

SAMBURU STORIES FOR CHILDREN.

These stories come from the Samburu tribe in East Africa. For centuries Samburu children have gathered together at the end of the day when all their chores are finished to listen to them. The Samburu live in a remote semi-desert area of northern Kenya. They are nomadic and traditionally they move their homes every few months to search for fresh grass for their cattle. It is a way of life that has served them well for thousands of years. They are related to the Masai and Rendile tribes and have much in common with all other people living in the desert areas south of the Sahara.

All the stories here are fables and they feature a recurring cast of animal characters, each with its own distinct personality. The morals they teach are the morals that are essential for survival in the desert. Personal greed (the hyena) is unacceptable in an area where food is always scarce. In dangerous situations quick witted thinking (the tortoise) can be the difference between life and death. And traits like pride (the lion) or bullying (the elephant) can have no place in village life.

The first compiler of fables was Aesop. Greek historians tell us that he was a slave who lived in Athens 600 years BC. He collected his fables from traders who traveled to places as far away as India and the Sahara. One of Aesop's most popular fables, loved by people all over the world is "The Tortoise and the Hare" with its message "slow and steady wins the race." It is also one of the ancient Samburu tales. Moreover, the two characters, Trickster Hare and Clever Tortoise, feature in many other fables told by the Samburu. It is interesting to speculate that "The Tortoise and the Hare" found its way from the ancestors of the Samburu all the way to Greece two and a half millennia ago.

In this book there are six fables that Aesop missed. They are stories of Africa beloved by the children of the Samburu who will hear them hundreds of times in their lifetime. The stories are about fairness, standing up for yourself, sticking to your decisions. They are timeless and their messages are universal.

The Tortoise and the Lion

One day Tortoise was out for a stroll. He was minding his own business when he came across Lion. Lion had not eaten anything all day, and although he didn't really like tortoise meat, he said to Tortoise,

"I am so hungry I will have to eat you up."

Needless to say, Tortoise was scared. But he thought quickly and decided to make the best of the situation. "Please may I have ten minutes before you eat me to put my things in order?" he asked Lion.

Lion agreed, so Tortoise got to work on his plan. With all his might he started to scratch vigorously around in the dirt. He scratched under a bush, beside a log and in a patch of long grass, kicking up dust and making a terrible mess.

"What on earth are you doing?" asked the very puzzled Lion.

"I am making my mark," replied Tortoise, "so that when I am dead people will see that I put up a good fight, and they will remember me as a great warrior."

This made Lion stop and think. If all the animals thought that a tiny tortoise had been able to put up a fight against a mighty lion, they would laugh at him forever after. So, with his nose in the air, he stalked off into the bush, leaving Tortoise to breathe several sighs of relief.

Moral: Always leave your mark in the world.

The Hungry Hyena

One day a hungry Hyena was out walking when a delectable aroma of roasting meat drifted by. He sniffed the air and quivered with excitement at the thought of feasting on the delicious meat. Off he ran in the direction of the scent, but soon he came to a fork in the path.

“Which path should I take?” he asked himself, “The left or the right?” He started along the left-hand path but after a few steps he reconsidered, “Hang on, what if I chose the wrong path, and it’s the other one that leads to the food?” So he went back to the fork and switched to the right-hand path.

After trotting along for a minute or two he began to worry that he really should have chosen the left-hand path, so he went all the way back to the fork and set out a second time along the left-hand path. Again he had doubts and changed to the right-hand path, and since he couldn’t make up his mind he kept switching from one path to the other for a long time.

Eventually, he was getting so tired he decided he had better take both paths at the same time. So he returned to the fork and put his legs apart along both paths and split himself in half.

A little later he came across another fork in each path, so there were now four paths. The Hyena could no longer tell which direction the delicious aroma was coming from, so he split his two halves in half again to follow all four paths.

This happened several more times, and each time he split each piece of himself in half. Eventually he was split into so many tiny pieces that he just disappeared altogether.

Moral: If you try to take all paths in life, you will end up nowhere. Choose your course and stick to it.

The Baboon and the Lion

A troop of baboons sat on a rock at sunset, watching swirls of orange and pink clouds fill the sky. But they weren't enjoying the beautiful view because their stomachs were growling with hunger. No rain had fallen for many months, and there was nothing left to eat.

Big Baboon, the wise old leader, was very worried. He knew they would have to find some food soon. He called one of the young baboons to him and said, "There must be a place where there has been rain and the fruit is now ripe. I want you to go and search for such a place, where there is plenty for everyone to eat."

Without hesitation the young baboon set off for the distant hills. He knew that the whole troop depended on him. After many days he found a green valley with all kinds of trees bearing ripe berries and seedpods. And oozing out of the bark of the acacia trees were big yellow globs of chewy gum that baboons love to eat. It was paradise, and the young baboon happily ate his fill.

But then he saw something that made his hair stand on end. There were fresh lion footprints leading to some bushes, and when the young baboon looked closer he saw a fierce lion lying there in the shade, swishing his tail and staring back with the big yellow eyes that all lions have.

The young baboon raced home to tell Big Baboon about the green valley, and the dangerous lion lurking within it. Big Baboon was delighted and without delay he led his troop to the land of plenty. When they arrived, he advised them all, "Go off and eat as much as you want, but be cautious and keep an eye open at all times for the hidden lion."

Big Baboon felt as if his worries were over and he bounded around from tree to tree sampling everything good to eat. He was so busy enjoying the fruit and boasting about his good fortune that he forgot his own advice. And that is when he made a fatal mistake. He peeped inside a bush and saw what he thought was a big chewy chunk of yellow gum. But as he stretched out his hand to grab it . . . he realized too late that it was the fierce yellow eye of the lion. Before he could pull his hand out of the bush, in one big leap the lion grabbed him and ate him up.

Moral: Only a fool acts as if risk disappears in the good times.

The Ostrich, The Lion and the Squirrel

Ostrich and Lioness were the best of friends, and spent many happy afternoons together playing with their children. One day Lioness's cubs got sick. They started to look scraggly and weak. Lioness was ashamed of them, thinking they were not good enough for such an important animal as herself.

"See here," she said to Ostrich. "These cubs are not mine. They are much too sick and ugly. They don't look anything like me at all." Then, pointing to Ostrich's healthy chicks, she said, "In fact, I am quite convinced those chicks are mine." She scooped them up and took them home with her.

Ostrich was extremely upset. She decided to seek assistance from the other animals and invited them all to a big meeting. But before she could finish explaining what had happened, Lioness interrupted her:

"Of course, any fool can see that these chicks are my children." Turning to Elephant, she asked in a harsh voice, "Don't you agree?"

Elephant thought he'd better show that all the biggest animals know best, so he said, "The chicks definitely belong to you, Lioness."

Then Lioness turned to Impala and demanded fiercely, "Don't you agree, too?" Impala's slim legs shook with fear as he remembered how often he had fled from hungry lions, so he stammered, "Oh, y . . . yes. Th . . . the chicks are yours, Lioness."

Lioness continued to question each animal, and they all agreed with her, until she got to Squirrel. He had been listening to the whole meeting, standing apart from everyone else on a large anthill. When it finally came to his turn he said, "Before I answer Lioness, I want to ask all of you two questions. First, have you ever heard of a bird with feathers having a baby with fur on it?"

"No, we haven't," answered the animals, thinking hard.

"Okay," continued Squirrel. "Here's my second question: have you ever heard of an animal with fur having a baby with feathers on it?"

"No, never," answered the animals, shaking their heads.

"Well then, there is your answer," said the Squirrel.

Lioness realized that Squirrel had outwitted her. She lunged at him with her sharp claws, but Squirrel was too quick and disappeared down a small hole in the ant hill. While Lioness was furiously chasing after Squirrel, Ostrich quickly gathered up her chicks and hurried home.

Moral: Be careful not to be swayed by the crowd if you want to remain fair.

The Tortoises and the Elephants

In the middle of a dry patch of scrubland was a watering hole, and it was the favorite watering hole of the Tortoises who lived nearby. The water was clear and refreshing, except when the Elephants came to drink. They stamped around so much with their big feet that they dirtied the water with mud.

One day the Tortoises decided they had had enough, so they chose a few leaders to meet with the Elephants and ask them to use a different watering hole. But the Elephants just laughed.

"Who are you to tell us what to do?" they said to the Tortoise leaders. "You are tiny Tortoises and we are huge Elephants, so we can do whatever we want!"

The Tortoises had expected the Elephants to say something like this, and were ready with their response, "Let us fight a battle and the winner can have the watering hole."

The Elephants, who had never lost a battle, thought it was a fine idea. They agreed to hold the battle in six weeks, to give the Tortoise warriors enough time to walk to the battlefield.

After that, every time a Tortoise met an Elephant, he made a point of asking, "I am in the Tortoise army, could you please tell me where the battlefield is?"

As the day of the battle drew near, the Tortoise leaders went to the Elephants and asked to postpone it. "Most of our warriors are still on their way," they said, "we need four more weeks for them all to get here."

The next day all the Tortoises climbed up the surrounding hills and scabbled in the earth, making dust clouds that could be seen for miles around.

That evening, the Elephants got together to discuss the situation. One Elephant said, "In the last few weeks I have met hundreds of Tortoises coming here for the battle." Another Elephant said, "They say there are many more to come." And a third Elephant said, "I saw them heading here today. They made enormous dust clouds from their marching."

After hearing this, the Elephants decided that it wasn't worth fighting a battle over such an ordinary watering hole, and that very night they moved on to a new one.

Moral: Brains can defeat brawn.

The Hare, the Monkey and the Hyena

Monkey and Hyena liked to grow cabbages in their gardens, which were next door to each other. They chatted to each other while they were out weeding their gardens or chasing away the birds and other animals who came to peck at their fresh young vegetables.

One day when they were out gardening, Hare came striding down the path between the gardens, dressed in a beautiful brightly-colored coat. One side of the coat was red, the other side was green, and the middle was yellow.

“What a wonderful red and yellow coat,” said Monkey, after Hare had passed by.

“Truly it was a wonderful coat. But it wasn’t red and yellow, it was green and yellow,” responded Hyena, who had seen the other side of Hare.

“I am afraid you are mistaken,” said Monkey. “It was definitely red and yellow.”

The two friends continued to argue, and all the while Hare was listening to them from behind a nearby bush. He came out and walked back through the gardens facing the other way. Monkey and Hyena both looked very closely at Hare’s coat, because they each wanted to prove the other wrong.

This time Monkey saw the other side of Hare’s coat, so he apologized to Hyena, saying, “I am so sorry, my friend. You are quite right. Hare is wearing a green and yellow coat.”

“No, no,” said Hyena, who had seen the red side this time. “You were right the first time. I saw it very clearly – Hare’s coat is red and yellow.”

Monkey was sure he had seen a green and yellow coat this time. “Are you teasing me?” he asked, getting angry and raising his voice.

Hyena knew very well he had seen a red and yellow coat, no mistake. Why was Monkey trying to prove otherwise? “You who are trying to make a fool of me!” Hyena shouted back. Now they were arguing furiously, getting louder and louder and more and more determined to prove themselves right.

All this time Hare was quietly laughing to himself. He sneaked back into the gardens and gobbled up the juiciest cabbages he could find. And he even took as many big fat round ones as he could carry home.

Moral: Don’t get distracted from the important things in life by trivial arguments. Keep your eye on the ball.

The Elephant, the Hare and the Hyena

Elephant's mother was sick so he gathered a big jar of golden honey to take to her. Along the way he met Hare who was so tired and dusty that he asked Elephant for a ride. Elephant agreed to take him as far as the big anthill past the baobab tree.

Hare sat up on Elephant's back right next to the honey. It shone gold in the sunlight and looked so delicious that Hare was tempted to have a little taste. The honey was so sweet and good that he had another taste and then another and before he knew it, he had finished the whole jar.

When he realized what he had done he quickly jumped off Elephant's back, said good-bye, and sauntered off as if nothing had happened. Only when he got to his mother's house did Elephant discover that the honey was gone. He was so furious that he ran all the way back until he found Hare. He easily caught Hare and tied him to a tree. "I'll come back later to punish you," he said.

Hare sat wondering how he was going to get out of this mess, when along came Hyena. "What's up, Hare?" he asked. "Why are you tied up like that?"

"Oh Hyena, poor me," cried Hare. "My uncle the Elephant is very mad. He wanted me to eat roast meat for lunch but I refused. In fact, he is so angry with me for disobeying him that he has tied me up. Soon he will be back to make me eat that roast meat. Oh, what shall I do?"

Hyena, who loved roast meat, said, "I think I can help you, Hare. Let's trade places. I'll untie you and then you can tie me up in your place. I'll be happy to eat the roast meat." Hare agreed, and as soon as he had tied Hyena to the tree, he scampered off as fast as he could.

Hyena sat tied up for a long time, dreaming of the tasty meat he would eat. When Elephant finally returned, he couldn't believe what had happened. He was furious with Hare for escaping, and just as furious with Hyena for being greedy and stupid enough to get himself tied up. So Elephant gave Hyena the punishment he had planned for Hare.

Moral: Beware of things that seem too good to be true – there is no such thing as a free lunch.