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OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

Kunapipi

Volume 6 | Issue 3

Article 13

1984

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Recommended Citation

Maseko, Bheki, Mamlambo, *Kunapipi*, 6(3), 1984.

Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol6/iss3/13>

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Abstract

Mamlambo is a kind of snake that brings fortune to anyone who accommodates it. One's money or livestock multiplies incredibly. This snake is available from traditional doctors who provide instructions regarding its exploitation. Certain necessities are to be sacrificed in order to maintain it. Sometimes you may have to sacrifice your own children, or go without a car or clothes. It all depends on the instructions of the doctor concerned.

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The duties involved are so numerous that some people tend to forget some of them. A beast must be slaughtered from time to time, and failing to comply with the instructions results in disaster. It is said that this monster can kill an entire family always starting with the children and leaving its owner for last.

Getting rid of this fortune snake is not an easy task when one has had enough of luck and sacrificing. Some say a beast must be slaughtered, then the entire carcass must be enfolded with the skin and thrown away. This is done in the presence of an indigenous doctor who performs the necessary ritual to the end.

Someone will come along, pick up a shiny object, and Mamlambo is his. There are many things said about this monster.

Here is an account of how Sophie acquired Mamlambo and what happened to her.

Sophie Zikode was a young, pretty, ebony-faced woman with a plump and intact moderate body. Ever since she came to stay in the Golden City to work as a domestic servant, she never had a steady boyfriend. The only man who lasted longer than any other was Elias Malinga who was from Ermelo. He was the first man she met when she came to Johannesburg and he was the only man she truly loved.

She was so obsessed with love that she readily abandoned any possessions or habits that Elias disliked. In spite of the priority his children and wife in Ermelo enjoyed, she was still prepared to marry Elias Malinga without the slightest intention of disrupting his marriage during their love affair.

One day, after a quarrel, Elias went away and never came back again. She phoned his place of employment to be told by a friend of Elias that he (Elias) had had enough of her. She never heard from him ever again.

After Elias, Sophie never again had a steady boyfriend. They all deserted her after two or three months. But it no longer hurt. The only name that haunted her day and night was Elias.

Ever since Elias left her she had never loved anybody else. All she wanted now was a husband she could be loyal to. But she just could not find one. Then along came Jonas, a tall, well built Malawian who was much more considerate than any of the other men.

For the first time in her young life a thought came into her mind. She must consult a traditional doctor for help. She wanted to keep Jonas forever. She must see Baba Majola first thing in the morning.

The following morning Sophie visited Baba Majola who was a street cleaner. The old man listened sympathetically to her problem while he swept rubbish out of a gutter. He told her to return at four in the afternoon. Sophie was there on time.

Baba Majola gave her a smelly sticky stuff in a bottle. He told her to rub her whole body with it before the boyfriend came, and to put it under the pillow when they slept. The poor girl agreed amicably.

She did exactly as she had been told to do. She felt guilty as the atmosphere became tense in the little room.

They ate in silence as the clock on the small table ticked away, disturbing the deep silence. Jonas was not his usual self today. He was quiet in a strange manner.

They were sleeping for some minutes when Jonas felt something peculiar under the pillow. It felt cold and smooth.

'Sophie, Sophie,' he called, shaking her gently. 'What is this under the pillow?'

Sophie had felt the strange object soon after they had climbed into bed. But she had been scared to ask Jonas what it was.

'I don't know,' she replied pretending to be sleepy. 'Switch on the light, let's have a look.'

With a trembling hand Jonas fumbled for the switch. 'Gosh, what a big snake!'

Jonas was the first to jump out of bed. Sophie followed. They fiddled with the door until it was open and ran into the brightly lit street.

Semi-naked, they knocked at the servant's room of a house in the neighbourhood to wake up a friend of Sophie's. Sophie's friend was very stunned to find them in that manner.

Quickly they explained the situation and together they went back to

Sophie's room. Through the window they could see the snake, lying across the bed. Sophie was very scared, but Jonas, Christ! Jonas, he could hardly speak.

Realising that things were bad, Sophie decided to tell the whole truth. She told Jonas she did it 'because I wanted to keep you forever'. They decided to go to a traditional doctor who stayed a few streets away.

They knocked and after waiting awhile, the doctor answered. He opened the door but quickly closed it again. They heard him say: 'Wait outside there. I can sense something melancholy.'

They could hear the indigenous doctor saying something in a strange language, and the smell of burning muti came to them in full force.

He began to moan as if speaking to gods in a faraway land. He then opened the door and inquired what their problem was. Sophie retold her story.

'Oh, my girl. What you have in your room is Mamlambo,' he shuddered.

'What? Mamlambo!' cried Sophie. 'Oh God, what have I done to deserve such punishment? What big sin have I committed to be punished in this manner?' Tears streamed continuously down her cheeks.

'Crying won't solve the problem, my dear girl,' intervened the doctor in broken Zulu. 'The only solution is to get rid of the snake, and I need your co-operation to do that. I'll give you a suitcase to take to your room, and the snake...'

'What!' cried Sophie. 'Must I go back to that room again? Oh, no, not me, I'm sorry.'

'The choice is yours, my girl. You either keep it or get rid of it. The sooner the better because if you don't it will be with you wherever you go. It is your snake. The witchdoctor was tired of it so he transferred it to you. So you are duty bound to transfer it to someone else or keep it.'

'Transfer it to someone else! Oh no! Why don't we throw it into the river or somewhere,' Sophie grumbled.

'You can't. Either you transfer it, or you keep it. Do you want my help or what?' asked the doctor in a businesslike manner.

'Yes.' Sophie agreed in a tired voice, eyeing her friend, Sheila and the timid Jonas, with the 'I hate to do it' look.

The traditional doctor took a large suitcase from the top of the wardrobe, put some muti inside and burnt it. He moaned again as if speaking to gods they could not see. He chanted on in this manner for what seemed like ages.

'You'll take this suitcase to your room and put it next to your bed. The snake will roll itself into the suitcase.' He saw that Sophie was doubtful so

he added: 'It's your snake. It won't harm you.' He continued: 'You will then go to a busy place and give it to someone. That you will figure out for yourself.'

They all went back to Sophie's room. The big snake was still there. Having told herself that 'come what may', Sophie tip-toed into the room and put the suitcase next to the bed.

Slowly, as if it were smelling something, the snake lifted its head, slid into the suitcase and gathered itself into a neat coil.

Her mind was obsessed with Johannesburg station where she would give Mamlambo to someone for good. She walked quickly towards the taxi rank, impervious to the weight of the suitcase.

She did not want to do this to anyone but she had no option.

Remembering that taxis were scarce after eight, she quickened her pace. She saw a few police cars patrolling the area, probably because of the high rate of housebreaking in the area, she thought.

It was while she was daydreaming at the bus stop that she realised the car at the traffic lights was a patrol car headed in her direction. Should she drop the suitcase and run? But they had already seen her and she would not get far. How will she explain the whole thing to the police? Will they believe her story? The news will spread like wildfire that she's a witch? What would Elias think of her?

'What are you doing here at this time?' asked the passenger policeman.

'I'm waiting for a taxi, I'm going to the station,' answered Sophie, surprised that her voice was steady.

'We don't want to find you here when we come back,' commanded the policeman eyeing the suitcase. The car screeched away.

She was relieved when the taxi appeared. The driver loaded the suitcase in the boot asking what was so heavy. She simply told him it was groceries.

There were two other passengers in the taxi who both got off before the taxi reached the city.

'Are you going to the station?' inquired the driver inquisitively.

'No, I'm going to the bus terminus,' Sophie replied indifferently.

'I know you are going to the station and I'm taking you there,' insisted the man.

'You can't take me to the station,' said Sophie, indignant. 'I'm going to Main street next to the bus terminus.'

Ignoring her he drove straight to the station, smiling all the way. When they reached the station he got out of the car and took the suitcase from the boot.

Sophie paid him and gestured that she wanted her suitcase. But the man ignored her.

‘To which platform are you going? I want to take you there.’

‘I don’t want your help at all. Give me my suitcase and leave me alone,’ she urged, beginning to feel real hot under the collar.

‘Or are you going to the luggage office?’ mocked the man going towards the brightly lit office.

Sophie was undecided. Should she leave the suitcase with this man and vanish from the scene. Or should she just wait and see what happened? What was this man up to? Did he know what was in the suitcase or was he simply inquisitive? Even if she bolted he would find her easily. If only she had brought someone with her.

Suddenly she was overwhelmed by anger. Something told her to take her suitcase from the man by force. He had no business to interfere in her affairs. She went straight into the office, pulled the suitcase from between the man’s legs and stormed out.

Stiff-legged she walked towards the station platform feeling eyes following her. She zig-zagged through the crowds, deaf to the pandemonium of voices and music blaring from various radios. She hoped the taxi driver wasn’t following her but wouldn’t dare look back to see.

‘Hey you, girl! Where do you think you’re going?’ It was the voice of the taxi driver.

She stopped dead in her tracks without turning. She felt a lump in her throat and tears began to fall down her cheeks. She was really annoyed. Without thinking she turned and screamed at the man.

‘What do you want from me! What on earth do you want!’

With his worn out cap tipped to the right and his hands deep in his khaki dustcoat pocket, the smiling man was as cool as ever. This angered Sophie even more.

‘You are running away and you are trying to erase traces,’ challenged the taxi driver indifferently, fingering his cap time and again.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked a policeman who had been watching from a distance.

‘This man has been following me from the bus rank and is still following me. I don’t know what he wants from me,’ cried Sophie.

‘This woman is a liar. She boarded my taxi and she’s been nervous all the way from Kensington. I suspect she’s running away from something. She’s a crook,’ emphasised the taxi driver looking for approval at the crowd that had gathered around them.

‘You are a liar! I never boarded your taxi and I don’t know you. You

followed me when I left the bus rank.’ Sophie wept, tears running freely down her cheeks.

‘Let her open the suitcase let’s see what’s inside.’ Sheepish Smile went for the suitcase.

‘All right. All right.’ The policeman intervened. ‘Quiet everybody. I do the talking now. Young man,’ he said, ‘do you know this woman?’

‘I picked her up at Kens...’

‘I say do you know her?’

‘Yes, she was in my taxi...’

‘Listen young man,’ said the policeman beginning to get angry. ‘I’m asking you a straight forward question and I want a straight forward answer. I’m asking you for the last time now. I-say-do-you-know-this-woman?’ He pointed emphatically at Sophie.

‘No, I don’t know her,’ replied Sheepish Smile reluctantly, adjusting his cap once again.

‘Did she offend you in any manner?’

‘No,’ he replied shamefaced.

‘Off you go then. Before I arrest you for public disturbance,’ barked the policeman pointing in the direction from which the man had come. Then he turned to Sophie.

‘My child, go where you are going. This rascal has no business to interfere in your affairs.’

Relieved, she picked up her suitcase, thanked the policeman and walked towards platform fourteen as the policeman dispersed the people and told them to mind their own business.

Platform fourteen. The old lady grew impatient. What’s holding him? she thought. She came bi-monthly for her pension pay and each time the taxi dropped them on the platform, her son would go to the shop to buy food for the train journey home. But today he was unusually long in coming back.

These were the thoughts going through her mind when a young, dark, pretty woman approached her.

‘Greetings, gogo,’ said the young woman, her cheeks producing dimples.

‘Greetings, my child,’ answered the old lady looking carefully at this young pretty woman who was a symbol of a respectable makoti.

‘When is the train to Durban departing?’ asked Sophie, consulting her watch.

‘At ten o’clock.’

The conversation was very easy with the loquacious old lady. The cars and people on the platform increased.

‘Excuse me, gogo, can you look after my luggage while I go to the shop? I won’t be long.’

‘Okay, okay, my child,’ agreed the old lady pulling the suitcase nearer.

She quickly ascended the steps. By the time she reached the top she was panting. To her surprise and dismay, here was Elias shaking hands with another man. They chatted like old friends who hadn’t seen each other for a long time.

Sophie stood there confused. Fortunately Elias’ back was turned on her and the place was teeming with people. She quickly recovered and mingled with the crowd. Without looking back she zig-zagged through the crowded arcade.

She was relieved when she alighted from the bus in Kensington. She had nearly come face to face with Elias Malinga. Fortunately he was cheerfully obsessed with meeting his friend. She was scared all the way to the bus terminus, but more so for the taxi driver. Now something else bothered her. The old lady? Who was she? Sophie felt as if she knew, or had at least seen the woman somewhere. She searched into the past, but couldn’t locate it.

What will happen to the suitcase? Will the old lady take it?

And Elias? What was he doing there? She suddenly felt hatred for Elias. He had never pitied her, and it was worse when she phoned his place of employment to be a laughing stock to his friends. She became angry with herself to have allowed her life to be dominated by love that brought no peace or happiness, while Jonas was there giving all the love and kindness he possessed. For the first time she fell in love with Jonas. But will he still accept her? If only he could ask her to marry him. She would not do it for the sake of getting married. She would be marrying a man she truly loved.

Jonas and the Nyasa doctor were seated on the bed when Sophie came in. Sophie was surprised to see all Jonas’ belongings packed up.

‘Are you leaving me, Jonas?’ Sophie whispered in a shaky voice.

‘No, darling. My father wants me back in Malawi because he can no longer handle the farm by himself. And I would be very happy to take you along with me.’

‘But I don’t have a passport. How can I go to Malawi without one? And besides, my parents won’t know where I am.’

‘We are in fact not going today. We will negotiate with your parents

next Saturday,' said Jonas pointing at the doctor who sat quietly on the bed, nodding time and again.

It was a cool sunny Saturday when the doctor took Sophie and Jonas to Jan Smuts airport in his small car. Sophie was going to board a plane for the first time in her life. Jonas had made many trips to see his ailing father who wanted him to take over the farm. For a long time Jonas had ignored his father's pleas for him to take over the running of the farm. But now he had finally relented.

Through the car window Sophie watched the people moving leisurely in and out of shops. The trees lining Bezuidenhout Valley Avenue and the flowers in the Europeans' gardens looked beautiful and peaceful as they fluttered in the cool morning air. It was as if she was seeing this part of Johannesburg for the first time.

They couldn't identify baba Banda (the doctor) among the crowd that stood attentively on the balcony, as they stared through the plane window.

The flying machine took off and the crowd waved cheerfully. Sophie felt that it was taking her away from the monster that had terrified her a few days ago.

The buildings below became smaller as the aeroplane went higher, until the undersurface turned into a vast blue sky.

She wondered where in one of those houses, was Mamlambo. But could never guess that it had become the property of Elias. Yes, after Elias had chatted to his friend, he went back to his mother.

'Whose case is this, Mama?'

'A young girl's. She asked me to look after it for her until she returned. But I don't know what's happened to her.'

'Well, if she doesn't come back I'll take it.'