

juliana
**THE QUEEN
OF THE BEES**

MAKENA BRANDON

JULIANA

The Queen of the Bees

*My Encounter and Life With the Queen of the Bees
and the Yaaku People*

Makena Brandon

A Narrative Nonfiction

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Publisher: Discussion Publishers

Sponsored by: Utu Heritage

Images: Discussion Publishers

Distributed by: Discussion Publishers Library

Library Number: DPL-000100002

ISBN: 979-8-20-100002-4

This is a work of narrative nonfiction. It reflects the author's personal experiences, observations, and recollections. Names of individuals and communities are used with respect and, where known, in consultation with those represented.

First Edition



Preface

This narrative began not as a manuscript but as a memory I could not put down. It started on the seventeenth, on a morning bright with the business of trees, when a team of us gathered in Nanyuki under the banner of Utu na Mazingira to mark a new beginning. I did not know, as I stood there with a cup of tea in hand at the launch, that within a few hours I would meet a young woman who would change how I understood land, language, and the quiet dignity of a people fighting to be remembered.

That woman was Juliana Loshiro.

What follows is my honest account of the two days I spent travelling with her, from a roadside stop at Peaks on the way to Doldol, to a fire-lit ceremony deep in Mukogodo Forest. I have tried, as faithfully as memory allows, to preserve the voices, the humor, and the small human details that made the journey what it was, while giving the story the shape and clarity a reader deserves. Some names have been kept exactly as I heard them; some moments have been trimmed for the sake of pace. But nothing in this narrative has been invented for effect. The people are real, the forest is real, and the struggle Juliana carries on her shoulders is real.

I offer this narrative nonfiction as a small tribute to her, to the Yaaku people, and to everyone working, often without recognition, to keep a language and a homeland alive.

Introduction

Who Is Juliana Loshiro?

Juliana Loshiro is a young Yaaku woman leader, one of the few remaining young speakers of the Yaakunte language, and an environmental advocate from Mukogodo Forest in Laikipia, Kenya. She works to preserve Yaakunte language, culture, and Indigenous knowledge while promoting forest conservation, biodiversity, and sustainable beekeeping.

Known among her community and beyond as a “Bee Whisperer,” Juliana practices and teaches traditional ways of caring for bees, including the use of Indigenous herbs and the ability to recognize the early signs of bee illness — knowledge passed down through generations of Yaaku beekeepers. Through her work she advocates for women and youth, for Indigenous rights, for climate justice, and for the protection of Mukogodo Forest and Yaaku heritage.

To understand Juliana is to understand, at least in part, the people who raised her. The Yaaku — sometimes written Yiaku — trace their roots back to a migration out of southern Ethiopia, arriving in the shadow of Mount Kenya generations ago as hunters, honey-gatherers, and keepers of a Cushitic tongue found nowhere else on earth: Yaakunte. For a long stretch of their history, the Yaaku lived off Mukogodo Forest itself, reading the land the way other communities read pages, tracking bees to their hives and game to their trails, and passing that knowledge down entirely by word of mouth.

That way of life began to unravel in the twentieth century. A colonial-era ban on hunting inside the forest pushed many Yaaku away from the very land that had shaped their identity, and in the decades that followed, the higher social standing of neighboring pastoralist communities, chiefly the Maasai, drew Yaaku families toward the Maa language and Maasai customs. Independence, rather than restoring what had been lost, complicated it further: the Yaaku found their historic claim to Mukogodo Forest unrecognized, even as the forest itself remained tied to who they were. Generation by generation, fewer and fewer people kept speaking Yaakunte at home, until, by the time UNESCO classified it as critically endangered in 2020, only a small handful of elders could still speak it with any fluency.

It is against this backdrop that Juliana’s work carries such weight. She belongs to a small, determined generation of young Yaaku, among them relatives and neighbors tagging forest trees with Yaakunte names so children can learn the language simply by walking to school, working to

keep Yaakunte from disappearing along with the elders who still hold it. For Juliana, that effort runs hand in hand with beekeeping, conservation, and advocacy for Yaaku land rights, because for the Yaaku, language, forest, and bees have never really been separate things. They are one inheritance, defended together or lost together.

The pages that follow are my personal account of meeting her, but they are also, in a small way, an introduction to a people the wider world rarely hears about: the Yaaku, once hunter-gatherers of the Mukogodo Forest, today among the smallest and most endangered Indigenous communities in Kenya, working every day to keep their language, their forest, and their bees alive.

CHAPTER 1

A Morning of Trees and Tea

It was on the seventeenth, just after we had finished the official launch of Utu na Mazingira, that this story truly began. We had just wrapped up a tree-planting ceremony, and when I say “we,” I mean the whole team, along with several notable guests: Al-Amin Kimathi, popularly and affectionately known as Babu; Cynthia Achieng, his personal assistant; Christopher Sanya, the Utu Heritage Project Lead; John Maigua, the Utu na Mazingira coordinator; and many others who had come out to support the day.

Afterward, Cynthia and I sat down for a cup of tea and guacci — sweet potatoes, as they are known outside Kikuyu. Cynthia complained that the tea had far too much sugar in it and could barely finish her cup.

Once tea was done, we took a few photographs, some as a group and some solo, before Babu announced that we needed to leave for Doldol. All the picture-taking and tea-drinking, it turned out, had been a way of passing time while we waited for a young lady named Juliana Loshiro, whom I had never met.

Babu called out that it was time to go, and it was only then that I discovered Juliana was already waiting for us inside the car. I dashed back to collect Babu’s books and his coffee mug, and then, at last, we set off on our journey to Doldol.

CHAPTER 2

The Girl in the Car

Not long into the drive, Babu needed a washroom, so we stopped at the nearest hotel, a place called Peaks, to let him step out. While he was away, Juliana and I fell into conversation for the first time.

My first question to her was whether she was a musician — and, to my embarrassment, I had momentarily confused her name with Juliani, the musician known for the song “Nikonjaa Nasiwezi Karanga.” It made no sense, since Juliani is a man and Juliana was clearly not, but the confusion had already lodged itself in my mind before I could catch it. I asked anyway if she was a musician. She said yes.

I asked what she did for a living, and she told me she was a bee whisperer. I froze for a second. I knew of dog whisperers, and lion whisperers — but a bee whisperer? I had never heard of such a thing. I asked her where we were all headed, and she told me: Doldol, in Mukogodo Forest, where her people lived. The Yaaku people — a name I had also never encountered before. She explained that her community was facing extinction, and that many Yaaku had, over time, been assimilated into the neighboring Maasai community.

Babu returned and asked if anyone wanted coffee before we continued, but he quickly changed his mind, worried about the hygiene of the food and drink available nearby given the ongoing construction in the area. We agreed instead to have coffee once we reached Timau.

Rhumba on the Road to Timau

Babu started up his Honda CR-V, and with rhumba playing softly, we began the drive to Timau. By the time we arrived we were famished, so we turned into the Timau River Lodge for lunch. Babu spoke of it fondly, calling it one of his favorite spots because of its closeness to the river.

As we pulled in, we were greeted by two older women — one Indian, the other an African woman, though not quite as elderly as the first. The Indian woman approached the car, and Babu, sensing something formal in her manner, asked if there was a problem. She assured him there was none. When asked whether she worked there, she smiled and said she was, in fact, the owner. Her name was Mumtaz, wife of Mr. Wason, the man behind the well-known Wason Timber company.

It struck me as unusual — the owner herself taking our orders — but she did, patiently and warmly. I ordered mutton and chapatti, and Juliana ordered the same. Babu, finding there was no naan on the menu, settled for mashed potatoes and chicken instead.

While our food was being prepared, we wandered down to the river. Babu and Juliana washed their hands and faces at the water's edge while I recorded them on my phone. I remember being struck by how beautiful Juliana's hair was, though I promised her, and I have kept that promise, that I would never post the footage online.

Juliana began pointing out the trees around us, explaining which ones were used as herbal medicine. It was in that moment that Babu, who loves herbal remedies himself, realized he had been preparing his own herbs incorrectly all along — boiling them, when they were meant to be soaked.

Our food arrived, and we chose to sit by a section of the riverbank the lodge had named Mumtaz Canopy. A Maasai woman came to serve us; we later learned her name was Mama Carol. The mutton and chapatti arrived, along with a plate of minced mutton with chapatti meant for Babu, since the naan he had originally wanted was never an option.

We finished the meal and, on our way out, ran into the two women again. Babu took the opportunity to explain the work of Utu Heritage, and the two of them were so taken with the

mission that we ended up striking a promising partnership — a story for another day.

Crossing into Yaaku Land

We set off again for Doldol. The roads grew dusty and uneven, but we pressed on and eventually reached Borana Conservancy, which we had to cross to reach our destination. It was only once we had crossed to the other side that we were met by armed rangers, several of whom, to my surprise, turned out to be relatives of Juliana. They escorted us the rest of the way, and soon we arrived at last.

We were welcomed by a young man named Laser Boy, a musician and, we were told, the only Yaaku musician performing today. Tea was brought out for us, followed by a powerful poem recited in the Yaakunte language by a twelve-year-old girl named Sarah, whose hair was as striking as her voice.

As night fell, the community prepared to slaughter a sheep in our honor. Because Babu is Muslim, they first sought the appropriate religious guidance, since Islamic practice requires meat to be slaughtered in a specific way. Babu made calls to consult with imams before the slaughter proceeded. I did not follow every detail of the conversation, but by the time it was settled, the sheep had been properly prepared, and we spent the night around a bonfire, sharing nyama choma with the whole community.

What struck me most that first night was how considerate, welcoming, and respectful of other cultures the Yaaku people were — despite everything they themselves were up against. Later, when I asked Juliana where the washrooms were, she explained, quietly, that the government does not permit them to build toilets on their own land. It was a sobering realization: a people already fighting for survival were also being denied something as basic as sanitation, forced instead to use the bush for even the simplest of needs.

Keeper of a Language

That night I learned more about the weight Juliana carries. Her father was killed while fighting to protect Yaaku land from being seized by a government official — a loss that has shaped her life's purpose ever since.

I also discovered, almost by accident, that Juliana is among the very few people, even among the community's elders, who can still speak Yakuunte fluently. It is a staggering responsibility for someone so young: an entire language, in many ways, resting on her shoulders. And yet she carries it with a steadiness that never once felt like a burden to those around her.

That evening I interviewed Juliana, along with her sister, Natalie, a journalism student at Zetech University, and Laser Boy, whom we confirmed to be the only working Yaaku recording artist. Afterward, we retired to our tents. Thankfully, sleeping bags had been provided, and despite the unfamiliar ground, sleep came easily.

Morning arrived bright and clear. I had tea and three queen cakes for breakfast. Mukogodo is a place the government has largely overlooked; even electricity remains a daily struggle. Residents travel to Sieku Primary School, where outdoor sockets allow the community to charge their phones and other devices. I joined the queue myself, laptop, phone, and power bank in hand, waiting my turn like everyone else.

About two hours later, Babu called to say he needed to make a bank transaction. I told him my devices were still charging, but gave him directions to where I was, and he found me and we sorted it out together.

The rest of our Utu Heritage team arrived that morning: Wairimu Kamangara, a talented and spirited marketer; Faith Njambi, a gifted young artist; and Jade Kirunde, my workmate at Utu Heritage and, without question, a stud of a journalist in her own right.

We made our way to a local gathering ground, where we found Juliana already teaching the community about Yaaku heritage. We joined in, though I remained mostly behind the camera, documenting the day. Laser Boy and others gave moving performances that left all of us moved. We had hoped to venture deeper into Mukogodo Forest that night, but an ongoing military operation in the area made that impossible.

The Keepers of the Bees

That night, we took part in a ceremony unlike anything I had witnessed before. Juliana led it herself, guiding even the elders through its steps. We offered tobacco to the fire, along with other traditional offerings, as a sacrifice to the gods. Watching a young woman direct her community's elders through a sacred ritual, with such quiet authority, was one of the most striking moments of the entire trip.

Unlike the Maasai, who are traditionally cattle people, the Yaaku are beekeepers. Bees are, in every sense, their livestock, and Juliana is an expert among experts. Her primary livelihood is built around honey and beekeeping. In the course of our conversations, she told me she works across East Africa and interacts with an estimated twelve hundred beehives in total, of which around one hundred are traditional hives maintained at the community level — a living archive of Yaaku knowledge as much as an economic activity.

After the ceremony, we were given the honor of tasting meat that had been preserved in honey, a Yaaku delicacy I had never encountered before and one I doubt I will forget. The community also honored Babu directly, presenting him with a traditional beehive blessed with honey, along with a hand-made chair — gifts that visibly moved him, and that spoke to how deeply the Yaaku had welcomed us into their fold. We shared another round of nyama choma before finally retiring for the night, since the following day would take us deeper still, into the forest and its caves.

CHAPTER 7

Into the Forest, Toward the Caves

Morning came, and I managed only an egg for breakfast, with no time left for tea before we set out. We made our way toward the forest and its caves. The terrain was demanding, but we pressed on and were rewarded with the sight of ancient artwork made from animal fat, preserved deep within the rock.

We returned from that experience quiet and full, carrying with us something difficult to put into words. That journey — from a cup of tea at a tree-planting ceremony in Nanyuki to a cave deep in Mukogodo Forest — was my encounter with Juliana Loshiro and the Yaaku people. It remains, to this day, one of the most humbling experiences of my life.

A Plea for the Yaaku

I want to close this narrative not as a storyteller but as a witness, and to say plainly what I saw. The Yaaku are not asking for charity. They are asking for what should never have been taken from them in the first place: their land, their forest, their language, and their dignity.

I say this boldly, and without apology, to the Government of Kenya and to every office that holds power over Mukogodo Forest: leave the Yaaku their land. Recognize, in law and not only in sentiment, a people who were there long before the borders that now cut through their forest were ever drawn. Let the Yaaku be Yaaku — from the language taught to their children, to the beehives that sustain their families, to the sacred ceremonies I was privileged enough to witness.

And let them have the most basic thing a government owes any citizen: a toilet. I have turned this fact over in my mind many times since leaving Mukogodo Forest, and I still cannot make peace with it. A community fighting daily for its very existence should not also have to fight for something as ordinary as a place to relieve themselves with dignity. If a country cannot extend that much to its own people, it must ask itself hard questions about who it considers worth protecting.

I do not write this plea out of anger, but out of respect for a people who received me, a stranger, with more warmth and grace than I had any right to expect. The Yaaku welcomed me into their fire, their food, their ceremony, and their history. The very least owed to them in return is the freedom to remain who they are, on the land that has always been theirs.

— Makena Brandon

Afterword

Juliana Loshiro continues her work today: teaching Yakuunte to a new generation, tending to thousands of hives across the region, and standing, often quite literally, between Mukogodo Forest and those who would see it disappear. Her title, the Queen of the Bees, is not a figure of speech. It is simply what she is — to her bees, her language, and her people.

This narrative was written in her honor, and in honor of every Yaaku elder, child, and advocate working to ensure that Mukogodo Forest, and the language spoken beneath its trees, are still here for generations to come.

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