Fire on the Mountain

Ethiopia

During his adolescence Amadi had heard his father say many times: 'Have no master or boss, always try to work for yourself, for few are just men who treat those under their command well'.

Yes, he had many times heard those words from his father, but he had never given them greater importance than any other family sermon.

However, he began to understand them the day when the rich merchant, for whom his father worked as a cook, said to him:

'I am going to reduce the pay that I have been giving you in recent years to a third. More and more people are coming looking for a job, people willing to work for half of what you receive. But, since your meals are tasty, and I'm now used to them, I'm going to do you the favour of not firing you and will pay you a little more than I would pay one of those other cooks.'

And faced with the cook's look of frustration, the boss added severely:

'I'm being generous! Take it or leave it! There are people out there willing to fill your job for much less money.'

When Amadi thought about what had happened, he understood that he had to leave the family home and stop being a burden to his parents. He had to look for a job, even if it was in another part of the country, far from Guragé. But he would have to do it without

announcing his departure because his father and mother would never let him go, knowing that he was doing it to make life easier for them.

So, one moonless night, when no sound could be heard in the house, or in the street, Amadi took the bundle he had packed before going to bed and, with great stealth left the house and walked towards Oramia. Maybe there, he thought, he could find a job.

So, shortly after arriving, a wealthy local merchant, owner of a large area of land, hired him to work in his fields. It did not take long for the merchant to realise that Amadi was a good worker, and he was sure he would have had him in his fields for many, many years. But Amadi remembered his father's words, and he dreamt of the day when he would have his own land and would not have to answer to anyone. Unfortunately, society was not made for the poor, and his pay was so low that he could barely survive on it. As a result, he slowly went into debt.

'If I can't do something soon, I'll spend my life serving men like this merchant,' he thought to himself, 'and I'll get more and more indebted to moneylenders.'

One day, with the onset of winter and the first icy winds hitting the region, he heard his boss comment jokingly with his foremen:

'With nights as cold as these, I'd be able to bet anything that no one is capable of staying a night atop Mount Sululta, and surviving the ordeal.'

'Would you bet twelve acres of land, a house and a cow, if someone took up your challenge?' Amadi's voice was suddenly heard to say.

He felt that a unique opportunity to break out of the vicious cycle of poverty was presenting itself.

The merchant, surprised by the daring intervention of the young man, did not want to back down in front of his foremen, and played along with Amadi's game.

'Of course I'd bet on that!' He answered uneasily. 'So, you dare to stay a night on top of the highest mountain in this region, on Mount Sululta?'

'I'm up for it!' Amadi replied.

'Without a fire to warm you, without food, without water … and naked?' The merchant added in an attempt to force Amadi to recant.

The young man bit his lip and looked at the merchant thoughtfully for a moment.

'Yes, I am willing!' He finally said with determination. 'Tomorrow afternoon I will climb to the top of Mount Sululta and spend the night there.'

But, before he reached his bedroom in the poorest neighbourhood of the city, he had already started to doubt the wisdom of his decision. Luckily, when he got to the house where he was staying, he found his father standing on the street. The man had left his home weeks ago looking for his son in order to ask him to come home, that they could all survive together. Although it had taken him almost a month to find him, he had been able to trace him to the outskirts of Addis Ababa.

Amadi told his father about the mad undertaking he had embarked on. The father listened to his son with a grave expression, and regretted having told him so many times that it was better not to have a master or boss.

'I don't know if I'll survive the night,' Amadi said, lowering his head. 'But, if I survive, I will have my own land and my own house, and I will work for myself,' he added, raising his head proudly.

The father was about to beg his son to give up his endeavour. However, knowing him so well, he saw that there would be nothing in the world capable of making him reverse his decision.

'I will help you,' he finally told him, his eyes brimming with tears. 'I will climb a mountain directly in front of Mount Sululta, a *farsang* away, and light a large bonfire. I know that this fire is not going to be able to warm you, my son, but you must look at my firelight all night. Do not close your eyes for anything in the world, or let fatigue seize you.

Also, as you look at the fire, think of its warmth and think of me, your father, who will be there all night with my eyes fixed on the top of Mount Sululta. If you do so, you will get through the night, no matter how cold the wind that hits you.'

The next day, when afternoon came, two servants of the rich merchant accompanied Amadi to the top of the Sululta. Then, when the sun was about to set, they stripped him naked and left him to his fate, retracing their path to the base of the mountain. There they were posted to watch and make sure that no one went up to help him.

The moonless night fell, and the stars appeared Amandi's high over his head, and a bitter, cutting wind rose to lacerate his flesh and enter his bones.

'I'm afraid I'm going to die here,' Amadi thought with a shudder.

But at that moment, on the top of the mountain that rose on the other side of the valley, he saw a flames ignite, which grew to become a great bonfire. His father must be watching him from there.

He tried to smile at his father, despite knowing he couldn't see him in the dark, but he only managed to produce a grimace from his freezing face.

As the night wore on, the wind grew colder and sharper, and the rock on which he had found to curl up on felt as cold as water from a well. But Amadi kept his gaze fixed on the fire that his father was feeding over the long hours, and tried to imagine him carrying more and more firewood to warm his soul, since he could not warm his body.

In the darkest hours of the night there was a moment when he thought he would not make it, and he was about to close his eyes and finally give himself up to death. But, just at that moment, a great flare emerged from the bonfire that his father continued to tend. Once again Amadi imagined him adding wood to the fire, and he felt, again, the love of his father who, from across the valley, was trying to reach him and warm him.

Finally, with the first light of dawn, the wind began to wane. Amadi thought that perhaps he could make it through the night on top of the Sululta, as he struggled with the cold and exhaustion, trying not

to close his eyes at the last moment and thinking about how his father must be looking across to where he was, even if he couldn't see him.

Shortly before the sun rose over the horizon, the merchant's servants made their way to the top of the mountain, convinced that they would find a corpse stiff from the cold. But, when they arrived, they were amazed to see Amadi, naked, with his arms outstretched, welcoming the sun. Overwhelmed by the young man's prowess, they returned his clothes apologetically.

When they reached the merchant's house, the merchant opened his eyes in disbelief and began to question his servants. He wanted to check whether Amadi had cheated or someone had helped him. Seeing that he was not getting the answer he wanted he turned to Amadi and asked:

'How did you do it?'

'I just kept watching a fire on a distant mountain.' Amadi replied, exhausted.

'What? You watched a fire on a mountain?' The merchant snapped furiously. 'Well then, you've lost the bet. You will not receive land or a house or a cow … although I will be generous with you and allow you to continue working for me.'

He said this because Amadi was a hard worker, and it was good for the merchant to have him among his labourers for such a small wage.

'But how could I have been warmed by that fire?' Amadi protested. 'It was on the other side of the valley!'

'You cheated,' the greedy merchant insisted, 'and therefore you lost the bet.'

Considering the matter settled, the merchant left the room, leaving Amadi alone with the servants.

Amadi felt defeated. The tremendous sacrifice of spending the night naked on the top of Mount Sululta had done him no good. When he returned to his lodge, lifeless and hopeless, and found his father, he told him about everything that had happened.

'Take the matter before a judge,' his father advised him, 'but you'd better do it yourself; because, if your boss sees me, he could make up a story, saying that I have helped you to cheat him.'

Amadi went before the judge and explained what had happened, told him about the bet and his long night in the mountain, and explained why the rich merchant did not want to comply with the agreement. The judge summoned the merchant, who arrived accompanied by the two servants. They testified that Amadi had said that he had been watching a fire on a mountain on the other side of the valley. Finally, after hearing both parties, the judge ruled:

'Young man, you have lost the bet, as your boss established the condition that you should spend the night on Mount Sululta … without any fire!'

'But I couldn't get warm with such a distant fire!' Amadi protested. However, the judge's gesture, and the severity of his gaze, silenced him and he bowed his head.

Amadi returned to his father and told him what had happened, finally giving up and accepting that he was doomed to have a life of poverty, under the orders of a ruthless and tricky boss.

'I guessed something like this would happen, my son.' The father confessed. 'Since time immemorial, judges have ruled, with honourable exceptions, in favour of the powerful and against the humblest.'

However, rising to his feet, he added:

'But this fight is not over yet. I have an old friend in Addis Ababa well posted in the city administration, and I'm sure he will help me convince your boss … and the judge.'

A few days later, the friend of Amadi's father invited the wealthy merchant and the judge to a feast at his home. They arrived wearing their finest clothes and accompanied by their servants. They were ushered into a luxurious room and made to sit at a table that was exquisitely arranged, but still lacking delicacies.

The aromas of exquisite dishes began to arrive from the kitchen: the aroma of *watt,* a stew of spiced minced meat, accompanied by

injera, a fine bread cake, and, of course, grilled meats and exotic sauces of all kinds … all producing wonderful smells.

However, time passed and no food was brought from the kitchen. Not only that, their host had disappeared. So that, after their superficial and brief conversations with which they tried to make the wait more comfortable, the merchant and the judge fell into an awkward silence, only accompanied by the exciting smells that came from the kitchen.

Finally, after an extremely long time, the father's friend entered the room, and the judge, with whom he had been more familiar, said to him, very annoyed:

'Me dear friend, why are you doing this to us? You invited us to a feast, but have served us nothing.'

'But can't you smell the food?' Amadi's father's friend asked, as if he didn't understand their annoyance.

'Of course we can smell the delicacies!' The judge replied. 'But smelling is not eating. The aroma of food does not feed!'

'And can you feel warm with a fire on a mountain, a *farsang* away?' Said the host, while Amadi and his father also entered the room.

The judge opened his eyes in surprise and, finally understanding everything, lowered his head in shame, acknowledging his mistake. Meanwhile, the merchant, embarrassed by the situation he had created in his folly, rose to his feet and apologised to Amadi. He declared that Amadi had indeed won the bet and that he would give him twelve acres of land in addition to the promised house and cow as soon as he wrote and signed the documents that proved it.

'Well, then,' said the owner of the house in a more affable tone, 'let's celebrate the fact that we have found justice together with a feast. This will be a delicious feast offered and prepared by Amadi's father.'

A mischievous smile spread across the cook's face, who muttered to his son in a whisper:

'Have no master or boss, Salana. Never have a master or boss, my son.'

From that day on, and on account of having survived until sunrise on the summit of freezing Mount Sululta, Amadi was called Salana: 'sunshine'. ❑

Adaptation dedicated to my father, Benjamin Cutanda, who used to say to my brother and me that of 'Have no master or boss …'

Comments

In The Earth Stories Collection we set ourselves, from the beginning, the obligation that people of Europe or European descent should not make adaptations of stories from traditional peoples of the Americas, Sub-Saharan Africa and Australia. We did not want to risk falling into cultural misappropriation after the immense damage caused by our nations to these peoples over the past centuries.

However, Ethiopia, being in Sub-Saharan Africa, had the immense fortune of not suffering from European colonialism. The only European imposition these peoples suffered was that of the Italian fascist occupation between 1936 and 1941, before the British Army expelled Mussolini's troops during World War II. This is the reason why I have taken the risk of adapting an Ethiopian story, despite the country belonging to Sub-Saharan Africa.

In any case, and as we have stipulated in these matters, if any representative person of a culture or nation, or a recognised custodian of oral tradition, requests that we remove an adaptation belonging to their culture or tradition from the Collection, they only need to tell us.

From what is told in the adaptations of this story, making Amadi –Arha in other versions– come from Guragé, leads to the possibility that the origin of this story can be traced back to the Guragé ethnolinguistic group, from a region which is around 150 miles southwest of Addis Ababa. This people is said to have arrived in the area in the Middle Ages from the north, as part of a Semitic migration. Another theory claims that the Guragé people come from the Tigray region, where the Kingdom

of Axum originated. This was an important trading kingdom which grew between the 1st and 7th centuries A.C.E. According to this theory, the Guragé people were probably descendants of the soldiers of the Axumite Empire, who dominated the entire region of Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Sources

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Associated text of the Earth Charter

> Principle 12c: Honour and support the young people of our communities, enabling them to fulfil their essential role in creating sustainable societies.

Other passages that this story illustrates

> Preamble: The Global Situation.- Communities are being undermined. The benefits of development are not shared equitably and the gap between rich and poor is widening. Injustice, poverty, ignorance, and violent conflict are widespread and the cause of great suffering. An unprecedented rise in human population has overburdened ecological and social systems. The foundations of global security are threatened. These trends are perilous—but not inevitable.
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> Principle 9: Eradicate poverty as an ethical, social, and environmental imperative.

Principle 10a: Promote the equitable distribution of wealth within nations and among nations.