

Musambwa Island: Where snakes reign

Musambwa is not a museum or a zoo. It is a working fishing village. Men wake before dawn, cast their nets, return to shacks and sleep beside cobras. They are not saints. They are rough men living a rough life.

BY TONY MUSHOBOROZI

When herpetologist James Ntulume first visited Musambwa Island, the men smiled dismissively when he informed them that he was a professional snake handler. They had seen many so-called experts freeze at the real thing.

"You want to see a snake?" one asked.

"Yes."

"Under a rock, in a basin, or in bed?"

He chose the bed.

A young man led him to a wooden shack. Others followed. "Go in," he said. "Find it."

Ntulume entered, found a large Eastern forest cobra in the bedsheets, grabbed it, and walked outside. When the men noticed he had no fear, they decided he was worth talking to.

Tradition as conservation

Musambwa is a five-acre rocky island in Lake Victoria, in Kyotera District near Tanzania. Its name means "deity." The island is believed to be home to a powerful spirit. Women and children are prohibited. Sex is forbidden. Snakes number over 2,000.

Killing or removing a snake is taboo. Why? Because snakes are not mere reptiles. They are the physical form of the *musambwa*, the island's guardian spirit.

Snakes without fear

Snakes roam freely into beds, between legs, through porous wooden walls. Fishermen nap beside cobras. Neither is bothered. Seeing a snake is a blessing. Finding one in a fishing net means good luck. Sharing a bed is an honour.

"Sometimes you return from fishing and a snake has taken your bed," a fisherman said. "So you lock the house and let it rest. Who are you that the spirit visits you?"

Only one non-lethal snakebite has occurred in 25 years. Ntulume believes this may be the only place on earth where humans and snakes coexist in harmony.

Rough lives, strict rules

About 100 men live here, all fishermen. They occupy 10 percent of the island. This is not an island for luxury, so you will not find any brick houses or even toilets. Everyone lives in iron-roofed shacks with warped walls. Visitors must wear gum boots to protect themselves from attacks. But strict rules govern them: no sex, no women overnight, no killing snakes, no cutting trees, no eating eggs. These rules come from the *musambwa*. Breaking them brings misfortune. There is no police force. No one breaks the rules.

A global bird sanctuary

Musambwa is also one of Africa's most important bird breeding sites. Tens of thousands of grey-headed gulls swarm overhead, forming a living canopy. Their constant screeching fills the air like a living storm.

"These birds arrive from as far as North America to breed here," says birder Isaac Olupot. "This small island is a global sanctuary."

The only place of its kind

What makes Musambwa extraordinary is not just the snakes or the birds or the all-male society. It is the harmony between them.

On most of the planet, humans and snakes are enemies. We kill them on sight. They bite in self-defense. But here, fear has been replaced by reverence. The snakes have lost their fear of man. The men have lost their fear of snakes. Both live inside the same small rock, sharing

beds and fishing nets, without harm.

This did not happen by accident. It happened because belief shaped behaviour. The men believe snakes are spirits. Therefore, they do not kill them. Therefore, the snakes do not bite them. Therefore, the ecosystem thrives. Conservationists spend millions trying to protect wildlife. They build fences, pass laws, employ rangers. Musambwa needs none of that. The fishermen guard the snakes better than any government could, because they are environmentalists, but because they are faithful.

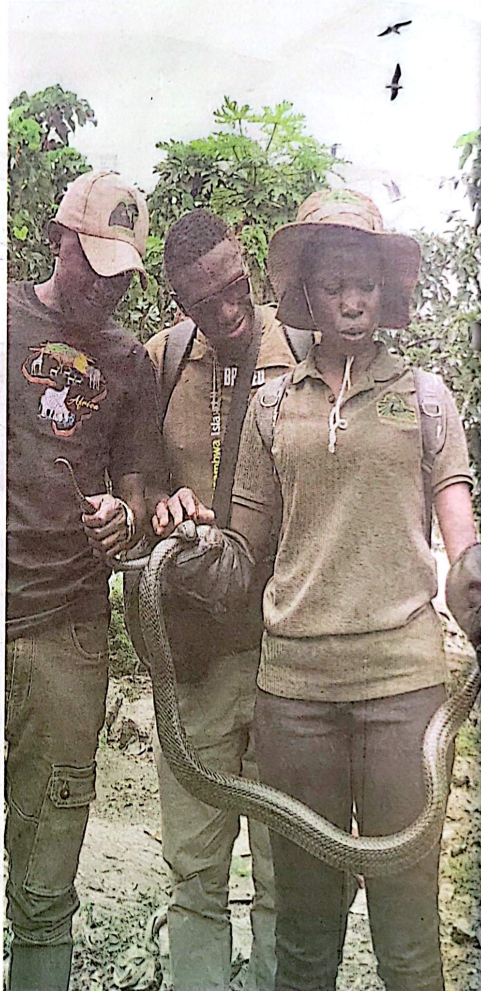
A living paradox

The men have learnt something the modern world has forgotten: that respect for nature is not a luxury. It is a vital.

Here, on this five-acre rock in Lake Victoria, men have built no temples. They need none. The snakes are their gods. And the gods let them stay.

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Devotion.
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