

Neither Male nor Female

The Story of Wakuru and the Zanaki People

DAVID W. SHENK¹

Introduction

In 1936, my parents, Alta and Clyde Shenk, moved to Bumangi, Tanzania, about eighteen miles from Lake Victoria's eastern perimeter. This is where they began a pioneer ministry of bearing witness to the gospel among the Zanaki people, who had never before heard of Jesus.

Four years ago, my wife, Grace, and I took several of our teenage grandchildren on a legacy journey to East Africa, where I was born and raised, and our time in Bumangi was a highlight of our travels. After visiting the local church there, which was packed with about seven hundred people, we joined a family who wanted to share how the gospel had transformed their mother, Wakuru. They told us, "We want the great-grandchildren of Alta and Clyde Shenk to know how significant the gospel has been in transforming the lives of women in our home. You must know the story of our mother." Much that I share in this reflection is what we heard that morning from the children of Wakuru and her husband, Nyakitumu.

Wakuru's Story

Not long after my parents' arrival in Bumangi, a young girl arrived on our doorstep and called out, "Hodi!" The girl was Wakuru, and she was about ten years old at the time. Calling out "Hodi!" was a custom of the Zanaki when they desired entrance into another's home. Before Wakuru even walked through our door, she stated simply, "I want to learn about God." In doing this, she became one of the first Zanaki seekers.

There was no literature among the Zanaki at that time, so my parents began to tell Wakuru the Genesis stories to introduce her to the God of the Bible. In these stories, one of Wakuru's first discoveries was that God created human-

¹ *David W. Shenk grew up in Bumangi, Tanzania, where his parents were pioneer Mennonite missionaries among the Zanaki people. Both as a professor and author, Shenk encourages peacemaking among Muslims and Christians. He and his wife, Grace, provide leadership for the Eastern Mennonite Mission's Christian/Muslim Relations Team. They have served together in Somalia, Kenya, and the United States.*

kind in God's own image. In the image of God they were created, both male and female. Those stories from Genesis turned Wakuru's world upside down! She was filled with hope.

When Wakuru was twelve years old, her father announced that she would soon marry an elderly, polygamous man. She learned that cattle had already been paid as the dowry price. Among the Zanaki, once the dowry was paid, there could be no retraction from the marriage contract. The elderly man who planned to marry Wakuru lived within a worldview that considered women as means to create progeny, and the marriage contract a promise that a woman would produce children for her husband. The more children a woman could produce the better, so having multiple wives was desirable in order to produce more offspring. This was true among the Zanaki, and it is also true of traditional societies across Africa.

This quest for children was a desire for salvation. Many in traditional African societies believe that we cannot be remembered after death by God, because God has gone away; salvation, therefore, can only be attained by children remembering their deceased parents. Within this worldview, offspring are essential and everyone must marry; singleness is unthinkable. Most in these societies desire children who will remember them in the next world.

Wakuru grew up in a tribal context that was not yet touched by modern cultures or Christianity, and at that time the Christians among the Zanaki could be counted on one hand. However, a significant transformation took place during Wakuru's childhood. When my parents arrived, the Zanaki were completely illiterate. My parents published the Gospel of Matthew in Zanaki, which brought about great change. This new ability to read the accounts of Jesus transformed the village. Across the valley from our home, people were hearing about Jesus for the first time. The hill across the valley was Wakuru's home.

After hearing the biblical stories for two years, twelve-year-old Wakuru had a hunch that Jesus might provide a solution for her marriage quandary. She secretly trekked the couple of miles across the valley to our house. Yet again, she stood on our doorstep, this time telling my parents, "I have decided to follow Jesus."

With this confession of faith, Wakuru also refused to enter into the arranged marriage. Never before in this village had a young girl refused to accept this demand. But Wakuru had seen the relationship of my father and mother as one of love, and she desired the same for herself. The Zanaki world was turned on end.

In response, the clan elders exploded with frustration. Wakuru was beaten

and chained and her life threatened. Yet with quiet commitment, she simply refused to accept what her father demanded. For the first time a girl broke free from the demands of an unwanted marriage, and the Zanaki society has never been the same.

On one occasion, four men appeared in the doorway of the church while the congregation was gathered in worship. They commanded Wakuru to follow them, who instead ran to the front of the church and sat by my father. With a quick martial arts movement, he disempowered the leader and led the men to sit under a tree in the church's courtyard. When the service concluded, Wakuru gathered the clubs they had brought to beat her and gave them back to her assailants, blessing them each in turn.

There Is Not a Friend Like Jesus

Before Wakuru died, I visited my childhood home in Bumangi for a dinner. Wakuru came into the dining room from the kitchen where she was supervising the meal.

She asked me, "Do you remember the time my brothers came to beat me, and I hid under your bed? You were just a little boy. Often in those days my parents would imprison me and tie my hands and feet in iron clamps so I could not escape." "When they were not home," she added, "I would sing, 'There is not a friend like the lowly Jesus, no not one, no not one.' Jesus was my friend in those long months of pain and conflict."

Created in the Image of God

Resisting a polygamous marriage was not the only conflict Wakuru faced in her choice to embrace her identity as a daughter of God created in the image of God. The next conflict loomed at puberty, the stage of life when all girls were to submit to genital mutilation. This practice was used to anchor the woman's progeny into the covenant of tribe, ancestors, and family.

The transaction of mutilation was rooted in the covenant blood of the society's ancestors, and not in the life-giving blood of the Lord Jesus's covenant. The practice mutilated women, who are created in God's image. With unshakable resolve, Wakuru informed her parents that she would not participate in the practice and rituals surrounding the mutilation. And she stood firm. The elders were aghast, and the whole society reeled yet again at the impact of Wakuru's trailblazing action. Her firm stand had cracked the tribal monolith of the mutilation.

Many years later, Wakuru's daughters wanted us to know that their mother's clear stand opened the door for them to likewise refuse this suffering. Today the practice of female genital mutilation in Zanaki is largely abandoned.

One of Wakuru's daughters shared, "Mother was the pioneer; today so many are walking in her example."

There Is No Divide

Several years later, Wakuru got caught in the web of another conflict between the transforming revolution of the gospel and the practices and totems of the tribal society in which she lived. Within Zanaki, there were two totemic clans, the basket-makers and the blacksmiths, and intermarriage between the clans was forbidden. The conflict occurred when Nyakitumu, one of the first Christian youth in Zanaki, sought Wakuru's hand in marriage. As a member of the blacksmith clan, he should not have been seeking the hand of Wakuru, a woman from the basket-making clan.

Nevertheless, Wakuru and Nyakitumu decided to confront this totemic stronghold. They shared with their families that in Christ there is no divide, for all people are equally created in the image of God. They married, and theirs was the first Christian wedding in the church in Bumangi. Greatly angered by this, the tribal leaders and shamans cursed this couple so that they would be forever childless. God, however, blessed them with thirteen children! In the course of time, this couple became leaders of the churches that emerged throughout the Zanaki regions.



Photo 1. Nyakitumu and Wakuru, senior pastor couple at Bumangi. *Photo courtesy of the author.*

Who Carries the Basket?

Developing a Christian home was a challenge for Nyakitumu and Wakuru since there were no models of Christ-centered home life among the Zanaki. A practice as routine as carrying the grocery basket could become a practice of ridicule or blessing.

Nyakitumu once told my father that shortly after his marriage he and Wakuru went to the market together. In Zanaki society, the woman always carried the grocery basket on her head and walked behind her husband. On this occasion, however, as Nyakitumu and Wakuru were leaving the market for home, Wakuru said, “My husband, I have a headache. I need you to help me carry this basket.” He replied, “You are my wife. It is your responsibility to carry the basket.” Some distance onward, he looked back and saw Wakuru without the basket.

“Where is the basket?” he demanded.

She replied, “It is your money that bought the groceries, so they are yours. I told you I had a headache. The groceries are on the roadside.”

Wakuru was indeed a revolutionary, but so was Nyakitumu. Men did not carry grocery baskets. And I suppose no woman had ever refused this assumed responsibility. The expected Zanaki response would have been for Nyakitumu to beat Wakuru.

But instead of punishing her, Nyakitumu asked Wakuru for forgiveness, walked back to where Wakuru had left the groceries, and carried them home even though others might have laughed at him along the way since he was doing what they would consider women’s work.

One of my earliest memories as a little boy was hearing a woman wail in a homestead across the hills of Bumangi when I was tucked into bed one night. But this never happened to Wakuru. She shared with me that Nyakitumu never beat her; instead, he loved her.

Valuing Education

In nearly every sphere of their lives, both Nyakitumu and Wakuru challenged patriarchal systems. When the Bumangi primary school opened in 1936, they were among the first to enroll. Wakuru’s enrollment in literacy classes was a shock to many because it flew in the face of their belief that women were good at cooking and capable of caring for the cows and goats but men were the ones called to academic pursuits. Together, Wakuru and Nyakitumu subverted these notions, eventually ensuring that their daughters also had access to higher education. Consequently, the women in this family have excelled in the academic and professional world.

Celebrating a Milestone

I kept in touch with Nyakitumu until he died. In his last letter, Nyakitumu wrote of his fiftieth wedding anniversary with Wakuru. Their children gifted them with new outfits for the occasion, and choirs sang along the half-mile trek from their home to the church. Bishops and pastors from across the region attended the packed event. Even government officials came by to offer congratulations. A bull was slaughtered for the grand feast, and Bumangi resonated with song and celebration.

Since polygamous families did not celebrate such milestones, Wakuru and Nyakitumu were the first to celebrate a fiftieth wedding anniversary in Bumangi. This was a landmark for the Zanaki tribe, and everyone joined together to thank God for Wakuru and Nyakitumu's commitment.



Photo 2. Elisha Nyakitumu and Susana Wakuru (center). They are surrounded by several of their thirteen children and grandchildren, with their firstborn, Rebeca, to the far left. *Photo courtesy of the author.*

Genesis and Gender Empowerment

Throughout Wakuru's life, she encountered tension between the biblical values she discovered and modeled and the society in which she lived. As I reflect on her story, I am reminded of her discovery of the revolutionary good news found in Genesis 1–3—that she was a child of God, created in God's image. This news changed her life, and because of her resulting zeal, the community around her was changed as well.

The stories of Wakuru's life highlighted the gender transformation that biblical revelation offers. Wakuru and Nyakitumu's faithful witness to Christ transformed their whole society and helped bring about an awareness that all people, including women, are created in the image of God.

The following eight themes are grounded in these chapters of Genesis that seem to have formed Wakuru and shaped the choices she made.

1. Men and women are equally created in the image of God (1:27).
2. We are one humanity (2:7).
3. Marriage is the one flesh covenant union of a man and woman (2:20–25).
4. Children are a blessing but not essential to the marriage covenant (2:22–25).
5. Our fullest humanity is in a covenant relationship with God, not in marriage (1).
6. Individually and corporately we have turned away from God; one of the core expressions of turning away is distorted relationships between humans, often expressed in men domineering women (3:15).
7. Being a mother is not a woman's highest calling. Rather, all people are created for covenant relationship with God.
8. God promised a son who would bring about healing and forgiveness in our societies, personhood, brokenness, and sin (3:15).²

And, as in Wakuru's story, engagement with these biblical themes takes place not just between church and society but also within the life and ministry of the church, and at a deeply personal level.

² These eight themes are developed by Walter Trobisch in *I Married You* (Boliver, MO: Quiet Waters, 2009.) Trobisch observes that the vast majority of traditional societies are organized around belief systems that view the woman as a field and having children as the purpose of marriage. He argues that Christianity provides an exception to this worldview. Chantal Logan developed a similar assessment in her essay "Is the Gospel Good News for Muslim Women?" in *Anabaptists Meeting Muslims: A Calling for Presence in the Way of Christ*, eds. James R. Krabill, David W. Shenk, and Linford Stutzman (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2005), 141–52.

Forgiveness and Reconciliation in Transformation

Forgiveness and reconciliation were central for Wakuru and Nyakitumu. As a young girl, Wakuru gathered the clubs of the men who wanted to beat her, returning them to the men and wishing each of them the peace of God. As an adult, in every return visit to Bumangi, Wakuru would share with me stories of reconciliation between her and her parents. Before her mother died, Wakuru felt that a full restoration of relations with her parents was at hand. Her mother even invited Wakuru to share gospel stories from time to time.

Wakuru and Nyakitumu did not set out to start a movement. Rather, they were two youth who met Jesus and tried to follow their Lord faithfully. In spite of conflicts at nearly every turn, they were careful to cultivate life-giving relations each step along the way. Continual forgiveness in the midst of the confrontations they faced was the hallmark of their revolution.

These stories highlight the gender transformation that biblical revelation offers. Wakuru and Nyakitumu's faithful witness to Christ transformed their whole society and helped bring about an awareness that all people, including women, are created in the image of God.

Conclusion

These stories began when a young girl walked across the valley in Bumangi to meet with a tiny community of Christians. She made that trek alone to investigate the rumor that there is good news in Jesus.

In the face of enormous opposition, her quest transformed her and her people. Because of her curiosity and commitment, her village learned that in Christ "there is neither male nor female" (Gal 3:28).