

# Ogres of East Africa



by Sofia Samatar



*Catalogued by Alibhai M. Moosajee of Mombasa  
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### 1. Apul Apul

A male ogre of the Great Lakes region. A melancholy character, he eats crickets to sweeten his voice. His house burned down with all of his children inside. His enemy is the Hare.

My informant, a woman of the highlands who calls herself only “Mary,” adds that Apul Apul can be heard on windy nights, crying for his lost progeny. She claims that he has been sighted far from his native country, even on the coast, and that an Arab trader once shot and wounded him from the battlements of Fort Jesus. It happened

in a famine year, the “Year of Fever.” A great deal of research would be required in order to match this year, when, according to Mary, the cattle perished in droves, to one of the Years of Our Lord by which my employer reckons the passage of time; I append this note, therefore, in fine print, and in the margins.

“Always read the fine print, Alibhai!” my employer reminds me, when I draw up his contracts. He is unable to read it himself; his eyes are not good. “The African sun has spoilt them, Alibhai!”

Apul Apul, Mary says, bears a festering sore where the bullet pierced him. He is allergic to lead.

## 2. Ba'ati

A grave-dweller from the environs of the ancient capital of Kush. The ba'ati possesses a skeletal figure and a morbid sense of humor. Its great pleasure is to impersonate human beings: if your dearest friend wears a cloak and claims to suffer from a cold, he may be a ba'ati in disguise.

Mary arrives every day precisely at the second hour after dawn. I am curious about this reserved and encyclopedic woman. It amuses me to write these reflections concerning her in the margins of the catalogue I am composing for my employer. He will think this writing fly-tracks, or smudges from my dirty hands (he persists in his opinion that I am always dirty). As I write I see Mary before me as she presents herself each morning, in her calico dress, seated on an overturned crate.

I believe she is not very old, though she must be several years older than I (but I am very young—"Too young to walk like an old man,

Alibhai! Show some spirit! Ha!”). As she talks, she works at a bit of scarlet thread, plaiting something, perhaps a necklace. The tips of her fingers seem permanently stained with color.

“Where did you learn so much about ogres, Mary?”

“Anyone may learn. You need only listen.”

“What is your full name?”

She stops plaiting and looks up. Her eyes drop their veil of calm and flash at me—in annoyance, in warning? “I told you,” she says. “Mary. Only Mary.”

### 3. Dhegdheer

A female ogre of Somaliland. Her name means “Long Ear.” She is described as a large, heavy woman, a very fast runner. One of her ears is said to be much longer than the other, in fact so long that it trails upon the ground. With this ear, she can hear her enemies approaching from a great distance. She lives in a ruined hovel with her daughter. The daughter is beautiful and would like to be married. Eventually, she will murder Dhegdheer by filling her ear with boiling water.

My employer is so pleased with the information we have received from Mary that he has decided to camp here for another week. “Milk her, Alibhai!” he says, leering. “Eh? Squeeze her! Get as much out of her as you can. Ha! Ha!” My employer always shouts, as the report of his gun has made him rather deaf. In the evenings, he invites me into his tent, where, closed in by walls, a roof, and a floor of Willesden canvas, I am afforded a brief respite from the mosquitoes.

A lamp hangs from the central pole, and beneath it my employer sits with his legs stretched out and his red hands crossed on his stomach. “Very good, Alibhai!” he says. “Excellent!” Having shot every type of animal in the Protectorate, he is now determined to try his hand at ogre. I will be required to record his kills, as I keep track of all his accounts. It would be “damn fine,” he opines, to acquire the ear of Dhegdheer.

Mary tells me that one day Dhegdheer’s daughter, wracked with remorse, will walk into the sea and give herself up to the sharks.



#### 4. Iimū

Iimū transports his victims across a vast body of water in a ferry-boat. His country, which lies on the other side, is inaccessible to all creatures save ogres and weaverbirds. If you are trapped there, your only recourse is to beg the weaverbirds for sticks. You will need seven sticks in order to get away. The first two sticks will allow you to turn yourself into a stone, thereby escaping notice. The remaining five sticks enable the following transformations: thorns, a pit, darkness, sand, a river.

“Stand up straight, Alibhai! Look lively, man!”

My employer is of the opinion that I do not show a young man’s proper spirit. This, he tells me, is a racial defect, and therefore not my fault, but I may improve myself by following his example. My employer thrusts out his chest. “Look, Alibhai!” He says that if I walk about stooped over like a dotard, people will get the impression that I am

shiftless and craven, and this will quite naturally make them want to kick me. He himself has kicked me on occasion.

It is true that my back is often stiff, and I find it difficult to extend my limbs to their full length. Perhaps, as my employer suspects, I am growing old before my time.

These nights of full moon are so bright, I can see my shadow on the grass. It writhes like a snake when I make an effort to straighten my back.

## 5. Katandabaliko

While most ogres are large, Katandabaliko is small, the size of a child. He arrives with a sound of galloping just as the food is ready. “There is sunshine for you!” he cries. This causes everyone to faint, and Katandabaliko devours the food at his leisure. Katandabaliko cannot himself be cooked: cut up and boiled, he knits himself back together and bounces out of the pot. Those who attempt to cook and eat him may eat their own wives by mistake. When not tormenting human beings, he prefers to dwell among cliffs.

I myself prefer to dwell in Mombasa, at the back of my uncle’s shop, Moosajee and Co. I cannot pretend to enjoy nights spent in the open, under what my employer calls the splendor of the African sky. Mosquitoes whine, and something, probably a dangerous animal, rustles in the grass. The Somali cook and headman sit up late, exchanging stories, while the Kavirondo porters sleep in a corral constructed of

baggage. I am uncomfortable, but at least I am not lonely. My employer is pleased to think that I suffer terribly from loneliness. “It’s no picnic for you, eh, Alibhai?” He thinks me too prejudiced to tolerate the society of the porters, and too frightened to go near the Somalis, who, to his mind, being devout Sunnis, must be plotting the removal of my Shi’a head.

In fact, we all pray together. We are tired and far from home. We are here for money, and when we talk, we talk about money. We can discuss calculations for hours: what we expect to buy, where we expect to invest. Our languages are different but all of us count in Swahili.

## 6. Kibugi

A male ogre who haunts the foothills of Mount Kenya. He carries machetes, knives, hoes, and other objects made of metal. If you can manage to make a cut in his little finger, all the people he has devoured will come streaming out.

Mary has had, I suspect, a mission education. This would explain the name and the calico dress. Such an education is nothing to be ashamed of—why, then, did she stand up in such a rage when I inquired about it? Mary’s rage is cold; she kept her voice low. “I have told you not to ask me these types of questions! I have only come to tell you about ogres! Give me the money!” She held out her hand, and I doled out her daily fee in rupees, although she had not stayed for the agreed amount of time.

She seized the money and secreted it in her dress. Her contempt burned me; my hands trembled as I wrote her fee in my record book. “No questions!” she repeated, seething with anger. “If I went to a mission school, I’d burn it down! I have always been a free woman!”

I was silent, although I might have reminded her that we are both my employer’s servants: like me, she has come here for money. I watched her stride off down the path to the village. At a certain distance, she began to waver gently in the sun.

My face still burns from the sting of her regard.

Before she left, I felt compelled to inform her that, although my father was born at Karachi, I was born at Mombasa. I, too, am an African.

Mary’s mouth twisted. “So is Kibugi,” she said.

## 7. Kiptebanguryon

A fearsome yet curiously domestic ogre of the Rift Valley. He collects human skulls, which he once used to decorate his spacious dwelling. He made the skulls so clean, it is said, and arranged them so prettily, that from a distance his house resembled a palace of salt. His human wife bore him two sons: one which looked human like its mother, and one, called Kiptegen, which resembled its father. When the wife was rescued by her human kin, her human-looking child was also saved, but Kiptegen was burnt alive.

I am pleased to say that Mary returned this morning, perfectly calm and apparently resolved to forget our quarrel.

She tells me that Kiptegen's brother will never be able to forget the screams of his sibling perishing in the flames. The mother, too, is scarred by the loss. She had to be held back, or she would have dashed

into the fire to rescue her ogre-child. This information does not seem appropriate for my employer's catalogue; still, I find myself adding it in the margins. There is a strange pleasure in this writing and not-writing, these letters that hang between revelation and oblivion.

If my employer discovered these notes, he would call them impudence, cunning, a trick.

What would I say in my defense? "Sir, I was unable to tell you. Sir, I was unable to speak of the weeping mother of Kiptegen." He would laugh: he believes that all words are found in his language.

I ask myself if there are words contained in Mary's margins: stories of ogres she cannot tell to me.

Kiptebanguryon, she says, is homeless now. A modern creature, he roams the Protectorate clinging to the undersides of trains.



## 8. Kisirimu

Kisirimu dwells on the shores of Lake Albert. Bathed, dressed in barkcloth, carrying his bow and arrows, he glitters like a bridegroom. His purpose is to trick gullible young women. He will be betrayed by song. He will die in a pit, pierced by spears.

In the evenings, under the light of the lamp, I read the day's inventory from my record book, informing my employer of precisely what has been spent and eaten. As a representative of Moosajee and Co., Superior Traders, Stevedores and Dubashes, I am responsible for ensuring that nothing has been stolen. My employer stretches, closes his eyes, and smiles as I inform him of the amount of sugar, coffee and tea in his possession. Tinned bacon, tinned milk, oat porridge, salt, ghee. The dates, he reminds me, are strictly for the Somalis, who grow sullen in the absence of this treat.

My employer is full of opinions. Somalis, he tells me, are an excitable nation. “Don’t offend them, Alibhai! Ha, ha!” The Kavirondo, by contrast, are merry and tractable, excellent for manual work. My own people are cowardly, but clever at figures.

There is nothing, he tells me, more odious than a German. However, their women are seductive, and they make the world’s most beautiful music. My employer sings me a German song. He sounds like a buffalo in distress. Afterward, he makes me read to him from the Bible.

He believes I will find this painful: “Heresy, Alibhai! Ha, ha! You’ll have to scrub your mouth out, eh? Extra ablutions?”

Fortunately, God does not share his prejudices.

I read: There were giants in the earth in those days.

I read: For only Og king of Bashan remained of the remnant of giants; behold, his bedstead was a bedstead of iron.

## 9. Konyek

Konyek is a hunter. His bulging eyes can perceive movement far across the plains. Human beings are his prey. He runs with great loping strides, kills, sleeps underneath the boughs of a leafy tree. His favorite question is: “Mother, whose footprints are these?”

Mary tells me that Konyek passed through her village in the Year of Amber. The whirlwind of his running loosened the roofs. A wise woman had predicted his arrival, and the young men, including Mary’s brother, had set up a net between trees to catch him. But Konyek only laughed and tore down the net and disappeared with a sound of thunder. He is now, Mary believes, in the region of Eldoret. She tells me that her brother and the other young men who devised the trap have not been seen since the disappearance of Konyek.

Mary's gaze is peculiar. It draws me in. I find it strange that, just a few days ago, I described her as a cold person. When she tells me of her brother she winds her scarlet thread so tightly about her finger I am afraid she will cut it off.

## 10. Mbiti

Mbiti hides in the berry bushes. When you reach in, she says: “Oh, don’t pluck my eye out!” She asks you: “Shall I eat you, or shall I make you my child?” You agree to become Mbiti’s child. She pricks you with a needle. She is betrayed by the cowrie shell at the end of her tail.

“My brother,” Mary says.

She describes the forest. She says we will go there to hunt ogres. Her face is filled with a subdued yet urgent glow. I find myself leaning closer to her. The sounds of the others, their voices, the smack of an axe into wood, recede until they are thin as the buzzing of flies. The world is composed of Mary and myself and the sky about Mary and the trees about Mary. She asks me if I understand what she is saying. She tells me about her brother in the forest. I realize that the glow she exudes comes not from some supernatural power, but from fear.

She speaks to me carefully, as if to a child.

She gives me a bundle of scarlet threads.

She says: “When the child goes into the forest, it wears a red necklace. And when the ogre sees the necklace, it spares the child.” She says: “I think you and my brother are exactly the same age.”

My voice is reduced to a whisper. “What of Mbiti?”

Mary gives me a deep glance, fiercely bright.

She says: “Mbiti is lucky. She has not been caught. Until he is caught, she will be one of the guardians of the forest. Mbiti is always an ogre and always the sister of ogres.”

## 11. Ntemelua

Ntemelua, a newborn baby, already has teeth. He sings: “Draw near, little pot, draw near, little spoon!” He replaces the meat in the pot with balls of dried dung. Filthy and clever, he crawls into a cow’s anus to hide in its stomach. Ntemelua is weak and he lives by fear, which is a supernatural power. He rides a hyena. His back will never be quite straight, but this signifies little to him, for he can still stretch his limbs with pleasure. The only way to escape him is to abandon his country.

Tomorrow we depart.

I am to give the red necklaces only to those I trust. “You know them,” Mary explained, “as I know you.”

“Do you know me?” I asked, moved and surprised.

She smiled. “It is easy to know someone in a week. You need only listen.”



Two paths lie before me now. One leads to the forest; the other leads home.

How easily I might return to Mombasa! I could steal some food and rupees and begin walking. I have a letter of contract affirming that I am employed and not a vagrant. How simple to claim that my employer has dispatched me back to the coast to order supplies, or to Abyssinia to purchase donkeys! But these scarlet threads burn in my pocket. I want to draw nearer to the source of their heat. I want to meet the ogres.

“You were right,” Mary told me before she left. “I did go to a mission school. And I didn’t burn it down.” She smiled, a smile of mingled defiance and shame. One of her eyes shone brighter than the other, kindled by a tear. I wanted to cast myself at her feet and beg her forgiveness. Yes, to beg her forgiveness for having pried into her past, for having stirred up the memory of her humiliation.

Instead I said clumsily: “Even Ntemelua spent some time in a cow’s anus.”

Mary laughed. “Thank you, brother,” she said.

She walked away down the path, sedate and upright, and I do not know if I will ever see her again. I imagine meeting a young man in the forest, a man with a necklace of scarlet thread who stands with Mary’s light bearing and regards me with Mary’s direct and trenchant glance. I look forward to this meeting as if to the sight of a long-lost friend. I imagine clasping the hand of this young man, who is like Mary and like myself. Beneath our joined hands, my employer lies slain. The ogres tear open the tins and enjoy a prodigious feast among the darkling trees.

## 12. Rakakabe

Rakakabe, how beautiful he is, Rakakabe! A Malagasy demon, he has been sighted as far north as Kismaayo. He skims the waves, he eats mosquitoes, his face gleams, his hair gleams, his favorite question is: “Are you sleeping?”

Rakakabe of the gleaming tail! No, we are wide awake.

This morning we depart on our expedition. My employer sings—“Green grow the rushes, o!”—but we, his servants, are even more cheerful. We are prepared to meet the ogres.

We catch one another’s eyes and smile. All of us sport necklaces of red thread: signs that we belong to the party of the ogres, that we are prepared to hide and fight and die with those who live in the forest, those who are dirty and crooked and resolute. “Tell my brother his house is waiting for him,” Mary whispered to me at the end—such an honor,

to be the one to deliver her message! While she continues walking, meeting others, passing into other hands the blood-red necklaces by which the ogres are known.

There will be no end to this catalogue. The ogres are everywhere. Number thirteen: Alibhai M. Moosajee of Mombasa.

The porters lift their loads with unaccustomed verve. They set off, singing. “See, Alibhai!” my employer exclaims in delight. “They’re made for it! Natural workers!”

“O, yes sir! Indeed, sir!”

The sky is tranquil, the dust saturated with light. Everything conspires to make me glad.

Soon, I believe, I shall enter into the mansion of the ogres, and stretch my limbs on the doorstep of Rakakabe.









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