

## The Bushfallers

by Kenneth Usongo

Tindo could vividly remember how her dream of traveling to and living in America was seeded. As a young girl in the local elementary school at Andek, she had scrawled, in capital letters with a lead pencil, on the last page of her writing exercise book the word: America. Several times a day she would open her book, glance at the page, and smile to herself. Dream. Drive. Hope. Haste. That was twenty years ago, when she first nursed such an idea to travel overseas.

Perhaps the thrill she felt upon watching cattle egrets effortlessly crisscross and sway across the sky had ignited her desire to travel abroad. If these birds can travel to distant lands, Tindo repeatedly wondered why she cannot. These birds often visited Andek in the heart of the harmattan when the weather was dry, cold and windy. These seasonal visitors usually preceded Christmas. Coincidentally, it was also the time when bushfallers or those who had traveled to Europe and the Americas flocked home to the ecstasy and pride of their parents, relatives, and friends. These emigrants to Western countries were locally known as bushfallers because most of them hardly told people when and where they intended to travel. It was always a guessing game whether a particular person would travel or be given a visa.

The unpredictability of traveling abroad profited tremendously the local diviners, who were always overwhelmed by the number of customers intent on inquiring about the best moments and places to travel. The diviners' reputation had suddenly rocketed like a bush fire in the harmattan. They basked in the wealth and fame regarding their fortune-telling. They advised anxious customers about which countries were most likely to grant visas to applicants and what times of the day were most conducive to being given visas. Diviners cautioned customers to apply for visas in countries or regions like Australia, Canada, Scandinavia, China, and India. They frowned on travel to the United States, England, France, and the UAE. If some customers insisted on traveling to this second category of countries, it meant that they had to pay more money because the diviners had to work overtime. The diviners often told applicants to schedule visa interviews in the evening because the interviewers were more vulnerable to the power of the diviners' magic, as the interviewee would constantly chew on some leaves in his or her mouth while responding to

questions. The diviners also boasted about how they tickled the officers' balls, compelling these interviewers to hurriedly approve visas rather than expose themselves to the onlookers' embarrassment with their unease. Through several enigmatic practices, the diviner mysteriously numbed and guided the interviewer's intelligence and made him or her nod their head like a duck to the interviewee's responses. Moreover, the fatigue of reading through stacks of documents and interrogating numerous applicants made the visa officer susceptible to manipulation.

At the same time, visa applicants were advised by the diviners not to bathe on the day of the visa interview. They were also instructed to smear a potent substance on their bodies to make the consular officer sleepy and distracted. Taking no chances, the diviners told their clients not to shake hands with anybody on the visa interview day. In place of handshaking, applicants were excused hugging only their parents or people who knew details of their travel plans. Furthermore, a translucent powder was given to visa applicants by diviners, and this substance needed to be sprayed on the documents requested by the consulate. Any consular officer who browsed through the documents would most likely plead in the applicant's favor. If individuals undertook all these necessary measures, diviners assured their customers that any case of visa denial would be unlikely.

Usually, in Andek, when a person suddenly could not trace the whereabouts of a friend, companion, or family relation, it was generally assumed that the missing person had "bushfallen." For their part, these avid visitors to European and American countries jealously guarded details about their travel plans for fear that their enemies could sabotage their trips out of envy. After all, there had been stories of individuals who had been duly given travel documents only to discover that, on the eve of their departure, these documents had caught fire or disappeared mysteriously. In the face of these uncanny events, people rarely gave out any information on their travel plans, including even to brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, or uncles. The date, time, and manner of travel were privy only to the traveler and his or her mother or father. Upon each departure, the village radiated with joy, food, and camaraderie as everyone was in good spirits and tried hard to associate in one way or the other with the lucky traveler.

Unfortunately for Tindo, her dream of traveling abroad was abruptly aborted. Her father had borrowed money from a wealthy person in Andek to fund the travel of her older brother, Thomas, to the United States. Ajae used some of the money to pay the diviner's charges, who was credited with outwitting the meticulous and stern officer at the US consulate in Yaoundé. Hundreds of visa applicants had always had their dreams of traveling to the US dashed by this austere officer. He fascinated visa applicants by speaking through his mouth and nostrils simultaneously. Most applicants commonly referred to him as "Mr. Denied." He always found fault with any document

submitted to him. The story was told of how, upon denying a visa to an applicant, he later informed him that if he, the applicant, brought a forty million franc CFA bank statement, his case would be reconsidered. In anger, the applicant asked the officer how many Americans could procure that amount of money without loans. However, this particular consular officer could not withstand the local diviner's supernatural strength that facilitated Thomas's travel to the US.

Ajae secured the loan from Ambeukum, counting on the proceeds from his coffee farm as well as on Thomas working hard in America and sending home money to repay the debt. Ajae's financial precariousness was compounded by the fact that his farm that year did not produce enough coffee. The year that Thomas traveled abroad, the weather was dreadful. The sun scourged the coffee plants making them look like a foster child being fed by a grumpy stepmother. The luxuriant coffee leaves turned yellow overnight. And the promising harvest hanging from the leaves suddenly dropped dead. There was also more alarming news for the family. The money that the family was expecting from Thomas was not forthcoming. Instead, he requested financial assistance from his family to help fund child support charges for a baby he had just had in America. Although he had always been a disciplined and hardworking son, Thomas said that he had entangled himself with a young American woman to get a green card that would enable him to work in his host country. The student visa that he had been given at the consulate limited his work choices. And he believed that the fastest way of making his family reap financial benefits from their overseas investment was to liaise with an American woman. After all, he told himself that if the mountain cannot descend to him, he might as well ascend it.

Thomas had single-mindedly pursued this line of thought, convinced that his family would buy into his idea. While some of his family members lauded his initiative, others begrudged it and argued that he acted out of personal greed. If only Thomas had alerted him to this recent development, Ajae told himself, he would have been dissuaded from this gamble. Where would he get the money to repay the loan he had taken from Ambeukum to finance Thomas's journey? Ambeukum constantly harassed Ajae, swearing to not only incarcerate him but also to sell his compound. He had had more than enough broken promises of payment from Ajae, and Ambeukum's patience was running thin. To match words with action, Ambeukum dispossessed Ajae of the coffee farm, and he was actively looking for buyers for Ajae's compound. The prospect of homelessness was staring Ajae in the face, and he needed to act fast. He lamented that unlike most people, when he drank water, it stuck between his teeth.

Ajae mulled over how to repay Ambeukum. He solicited financial assistance from his friends and family members, but no one was willing to do business with him. They privately gossiped about

how he would be unable to pay back any money loaned to him. While some people argued that Ajae was behaving like a chicken, eating alone and leaving his mouth always clean, others said that he was stacking up money to buy the whole village. Was his son, Thomas, not sending him money in a hat each month? He thinks that he is clever, hoodwinking all of us so that only his son should be abroad. Look at his plump jaws, like cocoyam growing near a palm oil mill. He is as greedy as most of his townspeople, including even their fowls and dogs. The gossip spilled across the village.

Faced with Ambeukum's constant harassment and threats, Ajae became desperate. He had to bail the water while it was ankle-deep. One day he nerved himself and approached Ambeukum. Ajae began his talk by reminding Ambeukum about a saying among the Ngie elders that the most beautiful woman can only offer what she has. He explained to him his financial predicament and pledged to fulfill any request from his creditor, including trading his labor and that of family members to pay off the debt. In fact, Ambeukum had acres of coffee farms and vast parcels of land on which he grew plantains, cocoyams, beans, and other foodstuffs. Contrary to his characteristic boisterous nature, Ambeukum patiently listened to Ajae to the surprise of the latter, who anxiously waited to hear Ambeukum's opinion on his suggestion. He was ill-prepared for what Ambeukum was about to say. "Thank you, Ajae, for your proposal. I will gladly take it," said Ambeukum. In a gesture of confidence, Ajae now stretched open his legs while tapping his feet on the ground synchronously. He beamed with joy at the thought that his burden was about to be taken off his shoulders.

"As you are probably aware, many people in this village have been offering me their girls for marriage, but I have not given serious thought to the idea. Ajae, I would like our relationship to move beyond friendship. Money should not stand in the way. Well, if you give me Tindo as a wife, I'll forfeit your debt," said Ambeukum. Ajae was speechless. He was stupefied and quickly shook his head sideward in disgust. "Ambeukum," howled Ajae, "How dare you to insult me? You know that Tindo is a little child still going to school." "Well," retorted Ambeukum, "I thought that you were serious about repaying me. I made a generous suggestion to you, and instead of thanking me for it, you are unappreciative." He added that if Ajae did not return his money or adhere to his suggestion in a week, Ajae would be rendered homeless. The latter then stormed out of Ambeukum's house, calling him a wizard and a vulture.

Ambeukum wielded much political clout in Andek, thanks to his wealth and influence. Almost everybody in the village, including the administrative and judicial authorities, attended to his whims and caprices. It was therefore not surprising that Ajae's house and coffee farm were impounded at Ambeukum's instruction. Many villagers wondered why a man with a son in the US should be so humiliated.

They pondered, as they often say in the local idiom, how a man by the banks of a river would choose to wash his hands with spittle. Most people were unaware that behind the scenes, Ajae was now secretly negotiating with Ambeukum, this time as in-laws.

While Tindo was talked into becoming Ambeukum's wife, she kept her plans to herself. She convinced herself that this decrepit and gluttonous man was not her type. For his part, Ajae got some reprieve from Ambeukum. He repossessed his house and farm. His jaws gradually filled out, and he regained his old smile. However, things started to change for Ambeukum dramatically.

One day neighbors were drawn to the pandemonium in Ambeukum's compound. He was lying outstretched on the ground like a dead person. And he was expensively dressed: a black three-piece suit, an immaculate white shirt, and a silk tie with black and white stripes. His family was hysterical: his wives were wailing loudly and rolling themselves on the ground while the children were sobbing uncontrollably. It was an emotional scene. Only Tindo sat down dry-eyed, seemingly unperturbed. Occasionally, Ambeukum would peep at the women and children from his vantage position.

Ambeukum often staged this drama every Christmas season. This was his strategy to determine who loved him most in the family in case he was dead. And to each wife and child, he shared Christmas gifts like lovely clothes, food, fowls, and jugs of palm wine in proportion to their lamentations during his sham death. At the end of his antics, Ambeukum got up and warned his family to be more serious in displaying public affection. He counseled them that he would share his property only with those who showed him love. He cautioned them that you do not feed your chicken only on the market day.

Each night Ambeukum patiently looked forward to consummating his marriage to Tindo. On numerous occasions in the night, neighbors were awoken by cries from Ambeukum's house. However, this time around, the screams appeared ominous. It was difficult to determine from a distance whether the terrifying wails were from a woman or a man. Then there was a distinctly male voice calling for help. On this eventful occasion, neighbors broke open Ambeukum's door, just in time to rescue him from the near-fatal clutches of Tindo, as she irritably tugged at his balls. Ambeukum was almost asphyxiated, breathing spasmodically like a wounded antelope in the throes of death. As Tindo lurched toward him with her clinched fists, Ambeukum inched backward, quaking in fear. He was trembling like a plantain leaf being blown by the wind, as he desperately looked at the curious neighbors.

He had seen enough of Tindo. Ambeukum instructed her to pack her belongings and leave his house, but she refused. Regarding Ambeukum's sexual advances to her, she swore to cure him of "madness." She even threatened to kick him out of the house each time that he offended her. Occasionally, when they had a heated argument,

she would aim for his groin, and he would dash out of the house. Ambeukum now ordered Ajae to come and take Tindo out of his house. His in-law responded that it is the roof that covers the house. He pleaded with Ambeukum to resolve his marital misunderstanding peacefully.

Help came to Ambeukum from an unlikely source. Word circulated in Andek that a young man, Apong, living in the US, was looking for a woman to marry. Apong "spoiled" everyone he met in the local bar with beer and food. He was rumored to be stunningly rich, and he caught the fancy of every lady in Andek. Diviners worked long hours as they propositioned every young woman seeking Apong's attention.

There was consternation in Andek when word went round that Apong had flown to the US with Tindo. "How did she win his heart?" questioned many anxious people. Others wondered what he saw in her, given that she was from a miserly family. Still, some people speculated that Tindo's brother, Thomas, in the US might have "connected" his sister with Apong. Other people stated that Apong cannot be expected to behave like cocoyam leaves, collecting rain to nourish the neighboring plants. As an indigene, Apong was expected to marry a girl from the village and not from another ethnicity.

Tindo could not believe her luck as she lived with her new husband in the US. Together they had a lovely family with four children: two boys and two girls. She enjoyed her job as a nurse while her husband worked as a tech engineer. The couple took home a handsome monthly pay. Tindo could not believe that the little self-pledge she made as a little girl in the elementary school had come true. Almost inadvertently, she had taken solid strides toward fulfilling her life dream. She was now a polished, accomplished, and assertive woman. In her village of Andek, she had become a local celebrity, as many young girls looked up to her as a mentor. She constantly sent home much money and American goodies like clothes, toiletries, food and wines.

One day Tindo received a text message from her father that her mother was feeling unwell. She had been taken many times to the local hospital in Andek, but the doctors could not precisely diagnose her ailment. She rapidly lost weight and had no appetite for food. She walked with much difficulty and looked aged. Upon receiving the news of her mother's poor health, Tindo was deeply distressed. She agonized over returning home to see her mother lest something terrible happen to her. Apong dissuaded her from traveling to Cameroon because of two main reasons. First, the civil war ravaging the country made it unwise to travel home. Second, the COVID-19 pandemic wrecking the country did not augur well for traveling. This scenario was mainly because most people there did not care much about safety guidelines such as physical distancing, masking, and other health protocols. If Tindo insisted on traveling to Cameroon, Apong

cautioned that it would be prudent for her first to take the COVID-19 vaccine. Unfortunately for Tindo, even though she was a nurse, it was still challenging to get a vaccine or set up an appointment for one. If she had to postpone her trip to Cameroon till she could get a vaccine, her mother might pass away in her absence. The thought of such a prospect gnawed her stomach. She was determined to risk everything for her mother.

When Tindo arrived in Andek, she ironically found her mother in good spirits. She was looking much better. Tindo's mother told her that it was a waste of money and time to have come to the village. "Why didn't you tell me that you were coming?" she asked. "I would have discouraged this trip. Completely unnecessary and dangerous," she emphasized. Tindo said that she wanted to surprise her mother with the visit and that it was risky to publicize her visit lest evil people hatch plots against her. For his part, Ajae was neither elated nor disappointed with Tindo's coming. He hardly believed how his little girl had grown into a healthy and responsible woman.

When news started filtering in Andek about Tindo's sudden collapse at home, many people were stupefied. Some people argued that it was probably Tindo's mother who had collapsed and not Tindo. Some people might have surely mistaken the mother for the daughter. Other people who were unaware of Tindo's presence in the village contended that she was in the US and not in Andek. "Is she a witch? How can someone be in two places at the same time?" they queried. Still, others warned against propagating falsehoods about Tindo, especially coming from enemies. According to them, only a wizard can hear a dead person's drumming.

Despite the conflicting accounts about Tindo's situation, one thing was clear. She had respiratory difficulties and had slumped into a delirium. She constantly gasped for breath. Tindo was rushed to the local hospital, where she underwent several medical tests. While Tindo was battling for life at the hospital, Ajae rushed to a famed diviner in Ngie. Adeibong's message was unequivocal. He revealed to Ajae that Tindo's marriage and visa application were facilitated by Uchuwed, the renowned diviner of Lower Ngie. Upon going to America, Tindo had failed to honor her promise with the diviner. She had paid him only half the money she owed him. The other half has been pending for five years. According to Adeibong, the unfortunate news is that Uchuwed died two years ago. It was, therefore, imperative that they find his successor and pay him the money Tindo owed. That way, the spell on her could be neutralized.

The hospital diagnosis of Tindo's sickness was shocking. She had contracted COVID-19, and the lack of a respiratory machine at the hospital apparently sealed her fate. Tindo's mother was inconsolable. "Where, how, why, and when had my daughter caught this disease?" she burst out, given that she had not tested positive for COVID-19, nor

anybody else in her household. She was torn between Tindo's hospital diagnosis and Adeibong's divination.

Granted that Tindo's health situation dramatically deteriorated, Ajae embraced a two-pronged approach to his daughter's situation. On the one hand, emissaries were dispatched with a large brown envelope in search of Uchuwed's successor. On the other hand, Adeibong commissioned his boys to go to the local forest to procure some potent leaves that Tindo was to inhale to clear her windpipe. It was a wise decision to explore any avenue that could alleviate Tindo's situation because, in the local parlance, how could this family carry a person with a broken waist? Before any of these two ventures could be realized, news broke that Tindo had died.

Tindo's death left her parents inconsolable. Her father, Ajae, was convinced that his daughter was a victim of the witchcraft and envy permeating the Andek community. After all, he believed that he had settled Tindo's debt with Uchuwed, whose insatiable greed made him continually request more money even after Tindo's transaction with him, according to Ajae, was settled. Unfortunately, the diviner envisioned Ajae's daughter as a source of revenue, piling one financial request on another.

The entire Andek community was bewildered following Tindo's passing away. Opinions were divided. While a section of the Andek people viewed Tindo's death as tragic and attributed it to natural causation, others decried the impact of witchcraft in Andek that prompted some individuals to embrace reprehensible practices to make money.

Nevertheless, most Andek people saw Tindo's demise as an isolated incident, which did not diminish the passion among the local youths to travel abroad for "greener pastures." She remained an inspiration to the indigenes, a lit lamp placed on the table to enkindle hope and shed light for those within Andek.