



The Fellowship of the Uvumbuz

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Meet the People

In some faraway land lives a tribe outsiders call 'The Lone Walker'. They refer to themselves as 'the people', or the Abantu in their language. An encounter with an Abantu is rare. They are giants whose torso stays above the lower leaves layer of the forests. Most outsiders only see long legs patted with protections when a walker passes by. For a normal person, all giants look alike and some believe there is only one lone walker. The giant's view of the ground is obstructed by branches and leaves. Even in open terrain, you will not get the chance to talk to a walker as they are not interested in small talk with small people.

However, if you are tall yourself or carry a long stick with an orange, their favorite color, flag they interpret this as a sign you have information for them and will stop in front of you. Those encounters are very brief because giants do not lose precious time talking to people. They only want the information you offer them. That is it. The conversation is also limited because the tongue of the Abantu is rarely spoken outside their tribe and communication most likely happens in simplified sign language. Once they have what they need, you better get out of their way.

Unlike the others think, the tribe does not only have giants or isiqhwag but also smaller, we would consider them as small but within normality, tribespeople or omncane. However, only the giants travel far and come in contact with outsiders. That is why outsiders think the whole tribe must be big walkers.

Being big with the Abantu means everything. The giants, males and females, are the ones holding the meetings, or umhlangans, to decide what will happen. During their gatherings, they discuss the future of the people. These discussions turn very heated and it is not unusual to see hot air escaping from the place of gathering. After a tribe council, the members are soaked in sweat and completely wasted by the release of all that energy.

Besides debating and deciding on high-level issues, giants are the ones who go on a quest. There is no use to send the little ones, they travel too slowly. Whenever there is something deemed important, they select the bravest travelers to go on an ukwenza to

look for it. Giants have the speed and endurance to cover huge areas in search of whatever they need to find. And they are convinced they excel in it.

Being a giant is a time-consuming but very fulfilling and respected duty. That is why Abantu parents, small and big, hope their children will become giants. All kids indifferent to their heritage may be born a giant. Although there are many beliefs on why a child becomes a giant, and consequently many useless rituals to influence the process, the real cause of the growth difference is not known. The first signs are apparent around the age of five, but sometimes this happens later in life. By reaching puberty, the distinction between an isiqhwag and an omncane is quite clear. That is also the moment the education of the boy or girl changes drastically. A giant kid is introduced to the circle of leaders, while the small children stay with their parents to be prepared for a place in the tribe.

If you now think that the life of an omncane is a bad one, you are mistaken. They rarely leave the dominion of the tribe. They find happiness in the small pleasures of life and are not interested in the big issues of the here and now. These are the worker bees taking care of the daily routine. They are the bakers, butchers, handymen, farmers... doing the work. Without them, there would be no tribe to lead. Some even say that the smaller people run the tribe. A thought the giants find preposterous.

Anyhow, life was good. The people lived well while their walkers roamed the surrounding plane in search of... important things.

The Interest in the Uvumbuz

It started with one giant coming home telling about some strange things he had seen. Then another one. A third told stories about a tribe that was sitting when holding a meeting. This way their meetings were less tiresome and they could discuss longer on serious matters. Why had they never thought about that?

Then another told about outsiders that had a special arrangement for the seating. The experienced walkers would sit on one side; the older giants would sit on the other side. They applied it and were very happy with this new arrangement. Why had they never thought about that?

Another walker came in with a story about travelers using white sticks. These sticks made walking easier. So, all the walkers painted their sticks white convinced that they would walk faster. Why had they never thought about that?

That question evolved into the main topic of the tribe meetings. A lot of hot air was vented on what it was that they missed. How comes that outsiders came up with those fantastic ideas, while the only thing they could do was to copy it. They needed to find

what it was that the outside tribes possessed and they did not. The council decided for the first time to send out ten walkers at the same time. The tribe was in crisis.

Well, that was what the giants thought. For the small people, it was business as usual. They needed to care of the collective, of the day-to-day activities and no fancy chairs or white walking sticks would change that. Crisis? Well, if the giants say there is one, then there must be one, right? Life went on while the walkers went looking for what they missed. For the thing that would change everything.

After a fortnight, the ten came back within the span of a day. When the last arrived, the giants held a tribe council. All ten told the story of their travel. It went on for hours, days. For the first time since the people could remember, the council was interrupted for a few hours, because the giants were too exhausted to continue. The smaller members started wondering if there was indeed something extraordinary going on.

Three friends, Ukuk, Ngokush, and Cabanga, had to know what it was and they agreed to spy on the council once it would restart. When the giants woke up and trotted to the meeting place, they followed quietly. Ukuk, the informal leader of the trio, knew a nice spot to observe the meeting. Close enough to hear the conversations, but far enough to stay undetected. Not that listening in was forbidden, but it was considered a waste of time for small people. As a rule, an omncane did not attend a council.

There was one exception to the unspoken rule and that was, Kanipha. He was always invited to the council. He had not only the ability to listen carefully about what the giants were talking; he could also summarize the discussions very well. He could even recap extremely heated discussions in such a way that all would agree. The giants appreciated his skill and gave him the last word before the chief concluded. Unfortunately, his way of compressing a council meeting in a few lines to everybody's liking meant that most of the time his words were not very precise. Every member heard what he or she thought about the issue. Being precise would have led to unacceptable conclusions.

The three saw Kanipha walking through the legs of the council member listening carefully and attentively. He was sweating because of the heat, but he could outlast any giant during a council. It went on for hours, until at last voices quieted down.

"You had a long and fruitful discussion. A meeting so though and long that for the first time, you had to hold a break before you could finish this council." A low rumble marked their agreement.

"We have heard the stories of the ten. They told us about new things they saw or were voiced by outsiders. We have discussed all that information. All these efforts were

worthwhile because our combined efforts had shed light on what we are looking for,” continued the chief. Again a low rumble.

“At last, we know how to recognize the uvumbuz!” The chief was indeed a happy man.

The chief pointed to Kanipha, the sign that he expected him to summarize the discussion. He walked slowly to a position next to the chief. Took a good look at all present and summarized the meeting in a rhythmic tone:

“Unearth fallen.

Untouchable imagined.

Uncertainty defied.

Unknown perceived.

Trinity overlooked.”

A low rumble rolled through the audience. That was indeed what they all could agree.

“Thank you, wise man, for this perfect report of our discussion,” the chief took over. “Our travelers know clearly what they have to look for. They will leave at first light. Good night my fellow isiqhwag.”

After these words, the chief left the meeting followed by the rest of the council.

“Always interesting to observe a council meeting,” concluded Ukuk.

“That Kanipha fellow is good at what he’s doing,” added Cabanga.

“But what does that all mean?” questioned Ngokush.

“Well, that our giants will travel again,” answered Ukuk. They laughed.

“Well, well, who have we here?” The voice of Kanipha. Sudden silence.

“Uh, uh, we were watching the council and were discussing your wisdom to summarize such meetings,” tried Ukuk.

“No worries, friends. There is no rule against listening. Only the idea that it is time wasted for you. Relax,” replied Kanipha.

“Yes, we know,” they said almost in unison.

“Only, only, it is a pity that only they can look for the uvumbuz,” uttered Ukuk.

“Why is that?” asked the wise one.

“Uh, because they are the travelers?” Kanipha shook his head.

“They walk faster than us?” Again a no.

“They are smarter?” No.

“We don’t know,” concluded Cabanga.

“But you are going to tell us,” probed Ngokush.

“No, I will not tell you why, because there is no rule stating that only giants travel,” instructed Kanipha. The three were surprised by that answer. They knew of no omncane telling stories about strange places. They thought that was because they were not allowed to go on a journey.

“Why is there no traveling omncane?” questioned Ukuk.

“Well, because no omncane is doing it,” was the simple reply. “If you are so interested in the uvumbuz, why don’t you three go looking for it?”

“Because we don’t know where to look?” said Ngokush.

“Walk four days towards where the sun sets. On your last evening, look for the mountain in the light. You’ll find what you are looking for on that top,” spoke Kanipha.

“Why would we find something the giants are looking for?”

“Does the eagle sees the same world as the frog?” Kanipha’s reply gave them something to think.

“But, how do we know we found what we are looking for?” tried Ngokush again.

“You know what the giants know. Unearth fallen. Untouchable...” His voice died while he walked away from the little gathering. Leaving the three friends behind.

The Ukwenza of the Frogs

The next day, the village was in for an early rise. Normally, only a few people are waving out travelers, but rumors had traveled faster than giants do and by morning, the whole tribe knew that this was not a routine ukwenzu. Their giants left in search of something life-changing, maybe even for the small people. Before the first traveler started her journey, there was a crowd on the street cheering. It went on for hours until the last disappeared behind the horizon.

Ukuk used the crowd to get next to his friend Ngokush. He kicked him in the side.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Ready for what?” his friend tried.

“Well, you know. For travel.”

“You are serious about going?”

“Of course. Let’s do this together.”

“What about Cabanga?”

“She’ll go if you go,” smiled Ukuk.

“Yeah, right.”

“Ok, that’s a go.”

“Hey, I didn’t say that.” However, it was too late. Ukuk was already next to Cabanga telling her they would leave in an hour. Ngokush saw she looked in his direction, nodded and left for her house. No way out. He turned around to get his stuff. Time to get ready.

An hour later, they met at the edge of the village. There was no crowd to wave them out. It was better this way. Nobody needed to know about this mission to fail. They would be the joke of the tribe if they returned empty-handed. No, it was better nobody knew about their plan. They could always make up a story to explain their long absence once they were back.

“Let’s start this journey,” Ukuk said with some excitement in his voice. And with that, the first Ukwenza of the small since long began.

“How will we call our group?” asked Cabanga after a while.

“Right we don’t have a name,” replied Ngokush.

“We should have one,” said Cabanga, “what do you think about Cangokuk?”

“Neh, too ordinary. Everybody makes up that kind of group names. We need something with more ring to it.”

“The small walkers? The little giants?”

“That sounds nice, but...” appraised Ukuk, “what did Kanipha tell us about seeing things differently?”

“That an eagle and a frog see the world from a different perspective,” replied Ngokush.

“That is it, the frogs,” smiled Cabanga. “The Ukwenza of the Frogs.” The two others looked at each other and simulated the low rumble to show their agreement.

During four days, they walked through forests, fields, over hills, and across rivers in the direction where the sun sets. No obstacles were too big to overcome. They only stopped when it was too dark to travel safely. It was hard work but that did not stop them from having fun or enjoy a good meal. Ngokush proved to be an excellent cook with his small field kettle. Cabanga was a born storyteller, while Ukuk could find the best camping spots, well-protected with magnificent sights.

There were not sure which mountain they were looking for, but that did not matter as long as they reached it on the fourth night. By midday on day four, they could see a lone mountain within reach of daylight travel. That must be the place. As they approach the solitary mountain, they could see a big tree on top. Was that their objective? Would the secret of the uvumbuz be hidden there? As they approached the mountain, the tension of expectation raised.

Suddenly, they stopped. A deep valley with a wild river below blocked their way. Traversing it meant they would not reach the treasure before dusk. Too late? However, they had no other option, so they descended the steep wall driven by the smell of their goal.

Unearth Fallen

Tired and a bit frustrated they reached the foot of the mountain when day turned into night. The full moon was already beginning her travel through the sky. Clouds were gathering above them announcing a violent thunderstorm. They were down while they had to be up there.

Ukuk and Ngokush sat down in disappointment. Their quest ended midway. A failure. Purposeful traveling was indeed something for the giants.

“Hey guys, look at that,” she said pointing to the mountain. Without much enthusiasm, both stood up and walked over to her. “Don’t you see it?”

“See what?”

“You remember the council meeting wherein they concluded that the uvumbuz should be bathed in light?” she explained.

“Yeah, they even thought it would be a star falling on the earth,” remembered Ngokush.

“Well, don’t you see it? The moon!” she replied. The moon had risen a bit and was shining just behind the mountain contrasting with the old tree on the top.

“Yes, the tree. That is where we will find it. We didn’t need to be on the top, but right here,” said Ukuk understanding the wrong assumption upon which their decision was based. They wanted to look for it from a point of view of a giant, but they were not eagles, they were frogs. That is why walkers did not find what they were looking for. They could simply not see it from the right perspective. It all made sense.

“Leave everything, we have to go to the top and find the uvumbuz before the storm hits us,” he yelled and started to run uphill without waiting for his friends. The two others stood for a moment puzzled at what just happened but then decided to follow their friend. There was not much time. The clouds were gathering fast. The mountain was not inclined to give up its secret easily.

As they reached the top, the first flash of light ignited a firework in the sky. A roaring thunder applauded for every flash like a very happy public. The nearby crackling of superheated air sounded like doomsday. The lighting touched the tree with one of its fingers setting the centuries-old wood ablaze. The tree fell and burned fiercely. Only rain could save it, but that did not come.

The three stopped in their track. They looked shocked. Failed at the finish. They stood there as time stood still. Then suddenly, Ukuk sprinted to the tree.

“Don’t do it. It is too late!” yelled Cabanga. Ngokush wanted to go after his friend, but Cabanga stopped him. “Don’t!”

Ukuk had no idea what he was doing or looking for, only that he had to run to the tree and salvage whatever it was. Unearth fallen. He had to find it now. There was no later.

Arrived at the tree, he saw that the power of the light had unrooted part of the tree. Everything was burning. Too hot to take something with him. Then he saw it: a small piece of the roots was broken off and only one end was in flames. He grabbed it and sped back.

They saw him coming with the burning root. Was that why they came here?

“We have to go down before it starts raining and make sure to keep this burning,” Ukuk yelled while passing by. The two followed without questions.

Back down, Ukuk asked for the field kettle.

“Look for some dry wood to fuel the flame,” he asked.

After a while, things calmed down. The rain did not come and the light show drifted to the West.

“This is all that I could take from the tree; a burning root,” Ukuk explained.

“But how can that be the uvumbuz?” Cabanga questioned.

“I don’t know. But think about it: Unearth fallen. The lightning knocked down the tree that was lit by the moon on the fourth evening. The fall of the tree unearthed this root. So that must be it,” he explained.

“But how do we know that it is the right thing?” Ngokush asked. “Why that piece of root and not another piece?”

“I don’t know. But it was the only thing left. It must be that,” trying to convince his friends and himself.

“Let’s eat and go to sleep,” she proposed trying to cool down the excitement of the last hours. Tomorrow, they would head back to the tribe.

Untouchable Imagined

The night did not bring surprises, nor solutions. There was no certainty that they had found what they were looking for, but they had to believe it was. If they made it back within the coming days, they could come up with an acceptable story explaining their absence. Clueless traveling longer would make it harder to repudiate their failed quest. Returning now left that honor saving possibility open. So, they left for the long walk back.

On their second day, they would pass a lake. A good thing because they needed to refill their water bottles. As they moved towards the water, they saw some strange figures stepping out a boat. Two persons dressed in blueish, long coats. Their skin was pale and looked like it was glowing.

“What are those?” asked Ngokush.

“Ssst. These are men from the Water People,” answered Cabanga.

“Water people? But I thought that tribe was a fantasy.” Ukuk was puzzled.

“No, look at them. They match the description. And they are real,” she assured.

“Let’s meet them. They don’t look dangerous,” proposed Ngokush.

“No. Stay! They may not look dangerous, but those boxes are,” Ukuk said.

“Yes, those boxes contain ghost dogs. The stories, and it is now clear that these weren’t stories, say that water people use those dogs, or whatever they may be, to catch their victims. Once caught, they take the victims to their tribe and turn them into one of them. That is how the tribe survives,” she explained. “Let’s move away silently.”

As soundlessly as possible, they increased the distance between them and the water people.

“Oh, no!” Ngokush fell over a root. The noise attracted the attention of the men at the waterfront. The two at the waterfront walked to their box and opened the lid. Out came some animal that resembled a dog with rough hair. They had the same blueish shine as their owners, but much more intense. They were a kind of mesmerizing, but that did not last long as danger was imminent.

“Run!” Ukuk yelled. The trio took off at top speed. Soon their pace slowed down. The distance between them and the dogs melted away quickly.

“We cannot outrun them,” Ngokush said closing the queue. “We have to come up with something else or we will soon be turned into water people. And I don’t like the color blue.”

“Stones! Run to those stones and let’s use them to stop the dogs,” Ukuk explained. They veered to the right. Stopped. Each took a big boulder. Turned around and waited for the right moment.

“Throw when you are sure you will hit. We only have three stones for the two dogs,” instructed Ukuk. Ngokush, the strongest of them, followed the dog running in a half-open space of the forest, while Cabanga, convinced of her precision, went for the dog closing in through the trees. Ukuk switched between both targets as he had decided to be the third thrower in case one missed.

“Be sure you hit your target,” Ukuk wanted to say, but Ngokush launched his stone before he could.

“Thoomp.” The blue dog disappeared the moment the huge stone landed on its head. It was a strange sight. The dog was gone. Ngokush felt great, but Ukuk found it startling. Why it did bother him, he had no clue, only that it was too easy to be told in stories. No time to agonize about it. He turned his attention to Cabanga’s dog. She was still following her target. The dog was further away and disappeared out of sight from time to time. That would be a hard one to kill. It disappeared again. Suddenly Cabanga threw her stone while the dog was nowhere to see. Ukuk’s adrenaline kicked in. She had missed it. But then, out of nowhere the dog popped up from behind an old tree just on time to meet his fate.

“Thoomp!” Only her stone touched the soft ground of the forest. The dog was gone.

“Amazing throw! Ngokush did you see that?” Ukuk spun around and saw his friend was already engaged with another dog. He turned around to see Cabanga and she too was engaged in a new dog. Soon, the three were taking turns in the fight, but the dogs keep

coming. Where did those ghost animals come from? Wait, I already vaporized that animal, and here it is again? He starting to grasp why he felt uneasy when Ngokush had hit his first target. Only two dogs were chasing them. So hitting the animals was not killing them although they imploded. Another 'thoomp' interrupted the awkward silence as to prove what Ukuk just figured out. That is why nobody could escape those dogs, there were not real dogs. You could never stop them. They kept coming.

It was his turn again to throw. Aim, throw, 'thoomp'. Soon a new attacker was coming from the waterfront. Then it hit him, every time somebody vaporized a dog, the same animal would leave the box to resume the attack. The animals would keep up until his friends and he would be too tired to throw stones, and that would not be long. Ngokush's reach was getting shorter, Cabanga's precision was getting worse and he felt the pain in his muscles. They had to do something. But what?

After his successful throw, he sat down to think.

"I take a short break. Keep throwing."

He sat down and looked at the flame in the kettle. What was the solution? Then suddenly he understood that throwing stones at the dogs was not the solution. Yes, they were a visible and urgent danger, but not the cause of their situation. Imploding them offered only short-lived relief, although satisfying at first, but soon they found themselves in the same situation. There must be something else to end this.

It felt like the burning root was telling him: "Untouchable imagined." That was it. The real cause of their perilous situation was the water people. They were sending the dogs. However, how to make them stop the hunt. They were too far away to be hit with stone, untouchable. He looked around. A black pool. Tar! Tar burned. The water people needed their wooden boat to get back to their tribe. That is it!

He turns towards Ngokush and told him to take care of all attacking dogs when he told him to do so. He needed Cabanga for something else. His friend was puzzled but agreed to do what was asked of him.

"Whatever you're thinking of, do it quickly. I will not be able to keep that up for long," Ngokush urged Ukuk.

"I know, but it can safe us," he replied.

Then he picked up some heavy and lighter stones. Rolled the lighter ones in the black puddle.

"Cabanga?"

"Yes?"

“Do you remember where the boat of the water people was put ashore?” he asked her. Another ‘thoomp’.

“Yes, I do,” she replied with question marks in her eyes.

“Would you be able to hit her boat from here?” he asked.

“Yes, I think I could,” she replied, “but I will need some luck.”

“OK, when I give the signal, you take a black stone from me, they may be warm, and try to hit the boat. Don’t care about the dogs. OK?”

“OK!”

Ukuk picked up a stone and held it in the flame. The small glow indicated that the tar started burning; soon there would be a bigger flame. Time to act.

While Ukuk was preparing the stone, she tried to picture where the boat was because she could not see it from here.

“Now!” Cabanga stretched her arm opening her hand expecting to receive a stone from Ukuk. The moment she felt the weight, her brain instantly calculated the power needed to hit the boat. Her throwing arm moved backward. Her muscles tensed up. And, there went the projectile. She did not wait to see where it hit. Hand open for the next stone.

Meanwhile, Ukuk had a quite look to see if Ngokush needed assistance, then took another black stone, lighted it up and passed it to Cabanga. No time to assess if she was hitting the boat. They just had to trust her capacities and luck. Ngokush was too busy defending their position to glimpse in the direction of two others. He had no clue what was happening next to him.

It was just a matter of time. Or they succumbed to fatigue in which case the dogs would be successful and they would be integrated into the tribe of the water people, or Cabanga would hit the boat convincing the water people to stop the hunt and retreat. Seconds seemed to last minutes, and minutes turned into hours.

“Smoke!” It was Cabanga.

“Smoke is good,” told Ukuk. Smoke reaching for the skies was a good sign. Cabanga was threatening the boat or at least something was afire. Will their attackers retreat or stay? Soon, their ordeal would be over. One way or another.

Ngokush stopped throwing. He stood there ready to launch another stone. But everything was quiet. He looked around. Nothing. Ukuk sensed the change too. He

handed over a black stone to Cabanga and stood up. An empty forest. No howling. No dogs.

“There they go! They run away!” yelled Cabanga. Indeed, they could see the smoldering boat sailing away on the lake. They had won. They yelled it out. They felt strong. Invincible. Soon fatigue kicked in.

“Let’s make camp here and stay for the night,” proposed Ngokush.

“Isn’t it dangerous here?” asked Cabanga.

“No, I don’t think they will return soon, and if they would, we have the puddle of tar nearby. Enough to scare them away, again. We stay rest and leave in the morning,” Ukuk concluded.

They prepared for the night. While enjoying dinner, Cabanga asked how Ukuk came up with the idea of throwing firestones at the boat. He pointed to the kettle and said “the uvumbuz”.

“It was the root that gave me the idea of ‘Untouchable imagined’. We were fighting against the things we saw and were a direct danger, but we had to look for the things that were not in plain sight. We had to stop the water people by threatening their boat. You had to imagine where it was to hit it,” he explained while pointing with his head to Cabanga.

“So, we really found the uvumbuz,” concluded Ngokush.

“It seems so. What would be meant by ‘Uncertainty defied’?” asked Cabanga.

“No idea, but we will understand when the time is right. Just like we did now,” tried Ukuk. While reliving their heroic battle against the water people, they fell asleep.

Uncertainty Defied

The next day, Cabanga woke up the rest of the fellowship. The sun was almost up. They should start early because they had a long day ahead. They had agreed to make up the time lost after the encounter with the water people. The second day passed without incidents. It was a nice and happy walk. After the eventful last days, they enjoyed the voyage back home.

When the sun touched the horizon, they made camp. Ukuk took care of the uvumbuz, Ngokush made dinner and Cabanga prepared the sleeping places. Dinner was delicious. They were in a familiar-looking environment in a well-hidden camp. Feeling

overconfident and tired, they refrained from a night watch. They fell asleep next to the fire.

With the dark came the silence. A peaceful silence.

However, with the dark also came danger. A slow, but deadly danger. Branches and leaves moved without a sound. A silent killer slowly but firmly entangling its victim. Its prey unaware of what was happening, until it would be too late.

“Cabanga!” yelled Ngokush. He had barely opened his eyes to see her entangled in a woody knot. His yell woke up the rest of the party. Cabanga could only produce a muffle.

“What ...?” but Ukuk directly saw what was happening before he finished his question. He directly followed his friend in an attempt to free her. Both were hacking the knotting ivy, chopping of roots. However hard they were slashing and hashing, the plant’s grip on Cabanga tighten. The roots were growing back faster than they could chop them off. She would soon be crunched inside the growing knot.

Ukuk needed to catch his breath because he was near collapse. He knew that doing the same thing over and over again would not lead to a different outcome, but he had no clue what to do to free Cabanga. In despair, he turned briefly towards the uvumbuz in the kettle as he felt drawn to it. The light flared up a bit. ‘Uncertainty defied’. He had no clue what these two words could mean if they even had a meaning in this situation. He turned again for a desperate effort to save his friend.

In the glimmer of the light, he saw two bigger roots coming out of the dirt leading to the big knot. They were barely distinguishable, but he understood the importance of this observation.

“Ngokush, take your ax. Slash it at the far left and right of the knot and as hard as you can,” he instructed.

“Why?”

“I’m not certain, but I think that is the only way to free her,” he explained.

Observing that their current method would never be successful, Ngokush quickly moved in the right position to do what was asked. With a larger swing, he planted his ax right where Ukuk had seen a root. The knot shuddered and loosened partly its grip. Smelling victory, he swung again and with all his might crashed the blade on the other side. The murdering bundle of roots fell apart. Ukuk was waiting for that moment. He snatched Cabanga out of the deadly stranglehold. Not too soon.

Once freed, they had to move away because the knotting ivy was maybe beaten, but not dead. They had to move away from this deathtrap. After an hour of walking in silence, they decided to take a rest, but not without somebody looking out for danger. They had learned their lesson.

Unknown Perceived

They were not eager to start a new day. During breakfast, they discussed the last night's event. Cabanga was still feeling a bit tight, but besides that, she did not seem to suffer from permanent damage. No ribs or bones were broken. Only a few brushes.

"How did you know that I had to cut those two roots?" asked Ngokush.

"I saw them briefly in the light of the uvumbuz after it reminded me of the next sentence. I was not sure that it would free Cabanga, but my gut told me I had to try it. Just keep on slashing into the knot did not seem to help," he explained.

"You two defied the knotting ivy by following an uncertain solution. Uncertainty defied," she concluded. "We surely have found the uvumbuz. We did what the giants couldn't." She smiled.

"Yes, we did. Together," said Ukuk.

"Yeah, we did, but you, Ukuk, are the one who understands the uvumbuz," replied Ngokush.

"I just got lucky," Ukuk tried.

"Three times," teased Ngokush while pushed Ukuk.

"I'm ready to start walking. Come on guys, let's go home," she proposed.

The colors of the stories about their adventure shone more bright as their feet covered more distance. Their spirits improved as they came closer to the village. They started recognizing the curves, the scents and the sounds of the environment. Soon they would be welcomed as the first omncane who solved a tribal problem giants could not. But they were not there yet.

"What do you think 'Unknown Perceived' would mean?" asked Ngokush.

"Maybe that we found the real uvumbuz?" tried Ukuk.

"Yeah, that we know that it is the real thing," continued Cabanga. "But, what about 'Trinity overlooked'?"

“That must be us. We are three, the trinity. And the giants look over us because we are small,” explained Ngokush.

“That could be. If so, that means we will have nothing to worry about for the rest of our trip. All of Kanipha’s sentences fulfilled,” concluded Ukuk.

“His skills are really phenomenal.”

Happy spirits, pleasant walk.

After another day of traveling, they reached the rolling plains of the tribe. Almost home. There were fantasizing about the surprise on the faces of the tribespeople when they would show up with the uvumbuz, and of course with the stories that proved they had found the real one. About the feast the tribe would organize in favor of the ‘The Ukwenza of the Frogs’. About ...

With a loud crack and rumble, the bottom opened beneath them. Like a giant monster. The earth swallowed them and the three disappeared in the underground belly. As quick as it happened, silence returned in the forest, but the trio was gone.

They were falling slamming against the walls of a natural chimney. For them, it seemed like an eternity. All happened in slow motion. Their ordeal did not stop as they smacked onto the dirt floor. Stone and dirt loosened by their fall had followed them and was now coming down on top of the friends. The noise died quietly after a while.

They had entered an ever-dark world. The home of cave-dwelling animals. With no light, they were trapped. No way out. Light would not have helped much, because the only certain way out, was up and that was impossible. Maybe it was better had they not survive the fall.

“Uh, uh,” the voice of Ngokush. “Ukuk?! Cabanga?!”

“Uhe, uhe,” a dry cough somewhere.

“Who’s coughing?”

“Me. Cabanga. I feel somebody moving next to me. Is that you Ngokush?”

“No, I’m here,” knowing she could not see him, “it must be Ukuk you feel moving.”

She tried to touch the body next to her. “Ukuk?”

“Yes, it’s me,” the faint voice of Ukuk.

“Everybody OK?” asked Ngokush. Two confirmations.

“Any idea where we are? And how to get out of this darkness?” asked Cabanga afraid of the answer.

“No, no idea.”

“Do we have light? Is the uvumbuz still burning?” informed Ukuk. “Where is it?” with an undertone of panic in his voice.

“There, I see a faint light,” shouted Cabanga. She crawled towards it. “Yes, it is still burning.”

“Great, we have light. Now, we have to determine where to go.” Ukuk went to Cabanga. Ngokush joined them. With three, they scanned their direct environment. Up was not a way out.

“It seems that we can only go that way,” Cabanga pointed to a tunnel.

“Let’s collect our gear and follow that tunnel. Hope it will lead us out of this cave.” Ukuk knew that hope was not a method, but that was all they had for now. A plan however sketchy is better than no plan.

It took them a few moments to collect the most important stuff. They moved through the tunnel in close formation, as the uvumbuz was only a small flame. Luckily, the cave floor was quite even, so walking was not a difficult venture. They walked for hours in the dark without any idea where they were heading.

“What do you think made these tunnels?” asked Ngokush.

“A subterranean river?” hypothesized Cabanga.

“I was thinking that too,” confirmed Ukuk, “with a bit of luck, we find freshwater.”

They took a pause. They had no idea how long they were walking. Without daylight, there was no telling what time it was. They felt like it was a good moment to rest. Cabanga took the light to look around. They had stopped in some kind of room. Minerals reflecting the flame created a ghostly ambiance. Then it moved. Dancing reflections?

“Hey, look. This is strange,” called Cabanga.

“What?” asked Ngokush.

“If I turn like this, the flame starts to dance,” demonstrating what she meant.

“It is as if ...,” Ukuk started.

“... there a little wind and that only means an exit,” she completed.

“Yes, that is right. Time to move,” that was Ukuk again. They picked up their stuff and followed the flame. It took them a while before they saw a faint glow. Daylight? Must be as the flame tilted towards that direction. Unintentionally they hastened the pace.

Cabanga, still with the uvumbuz in her hand, suddenly stopped. “Halt!” The others followed her example.

“I know where we are. Look down and then up, and you will know it too,” she explained. The two men looked down: water. And up: a round opening. The village’s water well.

“We are under the village,” said Ngokush.

“Right. What now?”

“We could yell?” proposed Cabanga. All three shouted at the top of their lungs. But no movement to be seen. Again. Nothing.

“We could stand here and shout, but we are not even sure they can hear us,” thought Ukuk loud. “Climbing up is no solution either.”

“What to do?” asked Ngokush.

“I propose we follow the water downstream and see where that leads us. If that doesn’t work, we can always come back,” Ukuk suggested.

“OK, let’s do this and see how far we get,” agreed Cabanga. The three followed the small underground stream. The number of tunnels, holes, surprised Ukuk and vertical pipes there were.

“Cabanga, can you bring the light here?” She came. He looked up in one such pipe. Now he saw that the layer of dirt forming the roof of this shaft must be very thin. Their village was on unstable ground. He looked back and could see the pool they consider the village’s water source. How far was that? The others were looking too.

“That doesn’t look good,” Ngokush determined, “Not good at all.”

“Unknown perceived,” recalled Ukuk. “We did not know about this network of tunnels and shaft. The ground the village is built on is unstable.”

“Right, we have to move on and warn the tribe that our village is in danger,” confirmed Cabanga. The group continued along the river until it went under a rock. They could see a dancing light coming from under the rock.

"I think we can dive under the rock towards the light. That must be a place with sunlight," said Cabanga.

"I will go first and see if you are right," proposed Ngokush. Ukuk took a rope and handed it to his friend.

"Put that around your middle. If there is something wrong, pull three times quickly and we will pull you back in. If you reach the other side and it is the exit, pull three times slowly. We will follow you as soon as possible. OK?" Ukuk clarified.

"OK," nodded Ngokush. He took off his shoes and stripped off as many clothes as possible. He went into the water. "Brr, cold." Took a deep breath and disappeared under the rock. The waiting took forever.

"Do you feel something?" Cabanga asked.

"Nothing special," he replied. "Ngokush is a good diver. He will make it," he felt Cabanga was worried.

It took Ngokush more than a minute to reach the other side. With every stroke, the light became brighter. When he felt no more rock above his head, he swam upwards. He broke the surface and saw women washing clothes. He had surfaced in the washing pool. They were surprised to see him and refrained from running away. The women came closer and started asking where he was coming from and what he was doing.

"Wait, wait, I will answer all your questions, but first I have to tell my friends that I made it," he told the excited women around him. He pulled three times on the rope and fixed his end to a tree. Now he had to wait.

Ukuk felt a long haul, followed by two more.

"Yes, he made it and it is an exit," told Ukuk. "You go first, I'll follow."

By pulling the rope, they could cover the distance under the rock much quicker. Both surfaced shortly one after another. The news of their sudden appearance traveled quickly through the tribe. People interrupted their activities to descend to the pool. It was not every day this happened and they all wanted to witness the return of this small but special group of travelers.

"We have to tell the council that we had found the uvumbuz," Cabanga told.

"And that the village is in danger," continued Ngokush.

"Yes, we have to tell them as soon as possible," confirmed Ukuk after he had checked that the root was still burning. They had left all their equipment behind except of course

the kettle. Ukuk had made sure that it was watertight before getting in the water and had opened it after he surfaced.

“You are lucky. The giants are in council. You can go now,” informed a bystander.

Trinity Overlooked

The headed to the meeting place. The three travelers in front followed by almost the whole tribe. When they arrived, the giants were discussing reorganizing the chairs. A change like that would certainly lead them to the discovery of the uvumbuz. It was a very heated discussion with proposals, arguments, and counter-arguments filling the space.

The traveling trio stood there watching the discussion. After a few moments, they went to the center and tried to tell that they had found it. First with a low voice, because small people do not talk during these umhlangans, than louder and louder until the three could not shout harder. No success. The giants did not even notice their presence.

They tried other approaches like standing on a chair, even kicking some legs... but all they received were some angry faces and a sign to get lost.

“This is important,” was the only words somebody said to them.

“But...”

“No buts!”

“Trinity overlooked,” sighed Ukuk the moment he decided they had failed. “Let’s get out of here. We will wait till things quiet down and try again later.”

“Good idea. We go back to the village and tell our stories with some real food and drinks,” agreed Ngokush. They walked off the perimeter of the meeting place.

“What do you think you three are going?” It was the voice of Kanipha. The council turned dead silent.

“Going back to the village. Nobody here is interested in what we have to say,” answered Ngokush annoyed by the sudden interest.

“No, the walkers want to hear what you have to tell,” Kanipha replied. “Tell them what you have found.”

“We have found the uvumbuz,” yelled Cabanga. A sound of unbelief raised from the giants. On the gesture of the chief, all went quite.

“And where is the thing you call the uvumbuz?” asked the chief.

“Here in the kettle. This burning root is the uvumbuz.” It was Ukuk.

“And why do you think you have found the uvumbuz?” questioned the chief.

“Because of the words of Kanipha,” he responded.

“Unearth fallen,” Cabanga gave the lead-in.

“We,” including the two others, “found the burning root, after a bolt of lightning smacked the old tree on the mountaintop in the direction Kanipha had send us.” The chief looked at his advisor who confirmed he did gave them a direction.

“Untouchable imagined,” continued Ngokush.

“We were attacked by ghost dogs. The uvumbuz inspired us to chase away their masters, the water people, by throwing burning stones at the location we imagined their boat would be,” Ukuk explained. A short discussion started about the existence of the water people. They were just stories, right? Ghost dogs did not exist? Of did they? The quarreling stopped when the chief raised his hand.

“Continue.”

“Uncertainty defied,” pronounced Cabanga. The two were taking turns to introduce the explanation by Ukuk as if they had agreed to do that to enhance the dramatics.

“We could free Cabanga because we acted swiftly although we were not certain it would work.”

“Unknown perceived.”

“We discovered that, unknown to you all; our village is on unstable ground. It could be swallowed by the earth anytime soon.” These words went through the council and the audience like a tsunami hitting land. The chief’s hands raised again.

“And the last one: Trinity overlooked.”

“You giants did not pay any attention while we, a group of three, tried our utmost best to get your attention. We were too small to be noticed,” concluded Ukuk. A whirlpool of emotions, reactions. As more people, big and small, got involved, the noise level increased.

“Quite!” The chief raised his voice and hand. “A nice story, but you have no proof. We just have to believe you, right?” The whole tribe was quite. A solar eclipse silence. Nature and people alike stopped breathing. Was this all fantasy? Cabanga and Ngokush stared at Ukuk as if to say “What now?”

“Follow me,” spoke Ukuk slapping the back of his friend, “I know how to prove it.” He walked to the water well. Looked down the hole as if he was searching for something. Some people put their head in the well too to see what he was looking for. He set his vision on an imaginary point and quickly stepped following his gaze. The crowd opened up to let the three pass followed by the chief, Kanipha and the giants.

Suddenly he stopped. People crushed against each other trying to avoid bumping into the leading group. He took two steps and with his finger marked a spot. Ngokush and Cabanga were beginning to understand what Ukuk had in mind.

“Chief, do you think this spot is safe to build a house?”

“Of course it is safe. Why would it not be?”

“Does somebody has an ax we may use?” Ukuk asked. Out of nowhere, somebody gavehim what he asked for. He handed over to Ngokush.

“Can you throw the ax as high as possible and make it land on that spot?” he asked Ngokush while pointing to the mark. Ngokush was now sure of the purpose of this request.

“Of course I can,” he replied confidently. The people made room because nobody wanted to be hit by accident.

“My dear friend, throw your ax.” With a flair for drama, why not giving a little show when your audience is glued to what you are going to do, Ngokush brought the ax back and high. With one smooth movement, swung it to the front and let it go at the apex of his swing. The ax climbed up the sky. Turned over when gravity had completely drained its upwards speed. It fell back to earth to crash on the spot. However, the moment it hit the ground a hole opened and the ax disappeared. A shock went through the tribe, but Ukuk had made his point.

“We didn’t know that,” spoke the chief. “I guess this proves your story. Where is the uvumbuz?”

“Here,” it was Cabanga who had thought to bring it with them. Kanipha walked to her and took the kettle.

“So, this is the uvumbuz?” he said with a clear voice.

“Yes, that is the flame that inspired us according to your words,” clarified Ukuk.

Kanipha took the burning root out of the kettle and held it up. People instinctively bowed slightly while releasing a quiet “ooh”. It was a magical moment.

The Discovery of Uvumbuz

He looked at the uvumbuz, at the people, at the chief and then at the three. He studied the uvumbuz and threw it on the ground. Took one step and killed the flame with his foot. The crowd froze in a petrified shock.

“What are you...” Ngokush was stopped mid-sentence by Kanipha’s hand sign.

“But ...” tried Cabanga. Hand up.

“And your w...” Ukuk’s turn to get the hand.

“Yes, I know. Your travel matched my words. However, those words were not about your stories, but about the uvumbuz. About you,” he continued, “Yes, I have shown you the way, but would you have started the journey if I hadn’t given you some direction?”

“Uh, no,” Ukuk replied.

“That is why I pointed in the direction of the sunset,” Kanipha explained. “With ‘unearth fallen’ I meant that you had to forget how you normally do things and try something new, even if you do not understand in the beginning how things will evolve. Like you did with the tree, you just went for it.”

“Yes, I was not sure, but it made sense at that time,” said Ukuk.

“‘Untouchable imagined’ refers to imagine what you cannot see and act on that idea. This creativity comes from your heart.” Kanipha was now standing behind Cabanga. He went to Ngokush.

“Then we have ‘Uncertainty defied’. Meaning that you do something even if you are not certain about the result. You try it anyhow even if you can fail. Doing that demands courage, guts.” He tapped on Ngokush’s belly.

“To get to ‘unknown perceived’, you have to open your mind for things you do not know and use those new insights. You need logic and intuition for that.” In the meantime, he had walked towards Ukuk and pointed to his head.

“And as last ‘trinity overlooked’. You need all three: brain, guts, and heart. Or, an open mind; courage to act, and creativity to imagine. And we have it all here, we just have to use them. We don’t require some bizarre burning root or bizarre, unproductive advice from strangers; we have here all that we need. We are the uvumbuz!”

Epilogue

By now, you, as the reader, have guessed that this story is not just a story. It is an attempt to tell about how we could install the uvumbuz or Swahili for 'innovation', in our organization. Innovation is not hidden in some magic formula made up by a well-paid guru, but dormant in every organization. There are innovators in every organization, although I have to admit that in some there may be more than in others. We just need to create a culture that stimulates these individuals to grow.

For an organization to flourish, having innovators is not enough, you need people who plan, implement innovative ideas, take care of resources... with different skills. Innovation is a fire made from different kinds of wood, not the flame of one special root.

There are of course more reflections hidden in the text above. I challenge you to find them. Maybe you will find more than those I had intended to be in. Surprise me!