

Aunt Mavo's Labours

A Story from Mozambique

ALEXANDRE SILVA DUNDURO

L'accès à l'eau est un problème majeur en Mozambique. Quoique que ce pays soit traversé par plusieurs rivières, l'eau est difficilement abordable. Plusieurs communautés n'ont pas accès à l'eau potable même si la rivière est à proximité. C'est un éternel dilemme. Si quelques communautés éloignées des cours d'eau doivent parcourir des kilomètres pour chercher l'eau, il y en d'autres qui habitent près des rivières et qui sont confrontées aux crues durant la saison des pluies ou encore craignent les crocodiles. La situation est encore plus précaire pour les femmes les plus vulnérables, celles qui habitent les régions rurales. Le partage du travail est une forme d'inégalité, parce que sexuelle. Les femmes doivent accomplir les travaux les plus pénibles et multiples comme cultiver la terre, chercher l'eau et s'occuper des enfants.

It is morning in the remote village of Manhetché and the sun announces his brilliance. This is how it is in Manhetché during the summer. The sun castigates all that is before him. Almost no one can withstand the heat, and it is only six in the morning. There are murmurs everywhere as each family in the village begins to rise.

A few moments later, many people begin their habitual activities. Women and men, girls and boys are scurrying about. They are all concerned with their daily business, all except Aunt Mavo. Since the sun came up, Aunt Mavo has been leaning against a leafy cashew tree in the middle of her backyard.

Aunt Mavo is tired. She cannot take on any tasks that require excessive of physical effort. Yesterday she was at the river all day long, washing clothes. Aunt Mavo, and many other women in that village, as well as in other rural areas of Mozambique, walks for miles every day searching

for water. Water! This is a precious liquid that is lacking in Manhetché, even though the Búzi River is nearby.

Aunt Mavo knows she is the one who has to go to the river to fetch water, so she will have to walk for six miles carrying a bucket on her head. When she thinks about that distance she starts to feel faint, she sweats, and she cries. She suffers inside. She thinks and rethinks: "I am tired. Yesterday, the bucket was too heavy. I will not be able to go to the river today." But Aunt Mavo prefers to talk to herself, to complain only to herself. Aunt Mavo knows that if she discuss this openly with her husband, she will be frowned upon by the rest of the community.

"There are certain activities that only women can do." This is the dominant thinking in the community. She thinks and rethinks: "Is it necessary to defy my husband and ask him to go to the river?" She knows this can have serious consequences. But she decides to go ahead with the bold decision to confront her husband.

On the other side of the village, there is another huge cashew tree. The cashew tree creates a large shadow, and therefore has been chosen as the place for long banter and drinking sessions among the villagers. This socializing and interaction among men of the community is customary. One of the members of that group is Manuel Guitumbo, husband of Aunt Mavo. Manuel Guitumbo is an uncompromising and very conservative man. He was educated in the tradition of his tribe that defends the supremacy of men in the marriage. He thinks it is sufficient that he is responsible only for the agriculture tasks, and it is normal that his wife must fetch water from the river, take care of children, prepare meals, and also help him with the agriculture tasks.

Under the shadow of cashew tree, Guitumbo is excited, and he laughs, laughs. He is drinking *Khabanga* (a beer produced on the basis of maize) and he takes several gulps. The conversation seems to gain a pace that, in the opinion of the members of the “get-together,” could not be better. But when in the middle of the conversation, Rafel Chimuli, a youth who attends school and has participated in several seminars on gender equality, decides to talk about women’s rights in the community, he is met with a stony silence. Then they all laugh!

“How can I help you, my wife?” Guitumbo asks with a sarcastic tone, paying little attention to his wife’s concerns.

“You have to go to the river to fetch water, I am very tired,” Aunt Mavo replies.

Guitumbo laughs out loud and says: “You want *me* to go to the river! You want *me*, your husband, the man of the house, to go to the river? Are you serious?”

“Precisely!” replies Aunt Mavo firmly. “I want you to help me because I have not enough strength to go to the river to fetch water.”

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“Your school is corrupting your brain, oh boy!” exclaims Mr. Damian Chingule, a veteran of the gatherings under the cashew tree. “We have been gathering and talking here for decades. We drink and we have parties. We talk about community problems, we discuss important matters, but never, never someone come here to tell us that women have the same rights as we do!” Old Damian is visibly annoyed. He grabs in the youth’s glass and gives him a shot of *Khabanga*.

“Don’t try to poison us with these absurd ideas, Rafael!” adds Guitumbo, alarmed and also angry. Other members of the group remain silent and say absolutely nothing. Silence seems, to them, most convenient. Rafael, on another hand, feels limited. He wanted to say something else, but he feels he cannot continue.

While Guitumbo is having a fun with his friends, Aunt Mavo, in her house, all alone, suffers about her dilemma with the water. So she has decided to find her husband and ask him to go to the river. In fact she is now very stimulated by the debate that she heard few days ago on the communitarian radio. The debate was about the gender inequality and women rights. Remembering the debate, Aunt Mavo gains courage to face her husband. She walks over to the cashew tree where he is drinking *Khabanga* with his friends and tries to convince him to go to the river to fetch water the family needs.

When Guitumbo sees his wife approaching, he becomes agitated. It is unusual for women to approach that noble space. “It must be a very serious matter,” he thinks. Aunt Mavo gets closer and closer, and then looking deeply into her husband’s eyes, audaciously says: “We don’t have enough water at home, Guitumbo. I need your help!”

Unfortunately, Aunt Mavo was defeated. She could not convince her husband. It was very hard to hear her husband saying to her face that he is the man of the house and it is not for him to go to the river. It was too difficult to understand that he could be so insensitive. “He can’t see that I’m tired,” Auntie Mavo thinks.

Then Aunt Mavo returns home. She takes a huge bucket and in the company of her daughter, Tina, walks the six miles to the river. Aunt Mavo tells her daughter that she needs to be an independent woman when she grows up, to be someone who defends the rights of other girls and women that need to emancipate themselves. Tina accepts her mother’s advice, nodding up and down, showing that she agrees with her mother.

The Búzi River is huge, has a permanent flow. Aunt Mavo remembers the times the river was dry. And this is what intrigues Aunt Mavo. “There is so much water, but it’s too far!” A long time ago, Aunt Mavo and her family lived on the edge of Búzi River. Today, she and her family live in the highlands, far from the river, they are avoiding the floods. That’s why Aunt Mavo and the other women of their community are always fatigued; the river is too far now.

The only way to have water is to get it from the river. It is a dangerous because the river is infested with crocodiles. It’s a risk. But Aunt Mavo has to overcome all her fears and leave everything to chance. She is filling her bucket when she suddenly she feels a pressure from below, and pain, a lot of pain, and she screams and screams: “Help! Help! Help...” Tina cannot do anything. She screams too. “Help! Help! Aunt Mavo is under attack by a huge crocodile!” Luckily someone comes to the rescue, someone

who was on the other side of the river, a fisherman who had heard their cries for help.

The fisherman wades into the river, plucks a reed and thrusts it down the throat of the crocodile. The reptile escapes. Aunt Mavo is safe! However she is hurt very hurt. She has lost a leg.

The community is shaken to see the fisherman bringing Aunt Mavo back to the village cradled in his arms.

“What happened? What happened?”

“She was attacked by a crocodile,” the fisherman answers patiently.

The news quickly spreads through the village, and reaches the ears of Guitumbo, who is still drinking *Khabanga* in the shadow of the cashew tree. When he hears the bad news, he runs to his wife. He cannot believe what he sees and he cries. But it’s too late, too late.

Now, nothing can be done. His wife cannot go to the river again to fetch water. He will now have to, reluctantly, do what supposedly only women can do.

Alexandre Silva Dunduro, Mozambican, has a degree in International Relation and Diplomacy. Upon graduation, he started working as consultant on energy and extractive industries in Mozambique before becoming a social activist in a youth social movement in Mozambique. He is also a writer and this year, 2015, in March, he published his first book.

KAY R. EGINTON

Little Cat’s Feet

Big white shoes and little cat’s feet
The answer to everyone’s prayer
Expertise and beauty both desired.
My clinical-looking shoes

And poet’s habits
Combine in healing unison,
“Chime in: Chime in:”.
June, after long winter, brings

Bountiful babies, good health
Maybe. As Wordsworth had it
In “To the Small Celandine”
A spring flower, modest and growing.

Kay R. Eginton is the author of Poems (Penfield Press, 1981). She lives in Iowa City, Iowa.

JOANNA M. WESTON

The Reporter

she found me
wandering the graveyard

she beckoned me from a headstone
with name and dates inscribed
gave no hint of why
she wanted my company
but we sat, her toothless
jaw clacking in the wind

fleshless arms
and finger bones flailed
her manner of death

slow with attendant family
against a background
of coal mines charity soups
squalling kids racking cough
clattering pails
and eighteenth century
masculine morality

while I made notes
for the article
I would never write

Joanna M. Weston’s new collection of poetry, A Bedroom of Searchlights, is forthcoming from Inanna Publications in spring 2016. Her middle-reader, Those Blue Shoes was published by Clarity House Press. Frontenac House of Calgary published her poetry collection, A Summer Father. She has also published an e-book; The Willow Tree Girl can be found at www.1960willowtree.wordpress.com. She is married with two cats, multiple spiders, a herd of deer, and two derelict hen-houses.