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A Kipsigis Parable

A fearless lion killer knows the value of learning a foreign language

by Robert E. Daniels

A born leader, Arap Torgoti had been dubbed Kiruchu (you bulls!) because that was how he had habitually exhorted his fellow Kipsigis back in the days of intertribal warfare with the Masai, another East African people. Although his body was now thin and stooped, it expressed wiry strength, not frailty. Able to walk only with the aid of two long staffs, he would nonetheless snarl at anyone who dared to offer a helping hand. And although his eyesight and hearing were failing, he demanded and received total deference from all who got within ten yards of him. In public his conversations with his first wife, herself in her eighties, were little more than brusque commands, and he called his third wife by the crudest of terms. He would regularly chastise his sons, their wives, or anyone else at the slightest hint of disrespect or inattention. Once, when a nephew came to visit and reached to shake hands with the old man, Kiruchu burst into a tirade about all the times he had visited the man's mother (his own sister), bearing meat, milk, beer, or honey. With

withering scorn he told the nephew that he had no use for his empty hand now, and sent him off in shame, leaving me and the others around deeply embarrassed.

I had been told Kiruchu was at least a generation older than any other elder in the area, and so at our first meeting I had sought to estimate his age. Kiruchu's position in a society organized by age grades—sets of contemporaries who had undergone their initiation as warriors in the same few years—was clear, but translating that information into calendar years was difficult. I thought to ask if he had seen any solar eclipses or comets in his childhood. He answered these questions with patience, and I wrote down the details of his accounts with no idea what they meant (later they confirmed he was in his early nineties). When I also asked if he could describe the first time he had seen a European, Kiruchu made it clear he grasped not only the purpose behind my questions but also my general goal: "Ah, you want to hear about the old days, so that when you return home you can teach

your children how we Kipsigis used to live." It was a small but very gratifying moment; few of the younger men in the community ever came to understand the peculiar trade of the anthropologist.

When Kiruchu was feeling congenial he would respond to my questions with long discourses about whatever it was he wanted to talk about that day. As I struggled to learn the Kipsigis language, I depended heavily upon my assistant, Kimalel, to interpret for me. As men in the community said, I could not "hear" very well. Even when I got the gist of Kiruchu's remarks, I often found him difficult to read emotionally. Once in the midst of a discussion of polygamy, I asked him why Kipsigis men wanted to have many sons. "Because so many of them are disappointments," he shot back.

Kimalel, who like myself was in his mid-twenties, had his own problems translating Kiruchu's archaic turns of phrase and references to customs long since abandoned. Fortunately, Kimalel was quite skillful at dealing with the old man's cantankerousness. During one of our first visits Kiruchu had told us of a night, long ago, when he was awakened by an uproar in his cattle pen. Leaping from his bed, he grabbed his weapons and rushed out. A lioness had jumped the thorn fence and was climbing onto the back of one of his cows. Kiruchu ran into the herd of panicked animals and threw his long-bladed spear into the lioness. She fled, severely wounded. Without waiting for help he chased her through the dark bush until he cornered her and slew her with his short sword. Since hearing that story, Kimalel had found that when Kiruchu was feeling peevish, calling the old man by the honorific nickname Barng'etuny (lion killer) often put him in a talkative mood.

One particular morning, as Kimalel and I sat with Kiruchu, we were joined by two of Kiruchu's sons, Kimabwai and his half-brother Sigilai. More formally each was known as Son of Ng'asura, after another of Kiruchu's nicknames, "the man who



Arap Torgoti, known as Kiruchu (you bulls!)

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speaks his mind regardless of the situation." We were seated, as usual, in the men's area of the homestead yard, on a small grassy knoll under the shade trees. Over to our right was the house of the first of Kiruchu's three wives, Kimabwai's mother, a thin, white-haired woman affectionately known to all by her nickname Komosi. To our left was the house of Kimabwai's wife.

As the youngest son in his mother's house, Kimabwai had stayed on the parental homestead after his older brothers had married and moved into the neighboring communities. Now forty-two, he found it a dubious honor. Other men his age enjoyed a large measure of independence; he also felt he was due respect as a veteran of twelve years' service in the Kenya police. Nevertheless, his father would still send him on errands, issuing instructions in front of others with words more appropriate for a ten-year-old boy.

Nor had life dealt Sigilai an easy role. His mother, the second of Kiruchu's three wives, had died giving birth to him (I wondered if I was the only one who thought it cruel that he was occasionally addressed as "the last born"). As the only son in his mother's house, Sigilai was heir to a third of his father's estate. Moreover,

he had three older sisters whose marriages had brought in cattle reserved for his use. As a consequence, although only in his mid-twenties, Sigilai already had two wives and four small children, more responsibilities than he perhaps wanted. Because Sigilai had acquired wealth so easily, Kiruchu complained that he lacked ambition. "Sigilai never suckled at his mother's breast; from the first day he tasted cow's milk. And so he was spoiled as a child."

That morning the old man seemed more interested in soaking up the warmth of the day than talking, and since he controlled all conversation around himself, even our idle chatter soon faded into silence. I found myself wondering how much hanging around (or "participant observation" as we anthropologists like to dignify it) I would have to do to make any headway in my research.

After a while another visitor entered the homestead, a man in his sixties. I didn't know him but assumed he was a neighbor, as he was dressed in a simple shirt and khaki shorts typical of people in the countryside. He shook hands and exchanged greetings, first with Kiruchu and then with each of the rest of us, but as was typical of Kipsigis proprieties, there were

no formal introductions or volunteered explanations concerning the purpose of the visit. After the initial pleasantries, the visitor and Kiruchu engaged in several minutes of involved discussion. Then, after chatting briefly with the women and children in the house, the visitor left, and Kiruchu went back to his daydreams.

During this time my smugness about my progress in the Kipsigis language had evaporated. Although the exchange between the visitor and Kiruchu sounded like other conversations to me, I had not been able to pick up a single word of it. Nor had there been a chance for me to turn to Kimalel for help or for him to speak over his elders to talk with me. My curiosity, as unseemly as it was, had to be satisfied, so I asked Kimalel, in an aside, what it was all about. He replied that he didn't have the slightest idea, since the two had been conversing in Masai!

Hearing that, I simply had to ask Kiruchu how he came to know the speech of his traditional enemies, the Masai. That seemed to revive the old man, and he started in on a story that soon held the rapt attention of the two sons, a couple of young grandsons who dared to approach and sit quietly on the edge of the cluster of men, and Kimalel, who did his best to

whisper a running translation into my eager ear.

Relations between the Masai and the Kipsigis were not always hostile, Kiruchu explained; periods of cattle raiding, which often followed the initiation of a new set of warriors in one tribe or the other, alternated with periods of truce, during which trade took place. He had been taught the Masai language not by them but by one of the great Kipsigis war leaders of his day. His teacher valued trading livestock and exchanging grain for milk with the purely pastoral Masai; he also valued detecting as much as he could about Masai intentions. Scouts were sent openly to trade in times of peace and surreptitiously to eavesdrop in times of war. Kiruchu had been one of those men willing to risk his life in this way. He was also proud that he had developed a formal trading partnership with a Masai elder, a man to whom he had presented a young bull and other animals much as every Kipsigis herder establishes cattle partnerships with fellow tribesmen scattered over wide areas.

One time, Kiruchu went on, in the early years of his marriage to Komosi, the old woman now in her house preparing food for us, he took her on a trip to visit his Masai partner. This was long before Kimabwai and his older brothers had been born, he added, glaring at Kimabwai seated at his knee. Armed as usual with his spear and sword (but not, of course, carrying his war shield), he escorted her through many miles of empty scrub, inhabited only by wild animals, to the Masai plains. Upon their arrival they were greeted by the elder, who called some of his wives to escort Komosi into one of the houses that ringed the cattle pen. The elder told Kiruchu to wait by the gate while he went into another house to order preparations for entertaining his guest.

As Kiruchu stood there, he noticed a small group of young Masai warriors seated on the other side of the pen, braiding each other's red-ochred hair. They noticed him as well, and started talking about him. "What is that Kipsigis doing, standing there with a spear, in our land?" one of them wondered. "I don't know," said another, "but I hear they carry dull weapons." "And fight like women," added a third. The talk quickly escalated until one of them suggested, "Let's see how well this one fights," and the warriors stood up and started toward Kiruchu menacingly.

At this point Kiruchu could hold his tongue no longer. Raising his spear, he shouted at them in their language "Come on, you Masai. I know what you're saying. You are many and you will win, but I'll kill a few of you before I'm done, and there

are many more Kipsigis behind me than there are Masai behind you!"

Hearing the raised voices, the Masai elder came out of the house. On seeing the situation, he broke up the face-off, cursing at the young men and driving them off. Then he apologized to Kiruchu for the foolishness of youth and invited him to eat and get down to business.

As we sat there, enthralled by this unexpected tale of adventure from long ago, Kiruchu turned and fixed his two sons with a piercing look. "I tell you," he said, "if I had been a coward, like some people, I would have tried to run and been killed by a spear in the back. And if I had been a fool, like some people, and had not known their language, I would have stood there and been killed without understanding what they had been saying. But I am not a coward and I am not a fool. I know the Masai language, and that is why I am alive today, and why your mother is alive today, and why you are alive today."

And with that Kiruchu called to Komosi in her house to bring out a special treat he had been saving. She came over to us with a large milk gourd and several enameled mugs. "This is not curdled milk," he explained, mentioning a common food that I had not yet acquired a liking for. "This is something better," he went on, holding the beaded leather cap tightly on the neck of the gourd and shaking its contents. He turned to Kimalel and described the treat by a term I did not know. But even Kimalel did not know the ancient word and had to ask for an explanation. Kiruchu's response was, "curdled milk and blood," a traditional food among East African pastoralists but now almost never prepared by the modern Kipsigis.

For me the slight ethnographic thrill of the moment was quickly replaced by trepidation as Kiruchu selected the three largest mugs and carefully placed them on the grass in front of him. He smiled and leaned forward to pour. My throat and stomach tightened as a thick, lumpy, brown liquid flecked with charcoal glugged from the gourd to the very brim of each mug. "This is for my friends Robert and Kimalel," Kiruchu proclaimed, passing me the first mug, "not for fools." While his two sons sheepishly withdrew, Kimalel, the interpreter, and I, the struggling language student, shared the treat with the speaker of a foreign tongue. The rich, salty, sour mixture neither stuck in my throat nor offended my taste.

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