst into song. They did not; instead they trooped quietly in front of the chief and the elders and

made their way home for a late breakfast of fresh milk and millet, their staple food. Water had sanctified their lives.

His massive paunch heaving while riding on camelback, Double-chins hove into sight, having deliberately avoided the waterhole ceremony for the simple reason that he would not prostrate. Trousers bursting at the seams, the teeth could do with some attention. His rural cousins, especially Runti, made little effort to conceal their contempt for his ilk, effete, devious and totally untrustworthy as they were. It was heartily reciprocated. To urbanites living in cities up north, the rural yokels were good only for providing logs, charcoal, hides and skins and the odd opportunity for the urban elite to chill out in rainy seasons away from the tumult of city life. In any case, the guys spoke like old prophets. Urban and rural Kikatus had little in common except their common ancestry. Double-chins disembarked.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t make it,” he lied to Runti.

The reply came after an inordinately long time: “No matter.”

“Sorry.”

The chief swung her horse and rode away.

“Must be a better way of making a living than dealing with savages,” he told himself.

Omer and J lost no time organizing their own relays of men to collect hides and skins. Clean living, they called it. From dawn to dusk, among their other chores, they made sure that their hides and skins were properly scrapped, salted and stowed away. Eventually Omer would take them to Beled, the nearest market town, for sale.

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