



## The Man Who Stole Maize

*Zulu Nation – South Africa, Lesotho, Zimbabwe and Eswatini*

One day a villager came to see the tribal elder. He told him someone has been stealing his maize, a little at a time, but in the long run it has been adding up. Last night, he had been lurking and seen his neighbour stealing.

The village elder summoned the neighbour to come to see him, asking him if it was true he had stolen the food. The man confessed. The village elder called a community meeting to inform the villagers about the theft and to consult them.

Such a consultation, a *kgotla*, takes place according to rules.

The villagers form a circle. The elder presents the facts to the community without adding anything or passing judgment. The accused is given the opportunity to explain what and why he has stolen. All the villagers are entitled to give their view on the occasion, but only if he or she picks up the talking stick, lying in the middle of the circle. A speaker is not allowed to say whether he agrees or disagrees with a preceding speaker. Division should be avoided. There is never a vote. One should also refrain from repeating what has already been said by someone else. One is only allowed add something to what has not been mentioned yet. So, one must listen very carefully. Together the community is building an optimal picture of what happened. During the meeting the elder remains silent. He only reacts on repetitions and to prevent division into parties. However long it takes, even when it is getting dark and the meeting cannot be continued until the next day, the *kgotla* only ends when no one has anything to add.

The thief said his crop had failed and his family had been without food for some time. By being very frugal with their stock and even by eating the seeds for the next growing season, they survived. Finally, in despair, he had stolen some maize from his neighbour noticing his stock was still considerable. He was ashamed that hunger had driven him this far.

After the consultation was completed and everyone who wanted to say something about the matter had taken the opportunity to do so, the village elder withdrew for a moment to reflect.

When he reappeared in the circle, he said the following to the thief:

‘You have stolen corn, an offense we cannot tolerate. This is very serious. But even more serious is you did not ask any of us for help. We are a community. We help each other. I warn you! If you are ever again in a situation of need and refuse to ask any of us to help, you and your family will be sent away. Because again you prove that you don’t need us.’

Everyone was impressed by the wise judgment of the village elder. However, he wasn’t ready.

‘What bothers me is that, as a community, we did not see this family was starving. We are many. As members of the community, we are obliged to look after each other.

‘How come this has not happened, that we didn’t see it? Or did some of us see it, but kept quiet? Did we wait too long before asking this family about their well-being? In our greetings we express we see each other. Seeing and being seen is of deep significance. We did not see the unfortunate man with his family.

‘Therefore, I condemn the community to feed this man and his family, until they are able to feed themselves with the harvest of their land.’ □

Adapted by Dick de Groot (2022).

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## Comments

Dick de Groot, adapter of this story, has been a teacher, headteacher and education consultant since 1975 in different countries of the Sub-Saharan Africa. Regarding 'The Man Who Stole Maize', de Groot writes:

The story is an adapted version of: 'The stolen cows', in *African Tribal Leadership*, by Willem H.J. de Liefde. In Africa I retold the story many times. I changed the stolen property 'cows' in 'maize'. Stealing cows anonymously is very unlikely in an African village community. I checked this adaptation with some African friends, and they agreed. Everyone knows the cows as members of a family.

Trying to trace the story to an African source, it seems likely to come from the Zulu-people since it is a real Ubuntu-story. On the other hand, it could come from any part of Sub-Saharan Africa, because Ubuntu is well-known under different names. According to another source, Vusumzi MCongo, former political prisoner, and later guide on Robben Island, recognized the story when he was asked about it. MCongo said the prisoners used this and other stories from their oral tradition for the *Indaba*, like the *Kgotla* a way to practice communal decision making, emphasizing the importance of everyone's contribution, -past, present, and future- to the community in its context. (Groot, 2022)

This is, undoubtedly, one of the best stories in The Earth Stories Collection. Just look at the wealth of Earth Charter principles it is able to illustrate within the fields of social justice, democracy, tolerance and participatory and assembly practices. Indeed, this story, as Dick de Groot points out, is a classic history of what might be called the African worldview of Ubuntu. It is, fundamentally, an understanding of the social reality that should be explored in order to build more just and humane societies.

For more information on this, we refer the reader to the section entitled 'The Story of Ubuntu'. It is written by Dick de Groot himself and we published it, in 2022, in volume 2 of The Earth Stories Collection.

## Sources

Direct oral sources.

Groot, D. de (2022 Sep. 2). Remarks 'The story of Ubuntu'. Personal email.

de Liefde, W. H. J. (2002). 'The stolen cows'. In *African Tribal Leadership*. Deventer, Netherlands.

### *Associated text of the Earth Charter*

Principle 13c: Protect the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, peaceful assembly, association, and dissent.

### *Other passages that this story illustrates*

Principle 1b: Affirm faith in the inherent dignity of all human beings and in the intellectual, artistic, ethical, and spiritual potential of humanity.

Principle 2b: Affirm that with increased freedom, knowledge, and power comes increased responsibility to promote the common good.

Principle 3a: Ensure that communities at all levels guarantee human rights and fundamental freedoms and provide everyone an opportunity to realize his or her full potential.

Principle 3b: Promote social and economic justice, enabling all to achieve a secure and meaningful livelihood that is ecologically responsible.

Principle 9: Eradicate poverty as an ethical, social, and environmental imperative.

Principle 9b: Empower every human being with the education and resources to secure a sustainable livelihood, and provide social security and safety nets for those who are unable to support themselves.

Principle 9c: Recognize the ignored, protect the vulnerable, serve those who suffer, and enable them to develop their capacities and to pursue their aspirations.

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

Principle 11c: Strengthen families and ensure the safety and loving nurture of all family members.

Principle 12: Uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well-being, with special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities.

Principle 13: Strengthen democratic institutions at all levels, and provide transparency and accountability in governance, inclusive participation in decision making, and access to justice.

Principle 13b: Support local, regional and global civil society, and promote the meaningful participation of all interested individuals and organizations in decision making.

Principle 16a: Encourage and support mutual understanding, solidarity, and cooperation among all peoples and within and among nations.

Principle 16b: Implement comprehensive strategies to prevent violent conflict and use collaborative problem solving to manage and resolve environmental conflicts and other disputes.

