

THE AMAZEMENT OF NAMAHASHA

HILDA KUPER

MORE witches live in Namahasha than anywhere else in the world. The young witches send dreadful sleep-destroying dreams, and the older and more experienced steal and torment and kill, enslave a man's soul, leaving the vacant husk behind. Sometimes they stalk in animal form and sometimes they fly invisible through space, outstripping the most powerful good magicians who try to overcome them.

Among the leading witches was Xaya, a shrivelled man with uneven eyes and seductive voice. Everybody feared him. Under their breath, in the shelter of their huts, people recounted how as a child he would talk to unseen things, and when the hair was only beginning to appear on his chin he could play with lightning. It seemed that even the chief was afraid to banish him, the chief before whom all men trembled.

"I grew with medicines," Xaya would say softly when people expressed astonishment at his knowledge. "From my father, Makanye—a medicine man of big repute—I learnt to keep birds from the corn, to make barren women bear, to change the sex of a child in the womb and to bring power and love; and to this knowledge I have added with the years." But it was from his mother that he believed he inherited the other side, the secret, evil, powerful side, of which a man dare not speak. Thinking it over, he decided she had injected it into his blood when he was still at her breast. He remembered how she had been murdered by her co-wives for attracting excessively the affection of their joint husband. Xaya had been saved by the miraculous intervention of an ancestral spirit and had grown up lonely and unloved. Weak in physical strength, cunning and skill became his chief weapons. He learnt never to speak his anger aloud, nor show his fears; instead he turned to potions and spells that came to him mysteriously in the wakefulness of long nights. He realized that he was not like other men and he gloated in secret over his difference.

His harem was filled with lovely women, sure evidence that he possessed strange powers, or how could he have overcome their repulsion to his ugly and misshapen form? And his wives included, for a while, Tandile, favourite daughter of the chief, Tandile, the Loved One, who shone in the dance and whose

arms were strong on the grindstone and whose voice rang sweet as the herder's flute.

When Xaya first desired her, she was in love with a handsome youth in the neighbouring valley and was returning from a visit to his home. Xaya appeared before her unexpectedly and greeted her. "We see you, child of the chief." She stopped startled, her eyes soft with dreams, then as she saw who it was she averted her glance with a slight, unconscious shudder, yet replied courteously, "We see you, headman." He stared at her before continuing gently, "My, you have grown up now . . . no longer a child, but a maiden, beautiful, ready to become a woman. Don't waste yourself on a nobody." She laughed, and her teeth were white as the king's corn, and she replied tartly: "Don't you worry, father, about my wasting myself." "I see, child of the chief, but even the little bird that flies the highest must come to earth to feed." She was about to make a quick retort, but his eyes catching hers again disturbed her strangely, drying up her words of impudence. He gazed a few seconds longer, taking in each feature before he said, "Go well, girl. We will see each other." Trembling slightly she returned his farewell. He watched her walk past.

After that she avoided the little leering man, and he, noticing this, became determined to win her, to pit his deep powers against her natural resistance. He vowed to himself, "She will be my Great Wife, mother of my main heir." With this in mind, he sent a messenger to the chief. After listening carefully, the father called the girl and informed her of Xaya's offer. "Never. Never," she declared passionately. "Better to die." "Be quiet, child," the chief interrupted nervously. "What evil are you bringing on yourself with such dangerous words." He sent back the messenger with a polite refusal to which Xaya listened with a melancholy smile, commenting quietly at the end, "I will still try."

He worked on her *lipupo*, the powerful dream medicine, so that her sleep was interrupted by his appearance, but her loved one comforted her and for weeks she stood out against those night calls. Then Xaya grew weary of working *lipupo* and in anger added *lihabea*. Squatting in the secrecy of his hut he prayed humbly: "Makanye, my father, help me. This that I am doing is not for myself alone, but for you and all my ancestors. And you, my mother, listen to your orphan. Let me have that girl to bear my great son, he who will carry our name to those

who come after." With sensitive fingers he selected the different ingredients, muttering as he mixed them together: "Here is the calling dove and the plant that resists destruction, the bark of the toughest trees, the persistent life of the monkey, the reed that bends without breaking in the storm. Go. Go. Go to Tandile, daughter of the Chief. Fetch her with my name on her lips." So he summoned her, and she woke before dawn of the next day, singing like a dove, and with mad unclosing eyes she danced from out her hut. Like a straight wind she danced from her father's home to Xaya's, calling his name with the call of the dove, and no one could stop her till at his hut she dropped exhausted. And Xaya was waiting for her. "Rest, my wild bird, be still." He soothed her. "You have been sick. Rest. Now you will recover." He treated her with medicines and for two days she slept. When she awoke she begged, though her eyes were like those of a hunted buck, "Take me to bear for you." "As you wish, child of the chief."

Before the marriage-cattle were sent to her home she was shaped with Xaya's child. No one knew how much he thought of the son he would have by her, how tall and strong he wanted him to be, a dancer and a warrior. He only announced: "It will be a man child." For two long days and three long nights Tandile writhed in labour and when at length the babe was born, it was almost lifeless. The ancient midwives smoked it over a blazing fire in the fetid hut and the father, gloating at the birth of his son, sent skins of many powerful animals to increase the potency of the pungent burning herbs. And while they doctored the baby with the medicines, the mother died silently in a huge pool of blood.

The people shuddered when they heard the midwives sound her death cry. They understood why her pains had been so hard. They knew well that a wizard won promotion among his evil fellows by murdering someone near and dear. They looked askance at Xaya's show of emotion, and some condemned Tandile's broken-hearted father for his weakness in not taking drastic revenge. Night after night Xaya woke from sleep bathed in sweat with the name "Tandile" on his lips. He too was convinced that he had killed her through his mysterious powers, and though in his waking hours he grieved over his loss, he felt at the same time a strong elation.

He turned his attention to the child, whom he placed in the care of an aged and trusted relative. He urged her: "Care well

for my son, for it is hard to be without a mother." The ancient suckled the infant at her withered breasts and fed him fine gruel from crushed corn. Miraculously he spluttered to life, earning the name of Umhlolo, The Amazement.

But something was wrong with the child. It had a huge head and spindly body, and its face was empty of expression. When the chief, his grandfather, first beheld him he turned away exclaiming with horror: "Oh, Great Father! She died for this deformity!" For a time Xaya would not admit even to himself that there was anything seriously wrong with the child, saying only: "True, he is slow and awkward too, but that will pass when his big teeth come. He missed his mother's milk."

As the infant grew into a youth his imbecility became more marked. Xaya could no longer blind himself to it, and though he still kept up the pretence in public, he vented his fears and bitterness on the ancestors. Never had he offered them so many libations and sacrifices. Almost every moon he had his wives brew special beer which he carried at sunset into the shrine hut, and before the dawn, before the rest of the homestead was awake, he crouched at the hearth to speak to the dead. "Makanye, my father, and all you others. Hear me. Why are you killing me. Do I not give you food? Why have you turned against me? I asked you for a son by the daughter of the chief to carry on our name and instead you sent a nameless creature, an animal, a thing that cannot speak, that mutters like the antbear, that cannot herd the calves or milk the cows, that cannot stamp his feet in the dance or throw a spear in the hunt. His hands are useless and his body twitches like a headless snake. Though I give him clothes more often than the others, he is always filthy with jigger fleas nesting in his toes, so that when he gets up from a place the owner must cleanse it with ash. No child will share his blanket and he sleeps alone in his little hut. Sometimes he lies all night in the fields and I find him in the morning covered with dew or mud. Oh, my fathers, is this my son? Yet he harms no one, and I cannot hate him—as you seem to hate me. I watch him and feel my strength drop from me. What makes him stay out in storm and lightning, returning drenched and exhausted and yet alive? Why when the flying ants come out does he grow excited and chase them, his big mouth open and his arms flapping? Somehow he catches them quickly and brings them to one of the women to dry. That is the only time he seems alive, the only food he seems

to enjoy. Then he will curl up like a baby and sleep with his mouth in an empty smile. My fathers. Take this food. I do not grudge it you. It is yours as are the cattle in the byre. Only help me. You are cruel. I wonder what you want. You fill my nights with confusion and my days are soured. How often have I treated him with medicine to give him sense and personality, but he does not understand what I tell him. I watch him weep with fear when I heat the herbs or kill the goat with which to make him well. And he screams and struggles when I cut his body to rub in the powders. I try to hold his hands but they are wet and slip through my fingers, and my own hands are shaking. What have you done to me, my fathers? My mother, have you abandoned me? Have you no heart? Must I kill myself for an idiot?"

Yes, Xaya did his best to cure his son, but without avail, and because of his failure his spirits sank and his reputation dwindled. People whispered to each other, "Why doesn't he steal the soul from his idiot son to raise himself further in the power of evil?" and his enemies mocked: "He murdered his wife to become a leader of wizards and behold how he is defeated by his own abortion."

One day the air was stiff as a warrior's shield and lightning ran over the sky with the crackle of corded whips. People hastened home from their fields and sat in silence on the floor of their huts. Xaya sat surrounded by his wives soothing their whimpering babies in their arms. As the lightning stabbed the place and monstrous thunder shook the earth, Xaya rushed outside brandishing his sacred wand to protect his homestead and his kin. No one asked where The Amazement was, for had he not shown what powers of life were in him? The lightning darted through the thatch of the hut and the great Xaya threw it back, and when the storm was over, his village was still safe.

On coming from his hut to look for his son, he saw a henchman of the chief running towards him, his usually dark brown face a dirty grey. In a strained scarcely audible voice he panted: "A strange creature was dancing in the storm . . . on the mountain . . . lightning struck it bursting the skin . . . the wings burnt red . . . it fell . . ." Like one demented, and without uttering a word, Xaya tore stumbling along the muddy footpath, and the villagers cowered as he passed.

High on the Lubombo lay The Amazement. Xaya flung himself beside him, calling wildly, "My son. My son. Awake."

He touched the boy's hands with his and felt charred flesh. "Makanye, my father, help me," he groaned. "I have lost my child." He tore off his shirt and wiped the mud and rain from the big face seared by a jagged burn. Very gently, while the unrestrained tears fell in heavy drops, he closed the boy's blinded eyes. He stroked the clothes into position on the unshapely body, and flexed the legs, not yet stiff, into bends required by the ancestors. When all was done, he sobbed, "Farewell my child, my son. Forgive me. I did not want you to die. I did not want to kill you. I loved you. Yes, I know now how much I loved you."

All night Xaya sat beside the body and no one dared draw near. "How frightful he is," a woman murmured on his return. "See how his eyelids are swollen round his hideous little eyes."

He had The Amazement buried with full mourning for a main heir, in the presence of the entire village. No one dared be absent. The effrontery of his evil overwhelmed them. As though they did not know that the boy had been struck by his father's lightning! Xaya's reputation as the great witch of Namahasha was re-established.