



# Madiba's Favourite Folktales

## The Enchanting Song of the Magical Bird



***This East African story about the innocence and power that children possess was recorded at the beginning of the twentieth century in Benaland, Tangaryika (now Tanzania), by Pastor Julius Oelke of the Berlin Mission Church.***



One day, a strange bird  
arrived in a small village that  
nestled among low hills.



From that moment on, nothing was safe. Every morning there were fewer and fewer sheep and goats and chickens.



Even during the day, while the people were working on the lands, the gigantic bird would come and break open their storehouses and granaries, and steal from them their food supplies for winter.



The villagers were devastated. There was misery in the land – everywhere was the sound of wailing and the gnashing of teeth. No one – not even the bravest hero of the village – could get his hands on the bird. It was just too quick for them.



They hardly ever saw it: they just heard the rushing of its great wings as it came to perch in the crown of the old yellowwood tree, under its thick canopy of leaves.



The headman of the village tore out his hair in frustration. One day, after the bird had plundered his own livestock and winter supplies, he commanded the older men to sharpen their axes and machetes and to move as on against the bird. “Cut down the tree – that is the answer,” he said.





With axes and machetes ground to gleaming razor-edges, the older men approached the great tree. The fist blows landed heavily and bit deep into the flesh of the trunk. The tree shuddered, and from the thick, tangled leaves of its crown, the strange and mysterious bird emerged.

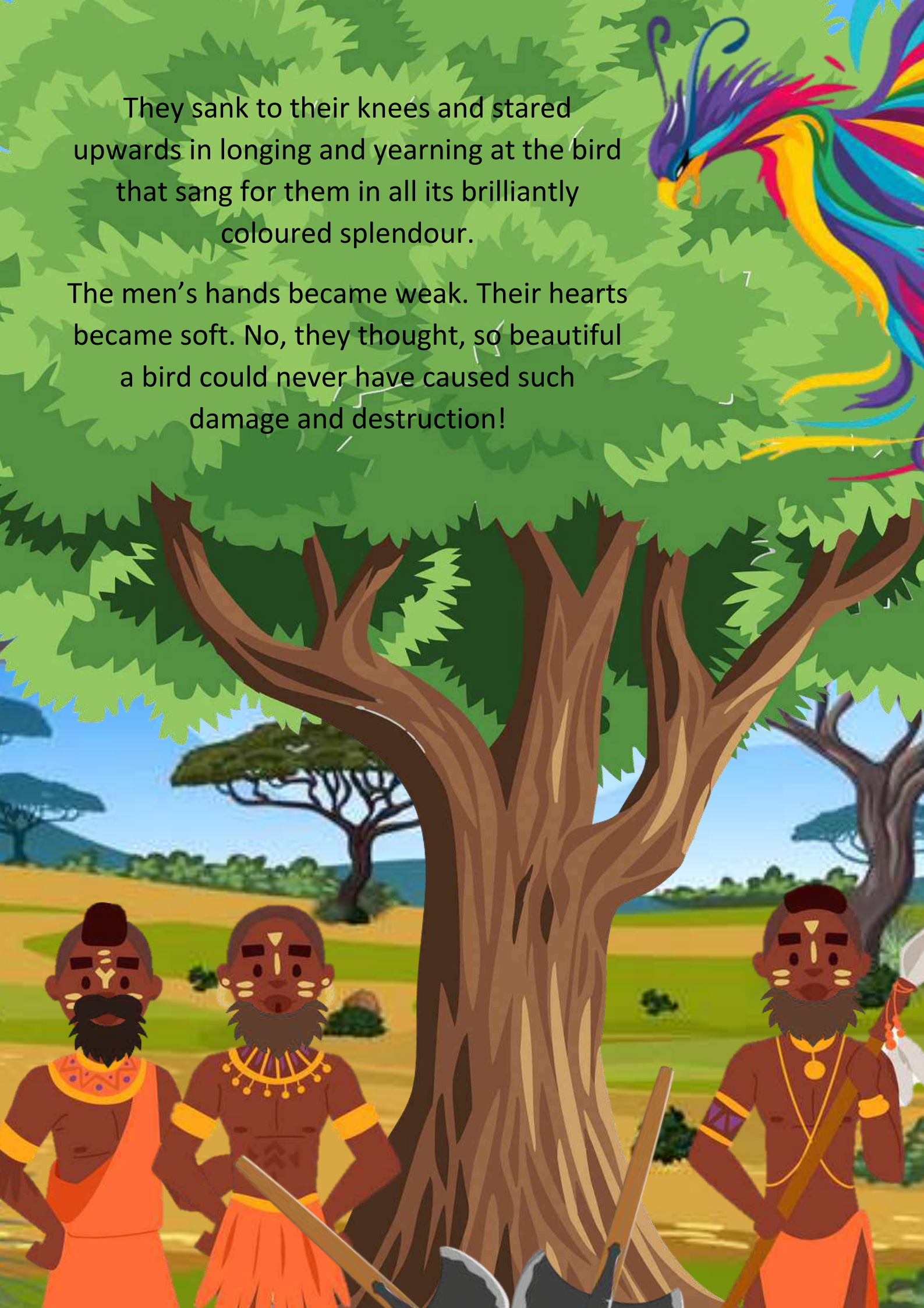


A honey-sweet song came from its throat. It reached into the hearts of the men and spoke of fabulous, far-off things that never would return. So, enchanting was the sound that the machetes and the axes fell one by one from the hands of the men.



They sank to their knees and stared upwards in longing and yearning at the bird that sang for them in all its brilliantly coloured splendour.

The men's hands became weak. Their hearts became soft. No, they thought, so beautiful a bird could never have caused such damage and destruction!



And when the sun sank red in the west, they shuffled  
like sleepwalkers back to the headman ...



... they told him there was nothing, but nothing, that they could do to harm the bird.

The headman was very angry. “Then the young men of the tribe will have to help me,” he said. “Let the youngsters break the power of the bird.”



The next morning the young men took their gleaming axes and machetes and set off for the tree. The first blows again landed heavily, biting deep into the flesh of the trunk. And, just as before, the green canopy of the tree opened and the strange bird appeared in all its multihued finery.



Once again, a most wonderful melody echoed across the hills. The young men listened, enchanted, to the song that spoke to them of love and courage and of the heroic deeds that awaited them.

This bird could not be bad, they thought. This bird could not be wicked.



The young men's arms became weak,  
the axes and machetes fell from their  
hands, and they knelt like the older  
men before them, listening in a trance  
to the song of the bird.





When night fell, they stumbled, bewildered, back to the headman. In their ears still sounded the enchanting song of the mysterious bird. “It is impossible,” said the leader of their group. “No one can withstand the magical power of this bird.”



The headman was furious. "Only the children remain," he said.  
"Children hear truly and their eyes are clear. I will lead the  
children against the bird."



The next morning the headman and the children of the tribe went to the tree where the strange bird was resting.



As soon as the children let the tree feel the bite of the axe, the leafy canopy opened, and the bird appeared just as before – blindingly beautiful. But the children did not look up. Their eyes stayed on the axes and machetes in their hands. And they chopped, chopped, chopped to the rhythm of their own music.



The bird began to sing. The headman could hear that its song was beautiful beyond compare, and he could feel like the weakness in his hands. But the children's ears could hear only the dull, regular sounds of their axes and machetes. And not matter how enchantingly the bird sang, the children continued to chop, chop, chop.



Eventually the trunk creaked and cracked apart. The tree crashes to the ground and with it fell the strange and mysterious bird.



The headman found the bird where it lay, crushed to death by the weight of the branches.



From everywhere the people came charging. The hardened older men and the strong young men could not believe what the children with their thin arms had accomplished!





That night, the headman declared a great feast to reward the children for what they had done. “You are the only ones who hear truly and whose eyes are clear,” he said. “You are the eyes and the ears of our tribe.”





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