

KALUME

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This is set in the mid-1840s in Rabai.

His was a peculiar story. Not in the novelty of rebellion, obviously, but in the nature of his subversion. Curled up in a ball was cracked clay and creed. And in it was the story of Johann John Kalume.

The Kaya was a secretive place to say the least. Even the mention of the place elicited a sort of forbidden excitement in people. Of course, very few people had actually ever gone in, at least in the right way. Only elders. Only a few select elders for that matter. Nonetheless, whatever the people had not seen with their eyes had been seen in their mind through the powerful lens of the Rabai stories and traditions.

The gatekeepers of these traditions wore *kangas* and had braided hair. They were grandmothers, mothers and aunts. Often, they would convene in their characteristic coastal unhurriedness and share stories about the sacred forest with each other. Somewhere along the way, as it often is, these stories trickled down to the children, quenching their thirst for the Kaya and its mystery.

“Mama Tetu sneaked into the Kaya to collect twigs for cooking. As soon as Tetu took the first bite of the *muhogo* that his mother had cooked, he could see no more. Can you imagine! All that because of

her laziness in choosing to pick twigs from the nearby Kaya instead of walking the distance to the normal forest! Motherhood is not for the lazy. She should know.”

“*Aisee!* If you try to cut down a branch from a tree, your cutting tool will bounce back and cut your leg.”

“If you let out a sound, even a cough, while in the forest your voice will be taken away from you.”

“Because all ancestors reside in there, if you so much as set a toe in when you have committed any crime that upsets them, even stealing a sickly chicken, you immediately burn in flames.”

The Kaya was special. And rightfully so. Contained in the fortress of intertwined trees and the magic of impenetrable darkness was the intrinsic source of ritual power and the origin of their Rabai cultural identity. Beyond ancestors, spirits and mystic trees, the Kaya housed the Fingo. This was the soul of the Kaya and the community. The community’s Kaya had two Fingo buried. One at the entrance and one at the exit. (So really I should say Fingos. But it sounds off, so I will keep it as Fingo, sounds more 1840s.)

What is the best way to describe a Fingo? Imagine something perceived to be very powerful and mighty shallowly lying unassumingly in random ground. Except in this case it was not random ground. It was holy ground. A Fingo was a protective talisman from Shungwaya, the community’s ancestral home. It was a pottery vessel the size of a fat goat and it housed a cocktail of medicinal herbs that were periodically replaced by the chief elder. The stories about the Kaya never focused on the Fingo, that would be too taboo. Talking about the Fingo would undermine their power. They were simply just there.

Now, Kalume had been told that it was a place of continued frenzy. Never a place that bent into the coastal lull that enveloped the rest of Rabai. In itself it was living. If spirits were alive, they would be alive there. It had been said that in the stillness of night, one could hear chatter and laughter from the Kaya. Crickets were always cricketing, spirits spiriting and sounds sounding. There was always activity. Except on that day there was none. It was still.

Let me not bore you with the details of existentialism, life's meaning and the meaning of identity that often overcomes a young man at some point in time. Instead, I will just say that Kalume was at that point in time. His decision to do the unthinkable was fuelled by a new found knowledge in seeing a structure far larger than he had ever seen stand firm just a few steps away from his homestead. Imposingly, it glistened in this unnaturally bright shade of white. There were holes in the wall perfectly cut out and replaced with clear walls that shone iridescently. On the roof were two things that looked like sticks but were far too perfect to be. One was long and vertical and the other short one lay on it horizontally. One wall had some black inscriptions on it that read: Church Missionary Society (CMS) Rabai. But Kalume could not decipher this. To him they remained intricate designs and he was okay with that. The building's magnificence alone represented to him that whatever lived there was something truly greater if it was housed in such brilliance as opposed to a forest.

He, on a whim, had made the decision to prove, to himself if anything, that the sacredness of the Kaya and the power of the Fingo were after all unwarranted. So that is how he found himself in the unexpected eerie stillness of the Kaya that day.

Breaking the first Fingo at the entrance would have been cowardly. He was a man. He was to venture into the Kaya and break the exit Fingo for this expedition to mean anything of substance to him. He had seen the first Fingo, or what he thought must have been it. (Who really knew what it looked like exactly?) It was buried just a few steps into the Kaya, barely on the boundary between the commoner's space and the holy of holies that was the Kaya. Kalume didn't stop to examine it. His plan was simple, to dash in quickly, break the Fingo, prove to himself that nothing happened and then dash out. After all, behind all the bravery of, in essence, breaking a sacred belief was still a young boy that found discomfort in the embrace of darkness and unexpected stillness.

It was midday, but who could tell? The trees canopied and blocked out even the smallest ray. Kalume instinctively decided against his sprint through the forest. So instead he walked gingerly, holding his breath, ensuring that he did not make the slightest sound. I guess some part of him was scared of losing his voice. He tried to be as vigilant as the darkness afforded him. He felt a few fibrous roots touch his toes and limp leaves tuck themselves between them. He smelt moist soil and sea salt and honey. What was honey doing there? Did the spirits love its gooey sweetness? It was a strange kind of place.

To occupy his mind, he thought about what he should name himself. He would need a new name, surely. One devoid of a link to a culture he was going to disprove. While at this, Johann Ludwig Krapf immediately came to his mind— the *mzungu* who kept visiting his community elders (and anyone who would listen really) talking about someone who died for everybody who has ever lived—at least that was what his translator said he was saying. They all thought he was crazy. Maybe even the translator secretly thought the *mzungu*

was on the lunatic end of the spectrum of sanity. But Johann Ludwig Krapf came to Kalume's mind because he was linked to that white building. So Kalume settled on naming himself Johann. He liked the way it rolled off his tongue, unlike the kinks and knots that the names Ludwig and Krapf had.

Johann Kalume.

Johann Kalume.

He repeated to himself. He liked the sound. He decided to keep the name Kalume as well because he reckoned that sometimes he would forget. And Johann worked well with Kalume anyway.

At last, he hit his foot against something that was not fibrous. It was sturdy. It was the Fingo.

Without thinking too hard, he kicked it hard. He felt and heard a shatter. He stopped in his tracks for a bit. Nothing. He was still there. He felt for the tiny broken clay piece on the moist ground and held it in his hand for a bit. He grasped it tightly in his balmy palms like a trophy and walked briskly towards the exit of the forest, following the little ray that now started to appear.

He was out.

It was a no brainer for Johann Kalume to head to the imposing white building now that he had broken his belief in the power of his community's religious tradition. He was prepared to feel the primacy of Johann's, his new namesake's, religion. He walked towards the imposing building and stood at one of the more nondescript see-through walls and marvelled at it as he looked inside.

The words looked like they rolled off his tongue so delicately but they came out loudly and brashly. Johann Ludwig Krapf talked at the two people who were seated on wooden stools: his translator and a person who looked as pale as he did. The rest of the building was empty and the three looked like little ants in it. As he spoke, he held something in his hands that he periodically glanced at. Johann Kalume listened intently from the outside window, hiding and somewhat shy. Although, he did not understand a word, he listened keenly to the sounds that came from Krapf, hoping that he would gain some closeness to this religion.

He did hear the word 'John' repeated over and over again. It sounded nice and because it had been repeated so much it must have been important. So Johann Kalume added the name John right there, outside the building, to his identity. It was tucked between Johann and Kalume. He was now Johann John Kalume. It was a mouthful. But a wonderful mouthful at that. He stayed on listening, braving the scorching sun and basking in the obscurity of one of the many nondescript clear walls. He would return a couple more times, only to marvel at the building really. His namesake did not make sense. Maybe he was crazy after all.

This is not a story where Johann John Kalume is suddenly tormented by spirits or things start falling apart in his community or he gets a deep calling to join Krapf's religion or anything big happens afterwards. His rebellion fuelled by seeking to find himself, whatever that means, did not yield to him finding his identity in a new religion or reaffirming a belief in his ancestral one. Neither did he find himself by "looking within". I cringe at such clichés.

He had a fragment of cracked clay and two new names.
And Johann John Kalume was okay with that.
So let's not try and squeeze out a moral.

This is set in the 22nd century in Rabai.

She finished the story in that grandmotherly way that was so typical yet very unique to her. 'Let's not try and squeeze out a moral,' that stuck with me. Such an atypical ending. Usually, her stories would end up pointing to gratitude, honesty, patience... and all that good stuff. But this one was different. Was it that she was too tired to weave in a virtue to her tale? Was it that I was to find one myself?

The latter would be a real task to my imagination. First, I had to imagine a place where many trees stood side by side in a warm embrace. I had to imagine them being so many that their presence was imposing enough to block out any light from snaking in between them. I had to imagine the sound of a cricket, the feel of a leaf between toes. I tried to muster such creativity within me. I could not.

GLOSSARY

<i>Fingo</i>	A protective talisman of the Mijikenda.
<i>Johann Ludwig Krapf</i>	German missionary in East Africa. Started the Rabai Mission Station.
<i>Kanga</i>	A light East African cotton fabric printed with coloured designs, used mainly for women's clothing.
<i>Kaya</i>	A sacred forest of the Mijikenda people.
<i>Muhogo</i>	Cassava.
<i>Rabai</i>	One of the nine ethnic groups that make up the Mijikenda.
<i>Rabai</i>	A location in Kenya, where missionaries of the CMS first established a Christian mission.