

## **KNOWLEDGE IN THE WILD**

### **Purity Gitonga**

The air is hot and dry. Goats can be heard bleating as they come from the fields. It is the end of a busy day. The sunset is breathtaking. I wish I had time to sit outside for longer. The bell for evening lessons is ringing. Everybody is rushing to the classrooms to prepare for tomorrow's test.

Tonight, everyone seems serious. There is none of the usual laughter. The whole school is silent. My plan is to revise the term's work. As I try to solve some trigonometric equations, Linda interrupts me. 'There is no water in the school!' she says and hurriedly walks away. We have no option but to walk to the stream which is a kilometer away. It is surrounded by thick bushes home to free-roaming hyenas. The thought of all this sends a cold shiver down my spine.

Armed with jerrycans, tins and bottles, we run downstream. It is the dry season and the stream is barely running. The water is muddy, stirred up by our feet. As we fill our cans, a loud blast is heard from a distance. We ignore it, thinking it is the bursting of a vehicle's tyre. After hearing multiple tyre bursts, we realize that these are infact gunshots and within seconds they fill the air. Screams and cries can be heard from the nearby manyatta (traditional homesteads). The whole place is in commotion as we run up and down to find a secure place to hide. Thorns and sticks do not spare us. They tear us ruthlessly. I am lucky to spot an abandoned cave where I hide and prepare for the worst.

As new student in the school, I am terrified by this whole incident. Though my fellow students are used to this kind of situation, they are worried too. The Pokot, (a nomadic community from the south), has once again raided the Samburu community where our school is located. Raiding of livestock is very popular in both communities. They believe that this is a way of exercising their military strength. After circumcision, the 'morans' (warriors) are free to marry. They must first acquire more than sixty cows to please the bride's clansmen. When a moran raids more livestock, his status in the community is elevated. This tradition is a way of encouraging bravery and risk taking. It has however developed into a social menace that claims many lives every year.

Eventually, the shootings abate. Fearful and confused, we crawl back to school. No one is ready to risk her life by walking. We go back to school with empty jerry cans not knowing where to get some water to quench our thirst. Nobody goes back to the classes. Dejectedly, we walk to our dormitories thanking God for being alive and praying to be healthy tomorrow. As I rest on my bed, I reflect on the incident. I fail to understand why people opt to live such violent lives. My heart is filled with sorrow when I think of the children and women in the manyattas watching helplessly as their livestock is being taken away. Many of the middle aged men will probably be injured or even

killed as they try to win their cattle back. My classmates who hail from this area look very worried. They fear that their families have been attacked.

After this occurrence, my friends and I formed a discussion group. We shared ideas on how to build peace in our communities. I suggested that we participate in peace building activities organized by religious and non-governmental organizations in our respective communities during school holidays. We ensured that each member presented a report each term on her progress in implementing our mission. During school vacations, I would attend the church youth group in my home area. We performed plays in the church hall and in open grounds. We also visited the neighboring villages especially during functions like weddings and burials. These plays focused on emphasizing the importance of peaceful coexistence. Our group also organized games such as athletics and soccer. These attracted many young people from different communities. We helped them understand that they were equal and should not be divided by tribalism.

It was the beginning of the second term, when Carol told us that she had convinced her brother Collins to stop cattle raiding. Collins had dropped out of school in Form One due to lack of school fees. He had fallen into raiding as the only way to earn a living. He told us that he and his friends raided once every month. They would buy guns illegally which they used in the raids. When we met him, a year later, he was a changed person who was very willing to speak out against violence. He visited manyattas and held discussions with elders. He urged them to advise the people to leave cattle rustling and instead focus on developing our society. He had re-enrolled in Nyiro Secondary School. He was the oldest student in Form Two at twenty years old. Collins is now an active ambassador for peace among his peers who are still involved in raiding.

This was a life changing experience for me. I realized that peace was so precious. Collins's story inspired me to continue with my mission of building peace in the society. I had heard stories in the television and other sources about cattle rustling and its effects. I thought that these stories were not real. I believed that living peacefully was guaranteed but this experience proved to me otherwise. I am still an active member of the church youth group. I feel compelled to ensure that peace prevails and our communities develop towards prosperity.