

Christmas in Kambi

Since arriving in Kambi and encountering and finally accepting the reality of a wooden church sitting on a concrete bunker full of wine bottles, Padre Pietro had stopped wondering how it got there and started agonizing over what to do with it. He could not just haul it out and present it to the Bishop before he understood how, by whom and why it was there. Without Father Angelo to shed some light on it, all he could do was speculate.

Perhaps Father Angelo had received the wine as a gift from some high-profile sinner in exchange for indulgences. Alternatively, he had cornered the market on altar wine and was hoarding the stock for when it would fetch a handsome profit for the church. It was unlikely Father Angelo would have left it behind had the wine been for his own consumption.

He wondered just how many bottles there were. How much of the project funds had gone into building and stocking such an extensive wine cellar? Little wonder there was no money left to complete the rest of the church. It was a miracle how the wine had survived the pipe thieves and the vandals, but the fact that it was still there, close to a year after Father Angelo's departure, was a credit to Savio's integrity and devotion to duty.

He would start by auditing the wine cellar, if he ever got around to doing what he came here to do. For now, he had to decide what to do with his new best friends. Reason said to ease them out, lock up the church, and seal off the wine cellar. Caution said to treat them with the same generosity they had shown towards him. He could do with such friends in Kambi, men who saw him as a man, as one of them. They may hold the keys to the many doors he needed to open before he could go home. They may also be just who he needed to help him find the Bishop's missing sheep. Besides, it was Christmas, a time for joy and merriment, a time for sharing and caring.

"Savio," he called, "a bottle of wine for our friends."

The old men rubbed their hands together in anticipation.

"Then you must go home," he told them.

They nodded, a little too readily, and made themselves comfortable on upturned beer crates. They rose again when Savio returned and they realised he had brought one bottle of wine, two glasses and two tea mugs. Mzee Moja shook his head at him.

"Savio," he said, "I am disappointed in you. The man said one bottle each."

"Each?" Padre Pietro exclaimed.

"*Batiri Botoro*," Kibogoyo put on his dignified elder's mask, "it is against eh ... against our custom for elders to drink from the same bottle."

Padre Pietro hesitated.

"Custom?"

From the little he had read about them, they were obliged to share what they had, no matter how little. They ate from the same bowl, drunk from the same calabash and slept under the same blanket.

"That was a long time ago," Kibogoyo informed him. "Today we have enough plates and cups and spoons and forks and beds and blankets for everyone."

"Glasses too," added Choma-Choma.

"We have only the two glasses," Padre Pietro said. "About the bottles ..."

"What are you waiting for?" Choma-Choma said to Savio. "You know our custom."

Savio waited for instructions. Padre Pietro considered. He had had a long day and he had to get rid of them as quickly as possible, so he could go to bed.

“One bottle each and no more,” he said to Savio.

The old men sat down again and settled smiling and rubbing their hands together.

“After that you must leave,” he said to them. “Savio, lock up after they leave.”

He turned to go, but Choma-Choma grabbed his sleeve and pulled him down on a crate.

“This is your house,” said Choma-Choma. “You can’t sleep while we drink.”

Potea Pata handed him a glass.

“It is against our custom.”

“Where is your tin cup?” asked Mzee Moja.

“My chalice? That is for Mass.”

Kibogoyo claimed the second glass and the rest had to settle for the tea mugs and a bowl.

Choma-Choma observed that the mugs were not that clean either.

“You need someone here,” Mzee Moja said to the priest. “Someone to cook and clean and take care of you.”

“Savio,” said Padre Pietro.

“Savio is a man,” Choma-Choma reminded.

“You need someone who works hard,” said Kibogoyo.

“Someone with big arms.”

“And strong legs.”

Padre Pietro conceded he did need some help, not just inside the sanctuary, but outside in the yard too. However, he did not have a budget for extra help, so he had to make do with Savio.

“You do not need a budget,” they told him. “We already have someone for you.”

“Someone very attractive,” said Choma-Choma.

“And hardworking,” added Potea Pata.

“And loving.”

“And gentle.”

“A good woman.”

In addition, all of it was true, except for the part about her being a gentle woman. Jeni the Castrator had the appearance of a queen up until she opened her mouth. What came out of it was anything but ladylike. She was unrestrained, unwomanly, and hard to talk to. They often warned her she would never find a Kambi man to marry her unless she tamed her tongue. But then again Padre Pietro was not a Kambi man. Her behaviour might appeal to his taste.

He listened to them praise her positive attributes and tell him what a great wife Jeni would be for him. From their description, he recognised the woman who had called on him to berate over the Catholic Church’s stand on birth control. He would never take such a wife.

“You can’t live here without a wife,” Mzee Moja informed him.

Every man in Kambi had a wife or was thinking of getting one. He too would have to get married to be fully acceptable.

“I can’t get married,” he said

“Are you not a man?”

“I’m not allowed to marry.”

“By whom?” asked Potea Pata.

“The church?”

They looked around the room, shook their heads at the empty beer crates they sat on, the bare walls made from off-cuts, the unplastered floor, and the corrugated-iron roof with holes in it. How could any of that prevent a man from getting a wife?

“It is not the building,” Padre Pietro explained.

Catholic priests, unlike their Protestant counterparts, could not marry and have families. They devoted their whole lives to the service of the church and humanity. They were married to the church, so to speak. The human race was their family.

“We have heard about all that,” Kibogoyo said impatiently.

“You do not seem to like your women much,” Padre Pietro observed. “Why do you want me to have one?”

“A man without a woman is not a man,” Choma-Choma told him.

“Just as a woman without a man is not a woman,” added Potea Pata.

“And a padre without a church is not a padre,” Padre Pietro said.

“That may be so,” they said, “but do you know what happened to Juma Pili?”

“I have heard,” he said.

He had heard all the dozen versions of it. He had heard it from Savio and from the widows who came for alms on Sunday and from the milkman and from the people he encountered when he went up the hill to call Nyeri. He had heard it from everyone who thought that he should be aware of the perils of being a Catholic priest on Protestant turf.

In his missionary zeal to establish the Catholic Church in Kambi, Father Angelo had cast his net far into Protestant waters and fished in bars and in drinking dens. In the end, it was the fish that hooked and converted him to a beer drinker. He had wasted entire days telling them everything they already knew about God. Many of them had been to a church, at one time or another, for weddings and funerals and occasionally just to make peace with their wives, but otherwise they saw no reason to take up space on pews and overburden the pastors with their presence at church.

Nonetheless, Kambi was dismayed when Father Angelo was fished by a barmaid, made her his housekeeper and, discovering her other attributes eloped with her.

“We do not want it to happen to you,” Kibogoyo said to Padre Pietro. “That is why we want to help you.”

They were on their second bottles.

“Do not get married without our help,” Mzee Moja said.

The padre was on his third glass and was slowly losing control of the situation. They liked his wine, they said, but did he have anything stronger? Was it true he gave wine to his people on Sunday?

“Just a sip,” he said. “Part of our Sunday service.”

“What time is your Sunday service?” someone asked.

“They only get a sip,” he repeated.

They consulted in elder-speak. They argued a little and then agreed. A sip was plenty, considering what they were going through. Yes, yes, they knew they had to be baptised, but nothing was impossible with the church. They had heard that, long ago, water had turned to Tusker, so everyone could have a good Christmas.

“To wine,” Padre Pietro said. “And it was at a wedding.”

“Whose wedding?” asked Mzee Moja.

Padre Pietro saw him wink at the others and suspected they were having fun at his expense. He hoped they were not seriously plotting his wedding. It was time to put the matter to rest and send them home to their wives.

“I told you I can’t get married,” he said to them.

“Do not worry about the bride price,” they said. “We’ll take care of all that. Your Bishop will not hear a word of it.”

“We will arrange everything ourselves,” said Potea Pata.

They consulted privately for a moment, argued who would donate what, then turned to Padre Pietro.

“Do not worry,” they said to him. “For your wedding we shall have Tusker.”

“Enough to drink and bathe in,” Mzee Moja said. “I will give ten cases.”

“Two goats for the feast,” said Choma-Choma.

“Ten chickens,” said Potea Pata. “I will talk to my wife.”

“We shall have the feast here in your church.”

“But who will preside?” asked Kibogoyo. “A Protestant pastor?”

“I am not getting married,” said Padre Pietro. “Now stop this talk of marriage and go home.”

“You will not go off and marry without telling us?”

“Go home now,” he told them.

“Promise you will not run away with a bar woman,” said Mzee Moja.

“I promise,” Padre Pietro said. “Now leave so I can sleep.”

“Do not get a wife without us,” warned Mzee Moja. “Kambi women are too strong.”

“Harder than cement *ugali*,” added Potea Pata.

“Too hard for a ... for an ordinary man,” Choma-Choma confirmed.

No outsider had ever survived being married to a Kambi woman. Some had escaped on the wedding night, never to be seen again. A couple of them had feigned madness, stripped naked and walked to Tanyai to catch a *matatu* to anywhere. Only Kambi men, and especially those from Nyeri, could survive Kambi women.

“*Atumia a Kambi ni aruru ta ngaita*,” said Potea Pata, who was Nyeri born and bred. “*Ni aruru ta mbaki*.”

“What?” asked Padre Pietro.

“He said that Kambi women are bile to a man’s soul,” Kibogoyo translated. “Do not mind him. Old men speak in riddles when they are happy. Savio!”

Savio appeared at the kitchen door. Kibogoyo drew a circle in the air, as they did in Tajiri Bar to order a round of drinks. Savio hesitated, but, when Padre Pietro did not object, he fetched the bottles. He brought a bottle for the padre too and placed it on the table in front of him. Padre Pietro stared at his bottle, while his visitors drunk away the Bishop’s water project. How would he ever account for it?

“Do not be sad,” Choma-Choma said to him.

“Drink up,” said Potea Pata. “*Ikimia ona mwene ni otaga*.”

He was not sad, he told them, just tired. He wanted them to take their bottles and go home now.

“We can’t do that,” Kibogoyo said. “We do not take bottles home,”

“The wives,” Choma-Choma explained. “The pastors have them convinced that the devil lives inside a bottle.”

“Finish up,” Kibogoyo said to them. “We have far to go.”

They drank in silence. The silence grew deeper, the closer they got to the bottom of the bottles. Padre Pietro was about to give up and go to bed when Kibogoyo suddenly rose. It was late, he said, and they had to be home before the sun rose.

“*Cia kuraya itihinyagia mahindi*,” Potea Pata said to their host.

“Riddles again?” asked Padre Pietro.

“Savio will tell you what it means,” they said.

“Savio!” he called.

Savio was about to go for more wine.

“See our guests to the door,” Padre Pietro said to him.

Savio opened the door and held it open for them, then followed them out in the church and round the altar without knocking down any candles and all the way to the back of the church without falling over the pews. They retrieved their sticks from where they had left them by the door and walked gingerly down the steps, without breaking any bones, and said goodnight to Savio. He watched them reel away until they were out of the gate, then he shut and locked the door and bumped into the pews and supported himself on the wall as he made his way back to the priests’ residence.

Padre Pietro was asleep in his seat. Savio left him to it and he slept until nine in the morning, when Savio woke him up to inform him the widows had come for the morning Mass.