

How turtle came to live in the sea

By Sam Mbure (Kenya)

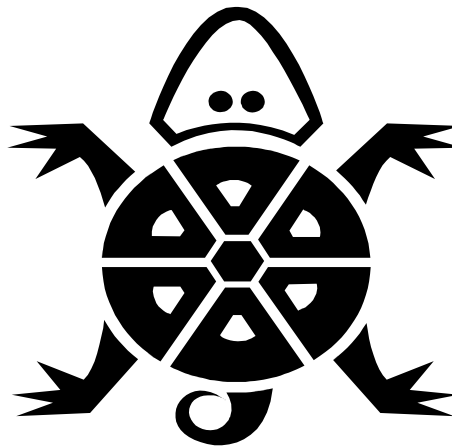
(An Excerpt)

The sun shone like never before in Kariua. Streams dried up, then the rivers. The snow on top of the only mountain on the land melted away. Lakes and ponds dried up. The earth became one huge dusty field with deep tracks everywhere. There wasn't a green blade of grass anywhere on the face of the earth. Animals whose main food was grass and plants died in thousands. Those that fed on other animals were forced to change their feeding habits. They began to eat the dry bones of other animals and finally dry tree-leaves and wood.

The land of Kariua had never witnessed such a drought before. For forty-eight long months, not a drop of rain fell. Occasionally, heavy, dark clouds covered the sky. As the land prepared to receive rain, the clouds melted away allowing the rays of the sun to come down with fury and vengeance.

Wise animals like Squirrel, Toad, Porcupine, Warthog and Mole dug holes to hide from the fierce heat

Mole charged five potatoes for a hole that could accommodate an animal the size of a hare and her two young ones while Porcupine demanded ten big cassavas for a hole big enough to house a deer and her baby. Soon word went round that Porcupine and Mole had huge stocks



of food collected from the animals they had provided shelter to. Elephant, Lion, Giraffe, Rhino and Buffalo became very cross with the two animals. They called a meeting to discuss what punishment would be meted out to them. They asked Rhino to play the role of prosecutor and Hare the role of the magistrate.

"It has come to the notice

of all of us that Mole and Porcupine have taken advantage of the current drought and have amassed a lot of foodstuff from the animals seeking to be provided with cooler underground shelter," charged Rhino. "It is true we are going through a very difficult time in this land of ours. However, we cannot allow greed and selfishness to divide us. We are guided by a simple rule: we struggle together or die together. I understand the demand five potatoes for a small den and ten cassavas for a medium-size den."

"I see two big problems here," said Elephant. "Even if we changed the rules and allowed anyone who chooses to live in a den to do so, there is simply no food to give to the den-diggers. Besides, my family and I would require all the available land for our dens."

Hyena laughed until his ribs almost cracked after imagining Elephant with his huge body squeezing into a den. Then suddenly he stopped laughing, opening his eyes wide as if he wanted them to speak and shouted, "Let's kill them!"

"This is a court of law," said Hare to Hyena. "And it is not a kangaroo court or hyena court. Then charges brought against our friends, Mole and Porcupine are serious. We must give them a chance to defend themselves. Do you have anything to say in defence?"

"These are false accusa-

tions," said Mole. "It is true I have some little food in my store but part of it is from my own saving. Part of it I have been given by friends freely and willingly. I have never used threats or force to get food. And whoever turned down a gift? One good turn deserves another and whoever helped a stranger gains a friend.

"Do you have anything to say, Porcupine?" asked Rhino.

"What I would like to tell the court is what everyone already knows," said Porcupine. "I use my own hands to earn my daily potato. I do not beg, demand, rob or steal. You may be relieved to know that what I have in my store is famine-relief food."

"When will you give it out?" asked Warthog excitedly.

"Give out?" Puzzled Porcupine threw the question back at Warthog. "I do it every day to my kith and kin."

"Then that is not relief food," Warthog replied.

"What is it then?" asked Porcupine.

"Relief food is food shared by all," said Warthog. "It does not matter ..."

"Stop this stupid argument," Rhino thundered. "We did not gather here to talk about relief food. We came to find out whether Mole and Porcupine

have committed an offence. Now shall we continue to hear the case?"

It was Owl's turn to speak. "Exchange is no robbery," he argued. "If one chooses to exchange his or her sweat for food, there is nothing wrong. Besides, we are living at a time when everyone is free to live where he chooses. I have chosen to live up in the trees. If anyone would like to join me up there, they are welcome."

Flamingo arrived for the meeting late. After apologizing for the lateness she said, "I delayed because I had to make a long-distance call to Lake Salaka. This is a big fresh-water lake. It is one thousand kilometers away. Lake Salaka has plenty of food for big birds like me. I am going to migrate there since the water here has dried up. Now, I have some news for you. I do not know why me and Porcupine are on trial. As far as I know they are innocent."

"Does this mean you know something the rest of us don't?" asked Hare.

"I think I do," said Flamingo.

"Would you like to swear?" Hare asked.

"I don't mind." Flamingo answered.

"Right," said Hare. "Hold this pebble in your right hand and repeat the words I am going to say."

Flamingo took the pebble in her right hand and repeated the words Hare uttered. "I swear by my inner feathers that the evidence I shall give in this court will be true and nothing short of true. SO be it."

Hyena laughed again until he made his chest wet with saliva. The Rhino asked Flamingo, "Who is guilty? Who has brought us all this suffering?"

"It is Tortoise!" Flamingo shouted.

"Tortoise?" asked Rhino in disbelief. The other animals gasped.

"Yes, Tortoise. The innocent-looking Tortoise sitting next to Hare. He is the one who has brought about all the problems."

"How? How?" asked Rhino, anxiety painted all over his face.

"It is like this," explained Flamingo. "Every evening Tortoise climbs to the top of the mountain and prays to a god he calls Amen for the strong sun to continue shining. This is how the prayer goes: 'Amen, thank you for the hot and refreshing sunlight. Amen, continue to give me hotter sunlight to arm the rock on my back. Amen, you are good to me because you always answer my prayers. Amen, good night.'"

Rhino's disbelief now turned into anger. He looked at Tortoise and asked, "Tortoise, is this

true?"

"Yes, it is, but I believe there's nothing wrong in asking one's Creator for the things one needs."

"Are you out of your mind?" asked Rhino. "Do you really mean to say that sunlight is what you need? Can't you see what damage the sun has caused? Don't your feet get burnt by the hot sand as you walk along?"

"I do not understand what you are complaining about," replied Tortoise, "I need heat and more heat. The big stone on my back takes many years to heat up. This is the reason why my maker gave me a long lifespan."

Monkey rose to his feet and begged Rhino to allow him to try some karate skills on Tortoise.

"Let justice take its course," Rhino told Monkey. Hyena again laughed uncontrollably until he bit his tongue.

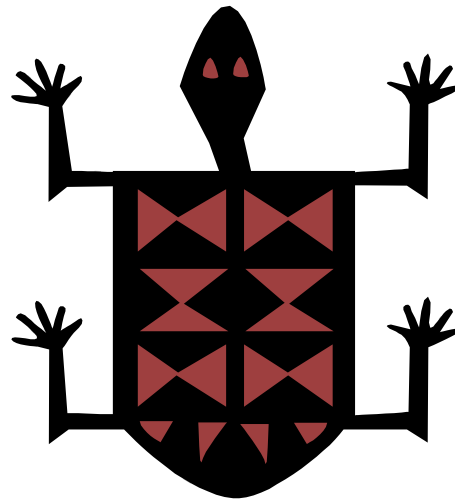
"I have no more evidence," Flamingo went on to say. "Every morning, Tortoise also visits a medicine man who specializes in scaring rain clouds away."

All animals were shocked to hear this.

"We need o further evidence!" shouted Hare. "The prosecution has proved its case. The court must adjourn now but will reconvene again at o'clock to pass sentence. Chain Tortoise to that tree over there and then turn

him upside down."

When the court resumed in the afternoon, Hyena and Monkey who had been given the duty of guarding Tortoise were ordered to bring him before the court. All animals were eager to



hear the verdict. All eyes were on Hare as he delivered the judgment to a hushed court.

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About the Author

Kenyan author **Sam Mbure** in his own words:

"I am a children's book writer, publisher, poet, storyteller, Human Rights campaigner, Animal Rights campaigner 2005 winner of International Fund for Animal Welfare, Animal Action Award, photographer, co-founder of Writers Association of Kenya, founder of Network for the Defence of Independent Media in Africa and Africa Free Media Foundation."

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In Your Opinion

How does the story end? Write an ending to the story explaining how the turtle came to live in the sea.