



# Unleash the Bulls!

By Stanley Gazemba



I watched a bullfight at the famous [Malinya Stadium](#) in Shinyalu, Kakamega, one Saturday morning. For all the hype around the preparations for the bullfight, it turned out to be a brief affair that lasted barely thirty minutes. I hardly caught any of the action because of the surging, twig-waving crowds and the billowing dust. Having woken up at dawn to catch the fight, I was a bit disappointed to have it end so abruptly but what did register from that war-chanting crowd was the adrenaline. It was a living thing that you could feel pulsate in the air. Many of the spectators had stayed up most of the night drinking traditional *busaa* beer in anticipation of the fight and as they led off the winning bull, dancing to the beat of the [isukuti drums](#), I knew it was going to be a long day of binge drinking and debauchery, going by the content of the songs they were singing. It is the reason why I decided to find someone to take me to meet some of the figures behind the bullfighting.

Our quest for the bullfighters starts at the Eregi Road junction on the Chavakali-Kakamega highway where my guide and I mount *boda bodas* and set off down the dusty murram road on a sunny Sunday afternoon. The ten-minute ride through the sleepy village centres along the route ends at a popular *busaa*-drinking place called Handshake, a large mud-walled, tin-roofed enclosure in Chandumba village on the border of Vihiga and Kakamega counties where I presume all the *boda boda* fares are headed since very few of the bikes go beyond this point. A cool breeze blows from the scenic Mlimani hills overlooking the rolling valley in neighbouring Ishiunira.

We talk politics for a while and sample the brew and pork as we wait for the old veteran we are here

to meet, a devout Catholic, like most of the people in the area, who never misses the first mass. After a while the churches start emptying and one by one the faithful saunter in, still in their Sunday whites - both men and women - to spend Caesar's coin. Our contact turns out to be a frail old man in a sagging old tweed coat who surveys us with a squint as we shake hands. He is in the company of another old man who walks with a pronounced limp, leaning rather heavily on his well-worn walking stick. I am intrigued. I can hardly picture the two rallying a well-fed champion bull to lock horns with a rival's in a packed stadium. The image they conjure up is that of smalltime traders at a village market, or village headmen.

I soon learn that bullfighting is a sport that is almost as old as the Luhya tribe, specifically the Idakho, Isukha and Batsotso sub-tribes who neighbour each other. The bulls are revered by these communities, and their owners are held in very high regard. When we later leave Handshake to visit the home of one of the veterans, Mzee Mukoto, in neighbouring Mativini village I witness a unique spectacle. The owners actually speak to their bulls, and the bulls understand them. As we walk through the village, we come across a young man leading to pasture a young bull that is being bred to fight. The young man is not carrying a herding stick, but instead keeps whispering instructions to the bull as they walk along the road, telling it to turn this way and that, which it does. We pass a market centre and we expect it to charge at the women traders seated by the roadside, and who seem not at all alarmed as the bull comes in their direction. The herdsman overhears our fears and smiles. "It won't harm them", he assures us. And sure enough, he guides it by the mouth steadily through the rickety stalls without damaging a tomato. It is something to behold.

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There are many myths associated with the bulls, some of which are revealed to me, though from the looks that are exchanged, I can tell that others are being withheld. For one, it is taboo for an owner to engage in sex the night before a fight. Bull owners believe that if this taboo is broken the consequences on the day of the fight can be grave. The bull could run berserk and plow into the crowd or even turn its deadly horns on the owner. Others claim that breaking a taboo can also cause the bull to lose focus and end up gored to death by its rival. They all agree that when such a disaster befalls an otherwise well-bred bull, there must be an underlying reason.

The other cause for disaster in the arena is if two bull owners who carry a grudge against each other - a past disagreement over a business matter or a long-running family feud - agree to a fight. It is believed that this affects the performance of the bull, since it shares the feelings of the owner and can communicate with him through a form of telepathy. An owner who agrees to such a bout is signing the death warrant of one of the bulls. It is extremely important for the rivals to have a clean heart when they shake hands on a deal.

"It is not really a duel", explains Mzee Mukoto. "You see, if I own a bull that you feel can square off with yours, what happens is that you approach me as a friend and we talk over the matter maybe over a pot of beer. When we are in agreement that our bulls can face off we then agree on a date and a figure for the winning bull, say ten thousand or above. Our friends can either chip in or place wagers. Sometimes a wealthy patron will come in and place a good sum on the winning bull. The fans are also important because they have to agree to the contest, otherwise it will have to be called off. If there is the slightest doubt in the mind of either owner the contest must similarly be called off. That is because if it proceeds against the wishes of one party then it will result in disaster".

"Both sides having agreed we then shake hands and go off to prepare the bulls for the big day.

Depending on the popularity of our bulls, word will often spread very quickly and everyone in the neighbouring villages starts to anticipate the big day. We look at it as a gentleman's agreement, and not really a contest as such. And the money is only a motivator and not really the main aim; often the winning owner will spend most of the prize money entertaining his friends and village mates after the victory. It is something we do because of the love, and not really a business where you expect to make money".

Preparing a bull for the fight is a craft shrouded in mystery. The bull is mostly fed and bred in isolation from the rest of the herd, with a special paddock and a zero-grazing unit set aside for it in the homestead. To preserve the bull's virility, mating with the rest of the herd is discouraged. Its isolation is also meant to drive the bull wild at the sight of its rival.

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About three days before the fight, in addition to choice foliage, the owner starts to feed his bull on *maseke*, the millet residue from the beer brewing process. On the eve of the fight he prepares a special concoction called *dawa*, wraps it in a maize leaf and asks a favourite son to feed it to the bull at dawn. I probe for the contents of the *dawa* but I am met with sly smiles. "Everyone has special herbs in their family or clan that they have traditionally used to prepare the bulls", is all my host will divulge. But as the conversation progresses, attracting the input of the other villagers, they soon reveal that it is common practice to feed cannabis to the bulls or make them inhale the smoke on the morning of the fight to make them more aggressive.

As the conversation with Mzee Mukoto progresses, it emerges that the thrill of the sport is in the savagery exhibited in the arena by the fighting bulls, the sight of a 500-kilo beast pawing the ground, grunting deeply as it sizes up its opponent before hunching its massive shoulders, lowering its head and launching into the charge, slamming headfirst into its equally massive opponent. It is the height of virility that is on display as the beasts grapple with each other, muscles rippling, coats shiny with sweat, mirroring the law of the African savanna, where the strongest male emerges as the ruler of the herd, driving the vanquished off his turf. It is this sexual undertone that is at the heart of the sport, and which the fans celebrate after victory as if to say to the opposing village that they are the more virile.

And as happens in the wilds of the savanna, there is always the threat of danger, both to the contestants and the spectators. Like old soldiers, most of the veterans I talk to carry the scars of their bullfighting days. My host pulls back his shirtsleeve and extends his arm, inviting me to feel the lump in the ulna bone. "My bull broke this arm. Unfortunately it wasn't set properly by the bone-setter, which is why you can feel it didn't heal properly", he explains, the gleam of an old soldier at a veteran's reunion in his eyes. I try to discern any hint of sadness or regret in the depths of his eyes but there is none there, only pride. He appears to wear his wounds like a badge of honour.

Mzee Mukoto then turns to the old man with a limp, who has hardly spoken so far, opting to listen and nod along as he partakes of his beer, the frown on his face deepening occasionally. "I got off lightly. This man's bull gored him very badly in the genitals. It would have killed him".

At last I have an explanation for the limp. An uncomfortable silence descends after this disclosure, with everyone staring into their glasses and tins. I can tell that the memory is still very fresh in their minds. I want to ask what could have caused the beast to turn on its trusted keeper but instinctively realise that I will cause offence, since he is an elder who is held in high esteem by his mates. I am

left to warrant a guess from the explanations I have been given.

“People have been killed when the bulls turn wild”, adds my host in a lowered voice. It reminds me that we are discussing a blood sport here, and not a casual game of rounders in the school yard. As we were walking through the neighbouring Ilanaswa village I had noted an unusually high number of graves in the front yards of the homesteads and I’m left to wonder how many of those lying there are victims of the bulls.

Although the fight I witnessed was brief and quickly resolved, I am told that some stretch on for hours and sometimes there’s no clear winner, with the weary beasts having to be forcefully separated when it becomes clear that they are equally matched and are going to tear into each other to death. All the same, the fight is dictated by the bulls and not manipulated by man.

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When one of the beasts has been badly gored it is usually led off the arena straight to the abattoir. If the wounds are less severe then it will be led back to its pen to undergo treatment at the hands of traditional herbalists. Sometimes the owner will donate the meat to the festivities that are to follow as he comes to terms with his loss. As for the victorious bull, regardless of its injuries, it will still have to be paraded through the villages on the way home to the accompaniment of thunderous singing and dancing.

The other veteran I meet is Mzee Christopher Mukoto, popularly known as Shanga Shanga in the bullfighting circles, and who sheds even more light on what the first Mukoto has told me. He is also from Ilanaswa village, and we meet at a *busaa* joint called Nasa in Shikuli village, a stone’s throw away from Handshake.

According to Shanga, before the bull goes out to a contest, it is important for the wife of the owner to strike it on the back with her *leso* wrap skirt, uttering the words, “Go and fight bravely and bring back victory”, so that when the bull faces its opponent, it will remain steadfast as it has received the backing and blessings of its owner and the fans accompanying it to the fight.

“If you are successful it is very important to share the prize money with the fans”, says Shanga. “You have to make them know that you appreciate the support they gave you. Also, when you return home after the victory you have to hand over a portion of the prize money to your wife and tell her this is what our bull brought us. As the person responsible for cleaning the cow pens every morning, she also needs to share in the success. Otherwise, if you spend the money alone, next time you take out the bull to another contest you will lose”.

On the day of the fight the fans assemble in the homestead early in the morning and dance an *isukuti* jig around the bull while it is still tethered in its pen. The singing is mostly in praise of the bull and also to encourage it to be victorious. Thereafter the owner untethers the bull and they head out in a dancing procession.

Mzee Shanga reiterates that it is not only important for the bull owner to refrain from sex the day before the fight, but that the same also applies to his trusted head handler who will be responsible for the bull as they head for the contest.

Some of the preparations before the fight include sharpening the horns of the bull to a point with a file. On the night before the fight, the owner collects fodder and chops it finely inside the manger

just after midnight. The bull owner and his minder keep vigil the rest of the night feeding it until they are satisfied that it is well fed. "If feeding is overlooked and the bull faces an opponent the following day on an empty stomach it will end up getting tossed around inside the ring like a piece of paper".

Quality fighting bulls do not come cheap, averaging anywhere between 100,000 and 200,000 shillings at the local livestock market depending on how well-built they are. Some people opt to acquire a fighting bull from the cattle market and then groom it for the contest. For Mzee Shanga this is a huge gamble. The old hands like himself prefer to buy a young bull that they have observed fighting in the ring, and then fatten it themselves for a bigger contest in the future. That way you do not risk placing your money on a loser.

It is also important to consult the fans when the owner wants to sell his fighting bull. Mzee Shanga cites a recent case where the owner of a popular fighting bull from the village nicknamed Nasa was sold off by the owner without the consent of the fans. The fans were so enraged they burned the special uniforms that they wear on the day of the fight.

The lowest wager that can be placed on a good fighting bull is 7,000 shillings but those in the top league command anywhere between 20,000 and 30,000 shillings. This money is handed over to the minder of the bull before the fight. It is only if his bull emerges victorious that the owner will take the money and decide how to share it out amongst his team.

One of the toughest fights Mzee Shanga remembers was against former Kakamega Senator Dr Boni Khalwale's famous bull Shikhuma. His bull gored the former senator's bull so badly it had to be stitched up by a vet after the fight. He recalls the senator calling him after the match to congratulate him on breeding a champion bull. The former senator even bought him a celebratory drink in a practice known as *khusura* - an important show of sportsmanship even as the vanquished tends to his injured bull.

In case of a bad injury following a fight, it is the duty of the owner of the injured bull to control the emotions of his fans so that they don't vent their anger on the rival fans. Should a bull gore a spectator to death, it is slaughtered right there in the arena and the meat shared amongst the spectators.

Some of the famous bulls in the sport's hall of fame include a bull called Luchidio owned by Mzee Imbuti from Ilanaswa and another called Sub-chief owned by Mzee Aliero of Shisecheri village. These bulls were famed for what would be a technical knock-out in boxing terms because they often ended their fights by tossing their opponent high in the air in a clean defeat. Mzee Mukakanga from Shisecheri and Mzee Kendi from Malava were among the earliest elders to breed fighting bulls. From Bunyore was Mzee Mulima and from Kisa Mzee Kubasu. The Idakho and Isukha were the first Luhya sub-tribes to engage in the sport before other sub-tribes like the Kisa, Batsotso and Banyore joined in.

And it was only a matter of time before the sport attracted politicians who at some point realised that it had an even bigger following than the church. It is now common for politicians to sponsor fights between famous bulls in order to take advantage of the large turnout to do their campaigning.

"This sport can bring in a lot of money," said Shanga. "The problem is with the people who organise contests. Often they are dishonest, and want to exploit the contest to make more money than that given to the owners of the fighting bulls. When that happens we pull out our bulls and tell them to take their contest elsewhere".

According to Shanga, the bulls have killed many people, especially in Khayega and Malinya areas. “Usually the deaths happen after a fight. At that time a bull is wild, and the fans are supposed to give it space and keep to a distance. Usually the vanquished bull will be running away from the fury of the opponent’s horns. At that time if a spectator happens to be in the way it will gore him and toss him in the air. There are some that will simply single out one of the spectators and go for him. Sometimes this is caused by the herbs that will have been fed to the bull before the fight. There’s a famous herb here in Idakho called *msala kwi isimbwa* [herbal treatment for dogs]. If you give that to a bull it can even turn on the owner, becoming wild and unmanageable. There are also some that can be given cannabis, and others not, depending on how they react to it. There are those that you will give bhang and they become stupefied instead of wild. And others will do the opposite. It all depends on how you have conditioned your bull and how you treat it”.

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In 2008 there was a spirited campaign by a section of parliamentarians from western Kenya to bring the sport to Nairobi. Fronted by the then Kakamega County senator, Dr Boni Khalwale, an ardent supporter and a regular participant in the sport, they argued that it had the potential to attract cultural tourists to the western Kenya region and generate revenue. But their attempt to bring the bulls to face it out at Nyayo National Stadium in the heart of the capital faced stiff opposition from local animal rights groups and activists. Some of the opposing legislators termed it a barbaric sport that should not be encouraged in this modern age. Some of the villagers in Western Kenya were also against taking the sport out of the region where it is traditionally held and the plans were eventually dropped. Although the revenues that could be generated by the sport have never been quantified, there is no doubt that bullfighting has a huge following.

All the same, the debate highlighted the potential of the sport as a cultural heritage and social function in the western Kenya region, and succeeded in attracting funding to the tune of [12.5 million shillings](#) from the county government to develop Malinya Stadium in Shinyalu Constituency for bullfighting. It remains to be seen whether subsequent governments will support the full development of this traditional sport to attract the much needed tourism revenue to the country and conserve this age-old culture of the Luhya people.

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