

Chapter 5

Understanding Culture

Edited by Serendipity

There are benefits to wealth and power; you carry a certain level of influence. People either want to be you or be like you. There

are also a few who will dislike you but my mother always said that only those who can't have something, envy what another has.

As the Queen, I have a lot of responsibilities but also some of the greatest benefits that come with the title. My daughters and I can go shopping after closing time and often, we get invited to all major social events. I get to live in a beautiful mansion with my family. What more can a girl ask for?

Growing up was no different, I was a princess after all, so the benefits were there but I just wasn't in control of them. I only got what I wanted if my mother agreed to it or if the royal council thought it was best for the kingdom. My mother was very strict when I was younger.

"No Mapenzi, a lady does not sit like that", "Mapenzi, you can't let anyone in your class do better than you", "Zee, you can always do better than you've done". Those are the words that I remember most, no matter how great my achievement, my mother always thought I could do better. To many people that would be interpreted as some form of encouragement but something must have been wrong with me because I always saw it as her way of saying I would never be enough no matter how hard I tried.

My mother was always comparing me to her friend's children and how they were doing, how they were succeeding and how I had to do better or else no one would respect me when I took over from her. At times I thought she'd be better off with a daughter that wasn't so carefree or rather someone else, just not me.

If it wasn't for my father, I would have seen everyone as competitors or enemies. He is the reason I have friends. He convinced mom to let me attend a private school and engage with other children my age, so I wouldn't be as sheltered as she was. It meant having most of my private lessons to weekends or well into the evening on weekdays but I learnt how to be around people and the importance of social etiquette.

Even though he was the king, my father was more of an observer than an in-game gladiator. Never really said much. He would be silent while my mother made all the rules or enforced them. He would be quiet while she tormented me with continuous chants of "*You can do better*", almost in the manner of casting a spell. I grew up loathing him because when we were alone it was magical and I mattered but once my mother was in sight, I was a lost child seeking to be relevant.

On many nights I would cry myself to sleep wishing I was an orphan or that I would be reborn to parents who made sense and parents I made sense to.

Looking back, I regret making that wish because my wish was granted at the wrong time. A few weeks to my wedding, I asked my father why he would act differently when my mother was around, if he didn't love me enough and if him agreeing to this marriage was his way of telling me he had enough of me?

My father tried to explain to me why he was ready to let me walk that path but at the time I couldn't understand.

"A lion does not fight with a lioness, when he knows she is the reason he is respected."

A phrase I never understood but never left my mind because that was the last honest conversation my father and I had before he was murdered.

After his death I wanted to get away, I wanted to go far away, I wanted to forget holding him in my arms as he embraced death. I wanted to forget how he looked at me as he drew his last breath, his smile accompanied by the whisper of a lie, "Everything would be okay".

That night changed me. It changed a lot for me, I wanted to be somewhere else. I think my mother understood because she didn't fight me or try to stop me, she just let me leave.

I thought she would care about public appearance or what her friends would say but instead she just let me go.

Before I knew it, I was on a plane to Paris. It was 2 months after my wedding and I should have sought for comfort in the arms of my husband but he was still a stranger and I needed to get away.

My father was my safe place and he was gone, I needed to go somewhere else that felt like home and nothing felt more home than Paris.

It felt so welcoming, friendly and fun. I was meant to be there for 2 weeks but 2 weeks quickly turned into 3 months which then turned to half a year.

I wanted to call Michael but we ended on bad terms the last time I was there. He wanted me to stay forever and I knew I was a few months away from getting married to Rafiki. I managed to fight off the urge to call him and used visits to our favourite cafe as a coping mechanism. He was *Mon Petit Secret*, my little secret. I

never told anyone about him and the diary where I wrote about our adventure was lost when I travelled back home.

My revisit of Paris was pleasant and it made me forget the village and its people. It was my little heaven and because I had never been there with my father, everything didn't remind me of him. Everything was going well until one day I turned on the TV and found myself watching lions.

It was a program about lions and how they live.

I don't know if it was because I was bored or because the lions reminded me of Africa but I found myself paying attention. As I watched, my father's words began to make sense.

Even though a lion is seen to be majestic, he is just an image lazing around in the background, while the lioness hunts, bears cubs and does everything else he won't do but when she is in danger, he comes to her rescue. So as a benefit he is allowed to mate with as many lionesses as he pleases, as long as he knows he is nothing more than a public image, a caged animal in the zoo.

With this revelation, my view of the world changed. On the flight home, I understood all my father went through and began to pity him, he loved me but couldn't stand against my mother because he was nothing more than a public image. He was a glorified bodyguard assigned to my mother by the people of our village.

"I will forget who I am, to make sure you always remember who you are. I will ensure you are protected and respected. I will respect the lioness of Watoto and ensure I remain a humble lion", those were vows my husband said on our wedding day. My culture had placed so much importance on women that men were obsolete, that why we favoured daughters over sons and that even if I were to reign, it would never change.

I wanted change, so I had to change. Culture was important to my people, so I'd have to find a way around it. When it comes to my husband, he would always be a commoner and have no choice but to bend to the will of the people but when it comes to me, I'd treat him differently. I would be different from my mother and I would show love to both my husband and my children.

The world can see him as they wish but I would respect my husband and let him know he matters. I would not let him end up like my father, as a man unable to fully express himself or be completely happy.

I would never give up the throne or advocate for a world where men have equal or more power than women but the least I could do was give the man I would share my life with love.