

Genre: A SHORT STORY

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HITTING A GOAT by Naomi Kimonye (English Version)

"My fellow villagemates, the footprints have vanished at the entrance of our village, again..." The chief posed and sized the villagers. He scrutinized their reaction. They were angry, pissed off, and shocked. Murmurs grew. He could see their intense eye contact. They clenched their jaws. Not again! It was the third time the white man's cow footprints had vanished at the entrance of Kiundu village in three months. Each time, the villagers had to contribute to pay the white man; that was the rule.

"You all know the rule..." said the chief as he watched their reaction. They were gravely disappointed.

"No!" the villagers shouted in unison.

"We're so tired. This time, the culprit must be punished." One of the villagers shouted. The rest supported his thinking. Men, women, and youths all shouted.

"Let's hit the goat!" they all shouted. "Let's swallow our pride and go back to our culture."

The Kiundu village had stopped hitting the goat as a way of searching for the criminals. When the last ritual took place ten years ago, a family of twenty people perished. You see, there was a disagreement on a piece of land. Two families claimed ownership of the prime piece of land on the hill, and no one was willing to let go. They went to Kiama. The Kiama gave the two families a goat to hit. Two months later, Mutuma (the guilty one) went crazy. His three wives died mysteriously. His ten children went missing. His grandchildren were not spared either. And that was the downfall of Mutama's family. Though justice was served, they felt that the gods had gone overboard. 'Couldn't they have spared the innocent children?' they wondered. But the elders reminded them that in such cases, no one has the privilege of being spared. The entire family suffers the consequences of hitting a goat. The incident scared the village, and whenever there was a misunderstanding, they sought other lenient methods of settling the disputes since they dreaded the outcome of hitting a goat. Sometimes they took their cases to the white man's court, a decision that was criticized by the entire community. They were accused of disregarding the community council of elders. As time went on, the naughty villagers started taking advantage of the situation. Rules and regulations started being broken. The morals started decaying, and the rain started beating down on the village.

This time around, they had had enough. It dawned on them that their traditions were more important than the civilization they were struggling with. In that meeting, a unanimous decision was made. They were to hit a goat as soon as possible. They all went back home to prepare for the ritual. Each family was to be represented by one family member. The Kiama was notified and went out to search for the perfect goat.

“There goes our funeral! What are we going to do? You assured me that hitting a goat was a dead practice. See, they have raised it, and we are so dead. Are we all going to die like the Mutuma family did?” Kirimi, the eldest son of Githinji, asked.

“Shh! Don’t shout. There is no need to let the cat out of the bag. You want the entire village to know that we stole the white man’s cow?” Githinji told his son.

“Soon, it will cease being a secret. After the ritual, we will be exposed and then suffer the consequences. My brothers and sisters are innocent...”

“Stop it, Kirimi! I have everything under control. I am a clever man. I inherited my father’s sharp brain. Nothing bad will happen. Now go to bed. Tomorrow is a long day for the entire village. There is a ritual to be conducted by Kiama. I can’t wait to see the Kiama fail yet another mission. Our family is clever.” Githinji said with a weird smile.

The following day, early in the morning, a young goat was presented by Kiama to the villagers. Every family was well represented. Githinji’s family was represented by five year old Mutwiri, who had no idea what was happening. The shabby little boy was so proud to be the chosen one among his family members. He longed for his chance to hit a goat, and when the time came, he happily did it with a smile. They all hit the goat one at a time as they swore, “If my family is responsible for stealing the cow, let us all die like this goat!” Afterwards, the kiama took the goat and sacrificed it.

Days passed, weeks and even months, nothing happened. No family was affected. That was unusual. Villagers thought that the ritual had failed and that their ancestors had abandoned them. But in Githinji’s family, something happened. The young Mutwiri was found dead two days after the ritual. Githinji concealed this matter. Mutwiri was secretly buried. When asked, they all said that he went to visit a relative who lived far away.

“Baba, how come it’s only Mutwiri who suffered the consequences of our action?” Kirimi asked his father.

“Children born out of wedlock are not considered members of a family, so their mistakes can’t affect the entire family. Let’s just say that your brother happens to be a collateral damage.” Githinji proudly explained to his son.

Some villagers suspected Githinji's family. They decided to report the matter to the Kiama and tabled their strong evidence, including the sudden disappearance of Mutwiri. Githinji denied every accusation.

"Chief, let's go to *Kithirine*! Leave this matter to Njuri Ncheke. It's time we respect our league of justice." One of the elders suggested. The kiama had a discussion, and they decided to forward the case to Njuri Ncheke.

"Baba, what are we going to do. Now the matter is in the Supreme Court. These ones are powerful. We will surely be cursed," Kirimi complained.

"Don't worry, my son. I'm a clever man. This time, your brother Koome will hit the goat. He'll be our collateral damage," Githinji explained proudly.

"He was also born out of wedlock?" Kirimi asked his father, who nodded his head, giving him a weird smile.

The Njuri Ncheke didn't ask the villagers to hit the goat, but instead, each homestead was to surrender a piece of grass that was pulled out of the thatched roof. The entire process was well supervised; there was no room for cheating. Kirimi trembled on the rustling roof while he was pulling the grass from his father's house roof as one of the elders watched. Before the ritual was conducted, the villagers were given a chance to repent.

"Let's go and repent; we risk our family getting into a deep hole that no one will get us out of." Kirimi intoned; his mind was in turmoil.

"Nothing will happen. Be patient. I'm a clever man," Githinji assured his son articulately.

The ritual was conducted immediately. Njuri Ncheke cursed the guilty persons for disturbing the village peace. This time, the villagers were hopeful that the culprit would be brought to justice. As they were heading back home, Kirimi collapsed and died on the road. Githinji started shouting like a mad man, removing his clothes, including the inner ones. Everybody ran away from him. Two days after Kirimi's burial, Kirimi's mother and two sisters were hit by a cow, the very one that had been stolen from the white man. Within a week, the Githinji's had perished!

