

The Price of a Woman (novel)

and

Bride Price and Literary Activism in Uganda

(critical commentary)

Felicity Atuki Turner, PhD candidate

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DECLARATION

I Felicity Atuki Turner hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed

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Abstract

The Price of a Woman tells the story of a young girl's fight to break free from the bondage of bride price – the payment made to secure marriage. The opening chapters are set in Achieng's home and show the importance of her relationship with her childhood friend Obel. We learn of her determination to study, which is brought to an end when her father sells her into marriage. As the wife of the polygamous Raja she suffers numerous beatings, and her close friendship with her co-wife Min Kilo is brought to a brutal end. Unable to conceive, she puts this down to having been cursed by a resentful uncle. She eventually has a baby, but after another beating by her husband she runs away from home to live with her Aunt Nyarua, who opens her eyes to the injustice of bride price culture. She later settles in the border town of Malaba, where her business flourishes, but then her baby falls ill and dies. Meanwhile, Raja's demand for the refund of bride price results in a court hearing, which occurs just as Idi Amin is being ousted from power. After many twists and turns, Obel and Achieng are reunited.

In terms of the readership, my novel is targeted at young adults, especially girls living in parts of the world where the tradition of bride price is still practised.

The critical commentary re-conceptualises bride price – which is the payment of cash or cows to secure marriage – as a human rights issue. It demonstrates how storytelling is linked to social and political action, through the case of the landmark ruling achieved by MIFUMI (the NGO which I co-founded) in its appeal to the Ugandan Supreme Court. Two Ugandan publishing initiatives, FEMRITE and WRITIVISM, are also analysed in order to investigate literary activism. I have also discussed key texts drawn from the wider feminist movement in the African corpus. In the final chapter, the author reflects on the potential of fiction to achieve results that other forms of intervention cannot.

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Novel: The Price of a Woman

Prologue: I Will Follow You to the End of the Earth: *Anoluwin kir p'abone*

Achieng sat on the goatskin mat outside the kitchen. Her long legs stretched out on either side of the adheri only recently freshly smeared with cow dung, now heaped with the groundnuts she was shelling. At midday, the sun would be directly above and her shadow would squat beneath her. Absently, she shooed away the hens trying to steal the nuts; the nasal grunts they made reminded her of the white man's language.

In the kitchen, she could see her mother, Nyamiland, feeling around for the *nyangoda* knife under the firestone where she kept it at the end of each day. Nyamiland came out of the hut, cradling a big tray of vegetables and sat by the entrance. She started preparing the vegetables using a sickle-shaped knife, cutting the stalks from the greens with fingers that danced over each other, like someone plaiting hair. Nearby, in a shade of the granary hut, sat Proscovia Nyarua, lost in thought. Nyarua was Auntie to Achieng as she was Achieng's father's younger sister. Then the drums started beating and Auntie - or "Waya" as everyone called her - looked up as though someone had whispered her name. Achieng glanced at her mother whose hands no longer danced with the knife, but fought with it like someone uprooting stubborn roots from the ground. Waya got up and started walking toward the sound of the drums. They were coming from the village centre. The centre of Mulanda village was where important things happened. Good and bad news was broken there, people were rewarded or punished there, and war was declared or peace was brokered there. Achieng knew without being told that the village drummer, a short bow-legged man, was drumming out bad news. It was there in the way that Waya had suddenly got up and there in the way her mother fought with the *nyangoda* knife. The people were now coming thick and fast, the way rain suddenly pours forth after a brief warning drizzle, throwing greetings as they passed. Nyamiland did not look up or return their greeting.

Achieng gave up shelling the nuts, got up, and followed the crowd. When she got to the village centre, she pushed her way through the crowd and found herself at the front of the circle where she slipped in next to Waya. Standing there were five

elders surrounding something, or someone, that lay on a raised platform. When she saw what it was, Achieng felt goose pimples rise all over her body. On the platform lay a girl of about fourteen - naked as the day she was born. She was very thin except for her swollen stomach. Her hair, plaited in small clusters on her head, was wild and dirty and her body all scratches, but none of this could hide the fact that she was a very pretty girl. Achieng saw that the girl's hands were raised above her head and tied to two stakes while her feet were spread wide apart and similarly tied. In her eyes was a look of sheer terror. Two men were holding down her feet, another two her hands. Her stomach protruded from her body like a ball. Shame flooded through Achieng, though she didn't know why.

One of the elders said loudly, "Bring the millet," and Achieng realised with a start that it was her father, Misigile.

A man came forward carrying a calabash. He held it up and tilted it over the girl. Golden brown grains of millet fell over the girl's stomach and rolled down toward her thighs. Achieng craned her neck, trying to see what was happening.

"Now bring the morino," said another of the elders in a rough voice; Achieng realised it was Jagwe, her Uncle. When he said this, a cry went up from the other women around. Morino were red safari ants with scorpion-like mandibles and their sting was pure agony because they left teeth in their prey. They were best known for eating corpses in graves. Because of this, they were sometimes known as *morino mulumbo*.

A man came forward, holding the calabash swarming with the morino at arm's length, mad at being disturbed from their anthill. The girl saw the ants and started whimpering, twisting against the ropes, and protesting, but the man raised the calabash and tilted its contents over her stomach. Pitiful shrieks. Achieng slipped a trembling hand into her aunt's and gripped it tightly, unable to take her eyes away from the girl. The ants moved wildly over the girl's body. They swarmed toward the place where her legs met, attracted by its warmth. She cried out, struggling and began to pray incoherently, saying anything and nothing, calling out to her god to save her.

A third elder said, "Now bring the hens."

A young man who was standing by for just this task released the hens from an overturned basket. The hens rushed forward. The girl started sobbing. The people began talking excitedly to each other. The drummer beat his drums with renewed fervour and the drums went BOOM-BOOM! BOOM-BOOM!

Uncle Jagwe's voice rose above the noise from the crowd, like one evoking a spirit. "You were itching for it, weren't you?"

"She's got what she was asking for," said another elder.

The hens were pecking away at the ants, at the grain, and at the girl. Having been starved of food and water, they were hungry and mercilessly bit into the soft flesh. She was now crying for her mother. Achieng was terrified and horror-stricken at the sight. She looked away, her heart banging against her chest, her mouth suddenly dry. Next to the platform, a pestle, a thick metre-long club, stood in its mortar. One of the men took the club and came to the girl. His friend took hold of the other end of the club and they laid it across the girl's protruding stomach. Now, the girl was begging for mercy, forgiveness - never would she do it again.

"Do what? Did what?" Achieng's mind was in chaos against her own mounting fear.

"Forgive me!" Cried the girl, her body turning almost perpendicular to the ground as she tried to evade the men.

The man who had fetched the club spoke to Achieng's father, "Jadwong", he said addressing him with the title used for respected elders. "Shall we squish or squash?"

If they pushed it upwards, the foetus would be pushed up against the girl's chest, against her throat, choking her. If they pushed it downwards, the foetus would be forced out of the girl's body, tearing her apart. Either way, she would die.

The girl lay there rigid with fear, her breath coming out in short, jerky gasps as the whites of her eyes showed. The people were silent, waiting for Misigile's answer.

Then, a shadow began crossing the sun. At first, Achieng thought it was a great eagle with its wings spread out, swooping down from the sky. Then, the crowd was parting as someone rushed through them. Achieng saw that it was her mother, Nyamiland, the loose cloth that she wore round her shoulders flapping behind her like the wings of a bird. The sickle-shaped knife that she had used for cutting vegetables was in her hand, raised high above her like the beak of a bird of prey. Mesmerised, Achieng watched as her mother pushed aside the man with the calabash, causing the rest of its contents to spill all over the grass. She watched as her mother swung the sickle-shaped knife in a perfect arc the same way she did when she cut banana leaves off the banana tree, and swiftly cut the rope round the girl's hands. The men holding her down scrambled out of the way. Then, Nyamiland loosened the ropes from the

girl's feet and flung them away. The girl braced herself, her arms instinctively reaching out in self-defence thinking that Nyamiland was also there to attack her. She tried to cover her nakedness.

Nyamiland was a big woman - a whole head taller than her husband - and now, she towered above Misigile, eyes flashing, chest heaving.

“Why are you trying to kill this child?” She thundered, “What has this child done that is so wrong that she must die!” She looked at the rest of the men standing with her husband as she panted to get her breath back. Then, she turned to face the gathering and demanded, “Which one of you here has not sinned?”

Sometimes, they say that the voice of a dead ancestor comes and inhabits a living body and talks through it. It was well known that Nyamiland came from the Nyirenja clan, one of the first people in Padhola, famous for being protectors of the weak. In the minds of those present, this was not Nyamiland speaking, but one of her ancestors. The girl was dusty, covered with grain, ants, sweat, and blood. Nyamiland covered her with a cloth and helped her up. As she was led away, the girl's eyes met and locked on Achieng's. Maybe it was because Achieng was a child and was right there in front of her, or, maybe because it was Achieng's mother who had helped her.

The elders waited for Misigile to say or do something, but Misigile said nothing, seemingly unsure of what to do as he watched his wife lead the girl away.

Achieng turned to Waya. With wide eyes flashing like her mother's, her lips trembling as she demanded, “Why did they do this to her?”

Waya had a fierce scowl on her face. “It's all about bride price,” she said. “Come, let's go.”

The crowd was breaking up, forming into smaller groups to discuss what had just happened.

Waya lowered her voice and said, “Her parents found a rich old man who paid many cows in order to marry her, but on the night before they were to be married, as the bride-to-be was being bathed and oiled, they discovered she was pregnant. It was a calamity to the parents because the cows had to be returned and the marriage cancelled. To make matters worse, the boy who made her pregnant was poor and had no cows to offer.”

“Bride price...?” asked Achieng.

“Yes, bride price,” said Waya. “When you grow up, you will understand.”

“What's going to happen to the girl now?”

“I expect she’ll escape to Mayuge in Busoga,” replied Waya as she continued walking. “It’s where our people run to exile when escaping trouble.”

When they got home, Achieng found her mother seated outside the kitchen calmly chopping up vegetables as if nothing had happened. But Achieng, then only ten years old, was in turmoil. They made that girl suffer for nothing was the thought that kept going on and on in her mind. They just made her suffer for nothing. Then, she huddled into silence for the rest of the day. It was too much for her to comprehend.

1 Five Cows for Each of the Fingers on This Hand: *Chingan me dhoki abich*

Achieng woke up, and in one swift movement picked up the pot which she'd placed by the door of her hut the night before. She took the pot to the well, filled it, washed her face, and returned home. Then, she picked up her hoe and set off to the garden, noticing that her parents' door was still closed. By the time Misigile and Nyamiland joined in, she'd already put in half a day's work. That was why Jagwe, her father's younger brother used to say, "Misigile's girl – she digs like a tractor". That was in the years before he cursed her. Jagwe was like that - always something witty to say. Even back then, when she was still just a girl, he was eager to see Achieng get married because, as her uncle, he hoped to benefit from her bride price. He was like the man in the song who lies awake all night listening to his wife in labour in the next room, counting over and over again, "Five cows on this hand, five goats on the other. Dawn, come quickly!"

When the heat became too much for hoeing in the garden, Achieng returned to the hut, had leftovers for breakfast, and began helping her mother with the morning chores. This involved preparing food, fetching firewood, lighting the fire, peeling matooke, grinding millet, pounding groundnuts, and sweeping hen droppings from the kitchen. There was generally a fight between Misigile and Nyamiland over who Achieng would help. It was either stay at home and help Nyamiland cook or go to the forest with Misigile to look for reeds for building his new hut which was going to have a shiny, new iron mabati roof. She never knew which side would win. Her parents seemed to be equally balanced in their powers of argument, but if anything, Nyamiland had a slight edge. When the chores were done, it was time to take the cows out to graze. She got them out, counted them as they went out, and called them by name as she waited for Lando, the last one, whom she rode on. Lando would never harm Achieng because Nera had cut into her skin and rubbed herbs in, which meant Lando would be her defender against all foes.

As she passed through the village, she heard people talking about the coup that had taken place overnight in Kampala. Radio Uganda had announced that there had been a military takeover in the country and that General Idi Amin Dada had overthrown the government of President Milton Obote. The army said that it had the situation under control and asked everyone to remain calm. However, there were rumours of army men swarming all over the town, riding in lorries, raising their guns up high, and singing *Moto na waka*. The whole village was buzzing with the news which had all but eclipsed yesterday's unfortunate happening in the village centre.

Obel was already waiting for her in the forest. He was sixteen and tall with a lean body hardened from hours spent looking after cows. Though he was six years older than her, they had become close friends. It was said that his mother was a Munyoli who had been captured during skirmishes between the Japs and the Banyoli, and later died in the great plague. Nyamiland had found the boy wandering about alone back in her home village. She knew of several people who would be happy to look after him in return for him herding their cows, so she brought him back with her to Mulanda. After a couple of years, one of the people whose cows he looked after gave him a small piece of land as payment, and there, Obel built himself a little hut.

"Government's been overthrown," she began.

"The military's grabbed the seat of government," he said at the same time. They took the cows deep into the forest where it was cool and damp, cutting their way through the kapanga as they went. Whenever they found a nice, lush piece of grass that wasn't covered by millet or cassava, or sorghum or maize, they allowed the cows to graze. By the time they got to the heart of the forest, the sun had gone over their shoulders. They sat and had their food.

As they ate, Obel challenged her to a riddle.

"Si koiko,"

"Si ryete."

"What if I told you I like you very much?"

She'd not heard the riddle before. Normally, the ones he liked involved two big trays, heaven and earth, or an animal wearing a coat. She had no answer to this one.

"I want to marry you," he said.

"You can't. I'm going to school," she replied.

"What about when you finish?"

Achieng did not reply, nor did she look unhappy.

Obel jumped up and, cupping his hands to his mouth, sounded the *sos*, the trumpet alerting their friends, the other herd boys, that it was time to take the cows to water. At the well, the cows stamped about and muddied the water. Then, they were egged on to lock horns. After that, the boys also pulled out sticks and whipped each other in a contest. Achieng was the only girl around but she didn't mind. At last, at about four o'clock, it was time to go home.

When she arrived, there was a visitor. Of late, several men had been coming round to visit, but she didn't know why. They sat with her father under the tree and Nyamiland served them kongo. Many times, Achieng had watched her brewing kongo, her elbow deep in a big pot. After three days, the kongo would turn into the sweet kibunde. At this stage, Achieng and her brother would be allowed a taste, and after a couple more days, it was strong enough to make you lose your legs. Now, as Nyamiland set the pot down, the men breathed deeply, taking in the aroma. Nyamiland gave the straw to Misigile. The drinking straw was a long hollow dry stick through which beer was sucked. At the end of it was a sieve woven with dry reeds to keep the dregs out. Misigile tapped it against the bottom of the pot and pulled.

"It's blocked," he said.

"I'll unblock it," said Nyamiland. It wasn't unusual for straws that had stood against a wall overnight to become blocked. "Come with me," she said to Achieng. Achieng followed her mother to the backyard where her mother went whoosh whoosh, swinging the straw. When they went back, Misigile pulled again, and this time, he nodded.

After they'd eaten and the guest had gone, while Achieng was washing the plates by the drying rack outside and her mother was boiling some water by the fire, her father came and stood in the doorway. She heard Nyamiland say, "That child is going to school."

"Did *you* go to school?" Misigile said.

"Just coz I didn't doesn't mean she shouldn't," she said. "The missionaries have brought education. Children everywhere are now going to school. Why do you want to marry off Achieng when she's still so young?"

"Schooling spoils girls," he said, and walked away, as if having the last word.

*

Achieng was born at the beginning of the decade that ushered in the independence of Uganda. She grew up in a village called Mulanda among the Jopadhola tribe, or “Japs”, as they prefer to be called. She was born to Misigile and Nyamiland a couple of years after Misigile had returned from the Morikatipe maximum prison in Tororo where he and his younger brother, Jagwe, had served two years for their part in the brief but fierce Lwinyi ma Abiro, or War of Clubs, at the beginning of the 1960s when the people of Bukedi rioted against the increase in poll tax by the British Administration. When he returned, he found that his eldest two children had died, but that his wife, Nyamiland, and Akumu, his daughter, were alive and well. They soon had three more children: Musisi, a boy, a girl who died in infancy, and then Achieng. Nyamiland delivered her alone and without fuss in the banana plantations. After delivering her, she wrapped her in a piece of clean cloth, laid her in the atete basket, picked up the nyangoda knife that she had used to cut banana leaves to lie on during the labour, and went home.

Before she was even a month old, Achieng had already been baptised by Fr Hepton. Father Hep, as he was known, was a small but wiry priest from Ireland, head of the mission church at Siwa, and a man who had been around for as long as anyone could remember. She was named Achieng because she was born in the sunny season when the crops had dried and been harvested from the fields, when the grass was burnt brown, and when little work was being done in the fields save for the half-hearted clearing of land for the next season. Though named Achieng, she was baptised as “Justina” because, when they presented her at the Mission Church, Father Hep looked up the day she was born on the Calendar of Catholic saints and found the solemn face of St Justine, it mirrored the solemn face of the baby gazing intently at him. Misigile thought the child should have been named “Alwenyi” because she was born during the war, but Nyamiland insisted on her remaining Achieng.

Misigile had returned from prison much more appreciative of life. He wanted as much of it as he could get, and that included spending time with his family. Being the youngest of his three children, Achieng quickly became his favourite. He watched as she learned to crawl, totter about, walk, and cut her teeth. Soon, she was a little girl of six and happy to accompany her father wherever he went. Often, they’d go out early to the forest to hunt for birds, rabbits, and small wild game. Out there, Misigile would show Achieng how to trap white ants by spreading out banana leaves round the bottom of the anthill to catch the ants as they poured out. Most importantly, he

showed her how to extract the prize catch - the mother ant with a tiny head and a large round body made up of quivering rows of fat which Achieng would present to Nyamiland when they got back home. White ants were delicious raw or roasted.

More recently, Achieng had been helping her father as he went about building his new house by preparing the reeds to weave round the poles that would be cemented with mud to form the walls. The new house would have *mabati*, or corrugated iron sheets for a roof. A *mabati* was now Misigile's big dream. Passing through the district on his way back from the prison, he realised many people had moved on from traditional grass thatch roofs. He still hunted wild game, but rather than storing it for future use, he now sold it in order to save for the new roof. "Hurry-up girl! Let's get started, and Nyamiland, don't let me hear anything about needing Achieng for this or that," he said. Misigile usually swept when the sun began to set. He took pride in keeping his homestead neat with carefully tended plants. On either side of the entrance to the compound were two bushes of the Achak plant with yellow flowers. A patch of soft jiija grass lay in the middle of the compound, and behind it was the house, surrounded by hedges.

*

Achieng's parents were both survivors. Misigile had survived Lwenyi Abiro and prison while Nyamiland had survived the great plague, which was said to have been brought ashore by rats from the ships carrying the missionaries from Mombasa to the shores of Lake Victoria. Nyamiland lost most of her people this way, but she had survived just as Misigile survived after being shot. However, the two were now at war with each other and it was all about Achieng. Nyamiland was well known as a woman of courage. It was one of the reasons why the men in the village centre had not dared stop her as she rescued Nyawere from being tortured, and it was one of the reasons she wouldn't give in to her husband. She knew Misigile wanted to marry off their daughter, but there was no way she going to allow that. She'd been disappointed when her eldest daughter, Akumu, eloped instead of going to school like her friends. She wanted Achieng to go to school and learn. A few days after the visit from the stranger, while they were working in the garden, they resumed their argument about it.

"A young girl, hardly more than a child - why would you be marrying her off?"

Misigile leant on his hoe and looked up at his wife, who was a whole head taller than him, and gave her a back handed compliment trying to win her over, “Look at you. You didn’t go to school yet you’re thriving!”

They were digging side by side, turning over the earth in preparation for the new field of cassava. Achieng was several feet ahead of them since she was a fast digger, but she was also straining to hear what her parents were saying. There they go again, she thought. Words. Words. All the time, words. Misigile went on about how those white nuns spoilt girls saying, “They went there to train as nurses, and next thing you know – they’re prostitutes!” Besides, Musisi, Achieng’s older brother, had started school. A wife had already been identified for him and all that remained was for the bride price to be paid before she could leave her home and join Musisi. Where were they to find bride price to pay for Musisi’s girl, eh? Could Nyamiland tell him that? “The boy needs a wife to look after his home while he’s at school.”

Nyamiland threw a glance toward Achieng who immediately pretended to be interested in something she had just turned up in the earth. “I know why you want her to get married,” she said. “So that you can enjoy the bridal wealth. You’re only thinking of your stomach, not what’s best for the child!”

Stung, Misigile said, “What’s wrong with a man enjoying the fruits of his labour?”

In truth, there were enough cows in the kraal to pay Musisi’s bride price and still have one or two left for milking. However, Misigile wanted to buy mabati for the roof of his new house and Akumu, his eldest daughter, had eloped instead of waiting for them to identify a suitable man who would give them something worth having rather than the two miserable cows they’d been forced to accept. However, with her younger sister, there was still time to organise marriage.

“Let my *achoko* go to school,” Nyamiland said, referring to Achieng by the term of endearment. My last born - she has brains so let her study!”

“Well if she has brains she certainly didn’t get it from your people!” Misigile hit back.

Nyamiland straightened up and gazed at her husband in that way she had which made him immediately defensive. Then, she rested the small hoe over her shoulder, picked up the basket from under the tree, and left the garden. Misigile also walked off, but in the direction of the forest, humming then whistling. His dog, Rudi, left his place under the shade of a nearby tree and followed.

Early the next morning, when the sun was still a red flush in the distance, Nyamiland woke up Achieng and told her to throw on a dress and to hurry.

“Where are we going?”

“You’re going to learn.”

Nyamiland told her not to talk to anybody they met on the way in case that person alerted Misigile. They walked silently and swiftly, keeping off the main paths and soon got to the Nun’s school where Achieng passed a simple interview. Achieng was immediately enrolled in primary one. Most of the girls at the school were boarders, and Achieng, left behind by her mother that same day, became one as well.

Sister Boniface, besides being the headmistress, was also in charge of Achieng’s class. First, the girls had to learn the alphabet from A to Z in the form of a song. Next, they were taught how to use the letters to form words such as “ant”, “ball”, and “cat”. Achieng gobbled them up eagerly, greedy for more. Within weeks, she was able to write in her exercise book the words, “My name is Justina Achieng”.

They also learnt numbers. Sister Boniface said they needed to learn them because when they grew up, whether they were housewives or had businesses, they would need to be able to count. They also learned how to speak English. When Sister Boniface entered class every morning, Achieng stood up with the rest of the class and greeted her, drawing out the words in a sing song way.

“Good Mooor-ning, Sister Boniface.”

“Good morning, children. Sit down.”

“Thaaank you Sister,” they said before smoothing out their frocks and sitting down.

Achieng’s cousin, Super, was already at the school in a higher class. The two girls had fallen into each other’s arms the day Achieng first arrived and Super told Achieng everything she needed to know about her new school. They slept in the same dormitory and sought each other out at break times.

Achieng loved school, she loved learning, and she loved the nuns who were strict but kind. She did, however, miss herding the cows and she missed Obel, but she was happier than she’d ever been before.

2 The Poor Man's Grinding Stone Does Not Produce Sand: *Kidi pajachandi kiregi lowo*

It was Maundy Thursday, three days before Easter, about three o'clock in the afternoon. Achieng was playing with the other girls in the playground. School had ended for the day and there was an air of excitement among the girls because it was the start of half term, which meant that there would be no school for four whole days. The girls were free to do what they wanted. Even more exciting was the rumour that rice and meat would be served for lunch instead of the usual posho made from maize, flour, and beans, and for breakfast, there would be bread and tea with milk instead of the daily diet of porridge without sugar. The girls began to plot what they would do over the weekend.

Just then, the head prefect, a tall, athletic-looking girl, approached them and beckoned to Achieng

“Sister Boniface wants to see you at the Convent,” she said.

Achieng leapt up and hurried over. When she got to the Convent, she was again awestruck by the sheer size of it. Dedicated to St Francis of Assisi, it relied for its foundation, not on saintly virtues, but on a slab of concrete so big that the large rambling building, all red bricks, wooden doors and windows, squatted a metre high from the ground. A large set of stairs led up to a high balcony three metres deep and circling the entire house so that the convent looked more important than other buildings around it. Achieng felt very small as she stood looking up the steps. A summons by Sister Boniface was never neutral and inevitably caused severe tummy upheavals in the one summoned, but Achieng willed her long legs into action and strode up the steps with a show of confidence. She hesitated at the great wooden door that sealed off the world of Nuns from the ordinary world. Then, she raised a hand and knocked firmly on the door.

“Come in!” A voice called out.

Achieng found herself plunged into darkness. For a while the only thing she could see were embroidered white tablecloths covering coffee stools that sprouted before her eyes like mushrooms. Gradually, her eyes made out Sister Boniface sitting on a wooden chair softened by a cushion, and surely enough, her father was seated in a chair opposite Sister, a hat resting on his knee.

Sister beamed at her and said, “Justina, you know this gentleman?”

“Yes Sister,” replied Achieng. “He is my father.”

Again, Sister beamed at her as though she had passed a difficult exam. “Then you may greet him.”

Achieng went to her father and greeted him. “How are you father?”

He stood up and took both her hands in his. “I am fine, my child,” he said. Then, he sat down again as serious as could be, lost in a sea of white tablecloths.

“Your father wants to take you home for Easter,” Sister said. “Usually, I keep the girls in school for this holy break as I want to make sure they pray and give praise to the risen Lord, but if the parent of a child comes for her, I will normally allow them to go home - if they are well behaved girls and doing well in class. In this case, Justina satisfies me on both scores. So, you may take her home, if that is what she wants.”

Both Sister and Misigile now turned to look at Achieng. Misigile, unaware that he was humming a melodious tune under his breath, droned like a light-hearted bumblebee. This was a habit that overcame him when he was pleased.

Achieng felt torn. If she stayed, she would miss seeing her mother, playing with Obel, herding her beloved cows, and maybe even digging in her garden. But, if she left she would miss the chance to talk with the other girls late into the night. She would miss the Saturday ritual of washing clothes at the borehole and fighting to buy sugarcane and yams from the Banyoli women who, referring back to the old skirmishes with the Japs, would yell at them, “The Old Debt!”

“When will I come back to school?” she asked her father hesitantly.

Her father seemed uncertain how to answer, but luckily Sister Boniface answered for him. “You must come back on Monday afternoon or else you’ll get a demerit. School starts as usual on Tuesday at 8am sharp.” She looked at Achieng sternly, but there was warmth in her eyes. To Misigile, she said, “I am very pleased with Justina’s progress in class. She is a very clever child. Did she attend school somewhere before she came to Sesera Girls?”

“No,” replied Misigile firmly. “She has not been in school.”

“Well if she continues working hard, she will have a very bright future,” she said before dismissing them.

Achieng collected her few belongings and went home with her father who sang a war song all the way home, only breaking off now and then to whistle the tune.

Funga safari – Get ready for safari

Funga safari – Get ready for safari

Amuri ya keya – The rules of the army

Amuri ya keya – The rules of the army

After an hour's walk, they got home only for Achieng to find that her mother was not there.

"She's gone to attend the funeral of one of her relatives," said her father.

Achieng had hoped her mother would send her straight back to school after learning how pleased Sister Boniface was with her progress.

"When will she be back?" she asked.

"She will return when she returns," said her father.

The next day, Achieng's heart jumped when she heard the rustling of grass, but it was not her mother returning from the funeral - it was Super from school.

"Did Uncle Jagwe come for you too? Did he speak to Sister Boniface?"

"No, father did not come for me but I told Sr Boniface that I had received news that my mother was very sick."

Achieng's eyes grew wide at her cousin's, daring, for she knew Super's mother was perfectly healthy. The only sickness she had was her obsession with guarding her kitchen where her husband kept the paraphernalia for his witchcraft - baby gourds blackened with soot hung from the grass roof along with the scraps of clothing in which human nails and hair lay coiled. Additionally, cows' tails hung over the fireplace and powerful medicine was hidden in the crevice of the walls. No one apart from Uncle Jagwe's immediate family was allowed to enter the kitchen.

Super was dainty like her mother and pretty in a foxy kind of way. She had a pointed head, a pointed chin, pointed ears and large glittering eyes. Her mouth was arranged in a sharp pout. According to her own gospel, she had the flattest tummy and the narrowest waist in the village. Though she was still only fourteen, a song about her, by an aspiring musician, had recently been played in village discos throughout Japland:

Super eh

I've found me a super gal

But I ain't got no cows

Mama

Take a look at that Super gal

Ain't got no cows

Baba

Won't you help me marry?

Ain't got no cows

Super's original name was Nyadoi, but after the song, from that day on, everyone in the village called her Super. It soon became clear that she had lied her way out of school for a reason.

"Cousin," she said to Achieng. "I want to visit our cousin Nyapendi at Abweli and I want you to escort me."

Achieng did not mind the idea of a visit to their cousin. When she asked Misigile, he allowed her to go but said she was to spend only one night. So, early in the afternoon, they took the path through the woods. As they brushed aside low-lying shrubs from their faces and fought to untangle the thorns caught in their hair, Super told Achieng the real purpose of the visit.

"Cousin, lying is a bad thing. We are going to see Nyapendi's husband, Teacher Obbo. He is my boyfriend."

Achieng stopped. The shrill noise of crickets drowned out all other sounds as she stared at her cousin, "How can he be your boyfriend if he is married?"

Super laughed. "You're still a child. You don't know anything. How do you think I will pay for the things I need at school? A girl can't rely on her father to provide for her every need."

"What makes you think he loves you?"

"It's easy," said Super. "Watch me." She stood up straight, drew back her shoulders, and pushed out her chest so that her breasts strained against her blouse. Then, she took a deep breath, pulled in her tummy, and strutted around on her toes as though she was wearing high heels. Achieng couldn't help laughing. Pleased with her own performance, Super flashed a smile showing off perfect white teeth against lips smeared red with *osito*. "You think this is the first time I'm doing it? The last time

we had three rounds of sex and then washed with bathing water that Nyapendi heated and brought us.”

Achieng was shocked. "Your own cousin? What if she does something bad to you, like brings out a knife and stabs you?"

Super flared up. "How? Let her try! You think I can't stab back? I can report her to father and she'll see. Come on, let's go." Then, she grabbed Achieng by the hand and hurried her along.

They found cousin Nyapendi seated under a tree peeling cassava. As soon as she saw them, her face fell. She did not rise up to greet them, but cast her gaze downwards. On her head was a headscarf wound round the back and tied into a bow at the front. She was a dark beauty in her mid twenties, tall, and slim with beautiful, sad eyes. Every movement she made, whether it was turning her head or peeling cassava, was done with an air of dignity and grace. The husband, whom they called, "Teacher Obbo", taught in a nearby primary school. He was smartly dressed in black trousers and white shirt. He hurried to welcome the girls, putting his arms around Super and hugging her. Then, he turned to Achieng but she backed away. He was in his late twenties and as sharp in dress as he was in action. Pulling a chair here and arranging a table there, he ushered them to sit.

Then, everything happened exactly as Super had said. While they waited in the front room, Nyapendi heated water and carried it in a basin to the shower enclosure outside. Teacher Obbo and Super walked to the shower holding hands and began to bathe. What kind of bathing Achieng wondered, for they were in there a very long time. Eventually, they came out looking very clean. Then, they dressed up and invited Achieng to go with them to a neighbour who was throwing a small party, but Achieng refused, saying that she would stay and help Nyapendi peel cassava.

She joined Nyapendi in the shade and they peeled the cassava in silence.

At last, Nyapendi looked up and said gently, "So you have escorted your cousin to her marriage?"

Achieng faltered. "Marriage? How?"

"Don't you see what's happening? Didn't you see how they bathed together? I can't report her to Uncle Jagwe because he will just curse me." She looked Achieng bleakly in the eyes. Achieng found herself at a loss.

The two lovers remained at the neighbour's all afternoon and into the evening. Achieng could hear music from a cassette player and laughter as people partied. She

and Nyapendi peeled cassava after cassava until there was a mountain of white tubers between them. They were still sitting outside when the couple returned flushed with the pleasure of an outing. Achieng and Nyapendi went to make up a bed. It took up almost all the space in the small room. They covered the bed with a single sheet and Cousin Nyapendi's best Sunday *gomesi*, her special gown, was placed over the sheet. Nyapendi brought a goatskin and put it on the floor next to the bed. As soon as Achieng and Nyapendi lay down, Teacher Obbo and Super came into the room and got onto the bed. At first, Achieng was confused about what was happening, thinking that it was perhaps some kind of game or even a fight. Then, what was going on became all too apparent. Achieng's heart started banging in her chest. She scrambled up, determined to get out, but cousin Nyapendi pulled her back down. "Shh. Keep silent. If you make noise you will make him angry with me."

Achieng felt a wetness on her face and realised that her cousin was crying. The couple on the bed rocked on and on.

*

The next day, a subdued Achieng returned home alone. Super had gone straight to school from Nyapendi's house. She greeted her father and established that her mother was not yet back.

Misigile said, "Come. We have a visitor." He could not suppress an air of excitement.

She followed him and saw a woman outside the kitchen. She was a big stocky woman in her mid thirties with a broad face. Her hair was plaited and severely pulled back from her forehead so that small veins stood on her temples. She did not smile as they approached her.

Misigile introduced them, "This is Fulimera, my relative. I want you to help her carry some food to her home and to visit her for a few days."

Fulimera fixed her eyes on Achieng, unsmiling.

Achieng turned to her father, her eyes wide against the yellow light of morning. "What about school? Sr Boniface said I must not be late returning."

"Listen to what your father is telling you," Fulimera cut in. "Don't you respect your parents?"

"Go get your clothes," said Misigile. "You've a long journey to make."

There was something about the way her father stood there, and the look in his eyes, that barred further discussion. Dragging her feet, Achieng went and put a few belongings - a dress, an exercise book, and a pencil - in a small white sheet and tied them up. Then, she went outside to her father's relative and they set off for her village.

They had to cross the River Olele to reach it. When they arrived, Fulimera led her to the edge of the homestead where a man was engrossed in building a small round hut. Fulimera explained that it was Raja, her husband. He was a big man with light brown skin, a fierce dome of a forehead, and a long straight nose. His hair was cut very close to his head and he wore a torn shirt with trousers rolled up to his knees. When they stood in front of him, his eyes rested thoughtfully on Achieng.

Fulimera went down on her knees and said, "I greet you, My Elder."

"Yes Chief Wife. Are your relatives fine?" He asked briefly.

"Yes and they send you greetings." Then, she got up, put a hand on Achieng's head, and pushed her forward saying, "This is my cousin's daughter. Our visitor."

Raja grunted by way of a greeting.

"Hello," said Achieng.

Suddenly, his eyes went cold. "She doesn't kneel to greet?"

Fulimera turned to Achieng. "Don't you kneel to greet big people properly?"

But Achieng froze where she stood. She had never had to kneel to greet anyone before. Why should she kneel to greet this man? And wasn't she the visitor? Fulimera had announced her so. At home, when visitors came, Misigile or Nyamiland fetched or asked her to bring them a stool to sit on and then they were greeted properly. No. She would not kneel - something in her rebelled and her limbs stiffened, making her stand tall and firm with her chin jutting forward. She did not like this man, whoever he was.

"She's still young. She'll learn," Fulimera said as they left Raja to his work.

As soon as they got to the house, Fulimera turned on Achieng. "Didn't your mother teach you any manners? Don't you ever embarrass me like that again!"

Achieng sat down and welcomed the roughness of the mud wall on her back. She was too tired to feel the sting of Fulimera's rebuke. Fulimera went into the small hut that served as a kitchen and came out with food. She shouted to the children playing to come and eat. They came running over with hot breaths and sweating bodies and stared at Achieng as they washed their hands. She soon learned their

names. There was Amal who was fourteen, Night who was Achieng's age, and Achoko who was seven. Fulimera, or Chief Wife as she was known, had three other children but they were grown and married and lived away from home. They were all girls. A young woman of about eighteen years also briefly turned up; this was Min Kilo, meaning Kilo's Mum. Achieng learnt that she was Fulimera's co-wife. With her was a little girl, no more than a toddler, whom everyone called "Baby", and a thin boy, six years old, called "Kilo".

Min Kilo flashed Achieng a smile. "Greetings Visitor."

Achieng thought she had not seen such an attractive young woman before. She had radiant soft skin, her hair was cut very short, and large brown eyes sparkled as she appraised Achieng. The little boy squatted on the ground in front of Achieng and gave her a toothy grin.

Speaking quickly, Min Kilo said, "Where are you going to sleep? If there is no room here, you can sleep in my hut. I will leave you my bed."

Chief Wife darted out of the kitchen and said sharply, "No one asked you to be host. The visitor is going to sleep at Grandma Yosofina's place."

Min Kilo turned to Achieng with a rueful smile. "Alright. See you around." Achieng was sorry to see her go.

After she had eaten, Fulimera escorted her to Grandma's place a short distance away. They heard her before they saw her - a small thin woman, half bent and permanently out of breath. She was bending with one hand on her knee calling out to Kilo as she struggled with a goat that was tugging against the rope in her hand.

"Kilo! Where is that boy when you need him?"

"Let me take it," said Achieng as she took the rope from the old woman and spoke to the goat. At once it stopped struggling.

Grandma straightened up. She was old, but there was a youthful air about her. The skin around her eyes was wrinkled but her gaze was keen. Large veins stood out on the papery skin of her hands. A colourful piece of cloth was stylishly wound low over her head.

Fulimera said, "This is my cousin brother's daughter who has come to visit us, Grandma. Do you think you could find her a bed?"

Grandma brought her face close to Achieng's and peered at her. "If she is that good with animals, she can lay her head anywhere on my hearth." Then, she grinned,

showing large white teeth and Achieng saw the resemblance between the old woman and the boy Kilo.

“I used to look after my father’s cows,” said Achieng. “Before I started school,” she added with pride.

They walked to Grandma’s place and found her husband standing in the compound talking to a bare tree. “Even the trees have stopped bearing fruit since General Amin came to power. Soldiers are killers and that’s the truth of it,” he said.

Granddad Pinytek was tall and upright, and looked authoritative in the long white robe called a kanzu with a blue blazer over it. He spoke in a high rasping voice. “Too many killings. Too much violence.” Then, he turned and addressed himself to Achieng, “Who is your father?”

“Misigile of the Nyirenja clan from Mulanda.”

“That would be him who fought with and killed a lion? ”

“Girl, we must find you something to deceive your tummy with,” Grandma said.

“Does he still hunt?” Granddad asked.

“She has already eaten,” Chief Wife said.

“He hunts everyday,” Achieng replied.

“Then she can eat again,” said Grandma and for the first time that evening, Achieng began to feel welcome.

*

The days came and went and still found Achieng in the home of Raja, his two wives, children, and relatives. She ate her evening meals with Granddad and Grandma and slept in the front room of their hut. She did not understand why she was still here. She missed school and wanted to return to class. Why had her parents not sent for her? Surely her mother would have returned from the funeral by now and be wondering why Achieng was still at Migana village? Whenever she raised this with Fulimera, her father’s cousin responded with evasive answers that couldn’t fool a child, but Achieng kept on until one day Fulimera snapped and yelled at her to stop hassling her for nothing. Aggrieved, Achieng used whatever means she could to act the part of a little girl in the big people’s world. She cried and cried, demanding to go home. When this failed to work, she retreated into a sulk and wouldn’t speak. Then, she refused to eat

when food was brought before her, but this couldn't be kept up for long. Fulimera called upon her constantly to do this or the other - chores which she would have done in no time at all at home stretched out tediously before her and tasks that should have been light became leaden. She thought about running away, back home or to school, but she wasn't sure of the way. The only thing she looked forward to during those days was when the children came home from school in the afternoon. Then, Kilo would sit with her, his books between them and teach her what he had learnt that day. "I'm the teacher, you're the pupil. Do as I say!" This was his way of mocking disapproval when she failed a question. When he applauded her for getting a question right, her chest swelled with pride. The teacher-pupil relationship grew into close affection with Kilo acting as Achieng's assistant in everything she did round the house, fetching water, firewood, and even cooking. After dinner, she played with Kilo and the other children, skipping with ropes that they made from banana fibre or playing *tengo tengo* with dry seeds of the *achak* tree. Finally, one day, Fulimera said to her that her father, Misigile, was due to visit soon. At last, Achieng relaxed knowing that soon all would be well. She would go home and see her mother, then return to school and to her beloved Sr Boniface.

Achieng rarely saw Raja. He was preoccupied with building the new hut. She spent most of her mornings digging in the fields with Min Kilo. She was as fond of Min Kilo as she was of her son Kilo. As they worked, they sang songs and told stories. One of their favourites was about the uneasy relationship between Hare and Elephant. Hare was small and cunning while his Uncle, Elephant, was slow and stupid. There were many such tales of how the cunning hare outwitted the big elephant. It was one such morning, when mist still clung to the edges of the land, that Min Kilo told her about the family. They were digging and clearing the ground in preparation for planting cotton as they dug to the beat of a popular song.

Alilyo Alilyo

Ee Akendo madi yore

Day one

Friend wouldn't speak to me

Day two

Friend wouldn't visit me

Day three

Friend wouldn't greet me

As their hoes swung up and down, Min Kilo began to talk to her about Raja. His main problem was that he was a wife beater. He kept a stick standing in a corner of each wife's hut that he used to discipline the women and children. Apart from this, said Min Kilo, he was a good man who prided himself in keeping his family well fed, well clothed, and well housed. He could not stand men whose wives' huts leaked because a roof needed repair or whose wives came to drinking places to beg for money because there was no food at home, no paraffin, or matchsticks. Raja diligently bought each of his wives a *gomesi* and all his children new clothes for Christmas. He bought meat once a month, and if he had no money, then he killed one of his animals - a goat or sheep. Min Kilo said that as a wife, she could not complain of being starved or of lacking necessities. Furthermore, Raja was an upright man who went to the Protestant church at Nabuyoga every Sunday, who married his wives properly by paying bride price, who didn't go about having children anyhow and anywhere, and who kept his home clean, his compound swept and his animals well looked after. There was a small problem when his first wife, Chief Wife, failed to produce him sons, so he brought a second wife, but Sicola had had only one child, a girl, who died in infancy. She lived in a hut across from Grandma and was in charge of the crop fields. The problem of children and sons had been solved when Min Kilo came along and immediately gave birth to Kilo, giving Raja a son and heir. There, Min Kilo paused in her story and they dug on to the tune of the song.

Those high-heeled shoes of mine-
If you don't return them
I'll abuse you so
If Mama heard, it would make her cry

"I know she is your relative," said Min Kilo, "but that woman treats me badly just because she has the title Dhaku-dwong - Chief Wife. She's really proud for someone who hardly attended school and whose English has disappeared with the smoke in the kitchen. "She says here she'll stay and here she'll die. If you ask me, it's all her own fault."

“How is it her own fault?” Achieng asked.

“She’s one of those jealous types that cannot bear sharing her man with another woman.”

Then, Min Kilo told Achieng what had happened when she joined the house of Raja, as Wife Number Three- apparently there was chaos.

Chief Wife had flatly refused to have a pretty, 18-year-old girl as a co-wife. "You are not bringing another woman into this house!"

"Don't be unreasonable," Raja had replied. "You need someone to help you with the work around here."

"Have I ever indicated that I need help?"

" *Michala*," he said meaning "Star Wife", a title he only used when he was pleased with her or wanted a favour. "Michala, I've not spoken about this before, but both of us know that there is the difficulty of your religion."

"How does my religion come into this?"

"Well, you know how the world is. People are not happy that I married a Catholic woman."

"My Elder, Catholics are also people of God just like you Protestants."

"*Michala*, I did not bring up this subject to argue about religion or to quarrel with you."

"Oh, so did you think you broached this subject to make peace?"

With that, Chief Wife got up, tightened the gomesi round her waist, tightened the scarf on her head, and said "Bringing a woman into my house? Over my dead body!" And off she went to the banana plantations where she vented her anger by cutting down banana fruits even though they were not ripe. The following day, Raja knocked on the tin door to Chief Wife's mud hut - he hadn't yet built the house of mud bricks and iron roofing that Chief Wife now lived in. When she opened the door and saw them standing there, Raja and his new woman, Chief Wife gave her husband a wounded look. Without a word, she went back into the house, closed the door, and pushed something heavy against it. Soon, things could be heard breaking inside as pots and pans were thrown against the wall and saucepans and cups smashed against each other. Next came the splintering of wood. Raja broke the door down, helped by neighbours who had come running to see what the commotion was. Inside, everything in sight had been smashed. Had it not been a strong hut, it too would have caved in. Chief Wife shouted at him to get out and take his whore with him. Instead, Raja

attacked her and started beating her. The neighbours intervened to separate them, but not before Raja had inflicted serious wounds. She packed her things into a small tin case, turned to their bed, and viciously upended it. The neighbours, who had come to the rescue, formed a line on either side of the hut as she walked out, carrying her case with her head held high. She was, after all a chief's daughter. She paused when she got to Min Kilo, a figure of wounded pride, and said to her, "God will reward you for what you have done to me." Then, she walked away into the night that had fallen over Migana village back to Matindi to her people.

"But she came back?" Achieng half asked.

"She stayed away for almost two months. Raja went there twice to beg her to return, saying that it was no crime for a man to bring another helper in the home, and her parents agreed with him. During each visit, he took her parents presents. Finally, her people persuaded her to return. But, since then, she has turned her back on her people – what kind of a woman is that? Parents, whatever grievance you have with them, they remain your parents. You can't stay annoyed with them forever. And anyway, hasn't she heard the Jap saying, '*dhako kiloyi banja*', a woman can't win a case?"

"Before that first evening," said Min Kilo, "I had not really thought much about what my coming would do to Chief Wife, but from then on, I felt like an intruder. The good thing is that Raja quickly built me a hut and I left her house."

They were silent for some time while their hoes rose and fell in unison.

And that pricey dress of mine
If you don't return it
I'll abuse so
If Mama heard it would make her beat me.
My friend
What is this you've done?

"She is a pricey woman", Min Kilo said. When they got married, it was not before ten cows and ten goats had crossed the river. I hear she was brought in amidst singing and dancing to her new home and that the wedding feast lasted three days. It was only when I came along that she and Raja started quarrelling. She blamed

Grandma for advising her son to seek a new wife, but she was wrong. Men do as they please.”

“I feel sorry for her,” said Achieng.

“Don’t waste your sympathy on her. She had what most women do not. When Raja married her, he did it out of love. Love can carry a woman through the trials of marriage. As for me, I could not have wished for better parents-in-law.” She spat into her palm and rubbed her hands together so that she could get a good grip on the handle of the hoe. “If anything should happen to me, I know that my children will be cared for by Grandma. Roast maize, roast meat-on-sticks, or roast sweet potato - she always has something for them. If it were left to Chief Wife, they would starve. She hates them with a passion, especially Kilo, as though I’m the one who stopped her giving birth to a son.”

“You say, ‘if something were to happen to you’. Like what?” asked Achieng.

“It’s the way he beats me. I don’t know how such a gentle person like Granddad could give birth to a man like Raja. A stick is never far from his hand and I don’t know the number of times he’s broken them on my back.”

“How come your boy is called ‘Kilo’?” asked Achieng.

Min Kilo laughed. “When he was born, he only weighed a kilo, so people called him ‘Kilo’ and I became ‘Min Kilo’ – Kilo’s Mum.”

3 He Saw Me as a Useless White Coin: *Onenan pa pensi matar*

It was one evening, soon after Fulimera's pronouncement that Misigile was due to visit, that everything changed - a night where fireflies twinkled with an electric blue colour. Outside, the clank of saucepans could be heard as Grandma collected them off the drying *kitandilo* to bring them inside. Ever since Idi Amin had ordered that everyone must be able to learn to read and write, Grandma had begun to learn English even though she was seventy. Achieng could hear her muttering to herself as she did so. Agents of the new military government were being sent to villages by Sub-County Chiefs to spread word about the new Adult Literacy programme; old women would be the first to be examined and were expected to know the English names of things they used for cooking and domestic chores. Grandma began to recite the answer to what she was told would be the first question. What is your name? "My name is Yosofina Abbo", she muttered while picking greens, tethering the goats, and fetching food from the granary. Having learned the word *saucepan*, she never used the vernacular name, *sapiki* again. *Cho* became latrine, *dak* became pot, and *apala* became knife, which she would say with a grin as though to ask how could anyone give such a sharp thing such a soft-sounding name.

Achieng had just pulled out her sleeping mat when Grandma walked in and leaned on the doorframe.

"Don't you know you are not sleeping here tonight?"

"Why? Where am I sleeping?"

"They say you should go to Min Kilo's house."

"Why?"

But Grandma left without an answer.

Achieng never walked if she could run, so she took off at a sprint into the dark to Min Kilo's place. Could they be going to beat out ants from their anthills tonight and lure them with grass flames? But this was not the white ants season, was it?

Min Kilo was outside, scrubbing her feet against a stone. First the left foot, then the right foot, then the left again. Her body wriggled as though she was dancing.

When she saw her friend, she smiled and stopped with one heel resting on the stone, the toes pointing up.

"Grandma says I am to sleep here tonight." Achieng said.

"Here?" Min Kilo's smile faded. Then, she pointed to the hut and continued scrubbing her feet. A sense of unease stole over Achieng. She walked to the hut, pushed the tin door open, and peered inside. Kilo and Baby were asleep in the corner of the front room.

"In the back room," Min Kilo whispered behind her, making her jump.

Like most huts, the back room was separated from the front one not by a door but by an opening in the wall. Achieng had often been there when Min Kilo sent her to fetch something or other. She went in and saw the bed newly made up, neat and tight.

Achieng knew something was wrong. What had she done? Was Chief Wife annoyed with her? Slowly she sat on the edge of the bed. After a while there was a noise and she heard shuffling in the front room. Someone stepped into the dimness of the hut and stood before her. It was Raja. His shadow filled the interior of the hut. He was naked.

"Hello girl," he said with a smile.

A muffled cry escaped Achieng and she jumped up in fright.

"No. Please, sit. I am not going to hurt you," said Raja. "I like you very much."

He took a step toward her, but she sidestepped him and braced herself against the wall.

He laughed. "Girl, I've come to let you know I am your new husband."

Achieng was seized with panic. Raja took her hand, pulled her to the bed, and made her sit. Then, he sat down next to her and put an arm around her.

"What do you think about that? You as my wife, hmm?"

"No! I want to go home," she said and tried to pull away.

But Raja got hold of her dress and removed it. He pushed her knickers down and pulled her down with him on the bed. Then, he climbed on top of her, pushing himself between her legs. She cried out in agony, feeling as though a sharp rock was tearing right into her. She screamed and struggled as her head hit against the wall. She bit her lips and tasted blood. He was pushing into her harder and harder. She cried for help, but the world was silent.

When he had finished, he remained there for a long time. Achieng realised that he was asleep. She lay there, crying silently. Finally, he stirred, woke up, and rolled off her.

“From now on, I want you to stop playing around with the other children as though you are a child. You’re no longer a child. You’re my wife.” Then, he turned over and went back to sleep.

Shortly after that, Min Kilo came in and spread a sleeping mat on the floor next to them. Achieng bit her swollen lips, determined not to cry. She felt as though her body belonged to someone else. She stayed awake all night, rigid with fear. In the early hours of morning, both Raja and Min Kilo left the hut. She jumped up, then sank back as pain wracked her body. She pulled the *suka* from the bed, covered herself with it, and limped to the small window, hearing voices. Through the window, she caught sight of her father. He was standing outside Chief Wife’s house, dressed in his white kanzu and black coat, looking formal. Achieng started crying noisily, sure that he had come to rescue her. But then she saw Raja pulling a goat on a rope, which he handed to Misigile along with a wad of money. Misigile counted the notes, then put the money in the pocket of his trousers. The men shook hands and Misigile left, dragging the goat along. Still crying, Achieng rushed to the tin door and pushed it, but it did not yield. It was locked from outside. Panic seized her and she began to kick it. Because it was a flimsy door, it soon flew open. Luckily, Raja had wandered off and no one was around. Running blindly, she made her escape. It wasn't until she had left the village behind her that she stopped. Even so, she hurried as best she could, keeping to the bushes and avoiding the public paths. Finally, she reached the crossroads just before Siwa, about halfway home. She could see people making their way through fields, hoes held against their shoulders like rifles. A woman sang while balancing a pot on her head. Here, lives were going on just the same as yesterday. As she passed Siwa Mission church, the voice of children reciting their lessons carried over to her. Ordinary sounds that she had taken for granted were now precious. As she neared her village, she was aware of the people looking at her strangely.

When she reached home, Nyamiland heard the strangled cry and came out running.

“Oh my child,” she said and took Achieng into her arms.

Nyamiland led Achieng to the girls’ hut and helped her down onto the goatskin.

At last she said, “And just this morning your father went to fetch you back for school.”

A hurt look crept into Achieng’s eyes. She wiped her tears and then told her mother everything that happened from the time her father picked her up from school, to being coaxed to go on a visit with cousin Fulimera, to how she was raped by Raja.

“He made me his wife,” she said.

Her mother was speechless. From outside came the sound of Misigile humming a war song. He was high on the banana wine that Chief Wife had served him, pleased with the goat he was dragging along. Abruptly Nyamiland gathered her *gomesi* around her and rose. She went out and watched her husband weave his way towards her.

“Nyamiland,” he called out as he came in view, “See what I’ve brought back with me. A goat! My in-law also gave me money!” He beamed at his wife as he fumbled into his pocket... but then saw the look on Nyamiland’s face and faltered.

“In-law! What in-law?” She asked with deadly calm.

“Er, Nyamiland. I’m afraid the news is not so good.” He shook his head regretfully and began to stammer. “I found that, uum, Achieng ha- has eloped with Raja, Fulimera’s husband. I was very upset with him, and we had a big, uum, argument over it. However, he ha- has agreed to pay bride price and has given us this goat and some money as a deposit so I decided to, uum, let things be.”

Achieng stepped out of the hut clad in the stained *suka* and stood before her father. Misigile stared at her as though he had seen a ghost. The rope holding the goat slipped through his hands.

Nyamiland found her voice. “What have you done? You would force an old man upon a child? Do you know that while you sipped banana wine your daughter was locked up in the hut as a prisoner!”

Misigile opened his mouth and closed it again. “He told me that Achieng was out, uum, with her friends collecting firewood. He said that she was very happy and even showed me the new hut he had built her!”

“How can you sell your own daughter? How can you remove her from school and force her to marry! Raja is old enough to be her father! And as for your cousin, Fulimera, I never want to see her in my home again!”

“The girl is mature and anyway, he has pro- promised us, uum, five cows and six goats, including this one.” He looked around but the goat was nowhere to be seen, having seized its chance to escape into the crop fields.

“I am going back to Sister Boniface,” cried Achieng. She ran into the hut and came out holding her uniform.

But, her father blocked her way. “I for- forbid you,” he said and snatched the uniform.

Nyamiland, who had also run into her hut, came out carrying a bundle of clothes. “I am leaving,” she said. “And I am taking my daughter with me.”

Misigile grabbed her clothes as well. Then, he picked up his bow and arrow and walked off with a fierce scowl, tightly clutching the bundle. His hunting dog, Rudi, looked anxiously from Misigile to Nyamiland to Achieng before getting up and following his master.

Achieng watched her mother pacing among the banana trees. Then, she heard Jagwe’s voice. Jagwe had obviously waylaid Misigile. She listened as they started to argue.

“Brother, you know how cows are divided in Jap culture,” Misigile was saying. “Out of five cows, one cow goes to the girl’s maternal Uncle, one cow to the girl’s paternal Uncle, and the rest of the three cows remain with the girl’s parents.”

“And which one comes to me?” Jagwe snorted.

Misigile continued. “And likewise with the goats. Out of six goats, one is given to the girl’s maternal Aunt, one to the girl’s paternal, uum, Aunt, and one goes to the girl’s eldest sister and is used at the ritual to introduce the bride to her new family.”

“My brother. Now that your daughter is married, I would like to remind you that I fully expect to receive a cow as her paternal Uncle.”

“Jagwe, you know our older brother Ochwo gave me a cow to pay for Musisi’s education and I promised him I would, uum, repay the cows when Achieng got married but he died before I could do so. Now, uum, I intend to honour my word by giving a cow to Daudi his oldest son. That’s the proper thing, huh, to do.”

Jagwe reared up. “Ochwo’s dead. Aren’t we all brothers from the same womb?”

“If you want cows huh so badly, uum, um, why don’t you look to your daughter, Super? You’ve spread it around that she’s too good for any of the men in

the village. There she is, still unmarried, and you pestering me for my, huh, daughter's bride price!"

Jagwe pointed an angry finger at his brother. "Alright, we shall see. My daughter will bring ten times the number of cows when the right suitor comes along."

Nyamiland emerged from the banana plantation where she had been trying to catch the goat. "What's all this about cows? Stop your quarrelling."

But Jagwe was unstoppable. He ran over to the graves that lay between the two homes where his and Misigile's ancestors were buried and began stripping. He tore off his shirt and flung it away. Then, he pulled off his trousers and, clad only in his underwear, began cursing Achieng.

"Maybe I'm not your Uncle. Maybe I'm not the man who supported your mother while your father was away in prison. How can he refuse me a cow from his daughter's bride price?"

"But there are no cows," Nyamiland said, "How can you argue over what is not there!"

"I'm not giving you any cows," Misigile shouted. "I have debts to pay."

"You will never sleep under a mabati roof," Jagwe continued cursing. "May those animals die! May they break the fence and never return! May they roam and never recognise you as their owner." He spat several times on the grave. "Thoo! Thoo! As for Achieng, let the children she produces die. May she give birth to children only to bury them. Let not one of her children live long enough to walk. Thoo!" Then, he made his demand. "I want Lando. The bull I made sacred for Achieng with my special medicines. Now that she has a new protector in her husband, give me Lando!"

"No! Not Lando!" cried Achieng.

"Never!" said Misigile.

Jagwe was shaking his head like a drunk man. "For six years she shall bury her children, each year for the six cows that will be given as her bride price. May she roam throughout East Africa like a prostitute. To bury and roam. Let that be her role in life!"

"Dear brother-in-law, don't curse my child!" Nyamiland pleaded.

But she might as well have said "Amen" to his curse, for Jagwe, raising his arms up, repeated it over and over. "I, Zephanio Jagwe, swear upon these graves that

since my brother Misigile refused me a cow, my brother's daughter, the one they call 'Achieng', will produce children only to bury them!"

Achieng could not bear it any more and walked off. She took the path to the forest, the path she had taken many times in happier days. She found Obel taking a rest while the cows grazed nearby, Lando watching over them. They greeted each other like strangers.

After an awkward silence, Obel said, "Have you come to see me or the cows?"

Achieng looked away, chewing on a piece of grass.

"How is your new home?"

Achieng felt embarrassment wash over her like a hot wave. So he knew. She made an angry gesture and stared away. Finally, she went and put her hand on Lando, feeling his warmth beneath her hand. She automatically checked for ticks and whip marks on the hide, but there were none. She wanted to say something to Obel, maybe to thank him for looking after Lando, but she could not bring herself to speak.

"I don't beat the cows like some herdsmen do," he said.

She glanced up at him with eyes still red and considered her options. Staying at home was out of the question. Her father would insist she return to that man, and Nyamiland would start quarrelling with him again. She must run away, but to where? Super was at school and even if she hadn't been, Achieng no longer trusted her judgment, and Waya had left for some place near Tororo town called Rubongi. There was only one person she could turn to - Father Hepton. She remembered how, after they received their first Holy Communion, he had said they were now holy children of God. She would go to him and ask for his help and he would summon her father to persuade him to let her go to school. Sister Boniface would be angry with her for not returning sooner, but Achieng would make her understand.

Back at home on her sleeping mat. Despite her troubled state, Achieng fell into a deep sleep. She got up at the crack of dawn, before her parents woke, and set off. In a dress that was old but clean, she hurried along once again, avoiding the beaten paths, keeping in the shadow of banana plantations and bushes. It was easy for her because she knew the shortcuts through the woods from when she and Obel took the cows out to graze. By now, her mother would have woken and found her gone. She kept to the bushes braving the morning dew and scratches from the *obuya* grass. The early morning greetings of birds had now turned into full-throated calls. At last,

she could see the red brick of the church. She ran out of the bushes and crossed the road and sprinted forward with renewed energy.

At the parish house, she knocked loudly on the door calling out to Fr Hepton. When it opened he stood there patiently, one eye closed against the morning sun, a pipe in his hand. He had lived in Africa since he was a young missionary of twenty-three years and he had ceased to be surprised by anything. He was now seventy-five.

“Father help me!”

He looked at her in a friendly manner puffing on his pipe. "And how can I help you, my dear?" He asked speaking in the Japadhola language with an Irish accent.

"My father wants to marry me off to a man who already has wives," Achieng said breathlessly and began to explain. But, before she had got very far, they were interrupted by the arrival of her brother, Musisi, who stood watching at the bottom of the steps. He must have followed her.

“That’s my brother!” said Achieng. “He’s come after me.”

Fr Hepton called out to him. "Why are you chasing this young girl?"

"My Father sent me because she is running away."

"She says your Father wants to marry her off by force. He wouldn't want to do that. Would he now?"

"She is already married!"

"I am not!" Achieng said. "Father, the man is already married! He has two wives."

Fr Hepton looked grimly at Musisi. "Are you trying to marry this young girl to a polygamist? Don't you know that the church does not allow polygamous unions?" He inspected Musisi more closely. "And sure as I am standing here, you're the same person that escorted her to her first catechist class. Aren't you now?"

Musisi did not answer.

Father Hep stood there puffing at his pipe. Achieng understood his dilemma, young though she was. If he gave refuge to her when she was married, he could be accused of wife snatching, yet if he turned her over to her father, his conscience would play on him. He couldn't win either way, but the latter was the safer option, as it was Church policy not to interfere with the culture of the natives.

"Sorry my dear. You must go back with your brother. I can't help you. As you can see," he said, pointing to the room behind him, "I'm leaving."

Achieng looked at the little room that was a study at one end and a bedroom at the other and for the first time she noticed the boxes everywhere. Books were packed in piles and laid on the table. The tables and chairs were covered with white cloth.

“Your new President does not trust Christian Missionaries,” Fr Hepton said. “He has asked us to leave the country and my Bishop in Ireland has recalled me. If Sister Boniface was here, I would send you to her for refuge, but she has already left for Dublin. I will leave a note for my successor, Fr Deogratius, and ask him to speak to your father. Sorry I can’t do more.”

Slowly, Achieng climbed down the steps to where Musisi stood waiting. If even Sister Boniface had left, who could she turn to? They walked away from the parish house side by side in silence. When they got to the main road, she looked once in the direction of her home, then allowed herself to be led away toward Migana village.

4 He Who Rules Over You Calls You by a Name You Dislike: *Ngata dhumin lwongin ginyingin michero*

There is something about the number seven. God created the world in six days, resting on the seventh. Then, came the seven deadly sins and the seven wonders of the world. The city of Kampala is also built on seven hills, a fact taught to all children in primary school. Perhaps it was this he was thinking about when Raja presented his seven rules to Achieng. He had installed her in her new hut after she returned to Migana village. It was small with a grass-thatched roof, a tin door, and two wooden windows.

Raja did not visit her that first night, but in the morning, he came to her and said, "I want to talk to you."

Achieng didn't mind talking or anything that was not that other thing. She followed him into the front room of the hut where he sat on the wooden chair, his legs spread out on either side. Achieng sat on the floor in front of him, resting on her heels. Behind Raja was a tiny door leading to the inner room. A couple of pots were leaning against the wall, but otherwise, Achieng's hut was bare. Since that night in the hut, she did not know who to trust. Had Grandma known why Raja had summoned her? Did Min Kilo know? There were no answers but a small stone, hard and cold, lay deep inside her.

"I have certain rules in my life that are important to me," Raja began. "They help me organise my home, my life, and my wives. Now, they will apply to you. If you don't obey them, we won't be together long, but if you follow them, we'll be good friends."

When Achieng remained motionless. He said, "You are my wife. Running away like you did the other day is out of the question. I have put a deposit on bride price for you and brought you to my home and this is where you will remain. I want you to be clear about this - your survival under my roof depends on your obeying these rules. You hear?"

Achieng said nothing but her face tightened.

"The First Rule - you must keep time!" He paused to let this sink in then went on. "The white man did one good thing when he brought us education. I may not have gone far with education myself, but I consider myself to be literate and I dislike the idea of being married to a woman who can't read or write. I need a woman who does

her work on time.” He sucked the air from the gap in his teeth, stood up, and started pacing around the small room. “Much of your time will be spent fetching water from the well. We have many wells here, but no matter the distance, none of them should take more than an hour there and back. The furthest one is also the largest and must not take you more than forty minutes. Then, we have one down there by the swamp, Pugini’s well. For that, I allocate you twenty minutes and will suspect you of meeting a lover if you delay. There are other wells all over the land in Migana and these need not take more than fifteen minutes. As for the well by the stones, reserved for drinking water, that will take you just five minutes.

Achieng took a deep breath.

“Beware, for I will time you.” He dug his hand into his pocket and pulled out a watch with black straps. “Stretch out your hand.” He put it round her wrist. Achieng had never worn a watch before but tried to hide her fascination.

He laughed when he saw the look on her face: “Now all that remains is for me to buy two clocks - one will stand on the table and the other on the wall. Wherever you turn, there will be a clock, reminding you of time. You’ll have no excuse.”

Outside, women passed by on their way to the well chatting in high voices, their voices peeling with laughter.

“The Second Rule - you shall not sit at table with a male person.” He again allowed a pause before carrying on. “Not my male friends or any relatives who are mature. Not my brothers, cousins, or uncles. Nor yours.”

Achieng looked up in surprise. At home they had all eaten together. Misigile, Nyamiland, Musisi, Akumu, and Obel.

Raja said sternly, “The only male relative you can sit down to eat with is the brother you came from the same stomach with. If a male cousin is sitting at table with you, what topic would you be discussing over a meal if not the topic of love? If I am seated at table with a man, I expect you to be seated on the floor in the corner. However, I can sit at a table with any woman I want. In our family, save for my father, we marry many wives. Look at my Uncle Okecho. How many wives does he boast of? Five? Six? I shall marry another wife if I please. Do you understand me?”

“Yes,” she mumbled.

“The Third Rule – you shall not spend a night away from home.” He allowed her to digest this. “You’ve come here, and here you shall remain. I’ll be the one to go to your people’s home if necessary be it a funeral, be it a feast, be it whatever.

However, if I happen to allow you to go to a funeral alone, you must not spend a night, and, if by chance we get up one day and I decide to travel with you, you must not reply to the greeting of any man. You will leave the greetings to me. And if we travel together, you must walk in front of me. Don't look right, don't look left, just look straight ahead. Once we have reached our destination, and you start keening 'Wooii! Wooii!', I will have my eyes on you all the time, monitoring you. The minute you stop wailing, you come right back and sit at my feet. You understand?"

"What if people want to greet me?" She protested.

"They must come and greet you where I am."

"Won't I help the other women to cook and fetch water?"

"No cooking. No fetching water. Not my wife. You'll remain seated where I am. You understand?"

Achieng said, "I do."

"You shall address me as your Elder," said Raja.

"I do... My Elder." The word stumbled awkwardly off her tongue. She had never addressed any man as her "Elder", not even her father.

"The Fourth Rule - you shall not bathe outside once night has fallen. I know what happens out there when women go to bathe; that is where they meet their lovers. Use a small *karaya* of water and bathe inside the hut if you must. The floor is made of mud so it will soak up the water. Even if you think I am away, I will be watching you from the banana plantation. As soon as it is dark, I want you in the house. Leave the night to night-dancers."

Achieng could not help but think of the time she went with Super to visit their cousin Nyapendi and how Super went off to the shower with Nyapendi's husband. Perhaps Raja had a point.

"The Fifth Rule - you must not grow your hair." He elaborated further by saying, "I forbid you to plait your hair. No *cane row*, *wuzi*, *kiswahili* or *bututwas*. No hot combing or curling *mayengo*".

She put her hand up and touched her hair. It was thick and seemed to grow on its own, but this commandment was the least of her worries.

"I mean it," said Raja misreading her gesture. "You must cut your hair and keep it short at all time. Women like your co-wife, Min Kilo, think that by plaiting their hair men will desire them, but what a man desires in his wife is obedience. The

only thing I will allow you to do is wear beads round your waist. I don't sleep with a woman who doesn't wear beads round her waist."

Achieng swore to herself that she would never wear beads round her waist.

"The Sixth Rule - you shall not be in possession of any money."

Achieng refused to meet his eyes. She had a copper coin hidden in her clothes that Nyamiland had given her the morning she took her to school.

"I don't want you to look for work or till someone's land for money. No wife of mine will slave for another man - I am the only man you will work for. I also forbid you to sell any crops or animal of mine, not even a chicken. Everything here belongs to me and only I can sell it. When a woman has money, she becomes stubborn, and that is when she starts behaving like a man."

Achieng could feel pins and needles in her legs, but she dared not move.

"The Seventh Rule - you shall not hold any position of leadership. Why? Because when you go to meetings with other leaders, it is with those same leaders that you start having affairs. Men lead and women follow. It worked well for my forefathers and I see no need to change it. All this nonsense we see today of women clamouring for positions of leadership is stupidity. It is brought about by educated women who, if you ask me, are nothing but prostitutes."

Achieng bit her lips. This is what her father had said - that if she went to school and trained to be a nurse she would end up a prostitute.

"Girl, you will do well to observe my seven rules. Now, go and do your work."

Achieng got up and left the hut. How had she come to this? To be treated no better than an animal? Would she wake up tomorrow and laugh with relief because it had all been a nightmare?

As soon as the women had come back from digging in the fields and the children had eaten their breakfast, Raja called his wives and children under the mango tree. He sat on a chair and Chief Wife sat next to him. Min Kilo and Achieng sat on a mat at their feet. The children stood and waited patiently, shifting their gaze from one parent to another. Grandma sat slightly apart from them on a goatskin, a keen observer. When it was clear that all his children were there, Raja cleared his throat and began to deliver his second address of the day by reminding them he was the Elder and the provider of all their needs. Then, he introduced Achieng as his new wife and rested his hand on her shoulder. He expected all of his wives to love and respect

each other and did not want any of his wives to show jealous tendencies. He hoped they understood?

“Yes, Jadwong - my Elder.”

Addressing the children, he pointed to Fulimera and said, “She is Dhakudwong, your Chief Mother.”

Then, he pointed to Sicola and said, “She is Mama Mararyo, your second Mother.”

Next, he pointed to Min Kilo and said, “She will be known as Mama Maradek, your third Mother.”

Finally, he turned to Achieng and said, “You shall call her Mama Mathin, your Little Mother.”

Kilo looked at Achieng and giggled. Only yesterday she had been his playmate. Then, he half raised his hand, and when Raja asked him what he had to say, he said everyone called his mother “Min Kilo”, not “Middle Mother”. There was some laughter and some relief. Raja surprised them by saying they could call her that if they wanted since a mother was also known by the names of her children. In return, he said that he would also play his part. He would look after all their needs, and he would love and treat them equally. No woman would go without salt or soap, meat would be eaten at least once a month, and each woman would get a new gomesi at Christmas. However, he was a man who expected discipline from his wives and children. He would punish those who disobeyed him and they should know by now that his anger was harsh and his retribution swift. The whip that stood in the corner of each hut would be used liberally on the backside of those who disobeyed him. He stood up, a sign that the meeting was over. The women also stood up creating room for him to pass while the children went back to playing. There was a sense of togetherness, of being united as a family for better or for worse.

It wasn't long before Achieng witnessed the breaking of one of Raja's seven rules and the punishment that followed. He had put on his black trousers, a white shirt and a black coat, ready to go to Tororo town seven miles away, then went outside and paced angrily up and down his homestead. He was waiting for Min Kilo who had gone to the well to fetch water, as he wanted to make sure that she had returned before he left for town. The minutes of the clocks in the front room ticked by, but Min Kilo was nowhere to be seen. Suddenly, with a sound of frustration he flung off his coat and draped it on the back of a chair. He then went to a nearby shrub and broke off

several branches of all sizes so that the tree was shredded almost bare. He heaped the sticks in a pile on the ground. Next, he rolled up his trousers and shinned up the mango tree and craned his neck trying to spot Min Kilo. She was slowly making her way through the crop gardens with a yellow jerrican of water on her head. As she passed under the mango tree, Raja sprang down on her, picked up a stick from his pile, and started whipping her all over her body. When one stick was in shreds, he threw that aside and took another from the pile. Min Kilo tried to dodge the sticks, but he chased her and whipped her all the way to her hut where she crawled on all fours into the doorway. He accused her of failing his number one commandment, as the jerrican of water lay discarded near the mango tree, the water draining away. Achieng was so terrified that she ran to Grandma's shouting for help.

By the time she returned with Grandma, Raja had washed his hands, put on his coat and, satisfied that all his wives were at home, left for town. Achieng went to commiserate with her friend. She found her in the vegetable garden, furiously picking *boo*, a small basket under her arm, her body bruised all over. She sniffed continuously as she wiped the tears that ran down her face. Achieng didn't know what to do or say.

"It's all your fault," Min Kilo said. "You're the one spoiling that man!"

"How is it my fault?"

"You obey everything he commands. You will make him kill us!"

"But what do you want me to do? I'm afraid of being beaten!"

"Will sticks kill you? Disobey him. I do it all the time. If we all do it, he cannot fight us and he will give up! The same goes for that woman he boasts of as 'Chief Wife'. Don't obey her every order. That's the route to you becoming her slave."

"I'm not anybody's slave."

Min Kilo wiped her cheeks angrily like someone swiping at a mosquito. Her basket was half full of the tender *boo* leaves. "I've never known a man to monitor a woman's movement like our husband does. I don't know what he would do if he actually found me talking to a man. Even when it's a woman he still asks who she is and accuses her of courting you on behalf of other men."

She continued plucking off the leaves before flinging them into the basket. The two girls worked silently for some time.

"Min Kilo," Achieng said, after a while. "Why did Chief Wife bring me to marry off to her husband?"

Min Kilo sniffed and said, “That’s the way it used to be done in the past, isn’t it? If a man wants to bring another wife, he entrusts the task of looking for her to the Chief Wife. The Chief Wife then finds a suitable girl from among her relatives, usually a younger sister. In this way, the Chief Wife can be sure her new co-wife comes from a good home and will not be hostile to her. It’s like an insurance policy.”

And at last, Achieng understood Chief Wife’s ambivalent attitude towards her. It was a case of ‘better the devil you know’, and in this case, Achieng was the devil.

5 The Pot Breaks at the Door: *Abala tho gi dhi' ott*

Funerals were the most common kind of social gathering in Achieng's village. A funeral meant free food and meat eaten with *kwon*, or millet bread. There was much to gossip about, especially regarding the cause of death. Was the deceased bewitched, cursed, or poisoned? A funeral meant meeting friends and maybe lovers. Women felt relaxed at funerals, because for a day or two, cooking and caring for others was someone else's responsibility, and as they helped the bereaved family, they exchanged jokes and stories. The sense of freedom made some of them a little flirtatious. Men kept a watchful eye on their wives, and Raja was the most suspicious of them all. The day Achieng and Raja went to the funeral of Raja's Aunt's child was the first time they appeared outside the village as man and wife. Raja had already told Chief Wife that he would go with Achieng. Min Kilo was angry that she had been passed over in favour of the new wife, but she lent Achieng her *gomesi* to wear and soon forgot her jealousy in the excitement of helping her co-wife to dress. She put the stiff, long sash round Achieng's waist and tied it in a bow at the front so the ends of the sash hung elegantly almost to her feet. She looked like a properly married woman now. The generous folds of the *gomesi* made a rich sound as she practised walking in it - bwosh bwosh. When she emerged from her hut, she saw Raja near the guava tree, one hand on the bicycle that would transport them. The expression on his face made Achieng suddenly remember the rules - the dos and don'ts - and her excitement evaporated. The outing was no longer a visit, but a test. She hesitated at the entrance of the hut, then held her head high and walked to Raja. She was only twelve years old and, despite attempts to walk gracefully, her thin body disappeared into the folds of the *gomesi*. At the funeral, they expressed their condolences and she wailed as expected before they returned to the shed with the other mourners. Raja sat on a stool and Achieng sat at his feet. She kept her face downcast and let her thoughts wander.

"Get up, Min Ott. They've called us to go and eat."

Raja nudged her out of her reverie. She straightened her *gomesi* like a properly married woman, held her head high and walked two paces in front of him. Left. Right. Left. Right. She marched, arms stiffly by her side. Looking neither to the left, nor to the right, according to the third rule. But then a treacherous command of its own rang out in her head. "Eyes right!" It went. And, in her mind, her head turned sharply right

like the policemen in the parade she had seen when their Chief shouted out commands. Yes, the master could make her obey him outwardly, but inside, she was her own mistress. As in-laws, they were invited to go and eat in the simba as in-laws are usually accorded the privilege of eating in private. Several people came up to greet Raja and Achieng realised he was a very popular man. His manners were polite and charming, and he had all the latest stories about the new military regime. His friends' wives spoke freely with him and he threw back his head and laughed out loud at their jokes.

“And here I am, sitting still like a zombie because of the seven rules,” Achieng thought. “Anyone who would like to speak to me must come to me - I can't go to them.”

Despite these thoughts, she could not help enjoying herself. Raja introduced her as his new wife, his Little Wife, and she got to know many of his relatives. The women readily welcomed her and offered her roast maize, roast nuts, and banana wine. She felt at home because everyone was nice to her. Even Raja seemed proud to be explaining that she hailed from the great Nyirenja clan and was none other than the daughter of Misigile of Mulanda village. Older women stared at her in open admiration. They thanked Raja for bringing them a girl of good birth, from a good home, and one who would multiply the clan. Achieng began to relax. Maybe if she lived within her husband's seven rules, she would be able to enjoy life. She wondered about the rebellious stance that Min Kilo adopted and decided that she would not follow her friend's example. With a small sinking feeling in her stomach, she realised that for the first time, she had begun to think of Raja as her husband.

She was almost sorry when it was time to go, but what a lot she would have to tell Min Kilo. They said their good byes, or, to be precise, Raja did. She stood there shy and demure. Any man who greeted her, she could only look at from half-closed eyes.

The host gave them a small jerrican of *kongo* to take home. Raja received the jerrican gratefully and handed it to Achieng. She would have liked to smile or say, “thanks” but that was not allowed. He mounted the bicycle and Achieng sat sideways on the carrier of the bicycle like a *Michala* - a lady. On the way, a man called out, “Hello there, how are you?” Silent. Seal your lips. A woman they passed also called out, “I greet you both. How are you?”

Achieng replied to this greeting, "We are fine, how about you?" It was alright to respond to a woman. Even so, Raja immediately asked her who the woman greeting her was.

"I don't know her," replied Achieng remembering Min Kilo's warning.

Achieng congratulated herself on having passed the second commandment, forgetting that the Japs have a saying that goes, "*Abala tho gidhi oti*" or "The pot breaks at the door."

At home, Min Kilo greeted them and said there was a visitor waiting. Sowo-Fire squatted against a tree, smoking. He was an army man fond of firing his gun in the air, so he became known as Sowo-Fire. Achieng was dismayed to see him. He often stopped by on his way from town bringing news about the military. He was untidy with thick-knotted hair and numerous tribal marks on his face. He had on a dirty army uniform.

After greeting Raja, he turned his bloodshot eyes to Achieng. "How are you Nyako?"

Achieng did not mind being called girl by her father, Granddad, or any of her other uncles for it was a term of endearment, but the way Sowo-Fire used *nyako* was over familiar. Why did he not call her *Min Ott* meaning "Mother of the House", as Raja's other friends did? If she had a child, people like Sowo-Fire would have more respect for her and address her by her child's name like they did Min Kilo, but perhaps she never would have one. After all, Uncle Jagwe had cursed her. It was now over a year into her marriage and there was no baby to show for it. With that curse, he had also rendered her mute before her grandfather. That was the custom in this clan that a woman did not speak to her father-in-law until she had produced a child.

She returned Sowo's greeting coldly. "I am fine My Elder."

Raja turned to her. "Woman, go light a fire and put water to boil. Bring a pot and straws and be quick!" He pulled two stools forward. "Sit my friend, enjoy this *kongo*."

In the kitchen, Achieng blew furiously at the fire till it burst into flames. She rushed around, washing the little baby pot, looking for the thatch on which it would rest. When everything was ready she took it to the *garcia* tree under which the men sat. She knelt and placed it precisely between them, the way she had seen her mother do but she kept her eyes down and did not smile.

"What are you waiting for?" Raja said. "Pour the *kongo* into the pot "

She quickly poured the viscous brown liquid into the pot, taking care not to spill any.

"Isn't that water ready yet?"

"My Elder, it is about to boil," she replied and hurried away.

She returned carrying a saucepan of hot water and a drinking straw tucked under her arm. She knelt down and poured the scalding hot water till it flowed over the sides. The men sighed with satisfaction as the aroma hit them - the bubbles signifying a strong brew. She put one end of the straw into the pot and presented the other end to Raja. He took it, shook it once, then twice, and tapped it against the bottom of the pot. Then, he took a long expectant pull. Nothing happened. He pulled again. Nothing.

He looked at Achieng. "It's blocked," he said. "This straw is blocked!"

"Let me try," said Sowo. He took it, shook and tapped it, then pulled.

"Blocked completely," he said in his broken English.

They both looked at her.

"Did you not pull it through hot water before you brought it."

She shook her head.

Raja made a sound of disgust. "This is one stupid woman! Unblock this straw now!"

Achieng took the straw and ran to the back of the house. She steadied herself legs apart and swung the straw in an arc from left to right, the way she had seen Musisi do at home. "Whoosh" Then she heard a sharp crack. The straw was broken right down the middle.

She heard Raja's footsteps.

"What's taking you so long! Where's the straw? What the- "

"I... It broke as I was trying to unblock it."

"Broke? What did you do?"

"I swung it."

Raja yanked the straw from her sending her stumbling to the ground. Then, he swung the straw in several arcs over her body whipping her. When the straw was too short to be used anymore, he began to kick her. She drew herself inwards and cried out as his shoe dug into her back.

"Stupid animal! How can you fail to unblock a simple straw!" Kick. "What sort of a woman are you!" Kick. "Useless! I wasted my cows for nothing. From today

on, I expect you to start producing children for me. I want a child for each of the cows that are now being enjoyed by your people.”

Min Kilo came running from her hut. "My Elder! That's enough punishment. Leave her alone." She stepped between them.

Breathing heavily, Raja said to Min Kilo, "Find us a fresh straw and give it to this dog here. Hurry!" Then, he turned to Achieng. "Girl, dry your tears and clean up. Do not embarrass me before my friend. Don't bring what happens in the backyard to the front among people.”

Min Kilo brought the straw and handed it to Achieng. "First. Clean your nose," she said. Achieng wiped her nose on the gomesi she had so proudly worn to the funeral.

She went back with a new straw holding her head high.

Ignoring her, the men took turns pulling at the straw. She sat at a distance, on the grass, pretending not to listen to their conversation,

“My friend I have never seen so many dead bodies," said Sowu.

"Tell me.”

"You wait, the war is getting closer to us day by day and everyday we are burying people. Last night, we brought a lorry full of bodies from the fighting in Maga Maga to the barracks. The driver and I drove round Rubongi village to find a recruit to offload bodies. It was at around midnight when we came across a drunk on his way home. I held him at gunpoint and ordered him to *panda gari*, to board the vehicle. When he saw his fellow passengers in the back of the truck, he sobered up completely."

Sowu-Fire shook with laughter at the memory. Raja pulled at the straw, looking at his friend, waiting for the story to continue.

"Then, we picked up some boy on his way home and the two of them rode in the back with the bodies. You should have seen those bodies - the look on their faces, the position they died in. Our poor recruits were throwing up like anything."

"Why were you taking the bodies to the barracks?" Asked Raja.

"The grader man comes with his grader tractor at night to dig the grave, then, he loads up and buries them. The sight is enough to turn over the stomach of even a strong man."

Achieng left them and walked away, sitting inside the kitchen. She knew she should be tending the fire and keeping the water hot because, any moment now, the

men would want more boiling water, but she did nothing. Min Kilo came into the hut. She set to building the fire, blowing at it until it lit. She added more water to the pot and watched it begin to bubble. Achieng examined her body, running her fingers over the bruises and welts. When she failed at any tasks, when she did not work hard enough, when she broke a straw, the cows paid to her people were hurled at her. It was *she* who was actually paying the bride price. Not her husband Raja, not her father, or mother – she was the one. As soon as Min Kilo left, Achieng got up, entered her hut, and grabbed a few belongings. She walked toward the gardens like someone going to pick vegetables and then continued walking. Let Raja come asking her to take more boiled water to them, and he would find her gone. She didn't care. That was his problem.

When she reached Mulanda much later in the evening, she told her mother what happened. She said Raja beat her over a broken straw and so she had run away. She never wanted to go back to that man. Nyamiland explained the situation to Misigile as he and Musisi sat outside the hut waiting for the evening meal.

“Uh Uh,” said Misigile. “Breaking a man's drinking straw, that is one of the worst things you could do. I am not surprised he beat you like that!”

“Misigile, what rubbish you speak! Does a man need any reason to beat a woman?” Asked Nyamiland.

“You must have provoked him in other ways too,” Musisi said. “Were you rude to him?”

Achieng looked at him blankly as he went on seeking reasons to justify her husband's actions. Did she serve him burnt food like some women were wont to do? Did she not keep the house clean for her husband? Or, was she perhaps looking at other men?

“Don't talk nonsense,” said Nyamiland. “Men like him beat their wives and children for nothing - as though flesh doesn't hurt.”

Achieng went to her hut. She lay down and closed her eyes but found it impossible to sleep. In the darkness, she heard Misigile tell Musisi that he must go to Migana first thing in the morning and ask Raja to come.

Raja arrived at Achieng's home the next day with the air of a guest of honour. He was dressed in Kanza and blue coat and stood tall, holding his hands behind him and his head high. The men shook hands cordially and Raja was offered a seat. Musisi sat next to his father as a witness. Achieng and Nyamiland sat to one side of

them. Misigile explained to him that he had asked him to come because his daughter had come home complaining that Raja had beaten her. Raja said he regretted what he'd done and that he had not meant to frighten Achieng into running away. He had merely disciplined her after she broke his drinking straw, embarrassing him before visitors. However, he added, this was just one of many reasons why he had disciplined her. Indeed, he was surprised that he had contained his anger this long. Achieng was a lazy woman who had no idea how to look after a man. She could not cook or look after the house properly, and she answered him back all the time. Achieng started to protest, but Nyamiland, who was also seething, put out a restraining hand and held her back. Misigile said he was sorry to hear this about his daughter and said that Nyamiland would speak to Achieng. He offered Raja the wisdom that educating someone to improve their ways was much preferable to using the stick. When Raja didn't react to this, Nyamiland lost her patience and said she would not stand by and see her daughter beaten. Neither she nor Misigile had ever raised their hand in anger against any of their children. Raja listened with an air of polite boredom, thanked them for educating him, and assured them that it would never happen again. He said he treasured peace in his home, just as anyone would.

When Misigile said they required a good-sized cock as compensation and surety that Raja would keep to his word, Raja agreed and went to the nearest market. He returned with a fine white cock and a mother hen on top, just to show his good will. Then, the women were asked to cook and serve the food. Nyamiland stood up and said she had work to finish in the garden first, and asked Achieng to escort her. They, walked off leaving the men to stare after them.

“If they're that hungry, let them cook,” said Nyamiland.

When they returned, the men had indeed cooked the food - and eaten it all as well. Achieng reluctantly said “goodbye” to her parents and left with her husband. They walked back home, mostly in silence save for Raja greeting passers-by. Achieng hoped that things would change, that Raja meant what he said about wanting to live in peace. But as soon as they entered Achieng's hut, Raja closed the door and gave her a resounding slap.

“Don't ever report me to your people again, you hear? And don't bother to run home because they will only send you back here as they have done today. Next time you do such a thing, I will hit you harder.”

Late that night, Raja joined her in bed.

“What’s wrong with you?”

When she did not answer, he pulled her roughly to him asking, “Since when did a slap cause an illness?”

6 Daytime Rain Does Not Fall on One Person: *Koth machwe odiechieng kigoy ngatachiel*

It was during *ndir ma kecho*, the harvest season, that things really began to go wrong. It was a time of new millet and from it new *kwon* prepared and eaten, a time for feasting and making merry. The clouds had retreated high into the sky leaving it a clear blameless blue. Groundnuts grew in fat clusters. Beneath the soil, sweet potatoes and cassava tubers spread. Children spent long hours looking for mangos, guavas and the fleshy purple berries called *jambula*. They cut down low-lying jackfruit encased in green pods that hung like giant tumours and pawpaw fruits hung high up in pairs tempting children to climb up, resulting in falls. The day before, Raja had been to Tororo town on his monthly shopping trip. He usually returned from these trips in a buoyant mood, but this time, he returned almost empty handed. There were few goods in the shops and prices were impossibly high, so the only thing he managed to buy was bread and Blue-Band margarine.

On this particular morning, Raja, Min Kilo, and Achieng were in the field harvesting millet. They cut the millet fingers using small *nyangoda* knives or scythes. They collected it in *atete* baskets, and when these were full, emptied them in a pile under the mango tree. Chief Wife, her daughter Amal, and Sicola, the second wife were the transporters, periodically ferrying the piles of millet in sacks back to the house. Chief Wife's other two children, Night and Achoko, had gone off to the forest to eat mangoes. The broad back of Chief Wife could be seen swaying under a sack heading for home.

Raja was still complaining about his trip. "Tororo town is no longer the town I used to know. When I got to Rubongi, where there used to be empty land before the bridge, there is now the army barracks. There were army men everywhere. They've set up roadblocks. I was stopped and ordered off my bicycle. People without IDs were harassed and their goods confiscated." Raja struck his hands together in disgust.

"But what are they searching for?" Asked Min Kilo.

"They are looking for rebels fighting the government, so you need a photo ID to prove that you are not. "Density na Diagram" is what they call it, and they're no joke I tell you – tall, dark, serious looking men. People say they're from Sudan."

“What? Would someone like me also be mistaken for a rebel?” said Min Kilo, and the girls laughed.

“Talk as you work, women!” said Raja and his wives pretended to jump back to their task. He continued. “They say Amin is clean and fastidious. When you look at his picture, he is very smart in his military uniform. He has started a campaign to ‘Keep Kampala Clean’. I hear he’s even got people sweeping the streets. And that’s not all... he has banned slippers. When you go to town, you must wear shoes or else walk barefoot. People now have to borrow shoes from friends or get them from cobblers, and if you’re found wearing slippers, they make you eat them.”

The co-wives gaped at him, scythes in hand.

“As you work, women. As you work.”

“Amin has declared Friday a public holiday,” he went on, “because Moslems need to go to the mosque to pray. He has declared that lights have to be out by ten o’clock at night, otherwise, you will be accused of plotting to overthrow the government. Since he sent away the British technicians, the electricity board is struggling to produce electricity, and places like Senior Quarters, Masaba Road, Jackson Drive, Cameroun Crescent, and Sukulu Road that housed white people are now empty. They have packed their bags and left.”

The girls stared at Raja, totally absorbed. General Idi Amin’s economic war, it seemed, was about putting African matters into the hands of Africans.

“What will happen to businessmen? They are going to lose their profits,” Min Kilo said.

“They have started hoarding goods. Things in shops disappear overnight only to reappear at double or triple the cost in back streets, and the government has declared that anyone caught hoarding or smuggling goods will be shot. The Lint Marketing Board and the Coffee Marketing Board have broken down. I hear coffee farmers from Bugisu have started smuggling coffee to Kenya.”

“I’ve always wanted to go to Tororo town,” Min Kilo said. “I used to hear that lights shine all night and water flows from taps that never run dry.”

Raja smiled. “I’ll take you there someday. With Amin, nobody knows what will happen next. Do you know how many titles he now has?”

“Tell us.”

“His Excellency, President for Life, Field Marshal Al Haji Doctor Idi Amin Dada, VC, DSO, MC and Conqueror of the British Empire.”

Then, he saluted. The girls laughed.

They carried on working for some time until Min Kilo said to Achieng: "My mouth is dry. Shall we go and drink some water?" She called out to Raja. "My Elder, shall I bring you some water to drink?"

"I'll come and drink it from the shade. The heat is getting to me too," said Raja.

Achieng and Min Kilo stood under the mango tree, sharing the tin of water from the small pot they always carried with them, resting their eyes on the stretch of field they had yet to cover. Min Kilo tilted her head up and let the cool liquid roll down her lips, down her neck, and over her chest. She closed her eyes against the sun and that was when they heard someone cry out. All faces turned in the direction of home. The cry came again. They broke into a run. It was Chief Wife, crying, her hands on her head as though someone had died.

"What is it?" shouted Raja.

"The boy!" She cried.

"Kilo?" Cried Min Kilo desperately for there was only one boy child in Raja's household. He stood near Chief Wife's hut, looking terrified. Sicola and Amal who had been ferrying the millet with Chief Wife, also came running. They stared at Kilo.

"What has the boy done?" Asked Raja.

"The meat! He's eaten all the meat I left in the pot!"

Raja turned to Kilo, his brows furrowed like rows of newly dug earth.

Under his father's look the boy shook. "I did not -"

"He did!" Shouted Chief Wife, rushing into the hut came out with the pot.

"Look, it's empty. There are only bones and soup left!"

"Let me see," said Min Kilo reaching for the pot.

But Chief Wife swung the pot away. "What is there to see? Your thieving son has eaten the meat I had prepared for my Elder and the children. Instead of doing the work he was left home to do, he was in the kitchen stealing my meat. I am tired of this boy."

Achieng looked towards the place where she had left the white ants to dry and noticed that the boy had transferred the earth tray higher up on a branch safely out of the reach of hens.

Chief Wife went on quarrelling. "Don't you feed him so that he has to come stealing food from my house?"

Truth be told, there were still quite a few pieces of meat left in the pot but Chief Wife was not going to admit this.

She turned to Raja. "She is always sending that boy into my kitchen to look for food. I've complained to her many times about this but she just ignores what I say. Truly, your wife doesn't treat me with the respect I deserve as the eldest woman in this home. If I ask her to fetch water from the well, she brings one pot and that's it for the day. If I ask her to keep an eye on the food, when I come back it's burnt."

Min Kilo protested. "You're the one who hates me and my children. If any of your children are sick, it's me who has bewitched them. If they fail at school, it's my witchcraft. If something is lost, it's Kilo who's stolen it. Why don't you stop bullying mine and produce your own son!"

Min Kilo had touched a sore spot. Chief Wife turned to Raja. "Your wife won't rest until you send me away. I will save her that trouble. Let me pack my bags and go home."

For an answer, Raja grabbed and dragged Kilo to the guava tree where a goat was tethered. He broke off a branch. "I want the truth from you! Did you eat the meat?"

"No."

He whipped the boy all over until the stick broke. He tossed it aside and strode to the guava tree for another branch, an even bigger one, thick as a club.

Min Kilo fell on the ground before him, her arms around his legs, holding him tightly. "My Elder! Don't kill my son. I will repay the meat."

"I'll kill you instead if you don't get away from me."

Min Kilo turned to Chief Wife. "I will pay you back your meat. Please forgive us. I beg you." But Chief Wife just stared.

Raja brought the branch down heavily on Kilo and blood sprang from his forehead where it caught his brow.

Min Kilo circled the two like a referee in a boxing ring, crying to Raja all the while to leave the boy.

"Did you eat the meat?" Roared Raja.

"I, I..."

Raja swung the branch again, this time on the back of Kilo's head. He bent forward and threw up. Blood mingled with vomit hung in strings from his mouth.

"That's enough, Raja," Chief Wife said.

But Raja raised the stick again. "Do you want to live or die? Now one last time, did you eat the meat?"

"I ate it," whispered the trembling boy.

"But why oh why did you eat the meat!" cried Min Kilo. She was standing by the granary.

"I - I only ate two pieces. I was hungry. The other children said they would bring me mangoes but they didn't."

Raja heaved a deep breath and looked at the women standing before him. Chief Wife looked uncertain, still holding the pot in her hand. Min Kilo was now kneeling.

"I see." said Raja. He threw the branch behind him. "Now, I'll show you how I punish a thief." He walked to the goat that was under the guava tree and took the rope that had been tying it.

"No! No!" Min Kilo shouted. Seeing the rope in his father's hand the boy started running. But Raja was there in a flash.

Min Kilo fell on her son and Achieng fell on Min Kilo. Sicola and Amal joined them. All trying to protect the boy.

Raja kicked them out of the way and dragged Kilo to the hut. When he fastened the rope tight around the boy's wrists, Kilo wet himself. Urine trickled down his legs to the mud floor.

Min Kilo was on her knees outside. "Raja, please forgive the boy."

"If you want me to put this rope round his neck, dare to speak once more."

Raja aimed the rope at the wooden beam on the ceiling. He missed a couple of times but finally the rope swung over the wood. Then he lifted the boy up and knotted the rope. He stepped away and Kilo was left hanging by his wrists.

From inside the hut, the sound of Kilo begging for mercy came out to them: "Father, untie me please! I won't do it again."

Raja came out and pulled the door shut. "No one cuts him down. No one enters this hut except me."

He took up his scythe and returned to the millet fields. Min Kilo sat against the wall, staring vacantly into space. Raja was a man who worked long in the fields. They had always admired him for that. How long would it be before he returned and cut down the boy? The day was still young.

Achieng could stand it no more. She strode off to the hut.

“Where are you going!” Cried Min Kilo, throwing her arms around Achieng to stop her.

“We can’t just do nothing!”

“If you cut him down, Raja will kill him!”

“Not if it’s me who cuts him down!”

Min Kilo clung to her friend. “If you want to save my son, you will not take another step towards that hut.”

At last, when the sun had lost its glare, Raja came back from the fields and went into the hut. The girls got up and followed him and stood outside. They heard him speaking to the boy but there was no reply. They heard the sound of the rope being cut and something fall against the ground. Min Kilo ran into the hut with Achieng at her heels. Kilo lay on the ground, motionless.

"Kilo, Kilo," said his mother urgently taking his hands in hers.

Slowly he turned dull eyes upon his mother and said something she could not catch.

"Kilo. What are you saying?"

"I can't feel my hands," said the boy.

*

The harvest season was over. There was no more millet in the fields to be dried, no cassava to be uprooted, no groundnut clusters to be pulled up, and no maize cobs to be plucked from the stems. The hot days were drawing to a close. The grass lay brown and flattened on the dry ground. The shrubs were burnt out. Everywhere there was dust - in the air, on the grass, on the leaves, in people’s hair, eyes, and on their clothes. The fields where Achieng and Min Kilo had harvested the millet now lay bare with the stalks of millet flattened on the ground. Fires started easily and firewood was aplenty. The monkeys had stopped raiding the crops. When the boys chased them, the monkeys would run off to the forest. Once safe in the trees they would fiercely turn on the boys:

‘*Kewi Ka.* This is the boundary. *Kewi Ka.*’

Time had moved slowly for Achieng since the day that Kilo had been tied up in the hut. When Kilo was brought down and he said he could not feel his hands, Min Kilo had massaged them while Achieng had brought him hot milk. After drinking it,

life seemed to return to Kilo's hands and he was left to rest. But the next morning the pain was worse and throughout the day Kilo could be heard moaning. The place where the ropes had been tied at the wrist had cut deep into the flesh and the wound wasn't healing. Achieng went to look for herbs, but the wound started to smell and Kilo was hot with fever. One day, as Raja was passing by Min Kilo's hut, he heard the boy crying and stopped. "What sort of child was it that cried constantly like a baby?" He demanded? Kilo bit his lips and stopped making noise. Min Kilo, who was helping Achieng to wash the wound with the herbs, said nothing, but when Chief Wife looked at the boy lying down on the mat, she said, "This child needs to go to the hospital."

Raja got out his bicycle and together with Min Kilo set off to take Kilo to the missionary hospital in Nagongera. He returned alone in the evening and said Kilo had been admitted and his mother had remained to look after him. The next morning, at the hospital he and Achieng found Min Kilo looking solemn. Kilo opened his eyes and smiled weakly at Achieng. A male doctor in a white gown came to Kilo's bedside. The Doctor held up what he called the X-ray, a large sheet with an image on it, like a transparent photograph of Kilo's bony hand.

"The gangrene has set in too deep," he said. "We will have to cut off the boy's hand."

Raja stood bowed before the doctor. "Which hand?" He asked in a voice that was almost humble.

"The right hand. But we can't do it here," the Doctor continued. "So we are sending him to the main referral hospital in Mbale." He then left them with his white coat trailing behind him.

Raja and Achieng rode home on the bicycle silently. At home, Chief Wife and the children were waiting.

"Bring your father a chair," shouted Chief Wife to one of the children. "How is the patient?"

Raja lifted his head almost defiantly. "They are going to amputate."

The children, who had been noisy, fell silent.

"Both hands?" Asked Chief Wife.

"The right hand," said Raja.

“The one he uses for eating!” Grandma said and she starting hitting her legs with one hand. “Eh, Eh, Eh, What is this? What *yamo* is this? What evil spirit is this?”

Min Kilo and Kilo were gone for six weeks. By the time they returned, the small rains had begun. A pickup dropped them at Nagongera trading centre. Raja retrieved his bicycle from the shop where he had kept it and they set off for home. A night breeze was in the air. Old women could be seen drawing their *suka* round their shoulders, smoking tiny *kali* cigarettes and blowing out smoke from the side of their mouth. If it got too cold, they smoked misala or marijuana instead.

It seemed many people in the village knew Kilo was coming home and one by one, they gathered outside Chief Wife's house. Grandma and Granddad were already there, seated under a tree. Amal, Night, Achoko, and other children were playing around with a ball made of banana fibre. Achieng was busy in the kitchen making sure that there would be hot food. When she heard the first shouts of, "Here they are," she jumped up with a cry and ran to welcome them. Raja held the bicycle and Min Kilo helped Kilo down. He could not stand unaided and was very thin.

"Kilo! Kilo!" The children surged forward and started clapping spontaneously and shouting. The stump where his right hand should have been was exposed for all to see. The children stopped clapping and looked uncertain, their hands still held together as though in prayer. Kilo burst into tears.

"Give him space. Let him be." Grandma hurried forward, shooing away the children. Kilo let himself be led away to his mother's hut.

The reality of the amputation of Kilo's hand soon sank in. The school sent him home for he could not write. His left hand had also been badly damaged. Without the use of his hands, he could not even look after the cows. There remained only one thing left for him - to chase away birds and monkeys from the crops in the fields. He was to become a scarecrow. Soon, he was a common figure in the fields, his good hand and short stump waving away the birds, waving cheerfully at passers-by, and waving at Achieng when he caught sight of her coming toward him with a snack of roast maize or sweet potato.

One day, as she sat with him eating, he said, “Little Mother please tell me a story.”

Achieng obliged him.

“There was once a little girl whose mother died. Her father took her to be cared for by his sister, the girls’ aunt. But the aunt treated the girl cruelly and she was sent to the garden to chase the birds away from the sorghum and millet fields and left there without food. In desperation, the girl started singing to the very birds she was meant to be chasing away.

*Hoi. Hoi. Hoi-hoi little bird
Little bird after little bird
Eating my sorghum, pecking away
Had it been father who died
And left me my Mum
I would not be at your home, no -
I would have no need of you.*

“A woman who was passing heard the song and told the girl’s uncle what she had heard. The man was angry with his wife and made sure the girl was never sent to the fields without food or made to work long hours. She became happy and did not sing sad songs to birds anymore. Now, she listened to the birds singing to her.”

Kilo was silent for a long time. “What does the story mean?” He finally asked.

“What do you think?”

“I think it means a mother is very important to her children.”

“Yes,” said Achieng with a smile. “But it also means that whatever hardship you find yourself in, you must never lose hope.”

7 A Woman Never Wins: *Dhako kiloyi banja*

Grandma asked Achieng to escort her to the market at Nagongera. This was the big market that took place once a month and one to which Grandma loved going. All she needed was someone to escort her. It was usually Min Kilo, but ever since she returned from hospital with Kilo, Min Kilo had withdrawn into herself. She no longer answered Raja back or deliberately taunted him. In fact, Achieng could not remember when she had last seen Min Kilo laugh. If Grandma felt a guilty pleasure at going to the market, Achieng began to feel guilt all of her own. For a while, she had wanted the new *Mo Woodo*, the Vaseline that all her friends raved about. It came in an oblong tin container that fitted nicely in the palm of one's hand. The tin was purple with white flowers that ran round it linked by tendrils. *Mo Woodo* had the smell of the night queen - the little white flowers that gave out a wonderful scent at night. Achieng thought that if she were to rub that silky softness all over her body, she would feel good. She no longer wanted the *chapa makanzi* soap that she smeared on her arms and legs after bathing because *chapa makanzi* was washing soap meant for washing clothes. When she smeared herself with it, her skin went tight and shiny, with hundreds of little cracks appearing on the skin. A tin of Vaseline cost one shilling. She would have to sell an *atete* of millet at the market. She would do it. She would not do it. But why *should* she not do it? There were many reasons why she should not take the millet to sell. For one thing, it would be stealing, but how can you steal from yourself? Hadn't it been she who cleared the earth, sowed the seeds, harvested the millet and stored it in her granary? *Her* granary. No one referred to it as Raja's. If she asked Raja for the millet, she might as well break a stick and ask to be beaten. She thought how women worked hard in the fields planting and harvesting crops only for the men to sell millet as they pleased, or order you to sell it, then forcing you to give them all the money. It did not seem fair to Achieng. She told herself that she had as much right to the millet as Raja. The sixth rule that she should not be in possession of any money was unfair. The thoughts went on and on in Achieng's mind, but finally, she went to the granary and filled an *atete* with millet.

On market day, Achieng carried her basket of millet on her head; her long neck, adorned with natural lines, drew admiring looks from people. Grandma always said her daughter-in-law was not called the "swan-necked one" for nothing. In her

bare feet, each step forward felt like a step towards independence. It was as though she was walking out of her old life and into a new one.

"Does Raja know you're going to sell that millet at the market?" Grandma asked.

"He does not," she replied. Her lips tightened into a stubborn line. "I am going to buy myself a jar of *Mo Woodo*."

Grandma looked at her and grinned, and in that instant, they became female conspirators against the world of men. In due course, they arrived at the market popularly named *Weyiwulera* or "Let Her Roam". From a distance, the market resembled a huge maze made up of hundreds of reed mats, on which vendors laid out their goods. There was something for everyone. Women came to buy household wares and food, smelling the fish to check it wasn't rotten. Young girls tried on *lesus*, slippers, and peered into mirrors. They offered their waists to Singer-sewing tailors who gratefully took their measurements, exclaiming at the narrowness of some of the waists. The men sat in a corner drinking kongo and more potent spirits. A soothsayer had anxious-looking people waiting for their fate to be divined. People walked gingerly round the mats, careful not to step on the goods lest they would be fined. Achieng and Grandma first went to the section where dry foodstuff was sold such as millet, maize seeds, groundnuts, and beans. Grandma called out to whoever was passing by, grinning her infectious grin, saying that she had good millet to sell at a good price. Soon, a woman came along and Achieng had no difficulty in selling her the millet. In her pocket, she now had three shillings. Their progress was slow because Grandma spent more time talking to relatives and people she knew rather than shopping, but she did manage to buy a loofah for scrubbing her back and a stone for scrubbing her feet so they would be clean for her slippers. Achieng was beginning to get impatient when at last they came to the stall with the beauty products. Arranged attractively on a mat were jars of Vaseline, tubes of lightening creams, coconut hair oil called 'Nazi', and henna for dying hair and nails. Finally, in the middle was *Mo Woodo*. She stared at the shiny oblong tin then asked the seller if she could have a look. The seller was a young man who seemed to be from the shores of Mombasa; there was an Arab air about him. He smiled and handed her the jar saying she could open and smell it, but that she mustn't touch.

The scent enveloped her.

"How much is it?"

“Two shillings and it’s yours. If you use it daily, your skin will be as smooth as that licked by a cow.”

“I am not paying two shillings. You can have one.”

“Add 50 cents and I’ll wrap it up for you.” Achieng gave in and handed him one shilling and fifty cents. He wrapped the *Mo Woodo* in a paper bag.

Achieng turned to Grandma: ‘Will you not buy yourself something too?’

But Grandma shook her head, saying that the price of beauty was too high. They stopped at a couple of stalls where she bought more essentials. At last, they traced their steps back to Migana village where they parted ways, Grandma clutching her scrubbing stone and loofah, as well as a packet of *kali*, a box of matches, a kilo of sugar, and a small packet of Brooke Bond tea. Achieng carried the precious tin of *Mo Woodo*, running her hands over its smoothness. She also carried a *lesu* she had bought for Min Kilo who she found sitting under the oberi tree. Above her, the weaverbirds were chatting incessantly.

"You should not have bothered wasting your money on me," she said.

Achieng left her and went back to her hut. She poured cold water from the jerrican into the *karayi* and took it to the *sagati* or the washroom. Shivering against the thrill of the cool water against her skin, she lathered the *chapa makanzi* soap all over her body then rinsed it off, saving the Vaseline as a treat for later. She thought that the delight she took in caring for her body was a trait she shared with her father. She remembered how Misigile searched for the perfect *changwe*, or loofah, for scrubbing his skin, rejecting one after another for not being the right shape, and how for his teeth he would not use anything except a twig from the *achak* tree to clean them. Back in the hut, she sat on the bed, then opened the jar of *Mo Woodo*, breathed in deeply, and rubbed some between her hands, her legs, her neck and back, marvelling at how good she felt. A thought came to her that even Raja might appreciate her new self. When he got home, she boiled water for his bath because he liked his water heated. Then, she served him his meal - kwon and dried fish in peanut butter sauce. Raja took a big pinch of kwon and made a hole in the middle of it. He dipped it into the fish stew, scooped it up, and lifted it towards his mouth then stopped and sniffed.

"Woman what are you wearing on your body?" He asked.

Achieng had the pot of fish stew in her hand - a mixture of guilt and shyness stole over her.

"It is Vaseline," she replied. *Mo Woodo*.

"And where did you get this Mo Woodo?"

"From Weyiwulera market in Nagongera."

"Where did you get the money to buy it?"

"I bought it with my own money. I sold some of the millet."

He stood up and, like a footballer taking aim at a goal, kicked his plate of food to the corner of the room. Then, he knocked the pot out of her hands. It fell to the mud floor and broke. The fish stew in peanut butter merged with the earth floor mingling with the scent of *Mo Woodo*.

"My millet!" he said coming to strike her.

She flinched and was about to raise her hands to protect herself, then straightened up instead and looked him square in the face. He paused in surprise for a moment, then, he slapped her hard. She stood her ground, her eyes smarting.

"What is the sixth commandment I gave you?"

"I don't know. I can't remember."

"I'll ask you once more. What is the sixth rule?"

"I must not own or hold any money?"

"So you knew you were breaking my commandment. You did this to spite me!"

Spite had not even entered her mind. How could she explain that she wanted to buy something nice for herself? Was that such a crime?

Her voice trembled slightly with the things that wanted to be said but which she did not know how to say.

Raja pushed his face in front of hers. "So you did it to smell nice, is that it? And whom do you want to smell nice for? That useless boy from your village? Obel? Did you meet him at the market? Is he still courting you!"

Despite her protestations he pulled her out of the hut. He walked fast dragging her toward the banana plantations. They reached the pit latrine, a small round hut with a hole in the ground. The hut was so small you had to bend almost in half to get in. There was no door, just an opening.

"Get inside," he said pointing to the hole.

Flies buzzed angrily around the mouth of the latrine. Excrement smeared the sides or sat in small lumps where the kids had not aimed properly. The smell rose up, sharp and pungent.

"I said get into the hole or I will push you in myself."

Slowly she lowered one foot into the hole, "I can't go any further."

"You will go further!' he said, and pushed her down. Terrified, Achieng flung her hands out trying to grab hold of something, but there was only the floor of the hut around her. Luckily, her shoulders and widespread arms stopped her from disappearing down too far and there she hung, her lower body from the waist down suspended in the latrine.

"I paid five cows, five goats, and twenty-two shillings for you. Everything here belongs to me, including you. Even the children you will produce belong to me. I can do anything I want with you."

Achieng was silent trying not to breathe.

"You will remain in the latrine until I tell you to get out. You wanted to smell nice. Well, you will have all the smells you want here."

Achieng felt excrement creeping around her ankles, cold and slimy. Then, worms, fat maggots, were crawling up her legs. She tried to haul herself up but kept slipping back. The floor had nothing that she could use to hold on to. The smell rose up in fumes gagging her but there was nowhere to turn her head. She began to fear that she would be sucked down and be covered black with faeces. She turned her head so her cheeks rested against the floor. With a half sob she closed her eyes as the smell of *Mo Woodo* floated like magic, carried over in the night breeze by the tiny white flowers of the night queen growing round Min Kilo's hut.

8 What God Preserves for the Poor Never Spoils: *Gima Were kano rijachandi kitopi*

Late into the night, a sound made Achieng raise her head and stare out into the night. She could make out a figure standing in the dark, right outside the latrine. "Achieng. It's me, Min Kilo."

Insects flew about and she could not swat them off. Her head and arms were tingling with numerous mosquito bites and the sides of her body burned with pain where they had scraped against the hard earth as Raja forced her into the hole. Min Kilo tried to pull her out of the hole, turning her this way and that. Every so often, she stopped and turned her face upwards screwing up her nose against the smell. Finally, with a last heave, she pulled Achieng out. Never had fresh air felt so sweet. She tried to stand but her body was stiff with pain.

"You're coming with me to my hut," said Min Kilo. Min Kilo washed her with water and soap. Then, she led her to the warmth of the kitchen where charred wood glowed in the fireplace. Min Kilo threw a couple more pieces of wood into the fire. Kilo came in and sat down on the floor, chin resting on knees ignoring his mother when she told him to go back and sleep.

Min Kilo warmed up some milk and gave it to them. She turned to Achieng and said, "You're staying with us."

"Yes, little Mother. Stay here with us. Don't go back to that mad man," said Kilo. "You can sleep in Min Kilo's bed," he said. "She can sleep in the front room with Baby and me," he insisted.

"What the boy has said is how it will be," his mother said.

"I will get you into trouble for nothing," said Achieng.

"What will he do to me, that he has not already done? Anyway, he won't find me. I'm going to leave. I'll take my children and find a place somewhere else. I don't want a man breaking sticks over my back day in day out."

Achieng was shocked to hear her talk like this. She could not imagine living in this place without her. "Will you go back to your home?"

"My people at home don't understand. Besides, they have no cows to refund to Raja. They will just force me back. I'll go someplace where I won't be referred to as a mere woman or a dog!" Then she sang a little bit of the popular song:

You call me a dog

But when did a dog ever grind millet?

You call me a monkey

But when did a monkey ever dig?

She stopped and looked sternly at Achieng. "And you! Don't let him enslave you. You hear me, sister? Why don't you also leave?"

"I can't return to my parents again."

"What about your Aunt?" Asked Min Kilo. "The one you told me about who was with you when that girl was being tortured. Didn't you say she lives in Rubongi?"

"I don't know where Rubongi is."

"It's near Tororo town - you can't get lost. Just ask people and they will direct you."

They sat, watching the fire crackle and spit as it died. The hens grunted and nodded in sleep, and fireflies flew into the hut to flash their blue lights before disappearing again.

"Come, let's go and sleep," said Min Kilo at last. Then, as an after thought, she added, "What God keeps for the poor does not go bad."

Achieng was so tired that she fell asleep the instant her head touched the bed. Min Kilo covered her with a thin blanket and, returning to the front room, blew out the light from the tin candle *tadowa*.

When morning came, Min Kilo felt Achieng and found that her body was hot. She went off in search of herbs that would cure the malaria while Achieng slept. She dreamt that Kilo stood gazing down at her, looking for his hand. "Don't worry Kilo," she said as Kilo started to cry, "We'll get you a new hand."

Min Kilo pounded the herbs and mixed them with water. Using a leaf from the lemon tree, she fed her friend the bitter green liquid, drop by drop. The day passed and Achieng did not eat or drink anything except water. Evening came and still she lay in bed, weak and drained. Her limbs ached at the joints and she was shivering with cold despite the blanket that Min Kilo covered her with. Her skin was bruised and peeling. She kept up a dry rasping cough.

"I think you have malaria. What with the cold and all those insect bites in the latrine," Min Kilo said.

Achieng heard her speak as though from a great distance. Her head was pounding and her eyes couldn't bear the light. Time passed and she was dreaming again. This time she was sleeping in her bed. She opened her eyes and there was Raja standing over her. "So you want to smell nice," he said and peed on her.

Achieng woke up from her dream and sat up gasping for breath.

Min Kilo hurried in. "What?"

Achieng felt embarrassed, but she said, "It was Raja, I dreamt that he urinated on me!"

So caught up were they with the giggles that they didn't see the real Raja enter the room.

"What are you doing here?" He asked.

They jumped. Then, Min Kilo said, "She was sick when I got her out of the latrine, so I brought her here to recover."

Achieng held her breath at the daring confession. She waited for Raja's anger but it didn't come.

"She will return to her house now," he said in a controlled voice.

"She is still sick as you can see," Min Kilo protested. "She's got *musuja* after the cold in the latrine." Min Kilo was not going to let Raja forget where she had found Achieng. "Let her rest here."

"Is this a hospital? She can rest in her own hut."

"It's alright. I'll go." Achieng said and struggled to get up.

Min Kilo helped her up and slowly they walked to Achieng's hut where she sank into bed.

"I'll come and check on you from time to time," Min Kilo said. Stray light from the dying sun slid through the thatched roof.

By the time Raja came back to the hut, it was very dark. He prowled around for a while as she slipped in and out of delirious sleep, then left. Achieng heard the noise of the tin door closing. Perhaps Raja knew that Min Kilo was planning to run away tonight and that was why he had been so restless. The last thing Achieng remembered before going back to sleep was the moon slipping out of her sight and the banana leaves reaching to the ground. Much later, she woke up to the sound of wailing. For a moment, she did not know where she was. Someone must have died,

she thought, and stumbled out of the hut. People were gathered in the middle of the compound staring at something. She moved near and then froze. Min Kilo's body lay on the ground, covered by a white sheet. Chief Wife was wailing at the top of her voice and Grandma stood as though turned to stone. Kilo was crying hysterically and Granddad was trying to calm him. Night, Chief Wife's second daughter, was carrying Baby. Neighbours began to pour in, responding to the wailing.

Raja looked shaken. His shirt and trousers were drenched. He spoke to Achieng. "That co-wife of yours was a headstrong woman. See what she has brought upon herself trying to escape? Now she's gone and drowned instead."

"What happened here?" One of the men asked. "Did you have a fight?"

"No!" Raja protested. "She was crossing the swamp when she slipped and fell in the water where the current was strong."

"Why was she running away?" Someone else asked. "People don't just run away for nothing. We need to understand what happened here."

"Father was chasing her!" Kilo said.

"I was trying to stop her. Ask her co-wife here – she'll tell you that Min Kilo was fine. They were together all day."

"Did you chase her right into the swamp?"

"Yes, and then he pushed her down into the water," Kilo insisted.

"Eish! You child!" He rebuked Kilo. "I jumped into the water when I saw her drowning."

"OK," said the man doing the quizzing, "Lets get this right. She was running away from home, you followed to stop her, she fell in the water, and drowned despite you trying to save her."

"Exactly," Raja replied. "But I saved the baby, thank God."

Achieng fell on her friend's body, touching her all over and calling out her name.

Word soon got round of Min Kilo's death and mourners began to arrive. The people from the villages came carrying funeral bark cloth rolled up neatly in their arms. They came carrying three legged stools and drinking tubes. They came carrying *atete* of millet flour on their heads for mingling into *kwon*. The women came wearing *gomesi* with white sheets wrapped tightly round their waists. They ran round the hut four times because the deceased was female, wailing with hands on their heads. They unwound the white sheet from their waist and gave it to Grandma or to

Chief Wife, their contribution to what the body would be wrapped in. They went to offer their sympathies to Raja before finding a seat in their respective places with Raja's relatives on one side of the hut, and relatives of the deceased on the other. Raja stood up to receive the mourners. His eyes were grave. Only the quick sideways glances betrayed his unease.

Achieng lay on an animal skin under the lemon tree outside Min Kilo's hut, watching them through malaria-dulled eyes. Inside the hut she could make out the shape of Min Kilo's body on the bed that had been brought out of the back room into the front. The bed on which she Achieng had lain with fever only three days ago. Today was the fourth day, the day when a deceased female person is traditionally buried. "Where is Min Kilo? Gone to the anthills. She's gone."

Her people too had come to pay their last respects, Misigile pulling a goat behind him. Musisi and Obel sat with the young people behind a hut. Her sister, Akumu, sat on the mat next to her, waving away flies with a banana leaf. Only Grandfather did not come. Staying away was his way of protesting the death of Min Kilo, of refusing to condone his son's actions.

Min Kilo's Uncle, Mzee Obbo, stood up when the time for speeches came. He was a stocky man of about 50 with the same air of stubbornness as Min Kilo. He said he came in sorrow for the loss of their daughter, but he was even more pained to have to say that his *orr*, meaning Raja his in-law, the chief mourner, had not fulfilled his promise of paying the bride price of four cows and five goats for their daughter. At this point, Mzee Obbo reached into the depths of his kanzu and took out two medium size sticks and two smaller ones; he was still owed two cows and two goats. The people became alert to potential conflict.

Raja's uncle, Mzee Kamuge, was the spokesman for the Pinytek family. After a brief consultation with Raja, he asked for forgiveness from their *orr* for not completing the bride price payment. They had deposited two cows, however, it was true that they still owed two cows and two goats. But right now, the important thing was to give the deceased a decent burial.

Mzee Obbo reared up again, like a spear planted into the ground ready for battle. He said that the animals were required before they would allow their daughter to be buried. A fierce argument erupted, Raja's people loudly protesting the ultimatum while the people from Min Kilo's side insisted on it. There was a brief moment of quiet when Father Deogratius of Siwa Mission church, the priest who had

taken over from Fr. Hep, arrived wearing a white cassock and black collar. A small table had been set up as an altar under a tree and Raja's Uncle seized the opportunity to announce that it was time to start prayers. The pallbearers went to the hut to bring out the body, but there, they encountered Min Kilo's people blocking the entrance. Their daughter was not leaving the hut without the balance of bride price being paid. Some of the men forced their way in and an ugly fight erupted over the body of the dead woman. Prayers were abandoned. Father Deogratius packed up the bottle of holy water and said that they should inform him when the "home things" had been settled. He drew a sign of the cross over the body and left everyone to their fate. The arguments took on a new turn when Min Kilo's people began demanding compensation for the loss of their daughter. She had not been sick and did not die of natural causes. Thus, they demanded blood cows on top of the bride price. Raja's shoulders drooped.

Mzee Kamuge grabbed his nephew by the hand and led him a short distance away. "Do you want our dirty linen washed in public?" He asked Raja.

Raja capitulated and they went back to the group. Mzee Kamuge called the mourners back to order by getting the drummer to beat the *fumbo*, the long drum. When he had their attention, he told them that the anger brought on by the death of their daughter was understandable. He also agreed that the request for payment before burial was reasonable. He said that he had consulted with Raja, the chief mourner, and had agreed to go and look for the animals. Similarly, if the *orr* preferred, they could be paid in cash. Cash or cows - it was their choice. Now, if they could be patient and sit down, they would be served with food and drink before they slept, but Min Kilo's people were in no mood to be told that patience was a virtue. One got up and kicked at a pot of *kongo* in disgust and headed for Chief Wife's granaries, saying that he would help himself to it if the people of Migana could not help him. More men got up and followed him, and soon they had overturned Chief Wife's two granaries and started filling their sacks with millet, maize, and groundnuts. They stormed the fields and uprooted the cassava stems, they broke cobs of maize plants off the stems and set fire to any they could not take with them, and goats found in the shed were cut and slaughtered, the meat divided amongst them. Achieng lay under the lemon tree and watched the chaos break out around her. Her sister, Akumu, gathered the folds of the *gomesi*, got up, and ran to safety, urging her sister to go with her, but Achieng refused. She was not going to abandon her friend's body. Sticks were hurled and

stones were thrown as Min Kilo's relatives made off with their loot. It was not easy to find a buyer for the *kasugu* of land that Raja wanted to sell. The body of Min Kilo had now lain for five days decomposing in the hut and most of the mourners had left the day they came with their loot. Only the close relatives of the two families, mostly women, remained. Achieng's family had also left after paying their respects. Then, a cold wind blew down from Mt Masaba in Bugisu shaking the trees hard and scattering leaves down. It carried with it droplets of water and fine sand that whipped the skin and stung the eyes. In the distance, Achieng could see the rain coming down in straight dark sheets and steadily advancing. It looked like a tall thin old woman dressed in black, lean and straight, heading for the village. The season of the long rains had begun.

On the sixth day, people huddled under the tent made with sticks and covered with *masanja*. They had to keep shifting about as they tried to avoid the places where the rain leaked through. The few goats and sheep that had survived the slaughter stood motionless under the shelter of trees, their bodies shuddering against the cold. Achieng, watching from the shelter outside the hut, saw the ghostly shadow of Min Kilo standing under the *makuyu* tree, lonely and lost. There was a frown on her face as she looked toward the hut where her body lay.

On the *seventh* day, Min Kilo's relatives returned and stormed the hut, saying they would take their daughter and bury her back at her home if her husband had no respect for her. However, they stopped when they encountered Sowo-Fire holding an AK47. They shuffled back to the shed. The body now lay swollen as a balloon. From a leak in the grass thatch roof, the rain fell on Min Kilo's face and bared teeth - it was as though she were laughing. Grandma eventually covered her body with a banana leaf and put small onions in the nostrils to preserve the body.

At last a buyer was found and he came back with Raja and his uncle. The buyer measured the *kasugu* of land with his eyes and offered a fee. Achieng quickly realised that Raja was going to sell what had been Min Kilo's patch of land to pay her bride price. Now, Kilo and his brother would lose their inheritance. Money changed hands and Raja rushed to the market to buy two cows and two goats, then hurried back to hand them over to Min Kilo's father. The old agreement was pulled out and thumbprints made against it to show the balance had been paid. Min Kilo's people then agreed that their daughter had behaved badly and brought unnecessary suffering.

A woman running away from her husband and drowning had only herself to blame. There would be no more talk of compensation for loss of blood.

Min Kilo was finally buried during a slight drizzle. Little white butterflies fluttered round, dancing around the mourners. The body, wrapped in layers of white sheets and bark cloth was lowered to the ground. In the distance, as darkness gathered, Achieng watched as the ghostly shadow of Min Kilo turned and melted into the night.

9 Having Children Gives You Food That You Did Not Expect: *Nywol beri, miyin ichamo gimidikinwango*

Everyone expected that Achieng would get pregnant but this did not happen. She had come to Raja's home when she was about 12 years old, and in the beginning, the idea of pregnancy did not even enter her mind. She still preferred to spend her time playing with Night and Kilo when Raja was not around, but the months went by and soon one person then another began to question her about pregnancy. One day, Grandma removed an imaginary insect from her waist and asked how she was feeling *generally* in a way that left Achieng no doubt as to her meaning. A couple of months later, she pulled Achieng aside and asked her what was the matter. "We've been waiting but we see no baby," she said. Next, it was Chief Wife who asked her bluntly if she had begun "wearing the moon." Achieng timidly nodded in answer, not sure which one was more embarrassing - wearing the moon or not wearing it. "So, what are you still waiting for?" She demanded. "If there was any problem that needed to be solved," Grandma said, "Achieng should speak out so that something can be done about it." Achieng assured her that there was no problem for she had completely forgotten about Uncle's curse. Raja himself did not raise the subject with her or behave as though anything was wrong. Granddad did not, indeed could not, ask Achieng about her situation. By custom, Achieng was not allowed to speak to her father-in-law until she had produced a grandchild. When he passed by on his way to the forest, he often found her outside, leaning against her hut. He would stand for a while, respectfully sharing her burden of forced silence. Then, he would speak as though to himself, the way Achieng had first found him speaking to the oberi tree. She would be silent. If she wanted to ask Granddad something, she sent Grandma to him who would then relay the message and return with an answer.

Not having a baby had, until now, been the least of Achieng's concerns. It had not even crossed her mind as she went about her work. Now, however, the sudden interest in her reproductive capacity - or lack of it - caused her irritation and some confusion. She sensed rather than felt the affront caused by her body's refusal to swell and bring forth a child. Then, one day when Chief Wife asked yet again if Achieng was still wearing the moon, she realised with a start that she hadn't been for sometime. When Grandma heard the news, she fussed over Achieng, telling her what

to eat and what to avoid. Soon, morning sickness wracked Achieng's guts. Her sense of smell sharpened and ordinary food assaulted her to the point of nausea. She could not stand bathing with the chapa makanzi soap any more and resorted to only using water. The Mo Woodo that she had so desired revolted her. Most days, she was too sick and tired to do anything but lie down. She felt that her whole life had been disrupted.

One day, Grandma said to her, "Child, I don't see you blooming as you ought to be, is everything alright?"

Achieng could have told her that she felt wretched, sick, and bloated, but she thought that was how she was meant to feel. At last, the day came when she went into labour. Achieng writhed around the floor, clutching her stomach and trying to escape the burning pain that threatened to tear her apart, Grandma and Chief Wife were there to help her deliver. But, when she pushed, all that came out was a limb. It took a long while for the rest of the baby to come out. Finally, the baby's torso and head were out. The baby boy had died in the womb some time before.

"What is the meaning of this? What calamity has befallen us?" Grandma muttered.

Achieng recovered quickly for she was young and strong. Her body was her own again, light and nimble. Months went by and by the time Achieng turned 14, she was pregnant again. This time, she knew what to expect and what to do. The pregnancy seemed to advance well but in the seventh month of her term she went into labour. Grandma and Chief Wife were again in attendance, but when the baby emerged, there was no life in it. It too was a boy. Chief Wife gathered herself up and walked out of the room with an angry swoosh swoosh of her gomesi. Grandma took the baby and buried it.

Achieng felt sad. An emptiness she could not understand engulfed her. "I want my mother," she said.

A message was sent to Mulanda village to tell Nyamiland, her daughter had had delivered but it was a stillborn and wanted to see her. She came right away and Achieng cried in her arms. Then, she gave her meat stew with soft matooke that was said to be good for calming the hunger pangs of a new mother.

Grandma said to Nyamiland, "My dear in-law, if any words have been spoken in anger or out of spite by any of your people, tell us about it and we'll see what to do."

We shall see what to do was an all-encompassing phrase used by the Jap people to defeat the undefeatable. Nyamiland then told them about the curse. She recounted Jagwe's words and how he cursed her as he danced naked on the ancestral graves and how he said that unless given a cow from Achieng's bride price, all she would do was bury and roam. Whenever Nyamiland approached Uncle, he got up from where he was sat eating with Super's mother and melted away, a sure sign that he still bore a grudge. Grandma agreed with her saying that only if a curser dips his fingers to eat from the same plate as you does the curse get broken. The curse, then, was still alive and active.

"Can you not give him the cow he wants so that I can enjoy grandchildren?" said Grandma.

"What I'd like to do is give Misigile a piece of my mind. I told him this child was still too young to marry and that she should be allowed to study. Now, here she is suffering and all for what? Besides, there are no cows left. He's sold them to buy mabati for his roof.' Finally, she said, "Anyway don't kill yourselves with worry. I'll give him Lando, the only cow I have left in the kraal."

"Not Lando," Achieng protested weakly.

"Do you want to die? A cow is a cow - it can't be compared to a person," Nyamiland retorted. "Child birth should not be difficult for a young person like you. Why when I had you, I got up one morning and went to the garden with my basket and Nyangoda knife, and when I returned, you were in the basket."

So, when Achieng fell pregnant for the third time and felt the pain of labour, she picked up the *atete* and threw the *nyangoda* sickle shaped knife into it and went to the banana plantations. She felled each banana leaf with a single cut and arranged them on the ground like a mat. Then, she paced round her self-made shrine as though she was performing an ancient dance. When she could stand it no more, she threw off the *suka* wrapped round her body and fell on the leaves, gritting her teeth and muffling the sounds that escaped her until her baby was born. She cut the umbilical cord with the *nyangoda*, and leaving the baby on the ground, she walked back home.

Her arrival back at home raised a commotion. A cry of "the baby" went up and sent everyone into a frenzy with Achieng at the centre of it standing in confusion. "Where's the baby?" "What have you done with the baby?" They ran to the banana plantations and found the baby as she had left it. It's legs and arms waving in the air, its mouth opening and closing wanting to feed. A woman wrapped up the baby in a

suka and rushed it back home. Achieng was made to sit on a reed mat in the middle of the compound while the baby was forced into her arms and its mouth thrust into her breast and she was commanded to feed it. Now that the baby was safe, anger was directed at its mother by the rescuers. She was abused and jeered at and called all sorts of names. After the village people left, Grandma scolded her for giving birth secretly while beaming over her new grandson. Chief Wife also gave praise, but could not hide her disappointment that the baby was a boy. Her young cousin had managed to give their husband the son that she herself could not. She would become the favourite wife to their husband and her status in the home would rise almost to Fulimera's level. Grandma took the baby, washed it, and put it to sleep.

Hate was not an emotion Achieng had ever experienced, but she did not know or understand this animosity she felt towards her baby. Bile rose in her, threatening to choke her. She wanted to scream, run, or fight. She had not allowed herself to look at the baby. When they put it to her breast, she wanted to strangle it, but Grandma kept a close watch on her and took the baby away as soon as it had fed. Neighbours came to see the baby, asking whether they had been given a soldier or a grinder of millet? "Ah, he will protect us," they said on discovering it was a boy. Had it been a girl they would have said, "Ah, she will bring us cows." Grandma said the child would be called "Pinytek", after its grandfather and preparations for cooking the child's ancestral name began. *Matooke-kisubi* for making banana wines had to be cut, millet had to be ground for the brewing of *kongo*, a goat and chickens identified for slaughter, and invitations had to be sent out. For the first time, Achieng felt like a valued member of the household. She had brought a son into the home and was now a mother as well as a wife. One day, Raja came back from the Let Her Roam market with a new *gomesi* for her.

"I am very happy that you have given me a son," he said formally.

She was dumbfounded.

Just as everything was ready for the cooking of the child's name, the baby began to cry. He went to sleep crying and woke up crying. He cried when he was being fed and even paused while breastfeeding to cry. Achieng was fraught with nerves and when Raja was irritated, he would shout. Grandma tried herb after herb, but to no avail. Using his one hand, Kilo slung Pinytek on his back and took him for long walks, shaking him up and down, singing "Hoi Hoi Little Bird", but still, the baby cried. Grandma said there must be something more it to. Suddenly, Achieng's

heart grew cold with dread when she heard this. Her thoughts went straight away to Uncle's curse. "To produce and to bury, that will be her job." The next time she fed him, when Grandma came to take him away, she tightened her arms around the baby. Let me hold him for sometime. For the first time, she realised she cared for her baby, and then she too, began to cry.

The night before the cooking of the child's name, Achieng had a dream in which she was seated under the *oberi* tree, soothing her crying baby. In the distance, almost at the stream separating Migana from Misasa, she made out two figures walking towards the village. As they drew nearer, she saw two elderly men. One was of medium build with a light-coloured skin - Granddad Pinytek, and the other man was stooped with age, but you could see he had once been a tall lean man. He limped as he walked and one hand was pressed to his side as though he had a wound. When the two men reached the homestead, they sat down and the stranger asked Granddad to give him the honour of accepting his name. Granddad agreed, saying it would be an honour.

"Hmm, this is very important," said Grandma, when Achieng told her about the dream. "Describe him again to me. You said he was tall and lean?"

"Yes. He limped a little and one hand was pressed to the side of his body."

"Oh, how foolish of me. Of-course that would be Mileke, my great Uncle. The great warrior!" said Grandma.

"I remember hearing stories about him, she said. When war broke out between the Japs and the Banyoli, he was stabbed in the side with a short spear. He pressed the spear with one hand and ran 30 miles from Nagongera to Nagoke to announce the fate of the battle. After delivering the message, he pulled the spear out from his side and fell down dead. He is one of the heroes of our people. Mileke wants the baby to be named after him because he is the one that sold Raja's father this land we are living on.

It was agreed that the cooking of the names would go ahead and preparations for the feast began. By chance, cousin Super arrived on a short break from school the same day. She had come to visit, she said because she had not seen the baby since it was born. Achieng was ecstatic to see her. Super set about helping while talking nonstop. She told Achieng about Sesera Girls and the changes that had taken place since Sister Boniface left. There was a new headmistress, an African nun called Sister Assumpta. Super, now 17 years old, was the head girl, and next year, she would go to

a teacher training school to train as a vernacular teacher. Achieng felt wistful listening but told herself that now she had her baby, Blessing and nothing could take away that happiness. She was soon exchanging jokes with Super. Raja stopped by to converse with them and he teased Super, scolding her for taking so long to visit. Super pouted her lips and pulled in her stomach. If Achieng felt a sense of disquiet, she quickly dismissed it from her mind. She wanted no such thought to spoil her day. Two sizeable cocks had been found, one flame red, the other pure white. It was time to decide what the baby would be called. Kilo and Night brought over the cocks. Granddad held the Red cock and named it after himself, Pinytek, a good name he said, that had existed among his ancestors for generations. Raja loudly proclaimed that his cock was none other than the great warrior Mileke. Then, they tossed the two birds onto the grass thatch roof. The birds flapped about to avoid slipping off the roof then started to fight and within no time the white cock Mileke sent the red cock Pinytek flying off the roof to land squawking on the ground. The victorious white cock jumped down and was caught. Granddad took it to Achieng.

"The name of this child is Mileke and henceforth, he shall be known as Blessing Mileke. Great ancestor, Great hero Mileke, accept this child who will bear your name. We pray that you guide his footsteps throughout his life."

Then women, children, and a few men entered Achieng's kitchen hut and the door was closed. Carrying a stick, Grandma trotted round the hut then stopped at the door and banged on it three times.

"Hey people of this home, what is the name of your child?"

There was silence from within.

Again she half walked, half trotted round the hut, and stopped at the door and repeated her question. Again, there was only silence from within.

When on the third time she asked, "People here, what is the name of your child?" everyone inside cried out, "The name of our child is Mileke," then scrambled out of the hut laughing. A great feast followed with all sorts of food. Green bananas steamed in banana leaves and mashed till they were golden yellow, pieces of dried fish smoked over wood fire and cooked in clay pots, mushrooms freshly picked on the day and cooked in roasted groundnut sauce, *kwon* in a basket wrapped up in wilted brown banana leaves, and goat stew, lamb stew, whole chicken stew, cows' liver and cows' entrails all cooked. The vegetables were just as plentiful, the magira, creamy white lentils to go with the *kwon*, this being the traditional dish of honour, then a

variety of green vegetables - boo in groundnut paste; boo in liloth or spinach; akeyo in yoghurt; nyamijogo on its own, and Achieng's favourite - ngwen or white ants, which were in season. An earthen bowl of cow ghee melted to form a golden liquid to be liberally sprinkled over the food of one's choice. People fell to eating. After the meal, pots of *kongo* were set out and the guests began drinking. Next, the long drums, the short drums, and the ateke were brought out and the Jap dance began. The men began undulating their stomachs and the women broke in their chests and shoulders. Achieng danced with the others and happiness filled her heart. Later, while the party was at its height, she decided to get an extra covering for the baby as it was getting cold.

The door to the hut was closed. She opened it and stopped. Noises were coming from the inner room. Her husband and cousin lay there on the bed. Raja swore, leapt off the bed and fumbled into his underpants while Super threw on her dress, slipped into her heels, grabbed her handbag and fled from the hut. Raja threw Achieng against the wall and picked up the wooden stool to hit her with, but then a voice stopped him.

It was Granddad Pinytek. Leaning against the door he said, "One was not enough for you? You want to kill another?"

Raja let the stool drop.

In the days that followed, Achieng had plenty of time to think back to why she'd gone to the hut. At the time, she had pretended to herself that the baby needed extra covering, but this was only half true. She had gone because she suspected Super to be in the hut. Yet, she didn't even care that much if Raja *was* sleeping with Super – it wasn't as if she loved him. She thought about Super's father and how he had quarrelled with almost everyone in the village and ended up practising witchcraft on them. It was known that Super's mother supported her husband in his practice and guarded the kitchen where he kept all his witchcraft paraphernalia. Why should Super not follow in the footsteps of her parents, sowing disharmony and reaping her own rewards? Isn't that what she had done to their other cousin, Nyapendi? Why would she not also do it to her?

10 Persistent Beating Finally Bursts the Drum: *Giri amen yecho buli*

Achieng was making the early morning trek to the well to fetch water. She had a water pot on her head and Blessing was hoisted on her back. Hopping alongside her was Kilo carrying a small jerrican. The water would last till evening when she would repeat the journey. Above her in the trees, the monkeys screeched and screamed at the intruders in their territory. Achieng reflected on how times had changed. Whereas before Min Kilo had been her water-fetching companion, it was now Kilo and Blessing, the baby Min Kilo never saw. Kilo used his one good hand to swing the jerrican on his head. After Min Kilo's funeral, the elders had met to decide who would be the *Mukuza*, or Executor, of the deceased and Chief Wife was chosen. She protested that she could not look after another two children in addition to her own three. Achieng quickly said she'd be happy to look after Kilo and no one had objected. So, Kilo came to live with her. Baby also spent most days at Achieng's hut, playing with her brother Kilo, only returning to Chief Wife's to sleep.

Achieng passed the mound of earth that marked Min Kilo's grave several times a day, and each time, she could not help but feel the pain of loss, the pang of regret. But the death of his middle wife did not seem to have affected Raja. He carried on with his work as usual, going to the fields at the break of dawn where he worked till noon. When he returned, he ate the leftover cassava or potatoes washed down with a mug of tea before disappearing to the forest to trap wild animals or cut trees to sell as timber, using a power saw that Sowo-Fire had found him. He had let it be known that he was working to earn cows so that he could find a woman to replace Min Kilo. Achieng thought that even if Raja married ten wives, it would make no difference to her. She felt completely alienated from the man to whom she was married and with whom she slept with twice a week on the "visiting days" assigned to her.

Sowo-Fire was a regular visitor, bringing with him news of the happenings in town. He told them about more new rules decreed by General Idi Amin and how the army harassed people who disobeyed them. The latest decree prohibited the wearing of mini skirts or dresses that came six inches above the knee, but as Achieng soon

understood from what Sowo-Fire said, the law is one thing and its interpretation is another. The new decree was interpreted by the army men as applying to any woman wearing a dress that did not reach her ankles. It was interpreted as applying to any woman who wore shorts or the new and popular flared trousers called bell-bottoms. It was interpreted as applying to any woman who wore her hair long. It was interpreted as applying to any woman who had bleached her skin brown. It was interpreted as applying to any woman who looked proud, any woman who refused the advances of an army man, and any woman whom they did not like the look of. Sowo-Fire told them how they stopped buses and taxis at roadblocks and asked everyone to step out. The women were made to line up while the length of their skirts was inspected. They stood in line timorously, feet pointed inward, trying to keep their shaking knees together. The luckless woman found wanting was pulled out of the line and relieved of her money or pulled aside and the taxi ordered to drive off while they harassed her. Sowo-Fire said they came across a woman with long hair, bleached to the hilt. They took her to the barracks, broke a bottle of beer, and used it to shave off her hair. Raja's shoulders shook with laughter as he narrated this and Sowo-Fire slapped Raja on the thigh. Ah he was so smart! He only went silent when he looked up and saw Achieng standing with a saucepan of hot water, ready to serve them *kongo*, the glint of the sun flashing in her eyes. Achieng felt as though the things done to those women had been done to her.

Now that her lips had been unsealed after the birth of her first stillborn child, she often talked to her Father-in-law. When Achieng greeted him, he jumped and said "Eh, what is that you say?"

"I am only greeting you Granddad, that's all."

Then, he would start talking fast, "But tell me my child, what's going on in this world? I see Amin still rules. I tell you there will be bloodshed. People will die like flies. And what about you? Is life treating you well?"

The change in Granddad marked for Achieng how much time had passed since she first came to the village. She could not forget that time, the season of horror, when Raja first came into Min Kilo's room and forced himself on her. Then, there was the second (or was it the third?) harvest season when Kilo's hand had been cut, and then not long after that, Min Kilo... but she couldn't bear to think about it. Maybe if she had not been so vain and wanting the Vaseline, which ended up with Min Kilo rescuing her and getting into trouble, Min Kilo would still be alive.

One day, a young boy from her village called “John” came to tell her that there was going to be a second funeral rite for her mother's aunt, a woman called Kasalina Nyafwono who had died the year before. Achieng made John some food and went to Raja to ask permission to attend the funeral. It was agreed that she and Grandma would set off early the next morning and return the same day. John left to relay the news to Achieng's mother while she prepared to grind the millet flour that she would take with her.

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When she and Grandma reached the village where the funeral was, Pa’Biranga, a few miles from Mulanda village, Achieng was soon surrounded by her mother's people. It had been a long time since she had been showered with such warmth. They were delighted to see her - an *okewo* - the name given to the children of a woman by her relatives. It was a fond way of referring to maternal nieces and nephews. *Okewos* were given the first taste of *kongo-kibunde*, the best chicken pieces, and were pampered. The special treatment made Achieng feel happier than she had in many months. Obel was among those at the village. He too was an *okewo* because this was the place where his mother had been born before she was killed by the plague. He came and greeted Achieng as soon as she arrived. He looked older, and when he spoke, his voice was deeper. There was also a ghost of a beard above his lips. He helped her get Blessing down from her back and began to play with him, swinging him up high, much to Blessing’s delight. Gradually, Achieng began to relax. Raja was not here to make her march straight without looking left or right, or to make her sit at his feet as silent as one who was dead.

“Where is my mother?” She said. “Take me to her so that I can help with the cooking.”

She was soon with her mother, her mother’s aunts, cousins, and numerous other relatives. Blessing was taken from her by willing hands and proudly introduced as Nyamiland’s grandson, named after Mileke. Achieng joined the women and peeled potatoes, plucked vegetables, lit fires, and washed plates. As she listened to the stories the women had to tell and she watched them break into song or laughter, Achieng

began enjoying herself all the more. All the while, Obel moved in and out of her vision, but never out of her mind. Everyone seemed to be demanding his attention, his services, and his advice. Someone was needed who could ride to the trading centre to buy matches and soap - could Obel do it? Then off he went. When important elders came, he received them, greeted them solemnly, and directed them to their seats. He organised the boys to fetch firewood for the *kasik* at night and organised young men to ride to the borehole to fetch water in jerricans. He got the young boys to sweep the compound and smoke the latrines with dry banana leaves to kill insects and the pungent smells. Achieng had never seen him take charge in this way before. When the food had all been prepared and left on the fire to cook, they gathered at the front of the house. Then, Super arrived in her usual bustle and flair, preening herself like the crested crane of Uganda. She wore a tight-fitting dress that barely reached her knees and high heel shoes which stuck into the soft ground as she walked. She greeted Achieng like a long-lost friend, embracing, then immediately turned to Obel.

When he offered to take her to the women, she said, "Why do you want to take me to women? Take me to the men. I want to talk business!"

Achieng was determined not to let Super spoil her day. She would not dwell on how Super had betrayed her, but when she saw Super walking with Obel, something stabbed at her heart. Grandma was seated under a tree with two women, one of whom Achieng knew as Philomena. She went and joined them. A young man came over carrying a large gourd of banana wine. He poured some out in a small gourd and gave it to Achieng. She took a sip of the warm, sweet liquid and felt the glow spread through her. Grandma was enjoying herself too. Here, old women like Grandma were in their social element. Here, they could loosen up without worrying about whether Chief Wife would remember to send them food or whether they would have to rummage in the fields for green vegetables and forgotten cassava tubers to make Granddad a meal. Here, responsibility was suspended for a while. It was no wonder, thought Achieng, that women liked funerals and never failed to attend one if they could.

Smiling, Achieng turned to Grandma, "Super is here. Did you know?"

Grandma grunted. "What business do I have with Super?"

"What business would your Grandma have with that wild one whom life has defeated," Philomena said and spat in the ground.

The third woman whose name she did not know turned to Achieng and said, "Aren't you going to curl your hair with tongs like she does?"

Grandma snorted, "My daughter-in-law has no time for such foolish behaviour. That sort of behaviour is left to *malayas*."

"With that slim body of hers, she is no threat at all. You know what, Achieng? You could take hold of her and throw her down in a moment if you wanted," Philomena said.

"Our Achieng is not the fighting type. That's why women like that walk all over her," Grandma said.

"What about men like your son who walk all over me too?" Achieng could not help the thought crossing her mind, but she suppressed it because Grandma was always kind and defended her from Raja whenever she could.

Just then, Super came round the corner, carrying a handbag. Now that her sojourn with the men was over, she teetered over to the women on her mud-flinging high heels. Despite herself, Achieng moved to make room for her cousin on the mat.

"I greet you my friends," said Super kicking off her heels and smoothing her skirt down.

The women began to observe her legs, her painted nails, and her curled hair.

"What have you smeared yourself with that smells so nice?" Asked one of the women.

Super fluttered her eyes and smiled, "It's Lady Gay, the new vaseline on the market."

They had never heard of Lady Gay, but where did one get the money to buy Lady Gay if not through harlotting? Chapa Makanzi soap was all they could dream of, and she had on a bra that they could see save for her the carefree jiggling of breasts. They supposed that she could also boast of having underwear, or was she just like them in that regard with nothing but fresh air beneath their skirts? They tried a glimpse to see what sort of underwear she had on, but she had pulled her short dress down and stretched out her legs, crossing them at the ankles. The women tightened their lips in disapproval.

"I've been looking for you cousin," she said to Achieng. "I wanted a chance to talk. May I have a taste of your wine?"

She took a sip of banana and sorghum wine from Achieng's gourd.

"Mm, its sweet," she said and took another sip.

"Another person's wine is always sweet isn't it?" Auntie Philomena said.

The second woman laughed while Grandma looked morosely at Super.

Super feigned ignorance and said, "Cousin, have you found a place to sleep? I have no idea where I will lay my head tonight."

"That shouldn't be difficult," said the woman whose name Achieng could not remember. "So long as you find a place to stretch out, that's all you need."

It was true that there were no sleeping arrangements at places like this. People slept where they sat, piling dry banana leaves on the ground to make a bed, or sleeping on fibre mats that they carried with them.

"May I share your sleeping space, cousin?" Super asked.

"I'm afraid I must go back home today," said Achieng.

"Really? Before the rites are over?"

"Yes."

"Well then, I'll lay my chest down wherever I can."

Grandma brought her face close to Super's and said, "Ay, that you will do, you who would interfere with your sister's home."

Super paused and put down the gourd slowly. Achieng felt tense, the other women went silent.

"I don't know what you are talking about," Super said.

"I said, instead of securing your own marriage, you're intent on wrecking your sister's. Have you no shame, girl?"

"Uh uh," said the women.

"And another thing," Grandma went on, "why did your father speak words against my daughter-in-law? If he'd not uttered them, I would have several grandchildren by now."

Rather than answer, Super got up, slipped her feet into her heels, picked up her handbag, and began to walk away, her back straight as the *olwa* tree.

Achieng got up as though to follow.

"Super!"

Super's shoulders stiffened and there was the slightest break in her stride before she walked off into the night on her high heels - a figure of wounded pride.

The women carried on conversing, sipping banana wine, and listening to the drummers who were warming up for another song. Food was served and people sat down in their respective places to eat with the in-laws separate from the home people.

Drinks in huge pots followed and they pulled out their straws from *kikapos* bags and set up three-legged stools. It was soon nightfall. Obel came over and he and Achieng wandered to the edge of the huge fire that had been built with tree trunks. It covered a large circle in the middle of the compound and the people gathered around as near or as far from the heat as they wished. Then, it was time for the funeral dance. Drums were rolled out - the long drum, the short drum, the *fumbo*, *tongoli*, *ndara* and the *ateke*. The drummers, stripped to the waist, muscles in the stomachs clenched, began to play the *Kewo*, the haunting dance of the last funeral rites. It was a slow tune that pulled at one's heartstrings, creating a yearning for something that was always on the other side of the shore. Unlike the angry, throbbing beats at a funeral that spoke of a life snatched away, the *Kewo* was a slow song resigned to the knowledge that life must end.

Drawn to the music, the people got up and began to dance. Achieng saw her father enter the dance arena, a warrior moving stealthily through the jungle, spear in hand. In her mind, she saw him in the battlefields of a foreign land, fighting a foreign war. More people came and joined in, pushing Achieng and Obel further away to the outer circle till they found themselves at the grave of the dead woman a little way from the dancers. The light from the fire played on their faces so they could see each other only in shadows. The drummer's voice rang out into the night. Then, Obel turned to Achieng and before she knew it, he had taken her in a tight embrace. She buried her head in his shoulders and felt all resistance melting away. The hours they had spent together herding cows, the dank and dense stillness of the forest, the heat of the sun, the coolness of the spring from which they'd drunk, the grass that had caressed them, the delicious aroma as they unwrapped the food they'd brought, and the immensity of the sky above them all came back to her as she pressed against him.

Suddenly, she forced herself to pull away. She wanted to say it was hopeless - that she was married now and there was nothing they could do, but all that came out was his name.

"Obel... I can't."

"I know you are married," he said, "and I've no right to expect you to love me, but I must let you know how I feel. I've known you since you were a little girl. I grew up thinking of you as my best friend. When you said you were going to school, I realised how much I would miss you, but I was proud that you were going to study. Then, I heard you were going to be married off and I suddenly realised that I loved

you like a man loves a woman, not just as a friend. I was terribly jealous, but powerless to do anything.”

“I didn’t want to get married.”

"The things I’ve heard that he does to you... sometimes I want to come and face him man to man."

“Obel, please don’t say that.”

They remained sitting on the grave, their hands clasped together while the lead drummer took up his song again and his voice filled the night.

A sound made them both jump, and there was Musisi with a gourd in his hand. They dropped their hands. Musisi looked from one to the other, then offered them the gourd in turn.

“Come. Our mother is looking for you,” Musisi said. “She says it’s time for you to prepare your sleeping area.”

Achieng stood up alarmed. “Oh my goodness, I must go home!” How had she not noticed the time?

“You can’t go home now,” said Obel.

“It’s too late to travel back,” said Musisi.

But Achieng was already hurrying off.

She went back to the women she had left under the tree. When she began to say her farewells, her host likewise protested her leaving saying that she had not properly said farewell to her dead Aunt. She could not leave, not until she had seen the *kasik* lit and not until the fires had died down to warm ashes come morning.

"Who is chasing you away?" Asked Philomena.

"I haven't even had a chance to chat with you," her mother said.

"Achieng, let him object all he likes," Grandma said. “We can go back together tomorrow. Stay and enjoy your people for a while."

They looked at her expectantly, these older women who knew only too well the vagaries of marriage, who knew only too well her precarious relationship, who knew only too well that such moments do not come often, but that when they do, they come at a price. Would she be willing to enjoy the moment and pay the price? It was not that they wanted to cause trouble for her. On the contrary, they wished her well in every way, but this was a challenge thrown down and there was a collective resistance to the idea of her giving in. There was more to life than the fear of a beating.

"You can catch the first bus," said Philomena.

"Alright, you have persuaded me. I'll stay and leave tomorrow morning," she said, suddenly light-hearted and strangely carefree.

She followed her mother to prepare a sleeping place with all her thoughts still on Obel. She didn't know what would have happened if Musisi hadn't come and called her away. She worried how to deal with the sudden rush of emotions, yet she couldn't help feeling happy. In the hostility of her life with Raja, she had forgotten that there were other places where she belonged and had allies. A small room had been assigned to the women who wanted to sleep indoors. Together with her mother and the other women, Achieng gathered dry banana leaves to make a bed, then lay down with Blessing, whom she had at last reclaimed from willing baby sitters. The sound of the drums was still beating in her heart as images of Obel filled her mind.

The next morning, quickly gathering her things together, Achieng tied Blessing on her back and said her farewells. What had seemed like a brave act last night now seemed ill advised. She decided she would take the bus rather than walk, which would take the whole day, and left Grandma to be escorted home by an *okewo*, after she'd eaten. It was about a mile to the bus stop, so she had to hurry, the sun rapidly climbing in the sky and warming up the sand beneath her bare feet. When she heard a rumbling sound that could only be the bus, she broke into a run, Blessing bouncing up and down on her back, but the bus was already disappearing in a cloud of dust. There was nothing else to do but walk. As she turned to set off, someone drew up on a bicycle, the chain grinding loudly as the brakes were applied. It was Obel, smartly dressed on his way somewhere.

"What's happening here?" There was laughter in his eyes.

"I missed the bus," said Achieng and now she too couldn't help laughing at herself.

"Hop on," he said. "I'll ride you home."

Achieng hesitated, but the thought of a long walk in the scorching sun with a baby on her back made her yield to the offer.

"That old cranky bicycle won't go far," said a man. "Not with the two of you on it."

"I know how to manage it," said Obel.

They set off at a zig-zag on the sandy road before the bicycle stabilised. Only then did Achieng suddenly think of Raja and what he would make of her arriving with Obel.

"I hope your husband will not mind me taking you home," Obel said, as if he had read her thoughts.

"He should thank you, otherwise I would be walking all day."

They rode on in silence for a while, suddenly shy.

"The new roof has been installed," Obel said. "If you go home now, you will see your father's house shining from afar like glass.

"He has wanted a roof of corrugated iron sheets for so long; I am glad he's now got it."

Obel chuckled and started whistling but soon he cursed as the chain snapped. They dismounted and he got a piece of wire out of his pocket and started threading it through the chain. It was almost twenty minutes before they set off again.

"Where was I?" asked Obel, "Your father's roof?"

"Tell me about Uncle Jagwe."

"Your Uncle? Never a week passes without him going to your parents to demand his share of animals from your bride price."

"But he has already cursed me," said Achieng bitterly. "What more does he want?"

"He still wants his cow," said Obel.

"My father doesn't have any cows left."

"There is Lando."

"Yes, and I think my mother's going to give him up."

Obel cursed as the bicycle chain broke again. This time it took almost twice as long to fix, but finally, they were on their way and about an hour later arrived at Achieng's village, late in the afternoon.

"Your husband had better not quarrel," Obel said, as they spotted Raja in the distance sitting under a tree, drinking *kongo* with Sowo-Fire and another man. As soon as the men saw them, Sowo-Fire and his friend stood up, dusting their pants, shook hands with Raja, and hopped on to their bicycles. They were laughing as they passed Achieng and Obel but did not stop to greet them. It was obvious they were in a hurry to get away. Achieng waited for the inevitable as Raja walked towards them.

Before she could say anything he'd got hold of her arm, and slapped her hard on the ear. She fell to the ground with Blessing on her back.

He was shouting at her as she struggled to get up and untie Blessing. "I expressly told you not to spend a night at the funeral. You've been sleeping around with men!"

"I got up in the morning and here I am. What's wrong with that?"

When Raja moved to hit her again, Obel rushed at him and the two began to wrestling. Achieng put Blessing down and went to separate them. Her ear was still ringing from the slap.

Obel was shouting. "You can't beat her and think that I'll just watch!"

"I am beating my cow. What is it to you?!"

Raja was big, but Obel was quick on his feet from years of herding cows. So, Raja found himself reeling from blows he did not see coming. Chief Wife and her children stood watching as the two men fought. Finally, Raja doubled up, staggered and collapsed against a tree.

Still breathing heavily, Obel reached out a hand to Achieng. "Let's go."

"No Obel. I have to stay here."

"You're going to remain with this mad man?"

"Please go, I'll be fine. I am home now. And don't tell my people what has happened here - it will only make them worried."

Obel gave her a long look. "If you lay a finger on her again, I will come back and finish you off," he told Raja before hopping on his bicycle and riding off.

Inside her hut, Achieng slid down on the mud floor. Hot tears of rage flooded out - that Raja spoke of her as one of his cattle *and* that *Obel* had witnessed it.

The small, tin door banged against the wall and she scrambled to her feet. Raja stood there, blocking out the light, breathing heavily with dust all over his body and in his hair. He took hold of his favourite weapon, the stool, and turned its four legs on her. What could she do? When a bull charges at you, your only chance of escaping unharmed is to grab its horns. Instead of backing away, Achieng reached out and took a firm hold of the legs of the stool and swung it away with such force that she sent Raja crashing against the wall. For a moment, she stood there in shock at what she had done. Then, she took Blessing and ran out of the hut. She ran past Chief Wife who stood in the doorway gaping, past Granddad, and past Kilo. She ran on her long legs covering the earth in great strides. Behind her, she could hear Kilo crying out for her not to leave him, but she ran on and on, as though fulfilling her Uncle's second curse on her - to roam the whole of East Africa like a *malaya*.

11 The Wild Animal Finds Your Brother by Your Side: *Ogwang luli nwangin gi omerin*

Blessing bounced about on her back, his breath coming out in jerks. She had the feeling of someone who knew she had overstepped the line without being able to define what that line was. What she needed was to put as much distance between her and Raja as was possible. He would not do to her what he had done to Min Kilo. She had instinctively turned right on the main road at Siwa towards Mulanda, but then stopped in her tracks. Her feet were taking her home, yet the last time she had gone there, she had been sent back. Not even Father Hepton had been able to offer her sanctuary, and if Raja was following her, this is where he would expect her to be heading. So, she instead turned round and went left, deciding she would cut through *Weyiwulera* market and down to Katajula, following the railway line. In the distance, she could see Nyamalogo hills and the big boulders of the rocks that seemed to have dropped from the sky. Eventually, her pace slowed. Above her, the sky turned indigo as night began to descend. At the market where she had made that fateful purchase, empty stalls stood abandoned. Leaving it behind, she turned left toward Katajula, avoiding Nagongera centre where her old school was. Fear gripped her at the thought of passing through Katajula at this time of night for it was a village notorious for murderers and *kondos*, but she had no choice and hurried on.

Presently, she came to the forest that lay between Katajula and Mikiya. She had seen it in the distance like a black wall in the night. She flopped down exhausted, suppressing the fear that hung over her. She felt the ground around her with her hands until her eyes grew accustomed to the dark. Nearby was an olwa tree, and she decided that this was where she would sleep. She removed the *suka* in which Blessing was wrapped, spread it out on the ground and made him lie down. The moon was shiny in his big eyes. A sudden rush of warmth filled her and she held him close. She thought she had a broken finger and her wrist was sprained and swollen. Her head was pounding, and the ringing in her ears was mixed up with sounds made by night creatures. And all the while, she could feel insects biting. She did not know how long she sat up like that with Blessing in her arms, but gradually, she began to nod and gave herself up to sleep.

Achieng woke up when the sun touched her face and for a second, she wondered where she was. In spite of herself, she half smiled at the thought of how scared she had been the night before. In daylight, the forest looked harmless. Her movements woke Blessing who sat up and looked around him with wide eyes. She put him to the breast and he suckled greedily; his body was covered with red insect bites. She wrapped her arms round him and began rocking. So, this was the life of women, she thought. If your husband didn't like you, he beat you. If he slept with another woman, he beat you. If you refused to sleep with him, he beat you. If you answered his questions, he beat you. If you kept silent, he beat you. He beat you over anything and he beat you for nothing. If you tried to leave, like Min Kilo had done, he killed you. If you resisted, like Chief Wife had done, he humiliated you. If you tried to better yourself like she had done buying *Mo Woodo*, he brought you down. A woman was like a drum, good only for beating. You owned nothing, not even money that you had earned from your crops. What was a woman to do? Achieng decided that she wanted nothing ever again to do with a man except for Obel. He had never done her any wrong... but she buried that thought faraway. Whatever she had felt riding back home on the back of his bicycle was best forgotten. Such joy did not happen to women, certainly not to someone like her. She'd been foolish, and now she was paying the price. She had never felt so humiliated as when Raja hit her in front of Obel. He would still be thinking that she was with her husband at home, not in a forest at Namwaya.

She got up and winced, her joints still stiff and achy. Through the tree branches, she could see the red light of the rising sun. She hoisted Blessing on her back and looked for paths away from the forest towards the east where Tororo rock could be seen. She continued through the villages of Pumedede, Gwara Gwara, Abongeti and finally emerged at Kisoko, a few miles from Tororo town. There, she sat by the roadside, under a *Chwa* tree – the one with tamarind seeds - too tired to walk any further. She hadn't eaten since she left the funeral rites at Biranga village. Given her bloody nose and torn dress, she knew she looked like a mad woman, but she didn't care. Her main problem was where to go. Home was not an option, and she knew no one in Tororo town. But, she remembered what Min Kilo had said that night when they sat in her hut and talked about running away.

“What about your Aunt? The one you told me about who was with you when that girl was being tortured. Didn’t you say she lives in a village near Rubongi? Just ask people and they will direct you.”

That was the last conversation they’d ever had.

A man came along on a bicycle. He looked at her with open interest as he rode past, then stopped, got off his bicycle and walked back.

"Girl, I greet you."

He was a slim man with a long thin face in his thirties. He was wearing a kaunda suit and looked smart, like a businessman. Sweat shone on his face and he kept wiping it off with a big white handkerchief.

"You seem to me like someone in trouble. What’s the problem?" He asked.

"There is no problem," she answered firmly.

"I see you don't welcome my questions, but if you're not in trouble, why are you sitting on the road with a baby like someone running away? You should speak if you're in trouble so we can see how to help you."

Achieng thought about this for a while then said, "I am looking for Waya, my father’s sister who lives in Rubongi, but I don’t know how to get there."

"I see," he said, clearly not believing her. "I am heading to town. I can give you a lift to Rubongi if you wish. Hop onto the bicycle."

Achieng got up and holding Blessing tightly she hoisted herself on the back seat of the bicycle.

He rode steadily, the bicycle creaking under their weight. As they rode, he told her about himself. He was called Damasico Opendi and he had a home in the village of Kisoko where his first wife lived. This was where he was coming from. He had a second home in a small village on the outskirts of Tororo town and that was where he was returning. She listened to him, but her mind was on a different ride. They sloped downwards at some speed and passed Achilet village before reaching Rubongi.

“Down there - those metal huts you see - those are the new barracks being built,” he said as he turned right off the main road. Achieng saw hundreds of round metal huts glittering in the sun.

They stopped at a homestead where a man had just returned from the field. He still had his hoe in hand. Damasico introduced himself.

"This young woman is looking for her Aunt. I myself hail from the village of Kisoko, but I came across her on the road." He said this in a way that indicated he had not the slightest confidence in Achieng's story.

Achieng took a deep breath and said, "She is my father's sister."

"And who are you?" Asked the man.

Achieng found it difficult to answer the question. How was she to introduce herself? Should she identify herself by her husband or by her father? Speaking slowly, as though in a new language, she said, "I am Achieng Justina, daughter of Misigile of Mulanda."

The man looked at her. "Jadwong Misigile? I've heard of him. He is of the Nyirenja clan, isn't he?"

"Yes," Achieng nodded, brightening up.

His wife who had been listening stepped forward. "That means you belong to the clan of my grandmother on my mother's side. She is also a Nyirenja. I'm so happy to meet you!"

And with that, she embraced Achieng, took Blessing from her, and started fussing over him. "And is this our son?" She asked.

"Yes," said Achieng. "Waya's name is Proscovia Nyarua. I have not seen her for a long time."

"We know her very well," the man said. "Everyone here calls her Dhaku-dwong Nyarua, Daughter of the Rua clan. She lives not far from here, on the border between Rubongi and Kidera. She's practically my neighbour. Come, I'll take you to her."

They walked in single file along a path through crop fields, the neighbour leading the way, followed by Damasio pushing his bicycle. Achieng walked behind him and the woman, still carrying Blessing, brought up the rear.

As they walked, he told them what he knew about Achieng's Aunt. "People have a lot of respect for that lady."

"Is that so?" Asked Damasio.

"*Kabisa!* Very much so! Here is a woman who has travelled all over East Africa. She's been to Kenya and knows Nairobi inside out. She's lived in Mombasa and speaks Arabic as though she came from the same clan as the Arabs. She's explored Tanzania and knows Dar es Salaam and Arusha where the East African

Community headquarters are. She speaks Luzungu like an Englishman and Swahili, Luganda, Samia, Lusoga, and maybe even Atesot.

"That's er, that's rather..." Damasico was lost for words, as they all were.

But the neighbour kept speaking. "If you have a problem understanding a letter from the Mission church or from the Gombolola county, she will explain every word in it to you in no time."

"So, she is an educated woman?" Asked Damasico.

"*Kabisa!* She is so educated she's even better than someone who went to Makerere. I hear that in Mombasa she worked in bars as a waiter where she came into contact with politicians and lawyers discussing the Mau Mau struggle for independence in Kenya. That's when she picked up her knowledge of the law. You know what? When there is a case that is to be heard at the Gombolola county court, especially when the magistrate is coming from town, the Gombolola Chief sends her a letter notifying her of the date. She sits right in front of the Chief during sessions – no one sits on her chair if she is not there, it is reserved for her – and she listens carefully to the witnesses. Afterwards, she tells the Chief exactly who committed the crime, and the Chief never fails to find that person guilty."

"Is she married?" Damasico wanted to know.

"Ah, no. She never married and has no children - that is the way she's always been – that is if we're talking of the same woman." He turned slightly and spoke to Achieng over his shoulder, "And you say this woman is your Waya? A real Waya born with your father from the same stomach, or just Waya because you belong to the same clan?"

"She is my real Waya," said Achieng defensively while wondering if such a woman as had just been described really could be.

The neighbour began to whistle and they walked on. Eventually, they arrived at a neatly swept compound bordered by a well-kept hedge of green and lime yellow leaves. It was neatly trimmed to about a foot high. On either side of the entrance were two bushes of the Achak plant with yellow flowers. A patch of soft jiija grass lay in the middle of the compound and behind it was a house made of red brick and a tin roof. Not many people in villages took such trouble over their front gardens – there was more than enough work in the crop fields - but Achieng had seen just such a garden at her parents' home in Mulanda and she immediately felt a tingling in her spine, as though she had been here before. A woman was sitting outside on a three-

legged stool near a hut, which was obviously the kitchen. The stool was placed on a pretty mukeka, woven with an intricate diamond pattern in colours of gold, green and purple. She was a thin woman with grey hair braided and piled on top of her head. A piece of silky head cloth was wound round the braids. She wore a black camisole with lace at the hems and thin strips that hung over equally thin shoulders. A multi-coloured lesu was wrapped round her body. Slender delicate feet emerged from a pair of wooden clogs commonly known as mukalawanda. Her face was wrinkled, yet she looked youthful and a cigarette dangled from her lips. Achieng was not sure if this was Waya or not. She had no idea how old she was or what she ought to look like.

The woman seemed equally to have no clue about her or why people were crowding into her compound.

"Dhaku-dwong, Madam Nyarua, we greet you."

Dhaku-dwong was a term of respect for a woman meaning "Madam".

"And what trouble brings you to my house this early morning?" The voice that came out was deep, almost sonorous with a musical timbre to it. Achieng heard her father's voice in it.

"Dhaku-dwong, there is no trouble, but I learnt this young woman was your relative. I felt it my duty to bring her to you."

Waya looked curiously at Achieng, without blinking. Achieng looked back at her and saw herself as a little girl standing with a crowd of people watching a girl screaming, her hand tightly clutched in the hand of another woman who was saying, "when you grow up you'll understand".

"Waya!" Cried Achieng, and she fell at her Aunt's feet sobbing.

Waya neither moved, nor made any attempt to console her. Finally she said: "Achieng. Is this your child?"

Achieng stopped crying and lifted her head.

"I thought it was you," said Waya with the hint of a smile and as though they had just met on the road. She turned to her small audience, "This is my brother's daughter. You did well to bring her to me."

The men bowed and thanked her, as though she had done them a big favour, and left Achieng alone with her.

"He may call himself my neighbour," Waya said as they left, "but that Kosiano has a black heart. The only thing we have in common is the boundary we

share.” Then, she smiled at Achieng and said, “Come, child.” Then, she led Achieng and Blessing into the little house.

Over time, Achieng heard many rumours about Waya. Once, she heard that she had once been a prostitute in Mombasa. Another time, she heard that she was really a djinn, or spirit risen from the Indian Ocean, sent to lure and trap men before sucking the blood out of their bodies. However, in reality, she was an intelligent and self-taught woman who knew a lot about the law. In short, when Achieng turned up at her home, she found a woman who had all the tools needed to defend her.

12 She's Broken the Chains: *Ochodo Pingo*

By force of habit, Achieng got up at the crack of dawn, tied Blessing (who was still asleep) on her back, and went outside to go to the fields to dig. She had slept in a small hut a short distance from Waya's. She had not had such a good night's sleep for a long time. She found a hoe in one corner of Waya's kitchen hut and swung it on her shoulder.

Waya stood by the door to the hut looking amused. "And where are you taking that baby with dew still on the grass?"

"I'm going to the fields to dig, Waya."

"Hmm," said Waya, "A person wanting to work should not be refused, but wait until I find you a *kasugu* of land. Then, you can dig to your heart's content. Let's first have breakfast."

Waya rolled out a *mukeka* with the diamond pattern and invited her niece to sit. Achieng smoothed her hands over it. She had never sat on a *mukeka* before. Then, a tray was set down with a teapot, teacups, and a mug for Blessing when he woke. Next to the teapot, there was a small jug of milk and a bowl of sugar. There was also a teaspoon in the saucer of each cup. Two side plates each had a couple of slices of *tiptop* bread. Everything was in matching patterns of red roses circled by green, creeping leaves. Achieng looked in wonder at the arrangement, feeling afraid to touch such delicate things. Then, Waya came out with a plate of fried eggs, yellow and steaming. Her gestures were lavish and generous. "Come, eat. Here's some Blueband to spread on your bread, you can use that knife."

"Waya, I don't know how to use these things and I worry I'll break them."

"That's nonsense. If you break them, you break them. We used to enjoy tea long before we learned to drink it in cups like these."

Somehow, that put Achieng at ease and she helped herself to the food, doing everything she saw Waya doing. The tea was hot and sweet, and the eggs delicious. They ate silently in the fresh morning breeze, watching the steady climb of the sun into the sky. People on their way to the fields greeted them and Waya either waved or grunted in reply. Then, she fished out a *nyangoda* from under one of the stones in the fireplace and started chopping off the stalks from the vegetables.

Although Achieng felt much better, she was reluctant to talk about what had brought her. Plus, custom demanded that she wait until Waya asked her to explain.

Finally, Waya stamped out the cigarette she'd lit after her tea. "Achieng, yesterday you arrived with your baby looking for me who you haven't seen since you were little. Tell me, what's going on in your life?"

Tears welled up in Achieng's eyes. She started hesitantly, but told her Waya everything. She told her how Raja had come and raped her in the night, telling her that he was her husband and she was his new wife. She told her of the seven rules and the beatings that followed whenever she broke any of them. She told her how she wasn't allowed to greet anyone at funerals. She told her how she was hung in the pit latrine for buying *Mo Woodo*. She told her about the events that started with Kilo and finally led to Min Kilo being killed. She told her how Uncle Jagwe had put a curse on her not to give birth but to bury and roam throughout East Africa.

Waya reached for her packet of Sportsman and lit another cigarette. "Jagwe, that brother of mine. He is a devil," she said. "And what happened this last time?"

"I broke the second commandment because I slept over at the funeral, and then I missed the bus and Obel gave me a lift back. Raja fought with Obel and when he came for me, I pushed him away. He tried to hit me with the stool, but I got hold of it and pushed him against the wall. He fell and that's when I ran."

Waya stood up. "So, you acted in self-defence - that much is clear to anyone who knows the law. Your mother has courage of the heart, and mine is courage of the mind, but yours is courage of the body. I act on what I know, and knowledge is my strength. A person who knows their rights is a strong person. Have you heard of the Mau Mau freedom fighters of Kenya? When I lived in Mombasa, most of the talk was about them and they were greatly admired. They liberated the country from colonial rule. The Mau Mau knew that they had the right to claim their land back from the British and they did. They fought for their human rights, for their freedom."

"Weren't they afraid?"

"Yes, but fear and courage are like brother and sister; they walk side by side. Take a man like Misigile, your father. Why do you think he went to prison?"

"Because he fought in the War of Clubs. He refused to pay the hut tax."

“That and more. People like him were fighting for their human rights – the right to sovereignty. And women are also people - they too are entitled to their human rights. A woman who knows her human rights is an empowered woman.”

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In the days that followed, Achieng settled into a strange but exciting life at Rubongi. Waya challenged her to examine many beliefs she had never questioned - customs that she thought were a way of life that one simply adopted or adapted to. And she listened carefully to Waya, hoping that she would come to know what to do with her life. Waya also helped her in practical ways. She took her to the small hen house where she kept a few chickens and said she could sell some of the eggs. She pointed to a hen that she said was a “good layer”, and told Achieng that she could call it her own. So, every morning, she walked to the main road at Rubongi to sell eggs. If she turned right, she would be heading into Tororo town. If she turned left, that would be toward Achilet, Kisoko, and onto Nagongera. On the first day, a few yards up the road, she came to the small market called Sokomujinga or the “Market of Fools”. Because of its proximity to the barracks, only foolish people would venture there, but needs must be met, so there she sat by the roadside and sold boiled eggs to people going to or coming from Tororo. A boiled egg with little paper wraps of salt beside it was hard to resist. Selling eggs at the market became her daily routine. She often saw Damasico Opendi, the man who had given her a lift to Waya’s place. He had been told, he said, that she was married and had run away from her husband. He asked if that was true, and said that if so, he didn't mind having assisted her. He went on to say that if she was looking for somewhere to stay, he could offer her a place at his home. If she wanted work, there was more and better-paying work than selling eggs on the roadside. In other words, he was willing to look after her – “and by the way, throw me one of those eggs, yes with a bit of salt”. He would offer her more money than the eggs were worth, but she always insisted on giving him back his change, declining his proposition.

"Young woman," he'd reply, "are you still resisting me, preferring to sell small things by the roadside instead of coming with me to town?"

Blessing, who was almost one year now, was growing into a happy little boy. He was learning to walk and talk at the same time. His first word was Adhadha – meaning “Grandma”. This was the name Achieng encouraged him to use for Waya, and it was also what he used to hear before they ran away from Raja.

One day, they had finished breakfast but still sat on the *mukeka* chatting. Achieng was shelling groundnuts and Waya was preparing the vegetables. It was then that Achieng glanced up and with a start saw her brother Musisi and Kosiano the neighbour walking purposefully toward them. Waya continued stripping the outer skin off the stalks of pumpkin leaves as Achieng jumped up crying, "Musisi!" She flung out her arms and embraced her brother. Kosiano, the neighbour, having once again directed someone to Waya's place, wished them all a good day and left. Musisi sat on the wooden chair that Achieng had brought him from the house. He looked tired and hungry, and was ill at ease with Waya. He was given water to drink; it was cold and sweet, drawn from the pot kept in a cool corner of the house. He asked for more and drank a second mug. Then, he ate some maize cobs. At last, it was time to talk.

"What brings you here?" Asked Waya, as the cigarette in her mouth bobbed up and down, like the stick of the choir conductor at the Church in Siwa.

Musisi stared and swallowed hard. "It's like this," he began. "I have been looking for this sister of mine for over a week now. Our muko, our in-law, came home saying that he wanted his wife back. That was the first time we became aware that she had left her husband's home. We didn't know! Not even Obel told us you two had had a big fight after the funeral rite. We only got to know about it from Raja when he came looking for you!" He shot this accusingly at Achieng then added, "Ochodo Pingo!"

"Well, Achieng is here as you can see," said Waya. "So what are you saying?"

"I am not going back to that man's home!" said Achieng fiercely. "He can have his cows if that's what he wants, but I am not going back!"

"But father has no cows left in his kraal."

Waya stood up and slipped her feet into her wooden clogs. "Go and tell your father that his daughter has reported her husband for beating her. He should file a case with the clan, and arrange for them to hear the case at Achieng's home in Mulanda.

"Tell him we will be refunding no cows. You hear me?"

*

The clan court met on the first Saturday of the month at Raja's home. Dark clouds roamed the sky. Earlier, when Raja was told that he was being summoned to Achieng's village, he said he wouldn't go, "Let them come to me," he said. Waya was dismissive and said they would not fight over a small thing like a venue. However, since the case was held in Raja's village, Achieng's delegation was outnumbered by Raja's clan members, most of whom were men. There was Raja himself, Granddad Pinytek, Raja's Uncle, Mzee Kamuge, who had presided over Min Kilo's funeral, Sowo, who was not a member of the clan but was there as Raja's friend, Obbo-Othieno, Raja's cousin, and two other clan elders. Grandma and Chief Wife sat slightly apart from the men. Sicola, the second wife, wasn't present as she did not often appear in public. On Achieng's side there was just her father, her brother Musisi, and an Uncle called "Oyo". Achieng was asked to sit on the ground in the middle of the court and the men sat on either side on stools or chairs. Raja sat on a chair in the middle of his team and fixed a frown on Achieng. Waya declined the chair she was offered and sat on the ground next to Achieng and her relatives.

The clan leader from Raja's side chaired the meeting. "Ladies and Gentlemen, I greet you all. We are gathered here today to hear about the misunderstanding between our son, Elder Raja, and his wife, Justina Achieng. But, before I proceed, I would like to be reassured of one thing. Will we be looked after properly today?"

He was referring to drinking *kongo* and eating plenty of meat and was immediately applauded by the men. Raja assured them of this.

"Good. Then let us proceed. We shall first hear from Min Ott - the mother of the house, since she requested this meeting," he said, referring to Achieng. Being the one to call the meeting had been a clever idea of Waya's since they got to speak first.

Waya stood up, giving Achieng no time to say anything, "My Elders, I request to be allowed to speak on behalf of my niece."

The clan leader shifted in his chair and glanced around. Madam Nyarua was known as a formidable woman. If he refused her request, he would look weak, but today was supposed to be his day - a day when he could put women firmly in their place.

"Dhaku-dwong, I see no reason why you should not represent Achieng," he said, desperately trying to think of one. "Gentlemen are we agreed?" He looked round, hoping someone would disagree, but no one dared. "You may proceed."

Waya began. "My brother's daughter, Achieng, came to me when that child you see there had barely learnt to crawl. She was lost and in distress, and was fortunate to find me. I want to ask you elders present here, what sort of man beats a woman so badly that she is forced to flee her home at night with a baby that is still suckling?"

People started murmuring, but she forced them to silence with a sharp look. This was not the first time that Raja had beaten his wife, she said, and quickly narrated the heavy punishments Achieng had endured for the flimsiest of reasons. The men began to steal uncomfortable glances at Raja.

"And what was the reason the last time? Why, because she got a lift from her friend, Obel, when she missed the bus after her mother's cousin's funeral. Achieng grew up with Obel, so it was the most natural thing for him to give her a lift. We demand compensation for the suffering that this man has caused my niece."

Raja was dressed in a long-sleeved white shirt and khaki brown trousers. He cleared his throat. "I want to tell you, my Elders, that I have never laid a finger on this woman!" He shook a long finger at Achieng. "This is the worst woman I have ever come across in my life! She has no respect for me at all. She is all tongue and answers me back when I try to discipline her. She is lazy and cannot look after her home. She stayed overnight at a funeral, against my express instructions, in order to sleep with men."

"I did not!" Achieng protested, tears springing to her eyes.

"Do you understand what your husband is saying? Is that what you want, to become a prostitute?" Said the clan leader sternly.

Raja went on. " And you ask for compensation? Ask me what have I not done for this woman! I built her a house and gave her land to dig on. I buy her a gomesi every Christmas and meat every Sunday. I have completed paying the bride price, not a single animal is still owed to your people. But despite my best efforts, she has only managed to produce me just one child!" He demonstrated the single issue on his index finger.

Achieng's father Misigile stood up and spoke. "You must not blame my daughter for not producing children. That child in her arms is alive only by the might of God and we don't know for how long. This child's Uncle, my own brother, cursed my daughter Achieng not to produce children." He struggled to sit down, clearly emotional.

Waya weighed in heavily, throwing the book at them, "I want to hear from Raja how he intends to repair the wrong he has done to my niece. "Chairman, if we went to the police, he would be jailed for assault. You understand what I am saying. This girl also has her human rights!"

"Assault?" The Chairman hesitated.

"Yes, assault. It is against the Constitution."

"But what did you do?" Asked the Chairman of Achieng. "What did you do to make your man beat you so?"

"It was not even a beating," Raja said. "I just touched her a little with my hands to discipline her. Then she raised her hand against me."

"If she raised her hand against you why did you not report it to the authorities?"

"Has a lion ever been known to bring a case against a cat?"

The men laughed and clapped, but the matter of Achieng fighting her husband was dropped just as Waya had intended.

The Chairman looked around. "Fulimera, isn't this woman your co-wife? Can't you teach her the ways of the world?"

Chief Wife struggled up, came over to Achieng, sat by her and held her hand. "Child, bride price is paid to make sure women behave themselves and stick to their marriage. It happened to your mother, and to your mother's mother before that. Why should it not happen to you? Leave this nonsense of running away everytime our Elder lifts up his hand to discipline you."

"Young woman," the Chairman said. "Now that you've received counselling, tell this court what you want us to do for you."

"I want to return to my parents' home."

"Raja, what do you say to that?"

"I still love my wife. I want her as the Mother of my House. But if she wants to leave, let her refund the cows I paid to her people."

This is what Waya had been waiting for.

"Why should we refund your cows when you have beaten and chased our daughter from your house?"

"I did not chase her! She ran away of her own accord. If she came back today, I would happily receive her back."

"I am not coming back to your home."

The Clan leader called a short break and said that the Elders were going to consult and come up with their decision. When they returned, everyone was silent.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, we have heard this case and listened to Raja and his wife. We have also listened respectfully to Achieng's Aunt and we, er, thank her for her words of wisdom. We would like to caution Raja, and remind him that to counsel is a better form of education than to use the stick, so we find him to be in the wrong in the method he chose to discipline his wife. He therefore loses this case. If his wife agrees to return to him, a cock must be paid to this committee as court fees and a hen to his wife as compensation. If, however, she decides to leave him, the cows must be refunded. Achieng's father will be given one week to find the animals. If he fails to do this, his property will be confiscated."

He conceded that, because the child was young and still breastfeeding, Achieng could keep the baby. "But if she leaves the baby with the father, then her parents can return one cow less in recognition that she has produced a child for her husband's clan."

Waya jumped up at once. "We do not agree with your judgement. It is unfair. Why should we refund any cows when your son is at fault? We will not refund the cows."

"Our culture says that you must!"

"Does your culture also say that you can kill a woman like you killed Min Kilo? When you strangled her underwater, were you still hoping for a refund of your cows?"

The clan leader raised his hand: "We did not come here to talk about that! That incident has already been settled."

Waya would not be silenced, "And how was it settled? By Raja here paying a cow for the loss? Will blood cows bring back her life? No! You are not going to do the same thing to any daughter of the Nyijrenja clan."

The clan leader sat down and looked around at a court that was now in disarray. To bring out words like this into the open was enough to disturb the dead. No one would have been surprised if the spirit of Min Kilo began to haunt them.

Raja struggled on. "That woman's death was a punishment from God. She brought her death upon herself!"

"Then why did you pay the blood cow? Why was it all hush, hush?"

"The cow was given to help the grieving parents with their loss. It was not any form of compensation. No wrong was done!"

His side joined in to support Raja.

"Don't waste your time arguing with that mad woman," his Uncle said.

"Call me a mad woman all you like," Waya said. "That is how you cover your evil - by calling women who protest against it mad! But we shall not refund any cows! Come, my child, let's go." And with that, she grabbed hold of her bag and slipped her feet into her kalawanda sandals. Achieng also stood up and started tying the baby to her back.

Misigile folded his stool.

"Sir, I shall be expecting to hear from you soon," Raja said.

"Young man," he replied. "You know what our people say? Words spoken in the evening don't lead to the slaughter of the bull in the morning."

Just as the meeting broke up, the sky split open. People broke banana leaves from a nearby garden and used them as umbrellas to protect their heads from the pounding rain. The strong winds that followed broke branches and shredded leaves off trees. White light cracked above their heads and it was a silent party that made its way back to Mulanda. Even Blessing, who would normally be counted on to be noisy, was quiet on Achieng's back.

At the junction to Mulanda, Achieng and her family turned right to take the path home while Waya carried on towards Rubongi village. It would be half an hour before she got to Rubongi, but it was a cheerful goodbye that she waved from beneath her banana leaf. Evidently, she had enjoyed the fight.

When they reached home, Nyamiland came out and saw them looking like rats beaten by rain.

"Did they entertain you?" She asked.

"We were not entertained," Misigile replied, "and the rain beat us as though it owned us!"

13 You Can't Threaten the World: *Piny ki pir*

For the next few days, the question of the bride price refund hung over them. Where were they to find five cows and six goats? When she was told about the demand for refund, Nyamiland bit her lip and said nothing, but the implied criticism of her husband was obvious. The child should have been left to go to school and study. Hadn't she always said so? However, Musisi was angry with Achieng. "She should go back to her husband," he said. "What was she doing at home?" He began referring to her as "Ochodo-Pingo", the fugitive. Achieng had no answer to this, so she retreated to the fields, digging from morning till late in the afternoon. When she was thirsty, she drank water from the wells, and when hungry she ate mangos. She avoided home as much as possible. Misigile was the one most affected by the bride price refund ultimatum. Since returning from the prison, his fighting spirit had gone out of him, but with this threat hanging over him, he began subconsciously to prepare for war on his home front. He walked round the boundary of his land, made up of the fleshy *burowa* leaves, like a sentry. When he found that a broken branch had left a gap in the fence, he filled it up, muttering that animals would escape through it and eat neighbours' crops, but there were hardly any animals to speak of because he had taken his remaining two cows to his brother Jagwe and begged him to hide them. He was ashamed at being forced to do this, but short of digging a hole and burying the cows up to their necks, there was nowhere else to hide them. He knew Jagwe would exact a price for hiding the cows, but at least they were safe there. He laid traps at certain points in the fence where an enemy would most likely pass. He dug two holes at the back of the house, one on each side of the house and two near the entrance in the front. Then, he covered the holes with branches and leaves. With a sharpened spear in his hand and a lion skin on his back, he kept watch all day on top of some boulders. The huge rocks afforded a good view of the vast savannah land. He could see the Gombolola headquarters at Mulanda. He could see Nagongera parish to his left and on the side of Iyolwa he saw the Ligaga river making its way to join other tributaries of the River Nile. No matter which side the enemy came from - he would see them. He started humming the song that they used to march to in the War of Clubs.

Funga safari

Funga safari

Amuri ya keya keya

Amuri ya keye keya

At night, his spear lay by his side, but he was still nervous. They had been given a week to return the animals, but there were no animals to return. They could come and see for themselves that the kraal was empty.

Saturday came and went without incident. On Sunday, Achieng and her mother went to church for mass while Misigile climbed up the rocks of Mawundo to continue his vigil. By nightfall, no one had come and everyone relaxed. Perhaps they were reconsidering and felt they had been too harsh to their in-laws.

But then they did come in the early hours of Monday morning. They came, not as Misigile had expected, stealthily and on foot, but packed inside an army truck, hooting and shouting, sending dogs barking and hens scuttling out of the way. A Land Rover followed and stopped with a screech. Two soldiers swiftly jumped off the back of the truck and rushed up to Misigile's house. Two others remained on the lookout, guns at the ready. Misigile grabbed his spear and ran out with surprising speed for a man his age. War was here! But when he saw the *maje*, the military that were fanning out on his compound with pointed guns, he knew he was outnumbered and outfoxed. The first soldier, whom the others called "Abdu", pushed him roughly with the butt of his gun. He shouted at anyone still in the house to come out. Musisi came out and was also shoved to the centre to join his father.

'Private, check the back,' Abdu said to the second army man.

The Private disappeared round the back of the house.

"Show me where the cows are!" Abdu shouted at Misigile.

Achieng stood in the doorway not sure what to do, but then she looked over to the Land Rover and saw that the man in the driver's seat was Sowo-Fire and next to him, half ducking in his seat, was Raja. She marched to the vehicle and shouted at Raja, "What do you think you are doing?" Her mother came, took her hand, and pulled her away towards the kitchen.

Obel, hearing the commotion and arrived to help, but he too was shoved into the centre, next to Misigile and Musisi.

Raja shouted at Misigile, "I did not come here to quarrel. Give me my animals and that will be the end of the matter."

"Sure it will!" Misigile shouted. "But first, return my daughter in the state in which you found her. Put the children back into her womb and return her youth. Then I will give you your cows!"

That was as far as he got. The private whacked him across the face with the back of his hand. Nyamiland and Achieng screamed as Misigile staggered backwards.

"Leave him alone," Obel shouted. "He has told you he has no cows."

Abdu hit Obel hard across the chest with his gun and Obel fell. He turned on Musisi and did the same. Then, the Private started kicking them. People started coming but stopped short at the scene that met them. Amidst the commotion Abdu raised his arm and fired a shot in the air and ordered Musisi up onto the roof of the house. They tossed him a hammer and ordered him to remove his father's new roof. Everyone watched as he slowly went about his business. Finally, the sheets were stacked one on top of each.

"*Wewe kijana*. Now you young men are going to show us where the cows are," Abdu shouted. He was itching to fire his gun at someone.

But Sowo-Fire persuaded Raja to call it a day. "You've got the iron sheets. Let's go."

"*Haya*, we'll go," Raja said, "but this is not finished!"

They climbed back in the Land Rover and drove off, followed by the truck.

Misigile stared forlornly at the empty roof. Achieng's mother tried to wash away the blood caking his face, but he waved her impatiently away. She placed a mug of water beside him but he did not touch it. For a long time, he sat silently with his back against the wall of the hut and his head bandaged with an old cloth. Achieng began to fear he would not speak at all. From a man whose roar used to make the earth tremble, it was unbearable. Finally, he began to speak.

"Musisi, you have completed your education. Obel, you cannot look after other people's cows forever. What happened today has marked us in the eyes of the army men as rebels. You will not be safe remaining here. Go to town and find work there. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, father," said Musisi

"Yes, Jadwong," said Obel.

Then, he turned and faced Achieng.

"I did not expect that I would have to pay such a high price for your marriage," he said. "That person is not a man. He is a monster. Never go back to him. You would have been better off going to school."

Achieng knew this was the closest her father would come to admitting he had made a mistake.

"Give me your hands."

She stretched out her hands, palm upwards and he spat on each quickly, four times.

"You too must leave here. May the ancestors lead you," he said, then added "*Piny ki pir*" which means, "you can't threaten the world."

14 Boundaries are Fought With Hoes: *Kewi ilaro gikwer*

Achieng returned to Rubongi feeling defeated and weary. She sat down, placed Blessing on her lap and told her Aunt everything that happened.

"Raja's a beast!" Waya said. "But God will repay him - you wait and see! The Japs say, '*giramena yecho buli*' - something you take forcefully leads only to trouble."

"I am not going back to him," said Achieng bitterly. "They can refund his cows."

"Who? Your father who was beaten to near death? You know he can't."

"But I'm just a woman. How could I ever earn the money to buy cows?"

"I too am a woman, but I work when I need something. I don't wait for anyone to give it to me. You'd be surprised at how many women are out there in the slums working to refund a bride price. They've been there for years, brewing and selling alcohol, selling second hand clothes, doing business here and there just to be free of the bond." Waya paused to let her words sink in then continued. "And don't think it is only young women doing this, some are as old as I am."

Achieng took a deep breath. "Then I'll work until I have enough money to repay each of the five cows and six goats paid as my bride price." Then, she clasped her hands together as though making a solemn promise.

But instead of the approval she expected, Waya said, "I didn't say you should work to refund bride price; I said you should do something about it. Those are two different things."

"Well, how else am I going to free myself of it? Do you want me to do something that goes against the culture of our people?"

"That's exactly what you must do. Act not as culture dictates, but as you, a woman, sees fit. Listen, when you slipped out of your mother's body they did not cry out, 'It's an African child!' or 'It's a Catholic child!' They cried out, 'It's a girl!' That was your first identity. Does culture make us, or do we make culture?"

"But hasn't culture always been this way?"

“The way bride price is now practised is not culture. Rather, it has become a business. In the past, gifts exchanged between the two families were only given as a token. They were precious things like cowrie shells, old coins, anklets, or little hoes, but as the land prospered, people began to give cows as bride price. Among the Itesots, the father of the bride threw his spear as far as he could into the herd belonging to his in-law and all the cows that were between him and the spear, became his bride price.”

“That’s a lot of cows!”

“Then, the railway from Mombasa, the one they call Gari Moshi, reached Uganda passing through the border at Malaba to Tororo town. Indian coolies were building it and they brought money with them. Soon, some of them opened dukas, filled with exciting new goods and people began to demand a lot more cows. They wanted to sell the cows to get money to buy these goods, so parents began to sell their daughters like property in a market and God help the girl who jeopardised her parents’ chances of gaining wealth. Such girls got themselves in big trouble. They were beaten, strangled, thrown off cliffs, forcefully aborted, and many died in the process.” Here, Waya paused then said, “Do you remember Nyawere? That girl in the village when you were little? Nyawere was lucky your mother did what she did to save her.”

Achieng nodded.

Waya continued. “The only place I know that offers some sanctuary to women is in the west of the country. There, if a woman runs to the kitchen, her husband must respect that as her refuge. If he follows her there, then she is not blamed for whatever harm she may do to him.”

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Achieng slept badly that night. Waya’s questions had unsettled her. ‘I must start a new life,’ she decided.

In the morning, she told Waya she was going to town to look for work. So, once again, she packed her meagre belongings, strapped Blessing on her back and headed off to the road as she had done many times before. Only this morning she was not going to sell eggs. Would she see Damasico Opendi, the man who gave her a lift to Waya’s place almost three months ago? When she got to Nagongera road, she sat at her usual post at *Sokomujinga* market and watched people come and go. She waited

quite a while and was beginning to fear that Damasio would not come. But at last, she saw him on a bicycle riding toward her. He braked sharply, taking in the situation. She had no eggs, but there was a baby strapped on her back and a bag by her side.

She forestalled his questions. "Could you give me a lift to town? I want to go and look for work."

"So, you have come to your senses at last," he said. "I have always said that a woman cannot survive without a man on this earth!" A smile lurked in his eyes.

She bit her lips and said nothing.

"Hop on," he said. "Let's go."

"Isn't that the town?" She asked, looking at buildings in the distance.

"Yes, but I need to pick-up something from my home first."

"No, I want to get off here. Stop!" Then, she jumped off the bike falling and grazing her elbows as she tried to protect Blessing.

Damasio managed to control the bicycle and said, "Look, you don't know the town. There is a shortcut from my home. It's best if I take you there so I can introduce you to people who can give you work."

When they got to his home, she saw two houses and a smattering of children. Soon, she met his second wife, a girl of about her age whom everyone called "Mama Boy". His first wife lived with her children at her own place in Kisoko. Mama Boy cooked a meal and made her feel welcome, reeling off a host of questions. Where did Achieng come from? What was her clan? Was she married to the father of her baby? What did she come to do in town?

Achieng remained tense. "Can you take me to town now?" She asked Damasio.

"After you've eaten."

"After you've eaten" became tomorrow, and by then, Achieng was too tired to protest. At night, she was shown where to sleep. It was in the hut of Mama Boy who pointed to the bed she had made for Achieng.

Achieng shook her head. "I will sleep on the floor."

"No, no. You're the guest."

Achieng refused and lay down on the floor with her baby, but she did not fall asleep, not even after Mama Boy blew out the *tadowa*. What was she to do now? Where could she go? How would she earn a living?

After a while, the door to the hut was pushed open and a man stood in the doorway. She was not that surprised. She had seen the look in Damasio's eyes when he found her on the road.

He walked to the bed and turned down the blanket. Mama Boy lay there fast asleep, her baby next to her. Confused, he roughly shook her.

"What is the meaning of this?" He demanded. "Why is the guest sleeping on the floor!"

Mama Boy, drowsy with sleep, mumbled something.

"Get up at once!" He said throwing back the covers.

Achieng said in a cold voice, "I'm the one who insisted on sleeping on the floor."

"No. It is this stupid woman who does not know how to treat visitors."

"Touch her and I'll scream and raise an alarm."

Damasico stared at the slender body in the flimsy petticoat that Achieng wore for a nightdress. He cursed under his breath and strode out of the hut, banging the little tin door.

Mama Boy was now fully awake. "Girl, you have a nerve! I've never heard a woman talk like that to a man." Then, she began asking Achieng more questions, but Achieng was in no mood to talk and said they should sleep. She lay down, pulled the *suka* up to her chin, and stared into the night at the moon. It was a new moon, and she felt like a new person.

By the time she woke, Damasio had already gone off to town to his business. When he returned, his bicycle was heavy with bags. Mama Boy was pleased and excited as she opened one bag after another. One had sugar and another contained packets of milk. There was a loaf of bread, a tray of eggs, rice, and meat.

She smiled at Achieng. "They say visitors make the home people eat good things!"

Achieng left the hut and found Damasio under the guava tree on a wooden chair, listening to Radio Uganda.

She stood before him and said, "You promised to help me find work."

"What work is there in Tororo? Shops everywhere are closing down. My business at the grinding mill is dwindling. It is only the border town of Malaba that is thriving. That's where I go to buy spare parts for the grinding mill. If you go

wandering about in town, you will be taken for a prostitute by Amin's army men and arrested. Be patient."

"If I am to stay here," said Achieng, "I need my own hut."

He cleared his throat, "I see. So that's your way."

"That's my way."

"I will repair my first wife's former hut and you can start sleeping there while waiting to find work."

"Now the good things we have been eating will cease," said Mama Boy when she heard that Achieng was moving into the first wife's former hut. Achieng listened without saying much. She did not want to cultivate a close friendship with this woman. There was a knot inside her still grieving for Min Kilo and she did not want to untie that knot just yet. Besides, the two women were quite different. Whereas Min Kilo fought and rebelled against Raja all the time, Mama Boy did everything she could to please Damasico.

Once the repairs on the hut were completed, Mama Boy helped her to carry in a bed and a couple of stools. The poles in the hut were straight, the floor polished with mud till it was smooth. Damasico said that Achieng could move in next day. She saw the look in his eye. He pretended that he was doing it for her sake, but she knew he was doing it for himself. She told herself if nothing else, at least it meant a roof over her head for her and her baby.

The days came and went. Achieng sought refuge from work, digging and weeding the maize and potato gardens. When she sat in the doorway of her hut, she could see flat savannah lands stretching for miles until they reached the foot of Mt Masaba. Most mornings, Damasico left to go to Kisoko to his first wife or to town to see to his business at the grinding mill. At night, he would come to her hut when the mood took him. She tried to resist him at first, but it was futile, so she reluctantly submitted to his demands. She drew pleasure from Blessing, who was learning to talk in two and three-word sentences. He called her "Mama", which she - who had always called her mother by her name, Nyamiland - felt delighted to hear.

One day, she realised that she was about three months pregnant. She tried not to think about it. She had never loved Raja, but she had wanted a baby and when Blessing was born alive and healthy. She knew there was nothing more precious in the world, but it was different with this pregnancy. She could not define her feelings and decided not to tell Damasico or anyone else. Thankfully, the pregnancy did not

fill her with nausea or leave her fatigued this time. However, it did make her want to urinate frequently. She usually took Blessing with her when she went out, in case he woke up and started crying. One night, in the latrine she felt something sticky and realised that she was bleeding and losing the baby. She came out and stood still for a while, her abdomen burning with pain, then folded up some banana leaves and used them as a pad. She would have moved on anyway, in time, but now seemed the right moment. Instead of going back to the hut, she tied Blessing tightly on her back, turned toward the road, and set off into the night.

15 The Potter Eats Out of Broken Pots: *Jachwech ama chemo i thago*

She was in Tororo by early morning. Her plan was to head to Malaba, a trading centre six miles away to the east toward Kenya where Damasio had said there was more business. She asked some people she met on the road how to get there and they pointed the way. The sun was rising and she had to shield her eyes from its glare. She got to Malaba by eight o'clock as people were just beginning their day.

Her heart sank at the squalor. Was this really the place Damasio had spoken of with such enthusiasm? The large expanse of flat land was strewn with huts, shacks and makeshift houses put together by *kaveera*, or plastic sheets. There was no green to be seen anywhere - no grass, shrubs, trees, or flowers. What passed for the road was a muddy stretch of land between the shacks. Plastic bags lay all over the road filled with faeces which people had tossed from the back of their shacks. A few cows wandered along the road eating *buveera* in the absence of any grass. She made her way to a group of women basking in the early morning sun. They were skimpily dressed with *lesus* thrown carelessly over their bodies and petticoats pulled up to their shoulders. They stared at her from beneath half closed eyes.

"Habari," Achieng managed to say with the little Swahili she had picked up. She was suddenly unsure of herself as the women looked critically at her.

"Musuri. Tabu Gani?" One woman asked. She was tall and had a wrapper knotted round a tiny waist which emphasized large shapely hips. A dimple played on her cheek as she spoke.

"Hakuna Matata," replied Achieng. Then, she switched to Jap hoping one of them would understand her. She told them she had come to look for work and needed a place to stay.

"Gloria has a room," said a baby-faced woman who was lying on her stomach. She understood what Achieng had said in Jap, but replied to her in Swahili. She was multilingual like many border people who were used to holding conversations in two or three different languages.

Gloria was the woman with the tiny waist. She got up and motioned to Achieng to follow. They walked to the shack at the end of the row and Gloria lifted

the flap, a thick transparent plastic sheet that represented the door. “You pay me when you start work,” she said. “What work are you looking for? Night shift?”

There was an edge to the question. These mostly young women were prostitutes serving the border and Achieng represented competition.

“I don’t mind what work I do, so long as I can buy food for me and my baby,” The answer seemed to satisfy Gloria and they returned to the other women.

For a while, she allowed Blessing to be petted and cooed at. Then, the women seem to lose interest and she went for a walk. She came to what seemed like the border point. Men in white shirts sat behind the open windows and stamped people’s papers. She watched how these people, clutching their papers like precious documents, walked to the bridge between Uganda and Kenya. The River Malawa flowed under the bridge, sluggish and brown. At the bridge, people again stopped and showed their papers to army men who guarded the border point with guns. Bags were searched and goods were confiscated before some were allowed to cross to Kenya.

After feeding Blessing, she walked along the bushes parallel to the river. In the distance lay the Sukulu hills. Here, life started picking up and there was suddenly a lot of activity - trucks driving off toward Tororo, men on bicycles with boxes on their saddles, and people walking fast and talking to each other animatedly in Swahili, Lugisu, Samia, or her language – Dhopadhola. Who were these people, she wondered?

Later in the afternoon, back home, she found the baby-faced woman called “Fatuma” half asleep on a mat, and asked her about the people she had seen.

“Smugglers,” said Fatuma. “They smuggle coffee to Kenya at night, then return in the morning. The market opens at midnight and by sunrise it’s over.”

“Where do they get the coffee?”

“Bugisu. Farmers grow it, then the smugglers bring it here to sell to traders or agents.”

“And where is the coffee taken?”

“They mostly go to Bungoma where there is a small market in the village of Chepkube. Others take it to Oriyoi on the Kenyan side and sell it to traders there.” She sat up and looked at Achieng, “Why are you asking? You want to do the night shift there? I can introduce you to some of my clients.”

“No,” said Achieng quickly. If I do, I’ll become a *malaya*, she thought. Uncle Jagwe can curse me all he wants, but he’s not here to physically force me.

“You could make good money,” Fatuma said. “The sisters there are paid anything up to 500KC while here we are lucky to fetch 50KC.”

“No,” said Achieng again. KC meant Kenya currency, she knew that much at least.

She spent an uncomfortable first evening in her shack, kept awake by the heat and the activities of the night sisters entertaining customers. When midnight came she strapped Blessing on her back and went to the road and waited. Before long, there was a steady trickle of people, just as she had seen in the morning. The difference this time was that they were carrying fat bags of coffee and going in the opposite direction. Achieng followed them. They reached the edge of a shallow valley at the stretch of land known as Oriyoi. In the middle was the swamp that went on to join River Malawa.

One of the men saw her looking at the crossing. "If you want to cross, keep near the edge and take your time. No government owns this place because it's between the two countries, Uganda and Kenya. So, even if the army men were to come, they have no powers to arrest you.”

A woman, small and wiry with thinning hair, said, “I’m looking for someone to help me carry goods.”

“I can help you,” Achieng said quickly.

“Good. My name’s Magdalena. I’ll pay you when we return. Let’s cross to the other side.”

The other side was Kenya, and Kenya was a part of East Africa where Uncle Jagwe had cursed her to roam. She was fearful of crossing, but how else could she earn the money to feed Blessing? Besides, she would not let Jagwe dictate her life. She joined the queue of people waiting to cross, and when her turn came, she was careful to stay near the edge. Once across and beyond the bushes, she was safe.

A little later, they arrived at the small but busy market village of Chepkube. Thousands of people milled about and she watched Magdalena haggle with buyers over the price of her coffee. For instance, she wanted 500 Kenya shillings per bag and the buyer offered 400, but Magdalena haggled until she got the price she wanted. When the last of the coffee bags had been sold and the hot night had plummeted to a morning chill, Magdalena told Achieng that it was time to start heading back. They retraced their journey back through the forest towards the river at Oriyoi.

Once back on Ugandan soil, Magdalena gave her the 50KC and asked her if she could help her again tomorrow night, but Achieng declined. She did not want to be a smuggler. She would use the 50KC to make and sell orange and passion juice. One of her neighbours lent her Fanta bottles to sell the juice in. The following day, she set up a small stall using sticks and a plastic sheet.

Within no time, Achieng was settled as a seller in the market. She soon became used to the rhythm of life at the border. Trucks travelled overnight from the port of Mombasa and arrived in Malaba in the morning. By 10 o'clock, they had cleared immigration and arrived on the Uganda side. Kikuyu women alighted from Gari Moshi in the morning to trade Kenya goods in Uganda. Many of these people headed straight to food kiosks to eat or to stalls like Achieng's to buy juice. She found a young girl, about fourteen years old, called "Nuru", who minded Blessing as he played around the market, leaving Achieng to concentrate on the stall.

One day, the thought came to Achieng to buy the millet herself and brew it. She had watched Nyamiland brewing *kongo* and had done it many times for Raja. Here, the women in the market brewed and sold *malwa*, as it was known, placing benches under the stalls and setting out the pots. Achieng now did the same, buying pots and straws and making her first brew of millet. Soon, she had her first customer. Her stall became very popular and she made far more money than she had selling orange juice. Then, another thought occurred to her. Instead of doing two jobs, first the brewing, then the selling, why not make the *malwa* and sell it to the women running the drinking joints? So, she became the first wholesaler of *malwa* in Malaba, brewing the millet and sorghum and, as she struggled to meet the soaring demand, selling them in 5 or 20 litre jerricans.

Then one morning, as she was leaving the shack, she found a man waiting for her outside. He asked if she was Justina Achieng. When she said she was, he switched from Swahili and greeted her in Jap and said he was James Obbo from Tororo. He had come to Malaba to deliver a letter, he said, and handed it to her.

After he left, she sat on her bed and opened the letter with trembling hands.

"To my niece, Justina Achieng, daughter of my brother Misigile Ofwono. I am writing this to you to tell you that I want to remove the curse I placed on you. You must come as soon as you get this letter, so I can cure you. My health is not good so I don't know how long I have.

Your loving Uncle, Zephaniao Jagwe

She was now quite settled in Malaba. She had a roof over her head and a small business that made enough money to get by. She and Blessing were happy. The truth is that she no longer believed in the powers of Uncle Jagwe's curse. In any case, if he wanted to lift the curse, he did not need her there to do it. She folded the letter and put it in the wooden box where she kept her clothes.

Achieng's neighbours had elected her as the women's representative in the market area because she could read and write, thanks to her short exposure to the Mission school at Nagongera. She and the women were now like family - their lives intertwined. Many of them were working to pay off bride price, so they sent money home every month to make deposits on a cow or a bull until they were free – free not to remarry, they were adamant about this, but free to get on with their lives. Achieng was bemused to think that, as their elected representative, she was breaking the last of Raja's rules - You shall not take on any position of leadership!

The shack was getting too small for her, Blessing, and the girl who looked after him. So, Achieng hunted around for a bigger place. She found one among rows of rooms called *muzigos* made of red bricks with corrugated iron sheets on the roof. Achieng thought how strange that she would be sleeping under a roof made of iron sheets, the same kind that her father had for so long wanted, and she promised herself that she would one day buy him some. The sisters of the night helped her to ferry her things across to her new premises.

“If you need any extra business on the side, I have plenty of customers for you,” said Fatuma.

She felt sad to be leaving them, but when she saw the shiny cement floor and the wooden window letting in light, a feeling of exhilaration came over her. She picked Blessing up and they laughed together as she swung him round and round.

16 God Denies You That Which You Most Desire: *Gimi 'mito amibuyin*

One day, when Achieng returned home, Blessing didn't totter up to her with his usual cries of "Mama Mama," but remained sitting listlessly on the mat.

"What's wrong with him?" She asked Nuru.

"I don't know. He's been like that all morning. He even refused porridge."

Achieng now saw what she had refused to see all along - Blessing was not thriving. He had big round rashes, which had started as blisters on his hands and feet. Lately they seem to have spread all over his body, but she thought they could be measles that had not fully come out. She touched his forehead and found that he was running a temperature. Her mind went to the letter she had hidden in the tin suitcase under the bed, but dismissed it. She put Blessing to bed and went to the midwife's shop. It was a small shop that sold simple medicines like Aspirin *dawa ya kweli* and Andrews Liver Salt. She bought a packet of aspirin and gave him some on her return. But the next day, when he was no better, she decided to take him to the big hospital in Tororo. She opened the wooden box and took out all her savings, which amounted to about nine hundred shillings. A pick-up took her to Tororo where she was given directions to the big hospital. In Outpatients, the doctor who examined Blessing recommended that he be admitted for further investigations. Here, surely her baby would be saved.

Test after test was carried out on Blessing but they revealed nothing. He was given so many injections that after a while, he cried at the mere sight of a nurse in white. When she washed him, Achieng noticed how thin and wasted his body had become.

Another week went by with his condition worsening by the day. He stared with vacant eyes and Achieng feared he was going blind. Finally, the doctor came to her and said the latest test had diagnosed what was wrong. Blessing had contracted a disease called syphilis while still in the womb. The doctor called it congenital syphilis and said it had gone too far for Blessing to recover. There was nothing more they could do. He insisted on treating Achieng as well and prescribed several penicillin injections. Achieng had never heard of such a disease. The morning they were discharged, the nurse who brought their bill advised her to take the child to a witchdoctor. "The boy seems to be under some sort of attack by spirits," she said.

“Take him home.” Then, she added, “And best take the child home while he’s still alive, transporting a body these days is no joke.”

With a heavy heart, Achieng paid the bill using almost all the money she had and boarded a pick-up back to Malaba. Her neighbours, sisters as she now thought of the women, welcomed her back. She told them what the doctor and nurse had said.

"What the nurse told you was wise. Some of these things can only be settled the traditional way," said Fatuma. "Is one of your relatives cursing this child?"

For Achieng to admit that Uncle Jagwe was behind all this would be to accept that the curse was happening. But, there was still that letter lying in the tin suitcase under the bed. She fetched it and read it aloud to them.

"Woman, what are you waiting for? Go!" Fatuma said.

Achieng hurriedly threw in a few clothes for herself and a smaller bundle with Blessing's things. Then they set off in a special hire taxi, a small white Datsun, as the sun was beginning to set. It had taken a long time negotiating the price before agreeing on 60 shillings. The driver talked loudly and ceaselessly as they drove along the Tororo Jinja road. They were heading south towards Iyolwa before turning west towards Pasindi and onto Mulanda. It would take about an hour to reach Mulanda because the roads were bad. As they approached the forest near Iyolwa, the driver stopped talking and drove faster. There were many soldiers in this area looking for rebels and smugglers, and to be stopped by them was something everyone feared. From time to time, she spoke to Blessing telling him that everything would be all right. That they would go to Uncle Jagwe and that Uncle would make him well. That they were going to see his grandparents Misigile and Nyamiland.

They turned off the main road. The swampy vegetation meant they had passed the trading centre at Pasindi and were crossing the Ligaga river. As they approached Mulanda, they noticed many people hurrying along in the same direction and watching them warily as they passed. People no longer trusted strange cars, there were too many stories of people thrown into the back of vehicles never to be seen again. The men walked ponderously, their young wives carrying their three-legged stools and drinking straws.

"These look like people going to a funeral," Achieng said.

"Indeed they do. I wonder who has died?"

Then Achieng knew. It could only be one person.

They turned into the homestead. When they saw the car, people scattered. The driver waved and called out to them that there was no trouble. Soon, Achieng was recognised and they all gathered around. How good of her to come back to bury her Uncle Jagwe. Achieng stood there, holding Blessing tightly. Bereft.

A woman came and took both Achieng's hands in hers. "My daughter, it is good you've come, even though you've missed the burial. He wanted so much to see you before he died.

"How did he die?" Achieng asked.

The woman stared at her with surprise. "It was Lando, the bull your mother gave him as your share of bride price. About two weeks ago, he was leading it to graze when it picked him up and tossed him over its shoulder. Your Uncle landed on his head and broke his neck. He has been paralysed from the neck down until he died last week. The bull was killed immediately. There, look. That's its skin."

Achieng saw the hide of the bull stretched out on the ground. She sank down on her knees.

They offered her a seat under a suitable shade but Achieng did not sit.

A woman from the group of mourners came up to her and said, "The deceased said, 'if Nyamiland's girl gets here while my body is still lying on the floor, she should pour water into the palms of my hands and drink from each of them'."

"But he has already been buried so what will she do now?" Another woman directed this towards Achieng.

"Let her go and jump over his grave four times!" Said another kindly.

"No, she should take a goat and slaughter it at the grave beseeching him..."

Achieng came to Uncle Jagwe's grave and stopped briefly before the fresh mound of earth. The hoes still lay about discarded, as did the dried banana leaves the mourners wrap round bodies in mourning. The *okewo*, from the family who had dug the grave, sat with legs drawn up, their hands resting on the knees, the sweat still pouring off them. She saw Super sitting by her mother and stopped briefly to offer them her condolences. People clutched her hand to greet her but she walked on. Home was empty when she got there. Everyone would still be at Jagwe's funeral. She turned all her attention to Blessing, dabbing his hot body with a damp towel and coaxing him to drink milk. She sang to him, rocking him against her, and gave him medicine he no longer needed.

Misigile and Nyamiland returned as soon as they'd heard she'd come and at once went to the forest, searching for herbs. For two days, Blessing lay sick, one minute hot and feverish, the next shivering with cold.

On the third day, late in the night, something woke her. It was Blessing. "Mama, I am thirsty," he said. She gave him some water and took him in her arms. "Close your eyes and sleep. You'll be OK," she said. Presently Blessing closed his eyes. It was with a start that Achieng realised he had stopped breathing. She shook him urgently calling his name over and over again but he had slipped away. Day was beginning to break. She cradled her son's body and wailed till she was hoarse. Afterwards, they said never had a woman mourned so much for the loss of her child.

They buried Blessing the following day. He was only a baby, so they didn't have to wait three days as was the custom for an older child. Achieng crawled all over the ground asking where her son had gone and her relatives answered her cries with their own. "Where is Blessing?" "He's turned to earth." "Where is my child?" "He's become an anthill." Many of the mourners at uncle Jagwe's funeral had already left, so there were only a handful of mourners to bury Blessing. They each threw in three fistfuls of mud. Then they said their farewells to the family and left. Gunshots could be heard in the distance as the exercise to flush out rebels continued in the surrounding forest.

Asurumani Ogola, Uncle Jagwe's son, found Achieng sitting by the grave, staring vacantly into space. He squatted a short distance away and watched her. Her mother, sister Akumu and Waya Nyarua sat outside the kitchen, also watching, afraid she would harm herself.

"When I got here, I was fortunate to find my father still alive," Asurumani said, "*Tong Oromo* he said, meaning the blade is honed, I am dying. That's when he asked me to write you a letter. He was too weak to sit up then, so he dictated. I don't know if the letter reached you."

Achieng was silent, thinking how she had kept the letter underneath the clothes in the wooden box. If she had come to Jagwe to be cured of the curse, would her child still be alive? Or, was his death the result of syphilis rather than a curse?

Asurumani stretched his hand to her. "I am my father's heir. I don't want this curse between us any longer. Come, let's go and finish this business."

Waya and Akumu escorted her as she followed Asurumani to the kitchen at Uncle Jagwe's home. He began to retrieve things from the corners and wooden

beams. He brought out the two-pronged spear and planted it in the ground. He laid a piece of bark cloth next to it. He brought kenolyech, a gourd whose spout had not been cut. He chopped it and the gourd split in two with a hollow sound. Next, he brought *thago*, a shallow bowl made of clay and put it on the bark cloth. He removed the kooki – *a piece of cloth tied in a note* - from where it had been hanging directly above the fireplace. He cut it open and Achieng saw pieces of cloth from her dresses, soil from her footprints, and strands of her hair. Her saliva taken from a cup from which she had drunk would have been mixed in too.

Asurumani slaughtered a hen and used *obuya* grass to sprinkle its blood on her. A second hen was cooked whole. Asurumani broke off a piece, took a bite from it and passed the same piece to Achieng, who also took a bite from it. He broke off another piece and did the same.

Next, Asurumani brought *asiri*, a wide-mouthed gourd from which his father had drunk while cursing Achieng. Asurumani drank from it and sprayed Achieng with the water from his mouth to wash away the curse. He removed the two-pronged spear and assuming his father's identity and voice, he began to swear an oath. "I, Zephaniah Jagwe, ask forgiveness from God for all the evil things I did to my brother's child. It was foolish pride and anger that made me curse this child for something which was not her fault. I cursed her to stop producing children, but now I say may she have children even when she is old and grey. I cursed her to roam all over East Africa, but now I say let her find a good man who will look after her well."

Then, he spat his blessings into each of her palms.

*

Achieng barely stirred for weeks. When she did, her only interest was in tending Blessing's grave. Her father, though much slower after the beating he had sustained, went about his usual work of cutting reeds from the swamp to make weave baskets. Her mother was the energetic one, cooking and cleaning and trying to engage Achieng in conversation, but Achieng had no energy to respond.

One day, Nyamiland spoke to her firmly, "For how long are you going to go on mourning your son? What God has taken, he has taken."

Tears came to Achieng's eyes.

"Girl, you go on crying like that, till when?"

Achieng got up abruptly and headed for the well, taking the path that she and Obel used to take when herding the cows. She walked through the crop fields now lying idle. Only broken stalks of millet remained. They would be collected into a heap and burned in preparation for the new season. Where was Obel? Did he know she had lost her child? Those delightful days spent together now seemed so far away. At the well, she sank her pot into the cool water, filling it up slowly with a small calabash. Then, balancing it on her head, she started walking home. When she was within sight of the homesteads, she was startled to see Super walking toward her, her high heels digging into the earth on the narrow path, handbag in hand.

"Sister I came to tell you how sorry I am for your loss," said Super, an uncertain smile hovering around her lips. Then, she took a small step towards Achieng and put a hand on her shoulder.

"Leave me alone!" Achieng cried stepping back and spilling the water from the pot. "You had an affair with my husband which ended in him almost killing me. I don't believe you're sorry at all."

"Achieng, there is no woman who does not commit adultery. No way are you going to tell me that."

Back in the hut, Achieng lay on a goatskin, regretting her outburst. After all, since Damasico, she was no better than her cousin when it came to sleeping with other people's husbands. When she was married to Raja, he already had two wives. She had never given much thought to how her coming had affected Chief Wife or Min Kilo. Who was she to rage at Super? Instead, she should have been grateful to Super for opening her eyes to the truth. It was not Uncle's curse that had killed Blessing - it was his own parents, from Raja passing the disease to her and her to him. This must be God's punishment. She too was guilty of Blessing's death. She owed it to Blessing to straighten out her life. She made this promise kneeling by his grave.

"I promise, I promise," she whispered. "I am going away now, but I will never forget you."

There was something new in her step, something lighter in her voice, when she knocked on her mother's door. "Nyamiland, tomorrow first thing in the morning, I am going back to town."

17 The One Who Lives Near Reeds is the One Who Hears its Sound: *Ngata chegin gimidole amawinjo paka woy*

Achieng found that Rubongi had changed a lot, with the most remarkable change at the army barracks. Once, all there had been were a few metal shacks painted green and covered with asbestos roofing. There were now rows and rows of them made of black roughcast walls that would turn reddish brown with age, and with a roof made of grey asbestos. The shacks covered a vast expanse of land between Rubongi and Tororo town. Army jeeps and Land Rovers drove in and out of the barracks and for the first time Achieng saw tanks. Armed cadets and privates guarded the gates with guns while others patrolled the fence that had been erected round the barracks. Most of the army men had been brought in from the north of Uganda and their wives and children came with them. Achieng was curious about the women for they spoke Swahili like the women at the border whom she called her sisters; they even dressed like them except that these women wore full flowing skirts under their leesus. She heard they were Nubians who had settled in Northern Uganda from South Sudan. It was rumoured that any saloon car with the number plate, “UVS”, was driven by intelligence officers and that the boot of the cars were used to carry men, sometimes up to three, who were dragged off the street and taken to be tortured or killed in the barracks. The intelligence officers were both feared and hated, and school children shouted after the UVS cars as they drove past saying, “Uganda Very Stupid”.

When she reached Waya’s, there was no need for words save for a welcome. She went to wash the dust off her feet while Waya made breakfast and when she returned, it was laid out just like old times - on the mat with the gold and purple patterns. A small transistor radio sat on the mat beside them and they half listened to it as they talked.

“Nothing good comes out of this radio,” said Waya. “It is always about people who have disappeared. Recently, they executed electricians because of power cuts. They were accused of working with rebels to sabotage the government.”

“Which rebels?” Asked Achieng.

“It is rumoured that the exiles who fled to Tanzania are plotting to return and take over the government.”

The state of the country meant little to Achieng because she felt too depressed, too defeated to care. What was she now? What was she in life? Was she a wife, or a divorcee? A mother, or a childless woman? Maybe one day she would go to Malaba to see the young women who had been her neighbours. Those had been days when she felt like a human being at last. But right now, she did not want anything more to do with that part of her life. Not with the women, the border town, the smuggling or the brewing - not with any of it.

Later that evening, she watched traders from Tororo market returning to their homes in the village. They carried their goods on the back of the bicycles, fearing they would be stolen if left in the lock-ups. It was not yet seven o'clock, but they were trying to avoid being caught in the curfew since no one was allowed to be out after 10pm. The business instinct in her pointed to Tororo town as the best place to set up a stall. All that she could do for now was to find a new stall at the market in Tororo town, get up in the morning, and return at night with her goods. With whatever money she made, she would buy some land and, in time, build a house. When she returned home, she told Waya about her plans.

Waya smiled and said, "A person who wants to work should not be refused."

In Tororo, it wasn't enough to drive a stake in the ground and claim it as your patch. You had to make an application to the Market Master and pay a fee, then wait to be allocated a stall. So, it was a few days before Achieng had a stall of her own, but a certain excitement rose within her when she stood before her simple wares of orange juice in Fanta bottles and boiled eggs. The excitement faded when she looked around. Her neighbours were smartly dressed women in *gomesi* and colourful headscarves. They looked almost too smart to be market sellers. Many were fat, unlike the skinny sisters of the night, and very light skinned. Their stalls had all kinds of vegetables like carrots, tomatoes, green pepper, onions, stacks of oranges and passion fruits, heaps of Irish potatoes, eggplants, fresh ginger, and various herbs such as coriander and garlic. It would take her some time to catch up with them. At the end of the day, she returned from the town to the village just like the other traders, carrying her box of bottles and any remaining eggs on a tray. She put the money she had made in a small tin and hid it in her hut. Compared to the money she'd made smuggling and brewing, this was nothing, but she didn't care. Her heart was not in it. She engaged with the customers mechanically, but her laugh lacked warmth. Usually when she returned, Waya would be seated outside listening to the radio, a bottle of *Kill-me-Quick* by her side to keep

her bones from hurting. The talk on the news was about General Idi Amin accusing Tanzania of harbouring Ugandan rebels and plotting to overthrow him. The popular Simba battalion in Mbarara was also reported to have mutinied and some of its soldiers fled across to neighbouring Tanzania. More and more people were fleeing the country.

On Monday morning, Achieng arrived at the market bright and early. A new week always brought new hope. She was arranging her stall when a customer came and stood in front of her. She did not look up immediately as customers normally took their time looking at the eggs and juice before deciding what to buy. However, something made her look up and she found herself face to face with Obel.

They greeted each other awkwardly and stood talking for a while, but then, the joy that she felt at seeing him faded and she said, "Blessing died. We buried him."

Obel stood for a moment uncertain. "I heard. That is why I have come. Let's go and talk about this somewhere quiet."

"Go. I'll mind your stall," her neighbour said.

Obel asked her if she would like to have some tea, but she declined so they just walked. At the end of Market Street, they turned right at the crossroads and headed toward the roundabout on the Tororo-Jinja road, and were soon in the Lion's Children's Park that lay at the foot of Tororo Rock.

The few benches around were already occupied, but a man got up from the one he was sitting on and they took his place. For a while, they just sat, watching the children play.

"Achieng, I'm sorry about the pain you have been through."

She told him about Blessing - how he couldn't be cured even in Tororo hospital, how she'd taken him home in desperation to see if Jagwe could lift his curse, and how, from what they told her in hospital, even that wouldn't have helped.

"What happened when you left Mulanda? Where did you go?" she asked.

"I went to Busia and spent sometime there looking for jua kali, but there was no work so I set off again and eventually ended up at Majanji, where I joined the fishermen fishing in Lake Victoria."

He was quiet for a while, then said, "Can we meet here tomorrow when you've finished at the market?"

The next morning, she dressed with more attention than usual. She chose a red polka dotted dress and a headscarf to cover her hair that was plaited cane row style.

Then, she wrapped a lesu over the dress. She was glad that Saturday was a busy market day and that the customers kept her occupied, taking her mind off the impending meeting. But what if he didn't come? She was as nervous as a child on the first day at school. When she packed her goods away in the locker under the table and left for the Children's Park, it was as though the whole world was watching her.

He was there, standing by the bench where they had sat, wearing dark khaki trousers and a white shirt rolled up to the elbows. She walked up to him self-consciously, wondering if this was a wise thing to be doing after all.

"Where are we going?" She asked.

"Up there," he said, pointing to Tororo Rock.

The result of a single volcanic eruption, the Rock rose 977 feet up, like a stone finger pointing to the sky. Tor-oro meant "perennial mist" - the town got its name because of the mist that descended and wrapped itself round the neck of the rock once a year during the cool season. They walked on the street behind Uganda Commercial Bank with rows of houses that used to belong to the Asians. The area was still known as the Indian Quarters, but it was now occupied by army men and *mafuta mingi*, wealthy men, who acquired it under the Departed Asian's Properties Board. They went past Piliás High School, past the Sacred Heart Catholic Church, and reached the foot of the Rock. The Tororo golf course lay to the left of the Rock but there were no golfers to be seen. Many of them had been European expatriates who left after the Asians were expelled. A footpath led steeply upwards to the top of the Rock. They passed a cave where Obel told her a mad man preached every Sunday about the coming of the end of the world. It was a lovely afternoon with a slight breeze, so the air felt cool. After climbing a couple of iron ladders, they stopped to get their breath back as they took in the view. The Church lay below them, and beyond it, the Morkatipe Maximum Security Prison.

"Imagine all those people imprisoned on such beautiful hills," said Achieng.

"They call it the University of Learning." He put his arms lightly around her waist and Achieng melted to his touch. "It won't be far to the top now," said Obel and they set off again.

At the top, they peered at the town lying beneath them like a toy set. She could see the four roads that intersected at the roundabout, one leading east towards Malaba, one west towards Rubongi, one north to Mbale and one south to Jinja and Kampala. Then, they walked round the Rock to the side facing south towards Jinja and

Kampala. The Sukulu Hills lay in the distance. Achieng stood staring at them, then turned and found Obel leaning against the trunk of a huge eucalyptus tree that stood on a plateau in the side of the rock. Whether she went to him first or if he stepped forward, she couldn't remember later, but they buried themselves in each other's arms. The worn trunk of the tree was against her back and there was a smell of eucalyptus. With the hot sun pouring down on them, they slid onto the soft downy grass and made love.

Afterwards, they sat leaning against each other, gazing at the Sukulu hills. So many questions hung between them, it was difficult to know where to begin.

"Did you know I used to work in Malaba brewing kongo?" She asked.

"Yes, I knew."

"And you didn't come to see me?" She asked playfully, flirting with him.

"I kept asking myself what I had to offer you. There were so many complications."

There were still many complications, but neither of them wanted to think about them. Instead, they made love again. The evening was beautiful and they lay in each other's arms until the stars began to appear. Achieng felt that she could never hope to be happier, yet unease was gnawing at her.

"Are you free now," Obel asked "or is Raja still in the picture?"

"I'll never go back to that man again," she said simply.

"Those Sukulu hills that you see, that is where we could settle. It's not much, but I have put aside some money."

She was silent.

"We could build a home, a farm, and have children."

She shook her head. "I don't think it's a good idea. Marriage has brought me nothing but problems."

Obel held her close. "You can't run away from problems forever. The only way to overcome them is to face up to them. It will all be alright in the end."

"Let's go. It's getting late," she whispered.

They walked back down silently, loose stones, disturbed by their shoes, rolling ahead of them. When they were almost at her Aunt's hut, they came across Kosiano.

"Hey sister, is that you?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied.

"Who is that?" asked Obel.

“Our neighbour.” Obel raised his hand in greeting, and she thought about how different he was from Raja in his simple trust of her.

Obel saw her home and they promised to meet again over the weekend. She found Waya at her usual station, listening to the radio.

"The fighting is getting worse in Mutukula," she said. "A new curfew has been announced, and everyone must be in their house by 9pm with the lights off at 10pm."

For the next couple of days at the market, she could think of nothing but Obel. She had never known sex could be so pleasurable! Raja had possessed her body at will and she had forced herself to tolerate Damasico, but with Obel, all her senses were awakened. She longed for him.

The following Saturday, round three o'clock, just as she was about to start packing up to meet Obel, there was a sudden commotion. At first, she wondered if a thief had been caught. Then she saw the man, who couldn't have been much over twenty, stumbling about like a madman and shouting, "Help! People, help me!" He ran to the nearest stall and dove under it, knocking oranges and pineapples to the ground. The woman who owned the stall backed away. Then, six men stormed into the market, three of them army men in uniform carrying guns, the others in civilian clothes, all of them shouting in Swahili.

“Wapi Yeye! Wadui! Where is he? Rebel!”

One army man pointed his gun upwards and fired. People screamed and took cover. The army men were jumping over stalls and kicking them over. When they found the man cowering under Achieng's neighbour's stall, they dragged him out, and led him away. "Help me people! They're going to kill me!"

But no one moved. A car drew up at the entrance of the market, a white saloon with a UVS number plate, and he was bundled into the boot like a sack of vegetables. The lid of the boot came down hard cutting off his cries.

It seemed that he was one of the men who had been forcibly conscripted into the army recently. Some of them had mutinied against the forced conscription and lack of pay and had run away. When they were caught, however, they were treated as deserters and executed. Those who saw the car speeding away from the market said it was headed for the barracks where the man would be put to death. Obel arrived when the chaos was dying down. With his help, Achieng hurriedly packed up what she could take home. The stall would have to be repaired before she could hope to use it again. A hire car took them to Rubongi, where news had already reached the village

of disturbances in town. Waya was relieved to see Achieng home safe. If she was surprised to see Obel with her, she did not show it.

"So, it is you who has been keeping my niece away from home!" She said in mock sternness.

"That is a case I have to answer," he replied with a smile.

"You did good to escort her, but you'd better get back home now. After all that chaos in town, it's best to get in early and lock up."

Obel said he would help Achieng put the goods away then leave. They were inside Achieng's hut, putting away the soda bottles when they heard shouting from the direction of Waya's house.

"Thieves!" Achieng said. "Waya is being attacked!" They rushed out of the hut to help.

The voices were nearer now, loud and rough. "We are from the authorities and we have no quarrel with you. It's your niece and her boyfriend we want."

"What do you want with those children? They've done nothing wrong!"

Obel and Achieng hesitated outside Waya's house. But, before they could decide what to do, the men ran out and grabbed Obel. There were three of them, two in ordinary civilian clothes. The third was Sowo-Fire.

Waya pointed at a man standing in the shadows. "You! Kosiano! You man with a black heart! Is this what you do to your neighbours? Bringing us murderers in the night!"

Sowo-Fire told Obel that he was under arrest for stealing another man's wife – and that Achieng was under arrest for committing adultery. He said the two of them were being taken to the Gombolola headquarters. Waya said she knew the Gombolola Chief and he would never authorise such an arrest. If Raja considered himself a man, then why was he not man enough to come himself.

"Don't touch me," cried Achieng, as one of the men moved toward her.

"She has done nothing wrong," Obel said. "Leave her alone. If there is a misunderstanding, we can sort it out tomorrow."

Sowo-Fire said, "If you make me angry with you, I can order you to be stripped naked right here."

"Oh, you want to see a naked body, do you? Here let me strip for you!" Said Waya, fumbling with the lesu around her shoulder. The men all beseeched her not to

undress before them, as she knew they would since it was taboo to see the nakedness of someone old enough to be your mother or grandmother.

"Please, Achieng. Don't resist," Obel said as they tied his hands together.

"If you harm these children in any way, you will have me to reckon with!"
Waya shouted as Obel and Achieng were led away.

18 The Sword You Sharpen is the One You Will Fall On: *Tong ma ipako amanekin*

The Gombolola headquarters was a big colonial building with huge pillars and an outdoor courtyard. They were taken to the small prison cells at the back; there was only one other woman inside Achieng's cell. It was too dark to see her face, but Achieng could sense that the woman was staring at her. There was nowhere to sit or sleep. The cell smelt of urine. Obel had been butted with a gun and had a gash on his head. What would happen to him now? Should she have known that Raja would track her down?

When dawn broke, she found herself looking into the face of a woman of about forty, staring vacantly at the wall. Achieng greeted her, but the woman did not seem to hear. At nine, the cell door was opened and they were taken outside to the yard. Prisoners stood in clusters under trees waiting for their turn to appear in the adjoining courtroom. Nearby groups of cows were grazing, watched by herds-boys. They were here because court had ordered them to be brought for the refunding of bride price. Achieng was directed to stand with the other prisoners. She was pleased to see that Obel was safe, though his hands were still tied. When their case was due to be heard, Achieng and Obel were led inside. Sowo-Fire and Raja sat on a bench at the front. Court was already in session and a case of two men accused of stealing their neighbour's goat was being heard. They were sentenced to a fine of 100 shillings each or three months imprisonment. Next, the case of the woman in Achieng's cell was heard. Her husband claimed he had found her strangling their week-old baby because it was yet another girl. When the woman started to give her account of the story, saying that her husband kept abusing her for not producing boys, the Chief interrupted her, saying that he had no jurisdiction to hear a capital offence. He then committed her to the Magistrates Court in Tororo. At this point, Waya entered followed by Musisi. She was wearing a flowing gown and wide brimmed straw summer hat and using her walking stick. The clerk shouted for people to calm down, but it was the imperious way Waya walked down to the front of the courtroom that quietened them. She looked at Achieng and Obel and nodded at them. Then, she sat down in the

special chair reserved for her with Musisi next to her. The Chief said he would now hear cases relating to bride price. Raja's case was called first, but before the Chief could invite him to speak, Waya stood up.

“Chief Opondo, it is I, Proscovia Nyarua addressing you. I want to know whether it is your practice nowadays to send *maje*, armed men, to the homes of innocent civilians at night with no justification.”

Embarrassed, Chief Opondo said, "Dhaku-dwong, kindly let us proceed."

Waya brought out her Constitution and placed it on the bench in front of her, followed by her Bible which she placed on top of the Constitution. “Where is the law here that gives you the right to refund cows? This is a kangaroo court. You should close it!”

"Mr Raja, proceed!" said the Chief.

Waya pushed out the folds of her skirts before sitting down and crossing her arms across her chest.

Raja wagging a finger at Obel said: "That man there stole my wife. He was caught red-handed last night!"

"Your wife left you two years ago," Waya said. “How come it is only last night that you noticed she was missing?”

Kosiano came forward and stated that he had seen “that man”, Obel, returning to the village at night with the lady in question.

“You call yourself my neighbour but you have a black heart!” Waya told him. “And where was your own wife during this time of night when your eyes were glued to my niece?”

"Dhaku-dwong, respect the court please," said Chief Opondo. He turned to Obel. "How do you answer to that charge? Have you eloped with this woman, Justina Achieng?"

Achieng was startled to hear her full name said out loud in court.

"I have not eloped with her," said Obel.

"I have not eloped with anyone," said Achieng at the same time.

"If you have not eloped with him, what was he doing in your hut last night?"

"He helped me carry home things from my stall after the commotion in the market yesterday."

Waya affirmed what she said.

The Chief turned to Raja, "Do you still want your wife?"

"Yes. I still love her and want her to come back to me," Raja said without looking at her.

"I will never go back to that man," said Achieng.

"Then I have no choice but to ask her new husband to refund my cows," said Raja.

"I have no husband. I'm not married and I'm not refunding any cows," Achieng said. "What about the iron sheets they tore from my father's hut? Isn't that refund enough?"

"That was nothing," said Raja.

"No one asked you to refund any cows," said the Chief clearly amused, "Have you ever heard of women refunding their own cows?" He turned to Obel. "What do you say to Raja's demand? If this girl had been at her father's home, we would be asking her father to refund the cows, but since she was found with you, you must refund his cows if you want his woman. You can't just take her for free and live with her *faa!* Now how much can you afford to pay? We shall count the iron sheets as one cow."

Obel was silent for a while then asked, "What is the price of a woman?"

The Chief ignored this. "You have two options. Either you marry this woman, in which case you refund Raja's cows, or you have committed adultery with another man's wife, in which case you are fined the same number of cows as a refund. Which is it to be?"

Obel said. "That is not for me alone to decide."

"Well, while you decide, I am fining you 200 shillings for sleeping with another man's wife. You are going back to prison until that fine is paid."

"They must both go to prison!" Demanded Raja, "They are both guilty."

Waya stood up. "Don't ask him to pay what he doesn't have."

Again, the Chief ignored her. "He will be released from this court after payment of the fine of 200 shillings. Meanwhile, Achieng is free to go."

Obel was led back to the cell, and Achieng left the court with Waya and Musisi. Both had offered to pay the 200 shillings fine to release Obel, but Achieng refused their offers. She asked Musisi not to burden their parents with what was happening to her. He left for home, grumbling about wasting his time coming over in the first place. Waya also gave up trying to make Achieng accept her money. "The

words I spoke to you when you first came here, about not refunding cows... I fear that I have burdened you with something too heavy for your young shoulders."

Achieng smiled at Waya to reassure her. "What you said to me about marriage and refund was very important. You helped to open my eyes."

In court she had been on a high, but she was now plunged into depression and death seemed to be all around them. There were rumours that the invading liberation army from Tanzania was pushing toward Masaka in the central part of the Country.

Back at her hut, Achieng pulled out the tin from under the bed. She counted the money - 220 shillings altogether, enough to pay the fine. She put the money carefully in her purse.

She rose early the next morning, dressed quickly, and made her way to the Sub-county headquarters. Waya had offered to come with her, but she said she would go alone. When she reached the main road, she saw swarms of army men walking to town. There were more roadblocks and the soldiers seemed to be on edge. Many people were being searched and harassed. Finally, she got to the prison, but the cell doors stood open and she didn't have to look twice to see there were no prisoners there. She was standing there confused when she saw Chief Opondo.

"Where is Obel?" She asked.

"The military came and took him. That army man, what's his name? Sowofire? He came with another army man in a Land Rover. He said Obel was on the list of those suspected of working with rebels and that it was now a military case. New charges are to be brought against him."

"What charges!"

"He will be charged with treason and acts of terrorism. That is a capital offence outside my remit," said the Chief.

"Where have they taken him?"

"To the Rubongi barracks."

Achieng turned and with a half sob started walking away. The sun was hot above her. She passed the road branching off to Waya's place without even noticing it. When she reached the T-Junction near the barracks, she removed several of the notes from her purse and tucked them in her bra, hoping not to be searched too intimately. At the barracks, two huge metal gates stood wide open, uninviting as a cemetery. Four soldiers with guns stood by a little gatehouse.

"*Density na Diagram*," one of them said asking for her photo ID.

He studied it for what seemed to be a long time, then gave it back to her.

"I have come to check on a prisoner."

"Who told you he's here?"

"Opondo, the Sub-County Chief."

"Open that purse."

He pulled out the wad of notes and put it in his pocket but he did not search her.

"OK Go!" He said.

Two army trucks stood in front of the office buildings - army men, women and children were busy ferrying things into them. She avoided making eye contact with anyone, neither hurrying, nor walking slowly, following a sign that pointed to the office. No one stopped her. At the end of the corridor, she found herself in the office, a big room, empty save for a large table and chair. From the courtyard she heard a scream and the sound of a whip. She wanted to block her ears, shut her eyes, and get as far away as possible but she fought down her panic. She was still standing there uncertain what to do when a voice startled her. It was Sowo-Fire.

"What are you doing here?" He asked.

"I came to see Obel."

"Have you brought the money?"

"Some of it. Please let me see him."

He held out a pair of dirty hands and she gave him all the money she had. Then he demanded her ID and gave it to him, he put it in his pocket. "You'll get it when you bring the rest of the money," he said. "Come."

She followed him, her legs shaking. They walked to the other end of the corridor which held the cells. In the first cell a man lay on the floor, his face and head bruised. They stopped at the third cell. There were bars in a small hole in the wall. Sowo-Fire spoke to someone through this. There was a scuffling and the sound of something or someone being dragged.

"Make him stand!" Ordered Sowo-Fire.

Obel's face appeared before the window.

His face was unrecognisable. His eyes were closed and caked with blood.

"Go!" He said through swollen lips. "Don't come back here. This is a place of death!"

"Take him back," ordered Sowo-Fire.

“No! Set him free. He has done nothing wrong!”

But Sowo-Fire was walking away. “If you want him alive, you will bring the money to pay for five cows. I want 1,500 shillings. If not, I will kill him!”

*

By the time Achieng got back, it was already afternoon.

“Where’s your friend? Did you pay the fine?” Waya said.

Achieng told her what had happened.

“The war is upon us. Child, pack what you can and let’s get out of here.”

“Where will we go? I can’t leave Obel in the barracks!”

Achieng went to her hut. She had no more money. She also knew Waya did not have any. Obel might have some money, but she didn’t know where. She sat on the edge of the bed and stared blankly at the wall. Then, she thought she heard something. She got up and stood at the entrance to the hut listening. There it was again - muffled, choking sounds coming from Waya’s house. The sounds grew louder as she ran towards them.

“Where is she?” A man’s voice was shouting.

When she burst into the house, she stared in disbelief. Waya was on the floor and Raja had his hand round her neck. Achieng rushed at Raja and threw herself on him, “Leave her alone! If it’s me you want, I’m here!”

Raja let go of Waya and Achieng took a step backwards.

“Go!” Waya coughed, fighting to get her breath back. “Run!”

But Raja was too quick for her. He took hold of her just as she reached the kitchen hut and threw her across the floor. As she fell, she hit her head against one of the firestones. As she lay there semi-conscious, she could see Raja looking round the hut, moving pots and pans about in search of something. Hearing her groan, he came over to her, rattled a box of matches and tossed it beside her. Then, he sat astride her, put his hands round her throat and began to squeeze. She tried to struggle but could not move.

“When I am finished with you, there will be no trace of you left on this earth,” he said, squeezing tighter.

While he squeezed, her hands were feeling around under the firestones. She didn’t even feel the heat that burnt through her skin as her hand found and curled

around the *nyangoda* knife that she knew Waya kept there. It was as though her mind disengaged from her body. She thought of her mother, Nyamiland, and how on that day all those years ago she had swooped down like an eagle to save the girl and how her hand swung back with the *nyangoda* and came down and slashed the ropes. Now, she did the same. Raja let out a loud cry that was heard all through the village. He arched his back, stiffened, gazed at her wonderingly, and then collapsed.

She wriggled to free herself from the weight of Raja's body. Waya stood in shock as she saw the blood spreading onto her kitchen floor. Several neighbours crowded in.

Kosiano, was one of them. "Nobody touches the body until the police come!" He removed the knife from Achieng's hands as gingerly as if it was a grenade.

"Call the Chief," said Waya to one of the men.

In no time, the Chief arrived. He found a crowd of people standing outside and the body lying in the kitchen.

"Chief, this here is the most dangerous woman I've ever come across," Kosiano said. "She's brought nothing but trouble since she set foot in our neighbourhood. This woman, this is *yamo ka footh!*"

"Shut up!" Said Chief.

Achieng was led away, handcuffed as Waya collapsed against the wall and slowly slid to the ground.

19 He Who Asks for the Bull's Head Must Carry it Himself: *Ngata openjo wich jow won tingo*

In Tororo, Achieng was first taken to the Police Station where she recorded a statement, after which she was detained in a cell. A murder trial would often be delayed for months while the police gathered evidence, but it was a time of civil unrest and after being remanded in custody she was told her case would be heard quickly. A young woman came to prison to visit her. She introduced herself as Mary Apio, dark-skinned and in her late twenties with an Afro. She was dressed in a black skirt and jacket and a white shirt.

"Whatever you did, I'm here to defend you," Mary told Achieng. "I am your advocate."

She made Achieng tell her everything and wrote it down in a small notepad. When they'd finished, she advised Achieng to plead not guilty. They entered the plea at an initial hearing at the magistrate's court before the case was transferred to the high court and Achieng was moved to Morkatipe prison for two weeks to await trial. In prison, there was much talk of the political instability in the country, which to judge from the gunshots they could hear from Osukuru was getting worse - all the warders seemed on edge. Among the women prisoners, though, the talk was mostly about the homes they had left and worries about their children. The women all assumed Achieng was guilty of her crime as charged, but said she should not admit to having killed Raja. "It's best to say that you were happily married, had only gone to visit your Aunt, and when your husband came to fetch you he was attacked by a person or persons unknown." Achieng felt confused by the conflicting advice, but decided she must stick by what her lawyer had told her.

On the day of the trial, she rose early and was ready when the women's prison officer came to get her. They boarded the truck for the short trip to the courthouse. Outside the court, a fair-sized crowd had gathered. They seemed to be mostly people from the village scrubbed up for the day. When Achieng hopped down from the truck, a murmur went up and people pointed at her. Hurriedly, she made her way into the courtroom. Inside, her lawyer stood talking to the State Attorney. Apparently, he had come from Kampala to prosecute the case. His hair was neatly brushed back, and he wore a black suit, white shirt, and tie. Behind the glasses he was wearing, his eyes

suddenly glinted at something Mary said and he threw back his head and laughed. The mood was amicable, but when he pulled papers out of a briefcase, and waved them in Mary's face before putting them down, it was a reminder that they were opponents. Mary dumped her load of files and books on the table next to his. She turned and acknowledged Achieng with a brief smile. To the left of the front bench, two men sat at a desk. These were court-assessors who would assist the judge in deciding whether Achieng was guilty. Not that their views would necessarily be decisive, the judge could choose to ignore them. Discouraged by their stern expressions, Achieng turned to the gallery of spectators and spotted her father, Misigile, along with Musisi and Nera. She forced herself to look away, only for her eyes to meet those of Chief Wife, who was sitting with two of Raja's uncles.

The court clerk entered the room and shouted, "All rise!" When she came in behind him, the judge, much to Achieng's surprise, turned out to be a woman. She was about fifty and delicate-looking - a wisp of a woman. Her walk to the bench was slow and halting, as though the weight of her wig was slowing her down. As Achieng would later discover, this was Justice Modesta Ssendaula, the only female judge in the country.

"You may sit," she said in voice that was soft but clear. When she sat and sank back into the chair, it all but swallowed her up. Achieng could see tiny blue veins on the back of her hand when she picked up a fountain pen and held it between her thumb and forefinger.

"*State Vs. Achieng Justina*" cried the clerk and read out the charge: murder of one Raja Pinytek, against section 188 of the Penal Code. Startled to hear her name, Achieng did not catch the rest of the sentence but was aware that the Judge was speaking to her.

"You have heard the charge read out against you. What do you have to say to this?"

"I did not do it," Achieng said.

"I take that to be a plea of not guilty," she said. Then she turned to the State Prosecutor. "You may proceed."

The State Prosecutor stood. "My Lady," he began.

"I'm not your Lady," the judge said.

"My Lord, I beg your indulgence."

His gestures as he talked were as expressive as his voice was voluminous. Achieng, he said, had murdered her husband in cold blood, stabbing him in the back with a knife which she had hidden for that express purpose. The State would demonstrate that she had murdered him in order to be free to roam with her lovers. “My Lord,” he said, “this was a vicious crime that has not only robbed a man of his life, but also left a widow and several children orphaned. The State will move to show that the accused committed murder in the first degree and shall seek the maximum penalty of death.”

At these words a murmur went up in court and Achieng saw Misigile half-rise from his seat. The judge banged on the table for order.

“I will not entertain disorder in my Court. Anyone who cannot contain their excitement may leave now.” She looked and waited. Nobody moved.

The State called its first witness. Sub-County Chief of Rubongi, Mr Opondo raised his right hand and affirmed to tell the truth. After a long preamble, he described being summoned on the day in question. “I arrived to find the deceased lying in the kitchen floor of Madam Nyarua’s kitchen. Lying in a pool of blood. Lifeless.”

“What else did you see?”

“I saw a young woman standing by also covered in blood.”

“Is that woman in court today? Can you point to her?”

“Yes, she is in court,” the Chief pointed at Achieng.

“Go on,” Mr Kasame said.

“A neighbour handed me a nyangoda knife and said it was what she had used. I tied the lady’s hands with banana leaves and took her to the police in Tororo, since this was a case of murder.”

“Thank you. No further questions my Lord.”

The Judge picked up her pen. “Does counsel for the defence wish to cross examine.”

“Yes, My Lord,” said Mary rising and walking forward.

“You have met the accused before I believe.”

“Yes.”

“Can you tell court in what circumstances.”

“As sub-county chief I hear cases and this woman was brought before me with her new friend, Mr Obel, because her former husband was asking for his cows back.”

“Why did he want his cows back?”

“He said that since the accused had left him and eloped with another man, he wanted his cows to be refunded.”

“What is this refund of bride price? Can you tell court a little more about it?”

The Prosecutor jumped up and objected. “Bride price has nothing to do with murder. Do not drag our culture to court!”

“My Lord,” Achieng’s lawyer cut in. “My learned friend is mistaken. It is the custom and practice in this country that cows are demanded and paid in order for marriage to be secured. And a contract is drawn up which states the cows will be refunded if the marriage breaks down.”

“I am tempted to agree with the State,” the Judge said. “Counsel for Defence, what point are you trying to make with this line of questioning?”

“If you bear with me, My Lord, I will show that the issue of bride price is central to this case.”

Justice Ssendaula twisted her pen round and round between thumb and forefinger, then indicated to the lawyers to approach the bench. A fierce whispering ensued. Finally, the two lawyers returned to their seats.

A murmuring had risen in court while the lawyers conferred and the judge now banged the table and asked for silence. Let no one be mistaken into thinking this was anything other than a murder trial, she said. However, she had practised law in Uganda and had several times heard about the problems associated with bride price. Since the issue was now raised in her court, she would allow it to be discussed. The preliminary objection raised by the state attorney was overruled.

The second State witness to be called was Kosiano, Waya’s neighbour from hell. He walked briskly to the stand and held up his right hand to swear. He wore khaki shorts and a short-sleeved shirt and his head was shaven.

The State Attorney asked him if he was acquainted with the accused.

“And who else found her lost and wandering with a baby in her arms if it wasn’t me.”

“Could you describe her circumstances then.”

“Some women are like white ants flying about anyhow, like cows that have not been tethered, this woman is *yamo ka footh...*!”

Bang! went Justice Ssendaula’s gavel. “The language of this court is English. Counsel will control his witness.”

The Prosecutor tried again. “Where was she coming from with a baby in her arms?”

“Running away from her rightful husband who she had beaten and left for dead.”

“Objection my Lord. That is hearsay,” Miss Apio had risen.

“Sustained. Redirect your witness counsel.”

“Did you have occasion to see her again? Just answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’, please.”

“Yes. I saw her several times. Always at night, always with a man.”

“Objection! My client’s character is not in question here!” Miss Apio was up again.

“My Lord, I am trying to establish motive,” the State Attorney said. “If you allow me just a little more time.”

Justice Ssendaula wearily put down her pen. “Alright, but the State must make its point quickly.”

“When did you last see her?”

“Two weeks ago. With a bloody knife in her hand and a man dead on the floor – *yamo ka footh!*”

“Counsel control your witness or I shall have him down in the cell for contempt.”

“*Odiek nyamunyu!*”

“Counsel!”

“No further questions, My Lord.”

“I just have one question for him my Lord,” said Miss Apio. “You say she left her husband. How do you know she had a husband?”

“Why, everyone knew –”

“Did you ever see them together?”

“As I said, he was lying there dead and she was standing -”

“I mean before that. Did you ever see them together, carrying the baby, say, or eating a meal?”

“No.”

“No, what?”

“No, I never saw the accused with the deceased...”

“Thank you, you’ve been very helpful. Just one more question. Would you say you are a fairly observant man? That you notice details?”

“Yes.”

“So, when you saw the deceased lying there, and the knife, did you notice anything else?”

“Pots and pans. Chickens.”

“Anything else?”

“A box of matches on the ground.”

“Can you repeat that for the record?”

“I noticed a box of matches.”

“No further questions,” Miss Apio said.

The neighbour from hell walked majestically to his seat.

The prosecutor stated that he had no more witnesses to call. Court took a short recess before hearing the case for the defence. From outside, in the distance, sounds of the artillery that came to be known as *saba saba* were heard. Missiles were being launched as far away perhaps as Sukulu but loud enough to be heard in Tororo.

When court resumed, Miss Apio moved to the front and laid out her case. Before them stood an innocent young woman, she said, who had tried to be an obedient wife to a man who treated her little better than an animal. She would demonstrate that the deceased, known to be a violent man, went to the home of the accused with the purpose of doing her serious harm because she had resisted his demand of a bride price refund. To prove her point, she would call just one witness – Achieng herself.

Achieng raised her right hand and swore on the bible to tell the truth. From the witness box, she confirmed her name and age. “My name is Justina Achieng. I am twenty-five years old.”

“My dear, speak up!” Judge Ssendaula said gently. “How do you expect the Court to help you if we can’t hear you.”

Achieng’s spirits plummeted as she regarded the packed court. She wished that Waya was here, but her Aunt was still recovering from Raja’s attempt to strangle her.

“Tell the court *exactly* how you came to live with the deceased,” Miss Apio said.

“I was still a child at school in primary one. My father removed me from school and sold me to Raja. I was taken there by Fulimera, my father’s cousin, who was married to Raja as his first wife. They deceived me into thinking that I was

visiting my father's relatives. One night, I was asked to sleep in Min Kilo's hut. She was the second wife, but she died. Raja came, pushed me on the bed, and took me by force. He was allowed to do this because he paid a bride price for me. In the morning, I saw my father accept money and a goat from him. I ran back home, but my father sent me back. I even tried to seek help from the Mission church, but Father Hepton could not help me. Later, the rest of the animals - cows and goats - were brought home and paid to my father as bride price. The deceased beat me a lot. He beat me until I was forced to run away. After that, Raja kept harassing my parents and me to refund his cows."

"How old were you when he forced himself on you?"

"I was twelve."

"Now, Achieng, I want you to narrate to court the events of that day, exactly as it happened".

She described how she heard a noise and found Raja trying to strangle her Aunt. He then turned on her and knocked her out. She found herself lying by the fire.

"Describe what happened next."

"He sat astride me and started choking me."

"Did he say anything while he was choking you?"

"I don't remember."

"Try to remember."

"Take your time, my dear," said Justice Ssendaula.

"He said, 'by the time I finish with you, you will be erased from the face of this earth'."

A cry went up in the courtroom. Justice Ssendaula banged her gavel. The noise subsided.

"What happened next?"

"I felt behind me and picked up the knife from the fireplace."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I hardly knew what I was doing."

"Why not?"

"In my mind", she wanted to say, "I thought it was my mother cutting that pregnant girl's bonds free with the nyangoda knife all those years ago," but she knew no one would understand, and it wasn't what her lawyer wanted to hear.

"All I knew was that he would kill me if I didn't do something to stop him."

Another saba saba whistled in the distance. They were getting closer now and people in the courtroom looked anxious, as though they were ready to leave. The Prosecutor, Kasame, wiped his brow and looked at Justice Ssendaula as if hoping for an adjournment. She merely raised an eyebrow and, since the defence had finished with Achieng, asked if he had any questions.

Having previously resisted any discussion of bride price, he now tried to turn it to his advantage. If it was true that five cows and five goats were paid for her, he said, “wasn’t that as a sign of appreciation to your parents for raising you up properly? And as compensation to your parents for the loss of your labour?”

“Yes.”

Switching from his smooth coaxing voice, he now looked at Achieng very coldly. “A good man offers a good number of cows for you to show his appreciation and what did you do? You stick a sickle-shaped knife into his back and kill him.”

“No!” cried Achieng.

“What was his crime? He came to you to demand the refund of his cows. What is wrong with that? Well?” Achieng did not respond. “Tell me!”

“To pay for me, and then demand cows back when I leave, means that he treated me like something bought or sold at market at Weyiwulera. Bride Price is against a woman’s human rights. I am entitled to my human rights.”

“And what do you, a mere village girl, know about human rights? What do you know about freedom?”

“I know that it was because of human rights that the Mau Mau fought for their freedom in Kenya. I know it was because of human rights that my father fought in the War of Clubs. And I know it is because of human rights that I am fighting here in court. I am not property to be owned.”

“Who told you that bride price is about buying women?”

“I know what it is and I’ve seen what it does. It is because of bride price that Raja could suspend me in a latrine for selling millet that I dug for with my own sweat. He could do this because, in his eyes, I was nothing more than human waste.”

“No further questions.”

“My dear, I like to see a woman who knows her rights,” the Judge said to Achieng. “Counsel, do you want to re cross-examine?”

“My Lord, I have just two questions for the accused.” Mary walked over and stood before Achieng. “Why do you think the deceased came to you that night?”

“He came to kill me.”

“And what do you think he intended doing with the matches?”

“He was going to burn down the hut so as to remove all trace of me from the earth.”

Miss Apio returned to her seat while the court digested this in silence.

In his closing statement, the State Prosecutor reiterated that this wasn't a case about bride price, but about murder with malice and forethought in the first degree. For that reason, he said, the accused must be found guilty and sentenced to death, “so that she suffers the same fate she inflicted on her poor husband who only sought to regain what rightly belonged to him.”

Miss Apio argued that, on the contrary, bride price was central to the case. “The deceased had come to demand his cows under the notorious custom of refunding cows when a marriage breaks down. He attempted to strangle her and would have killed her had she not defended herself. My client was fighting against the violation of her human rights. She was also fighting for her life when she killed the accused. It was an act of self-defence, not murder. My Lord, I pray that the Court finds my client innocent of the charge before her and acquits her.”

It was time for Justice Ssendaula to sum up the case to the two assessors and for the court to adjourn while they came to a decision. When they returned, the Judge looked tired and jumped at every sound as though expecting trouble. Perhaps she'd learnt something about the impending war during recess? Another rocket artillery had been launched, by the sound of it much nearer this time.

“Have you reached a verdict?” She asked the assessors.

The first assessor stood up and said, “Not guilty”.

The second assessor stood up and said, “Not guilty”.

Before telling the court whether she had reached the same verdict, Justice Ssendaula had some words to say about bride price which, she said, “goes against the principle that men and women are equal before the law. I would agree with Miss Apio that the custom of demanding refund of bride price is the worst aspect of this practice. As has been shown, it chains women in abusive marriages, and in this case, it has resulted in injury and death. The matter before this court is whether the accused committed murder. It seems clear from the evidence that the deceased resorted to violence in his demand for a refund and would have killed the accused had she not

acted in self-defence. I therefore agree with the assessors' opinion that the accused is acquitted. She is free to go.”

“All Rise!” The clerk shouted, as the judge left court, but the people had already risen and were flying toward the exit. Achieng caught sight of Misigile and Musisi grinning at her, trying to push their way forward, but they were pushed back and finally swept away with the crowd, while she was escorted back to prison – not to be detained there, but to collect her few belongings and walk free.

Epilogue This World Comes From Afar: *Piny me woki bori*

The war came to Tororo, but save for a day or two of fierce gunfire exchange, it was over very quickly. Shops were looted and men associated with Idi Amin's regime were necklaced and torched, but soon, people who had run to their village homes to hide returned to their town houses, and children went back to school. The dust from the war had settled, and over time, the country set about re-assembling itself.

After the trial, Achieng returned to Waya's place. She found her Aunt much recovered and they resumed their life together and went about their daily chores. Sometimes, she tethered *Dibore* to a nearby shrub to graze. It was the cow that Misigile had brought her as thanksgiving to God. Nyamiland had insisted, he said. Seeing the ordeals that the girl had gone through, it was the proper thing to do. One day, just as she was about to untie *Dibore* to take it home, she looked up to see a soldier coming toward her. A moment of panic overtook her and she stood still, but there was something in the way he walked, striding over the grass that was familiar. Then, he smiled and tilted his cap at her and the rope slipped out of her hands. A half sob, half cry escaped her and then she was running into his arms.

When she and Obel had got over their surprise at finding each other again, they walked hand in hand back to Achieng's little abode. He told her how he had escaped from the barracks when Sowo-Fire had ordered him into the yard to help load up bodies into trucks to be buried. A grader had dug up a big hole into which the bodies would be tipped. When Sowo-Fire left the yard to go into the office, Obel climbed inside the truck and hid among the bodies, guessing Sowo-Fire would never think to look for him there.

"I could hear him shouting, but even if he *had* guessed, he'd not have had the stomach to search for me. The lorry pulled away and we were driven to the airstrip to be buried. When the lorry tipped us out, I scrambled out from the bodies and ran. You should have seen their faces when they thought a corpse had come to life! They took off even faster than I did."

Achieng could not help smiling.

"I think you saved my life by reminding Sowo of my existence," Obel went on. "If he hadn't ordered me into the yard to load the bodies, I would have died. My cell mates were all clubbed to death in their cells."

Afterwards, he said, he fled to Kenya using the smugglers' route and slowly made his way to Tanzania and joined the liberation army. Only recently were they given a choice to remain in the army or return to civilian life. He had chosen to quit and would soon be formally discharged. He had nothing to fear from Sowo-Fire any more as he'd been caught escaping to the north in a stolen car and shot dead.

"There is a piece of land waiting for us in the Sukulu hills," he said. "And children to raise."

"We already have two," she said looking over to where Kilo and his sister, Baby, were playing, mingling with the other children. She then told him about the promise she had made to look after Kilo and his baby sister.

"Then we have no time to waste," he said.

She wondered if he knew about Raja. "You know he died at my hands?"

"You did it in self-defence," said Obel. "You also probably saved Waya's life."

"I fear his ghost may not leave us in peace."

"He is the guilty one. He had it coming."

She recalled the day she returned to Migana and collected Kilo who was then ten, and Baby, a little girl of six. She'd worried how Raja's parents might react, but their warmth surprised her. "Who is the strange woman smiling so warmly at me?" Granddad asked while Grandma signified forgiveness by offering her a gourd of water. But, she did not visit Raja's grave; she'd come to make peace with the living not the dead. Only Chief Wife was cold toward her. "And what do *you* want here?" She asked. Achieng shook the sand off her sandals and left.

However, there was still peace to be made with Super. One day, she went to see her in the slums where she had heard that Super was living. She found her sitting outside with a little brown dog for company. Her once glowing skin was as pale as ash and her hair, which used to be thick, hung like grey string on her head. She was suffering from the new disease *slim*, later to be known as AIDS although children called it "eggs". There was no cure. It was painful to watch Super trying to eat, her hands trembling from weakness. Flies alighted on the plate and she did not even bother to swat at one that sat on her nose. Achieng fetched some water and helped Super wash her hands. Then, she made some tea. Super had a small transistor radio from which *lingala* or *zairwa* music was playing. It was the song *Malaika na kupende* – "Angel I love you."

“I have come to apologise,” Achieng said. “Let’s leave the past behind us. I forgive you and I hope you will forgive me too.”

Super put down her cup of tea. “Achieng,” she said, “You have no forgiveness to ask of me, nor me of you.”

They drank the rest of the tea in silence. Achieng knew she would not see her alive again. She was glad she had come, but was glad to be leaving too.

She often wondered about the curse that Uncle Jagwe had laid on her and whether Raja had laid one on her too. Would he haunt her because she had killed him? Would she see his ghost, just as she’d seen Milo Kilo’s ghost under the Oberi tree? Ghosts faded in time. The only face that hadn’t faded, that still haunted her after all these years, was that of girl who Nyamiland had rescued. When the girl locked eyes with her as she was led away, perhaps it wasn’t a curse or a haunting, but an attempt to recruit her as an ally in the fight against the oppression of women. She’d learned a lot about resistance. When she returned home, she had realised that many of her people were engaged in some form of protest or other. There was her father, Misigile, who had protested the increased poll tax and fought in the war of clubs; there was her mother, Nyamiland who fought to protect the girl being tortured; there was Waya, who resisted culture and had fought for her; and Achieng who herself had fought against being owned, against being treated as property. All of them were engaged in writing some script of their own of what kind of life they wanted to lead. And there they were, all these village people who had rushed to the village centre to watch the girl being tortured now came bringing gifts of eggs, milk, ghee, and chicken. Where before she used to ride on Lando the bull, she now milked Dibore, the cow. Life goes on, and she saw how these people here were also brave in their resistance and stubborn in their powers of survival. It was no wonder, perhaps, that they made her feel welcome, as though a warrior had returned from battle, with the women bringing her food and offering to watch over her children. Soon, they would notice that another child was coming, the one growing in her womb, and they would help her bring it into the world. She hoped it would be a girl and that any war her daughter fought would be a fight for freedom, for love without a price tag, and for the right to be respected not owned.

Notes

The rate of gender-based violence in Uganda is estimated at 68% for violence affecting women (which is well above the international average of between 28-33%) (*Uganda Bureau of Statistics*).

49% of women “okay” wife beating. According to the findings of the Uganda Demographic and Health Survey 2016, released by the Government, 49 per cent of the women, respondents aged 15-49, agreed with at least one justification why a husband can beat his wife.

In Uganda, 56% of women between ages 15 to 49 experience physical violence while 28% experience sexual violence every year (*The Uganda Demographic Health Survey (2011)*).

In 2008, for the first time, the Uganda Police recorded cases of Domestic Violence as separate crimes in its annual crime report.

The MIFUMI project estimates that 60% of all domestic violence cases reported to advice centres are bride price related (*MIFUMI 2000*).

The MIFUMI project is a grassroots women’s rights agency working to end violence against women and the harmful practices that condone such violence, such as bride price and polygamy. www.mifumi.org

Critical Commentary: Bride Price and Literary Activism in Uganda

Introduction

My PhD is an investigation of bride price, which I approach autobiographically, legally and creatively. Bride price is widely practised in Africa and other parts of the world, though to explore its many forms is beyond the scope of this commentary. Instead I focus on Uganda, my country of origin. However, even within Uganda there are different practices in different regions. What I am setting out to do is to tell an evolving story about the custom and practice of bride price – and about the campaign to abolish it. My thesis draws on my experience of work through MIFUMI, the NGO I co-founded in 1997 in Mifumi, the village from which the charity takes its name.

The tradition of Bride Price – when a groom pays cows or cash to the parents of his intended bride – has been embedded in cultures across Africa for generations. Originally it had positive and useful connotations. But as societies have modernised, bride price has become increasingly commercial, cynical and destructive – preying particularly on the right of women to a violence-free life. There is no doubt that bride price is a cherished practice in many parts of Africa. It is also a way of validating marriage for the majority of women who live in rural areas and are subject to customary marriage law (Chimonga 2018). Thus there is spirited opposition to any attempts to question its' value. This was evident in Uganda when I began my investigation into bride price with the foremost issue being whether bride price was a contributing factor to domestic violence. Wider questions to the debate soon became apparent: whether bride price contributed to poverty; whether the custom and practice relegated women to the status of a chattel or turned them into slaves and finally the issue of early and forced child marriages within a poverty context where girls were taken out of school and forced into marriage to gain income from bride price payments. During the campaign the questions changed from the issues to the strategies for campaign. In response to the question of changing culture, the point was raised that culture was not static but kept evolving. If so should the culture of bride price not be allowed to evolve at its' own pace or slowly die out? This led to the question of whether bride price should be abolished or reformed, and how reform would look? However, the most controversy remained the issue of whether bride price treated women as property and whether it contributed to gender-based violence. (See Hague and Thiara, 2011). To this day, bride price is considered the third institution,

next to female genital mutilation and polygamy, which brings out the tension between culture and women's human rights in Africa (Kisaakye, 2002).

My intention is to look at bride price in terms of its human rights implications, particularly the violation of women's rights, where previously it has been viewed as a local custom. The majority of women in Africa are subject to bride price, yet it remains one of the most contested aspects of customary marriage (which in Uganda refers to Marriages conducted under the Customary Marriage Act or the Marriage of Africans Act), both in terms of its nature and functions, and from the perspective of women's rights. In Uganda, it is only recently that bride price has been challenged in court as unconstitutional. And though it has been regulated in other African countries – for instance, Ivory Coast abolished the practice in 1964 – this has been achieved through legislature rather than in the arena of human rights.

I will begin with some definitions. In sub-Saharan Africa, bride price is the payment of cows or money to the parents of the prospective bride to secure marriage. The then legal scholar (now Justice) Esther Kisaakye, in her article “Women, Culture and Human Rights” (2002, p.280), writes: “Bride Price is a collective name used to refer to various gifts, property, etc., given by the prospective bridegroom and/or his family to the family of the bride-to-be, in consideration of marriage, which either is yet to take place or has taken place”. She also highlights bride price as “one single ritual that has been singled out as an essential requirement for contracting a valid customary marriage” (p.280) (See also *Mange vs Manono*, 1958, EA. 124; *Uganda vs Eduku*, 1975, HCB. 359). The adoption of this ritual as a preliminary to marriage has been emphasised by other African legal scholars. For instance, D. D. Nsereko, in the article “The Nature and Function of Marriage Gifts in Customary African Marriages” (1975), writes: “the giving of marriage gifts is a legal obligation and the gifts are given for a specific purpose” (p.683), and Kulsum Wakabi in her briefing paper “Bride Price and Domestic Violence” (2000, p.1) holds that “in a typical African setting bride price consists of a contract where material items of money are paid by the groom to the bride's father in exchange for the bride, her labour and reproductive capacity”.

A significant aspect of the bride price custom is the requirement of refund at the dissolution of marriage. Nsereko writes: “The gifts must be returned by the bride's father or guardian in full or in part if the intended marriage does not take place, is not consummated or ends in divorce” (p.689). The same issue is summarised by Wakabi

(2000, p.1): “If the bride/wife wants to divorce, the material items or money paid to the bride/wife’s father have to be returned to the husband. If the family is unable to pay, the wife cannot get a divorce and is condemned to live in an unhappy and sometimes fatal marriage”.

The terms “marriage gifts”, “marriage consideration” or “marriage-payment” are sometimes used instead of “bride price”, although many African scholars argue that none of these English terms convey the true meaning of this ancient African custom, because “inherent in most of them is the idea of sale, which is inaccurate” (Nsereko, p.682). The Uganda Law Reform Commission, in the “Study Report on Marriage and Divorce in Uganda” (2000), uses the term “marriage-gifts”.

The contention that the term “bride price” is incorrect and that the term “marriage gifts” should be used instead, has always seemed problematic to me. Kenneth Kakuru, a city lawyer (now a judge) and the second respondent in the MIFUMI case (2015) put up a spirited rejection of the term “bride price”. (See *What Price Bride Price*, 2013) arguing that “no one is bought or sold and that there is no purchase”. However a gift as defined in the Cambridge English Dictionary is “a present or something that is given” and as “something given voluntarily without payment in return, as to show favour to someone, honour an occasion...”. That it is given without consideration is the kernel of the idea of a gift. My argument is that if it is a gift why is it demanded and specified in terms of value, and secondly why is a refund or repayment demanded in the event of a break down of marriage? It is clear to me that bride price is a financial transaction which resembles a contract in that there is often a written agreement that is signed, stipulating the amount paid, with the provision that it shall be refunded in the event of a break down of marriage. The bride price represents compensation for the loss of labour of the bride when she leaves her parents home, to become part of her husband’s family. During the drawing up of the Domestic Relations Bill in 2003 (later renamed the Family Law Bill and which is still in parliament at the time of writing), Civil Society Organisations were invited to give feedback on the proposed bill. I wrote to the Law Reform Commission raising MIFUMI’s objection to the use of the term marriage gifts, arguing that this did not reflect the true nature of the custom and practice and that bride price should be inserted into the Bill with the idea that it is then reformed to “marriage gifts”. If a “gift” is definitely a gift, why the need to legislate against it? It is the bride price that is the problem and which, I argued needed to be written out of law. However our

objection “to call a spade a spade” as uttered by a priest at the MIFUMI bride price conference (2004) was not fully taken on board. Eventually however, bride price was added in the preliminary definitions to read: “marriage gifts” means a gift whether in cash or kind given by either party to a marriage in respect of the marriage, and includes *bride price and bride wealth* (emphasis mine). However society continues to prefer to name it “marriage gifts.” Property can be bought or sold. Bride price has been referred to as a slave-like practice (See Tamale, 2003 and Kulsum, 2000). My mother recounting to me the discussion that took place during the Kalema Commission said women reported that it likened them to articles of trade in a market that could be bought and sold (See Kalema Report, 1965).

Historically, bride price consisted of cows and smaller animals such as goats and sheep. Later it included valuable items such as cowrie shells and hoes. The amounts varied among the different tribes in Uganda, with as little as five to over 100 head of cattle being demanded or paid in the form of cash (Wakabi, 2000). Despite the tribal differences, there are common elements to the practice. For example, it is generally accepted that bride price is a conditional payment, that it will be refunded in cases of marriage breakdown, and that its negotiation is contingent on the parents rather than the wishes of the prospective bride and groom. In central Uganda (Buganda region), bride price is symbolic and is not designated in cows, possibly because the residents in this community have historically been agriculturalists. In Kiganda culture, the word “*omutwalo*”, meaning literally 10,000 shillings (now signifying a specified sum of money), means “bride wealth” when used in relation to marriage. This development is widely attributed to the pronouncement made by the then Bishop Joseph Kiwanuka of Masaka in the early 1960s, as a way of restricting bride price to no more than the *mutwalo*, or 10,000 shillings. A surge in education for girls had raised the price to new levels, and the Bishop imposed a limit of 120 SHS for all his Catholic followers in Masaka. His move met with some opposition, especially from fathers who had seen an opportunity to get easy money by “selling” their daughters into marriage so that they could buy *pikipiki* (motorbikes). One young suitor was allegedly told, “If you want to pay only 120 SHS, go marry Bishop Kiwanuka's daughter!”

Bride price in Buganda traditionally includes small amounts of money, food items, cloth gifts for the bride’s mother and aunts, and *kanzus* (tunics) for the father and brothers. However, in Buganda the commercialised aspect of bride price is visible in

the display of goods during the “give away” or introduction ceremony known as *kwanjula*, which literally means “to introduce”. Increasingly, such presents range from cars, furniture such as sofa sets, to household appliances like fridges – a showcase or display of wealth which can have a negative effect on those who cannot afford such gifts. When I interviewed Rhoda Kalema, a veteran female politician who is also known as the country’s “Mother of Parliament”, on the issue of bride price, she remarked that whereas in the past introductory ceremonies (hosted by the bride’s family) consisted of only a few people, now people in their hundreds were turning up. Gifts are becoming more expensive for the giver, and the ceremony financially draining for the host (Businge, 2006).

In northern parts of Uganda, bride price is paid in the form of cattle. In the north-east, where the nomadic Karamojong are found, bride price is known as *ekiitan*, and up to 100 head of cattle can be demanded; it can take a man up to ten years to pay the instalments. In the northern districts of Gulu, Kitgum and Pader, occupied by the Acholi, the word for both marriage and bride price is *nyom* (Businge, 2006), although the word *akumu* is also used. In Lugbara to the north-west, bride wealth is called *aje*. To the east, neighbouring Tororo (where I grew up) is Teso, home to the Itesots, a semi-nomadic people. In Ateso, bride wealth is referred to as *emaali* or *akituk nu emanyit*, meaning “cows for purposes of the marriage ceremony” (see the *Ateso-English English for International Learners* by Apuda Ignatius Loyola, pages 192, 415 and 344). A popular belief about the early practice of bride price – among the Bahima of Western Uganda and in Teso – is that the father of the bride would throw a spear into the herd and be allowed to claim all those cows located between him and the spear. In Teso, the number of cows used to range between 18 and 25, but after the insurgencies it now stands at 2–7 head of cattle, and cash (MIFUMI Case, 2015, p.12).

The Bahima, mainly found in Ankole, are semi-nomadic, although they’re now settling down as pastoralists. Bride price here is known as *enjugano*. Here the number of cattle demanded as bride price can also be exorbitant, an issue commented on by the President, Yoweri Museveni, who said it was very unfortunate that fathers were turning their daughters into “income-generating projects” by demanding hefty sums of money and herds of cattle from future-in-laws. Museveni said that the issue of “selling girls” in Ankole had gone too far, with some parents now demanding only Friesian cows (The Monitor, 1999, quoted in Wakabi, 2000). In my family, my niece

married a man from Ankole (a medical doctor from America who was visiting Uganda), and my cousin asked for 100 Friesian cows. When the marriage broke down, he could not afford the refund. However, in Ankole, the gift is reciprocated from the bride to the groom, in a process known as *okuhingira* (Munaabi, 2005). This would indicate an exchange rather than a transfer, whereby gifts are also given to the groom's family. However, the exchange is not equivalent, because the gifts to the groom's family are smaller and are regarded as voluntary.

It is worth noting that in many of the tribes in Uganda, the term "bride wealth" is used interchangeably with the word "dowry". See *Wongo vs Dominiko* (1958, EA), *Aggrey Aworia vs Rosette Tagire* (HCCS 178/2000) and *Namezio Ayiia Pet vs Sabina Onzia Ayiia* (Divorce Petition No. 8 of 1973).

In Tororo, where I come from, the bride price custom is deeply entrenched. The word *nywom* can be loosely translated as "bride-wealth", and *lim nywom* as "marriage wealth". The term *welo mweha* (literally "the price of a bride") more accurately defines bride price. Historically, gifts consisted of bracelets, anklets and precious coins; a man might even part with his prized hunting dog. However, with the advent of the cash economy, this gradually changed to payment in the form of cattle. Tororo is a relatively poor area, so bride price is regarded as an important source of income. One of the worst aspects of the practice is the refund expected at the dissolution of marriage: this either chains women in abusive marriages or, as a CNN report on *African Voices* put it, "forces women to pay to divorce their abuser" (Anyangwe, 2015). Poverty leads to harassment over the refund, including land grabbing, the jailing of parents, and harassment of widows. The practice also includes the refusal to bury a woman for whom bride price has not been paid. (See Appendix 1: Map of Uganda showing bride price areas).

Tororo was one of the places where colonialists attempted to regulate the practice. In the former Bukedi District (present-day Tororo, Pallisa, Busia, Butatejja and Budaka), the Bukedi Bride Price law entitled Legal Notice No. 259 of 1950 (revised 1964) restricted bride price to the payment of five cows, five goats and the equivalent of 25 currency points. Other neighbouring districts with similar problems also had bride price regulated, to curb exorbitant demands. (See the Teso Birth Marriages and Death law, Legal Notice No. 252 of 1959; the Bugishu bride price law, Legal Notice No.

1766 of 1960; the Sebei Bride Price Law, Legal Notice No. 176 of 1960; and the West Nile District Council byelaw on bride price, *Wongo vs Dominiko*, 1958, EA).

To give the reader a general background to the nature of Family Law and Customary Law in Uganda, the English legal system and law are predominant in Uganda, owing to Uganda's history as a protectorate of the British Empire from 1894 to 1962. As such, the legal system is based on English Common Law and Customary Law. The laws applicable in Uganda are statutory law, case law, customary law, common law and doctrines of equity, as recognised by the Judicature Act. In Uganda, the British recognised the traditional Kingdoms and allowed them to exercise judicial power in their courts, which gave a background to the dual system of law that exists in Uganda. In places where the British applied "direct rule", English law applied. For a marriage to be considered as legal in Uganda, it had to comply with the laws in place to regulate marriages. These are the Marriage Act, Cap 251; Customary Marriage Act, Cap 248; and Marriage of Africans Act, (1904).

The difficulty that this presents is that there is not one single law governing marriage. People can conduct marriage more than once under the different legal definitions of marriage. This allows the coexistence of monogamous and polygamous marriages without any restrictions. For example a man might conduct a marriage under Church law or a civil marriage and then marry another wife under customary law, which recognises polygamy and where the only requirement is the payment of bride price. This has complications as Kisaakye (2002) explains:

By giving an exclusive right to the man to marry up to four wives in Islam and an unlimited number of wives under customary law, the right of women to equality in such marriages is violated. The discrimination is further aggravated by the fact that many legal regimes that permit polygamy do not grant a right to a wife to divorce a husband who has married a second wife. On the contrary, the legal regimes provide for very stringent laws on adultery, particularly for married women, and entitle a husband to divorce the wife, even after a single incident of adultery. For example in Uganda, prior to the 1995 Constitution (See Kisaakye 2002 and Uganda Association of Women Lawyers, 2004), a husband could petition for divorce under s.5 of the Divorce Act on the grounds of his wife's adultery and also claim for damages and costs

against the man who committed adultery with his wife. In addition, the wife and the co-adulterer would be liable for criminal prosecution for adultery under s. 150A of the Penal Code. The wife, on the other hand had to couple the grounds of adultery with additional grounds such as cruelty or desertion for two or more years and the husband could be prosecuted only if the woman he had sex with was married. In many customary regimes this would also be accompanied with a legitimate demand for return of the bride price that was paid, irrespective of the duration of the marriage, the number of children borne by the women and the relationship enjoyed for the duration by the divorcing polygamous husband. (p. 279)

Today, the institution of bride price has infiltrated many different forms of marriages in Uganda, e.g. Civil, Christian, Hindu and Islamic marriages. In fact, the institution of bride price is so "deeply entrenched in Ugandan society that ... in practice, [even] a civil marriage will not be regarded as valid by all concerned parties unless it has been preceded by bride price." (Sylvia Tamale, *Law Reform and Women's Rights in Uganda*, 1 East Afr. J. Peace & Human Rts. 164-171, 1993; see also Uganda Association of Women Lawyers (FIDA-U), *A Research Project on Marriage, Its Rights and Duties and Marital Rape* 4.2, 1996).

The women's movement in Uganda has attempted to table a family law bill that mainstreams the law regulating marriage under one Act. However since it was first discussed in the Commission on the Status of Women (Kalema, 1965) and tabled in Parliament in the early 80s, the bill has failed to be passed into law. A similar recommendation in terms of lobola was made by Women and Law in Southern Africa (WLSA) who in their book *Lobola: Its implications for women's reproductive rights* (2002) recommended that "Marriage systems should be unified into one general law that would apply to everyone" (p. 47).

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The key players in the bride price discourse in Uganda before independence were the colonialists, closely backed by the early missionaries, who disapproved of African customary marriages, including polygamy – given that the Christian perspective defined marriage as the voluntary union for life of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others. Bride price is linked to polygamy because a man can marry as many women as he can pay for. Chief Justice Sir Robert Hamilton in *Rex vs Amkeyo*, 7 E.A.L.R. (1917) stated: “I know no word that correctly describes it [customary marriage]; ‘wife purchase’ is not altogether satisfactory, but it comes much nearer to the idea than that of ‘marriage’ as generally understood among civilized people.” This position was maintained for many years during colonial rule. Bride price was dealt with mainly through the administrative and judicial functions of the colonial government, which attempted first to abolish it, then to regulate it in the form of byelaws and statutes.

In part because of the negative attitude of missionaries and colonialists, anthropologists and ethnologists became interested in the custom, and there were several attempts at interpretation of bride price (Ogbu, 1978). Several scholars of the Royal Anthropological Society engaged in the debate, recommending the use of terms such as “Espousal Fee” (Wilson-Haffenden, 1931), “Inheritance Fee” (Driberg, 1929), and “Bride-Price: Earnest or Indemnity” (Radcliffe-Brown, 1929). The discourse seemed to suggest that the principal controversy around bride price arose from the notion of “price”. The debate which began with Torday, who published a letter on the subject: “Bride-Price, Dower, or Settlement” (1929a), continued for a long period, from the late 1920s to the late 1970s. It was taken up by Lord Raglan, who defended his position in an exchange of letters between 1929 and 1931, where he commented that use of such terms as “bargain, indebtedness, defalcation, appears to emphasise the essentially commercial nature of the transaction” (1929, p.75). Commenting on bride price among the Nilotic tribes, he wrote that “girls are regarded as a source of wealth”, and “spears or other articles of value were readily accepted in part payment” (p.75). Driberg (1929) used the term “Inheritance Fee” to describe the link between bride price and wife inheritance, observing that “Among the Lango a widow is normally inherited by a brother of the deceased or by his brother’s son, and in either case one bull (called bull of inheritance) is payable by the new husband, to the woman’s family” (p.87). In his letter to the editor of *MAN* (the journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute), Driberg took issue with Lord Raglan’s view that “bride

price is a purely economic transaction”, as he “did not believe that a single factor can be so easily isolated from the complex of activities which we call culture” (p.74). He was critical of Europeans for depicting native marriage as a merely commercial transaction. According to him, “the main, though not the exclusive emphasis will be found to rest in the legal aspect, bride price, that is, being the means which ensure the legal filiation of the children of the union” (p.74). Later, in his study “The Status of Women among the Nilotics and Nilo-Hamitics”, Driberg held that “bride price stood as security for the good treatment of the wife in her new home and served as a social and political link between the clans of the contracting parties” (1932, p.413). In this regard, he encapsulated what several Africanists regard as the pre-colonial idea behind bride price.

Other anthropologists used, or suggested the use of, such words as “dower”, “settlement”, “earnest” and “indemnity”; but “bride price” still had its supporters, as it was considered more convenient to employ an English portmanteau-word rather than utilise one such as “*lobola*” (Evans-Pritchard, p.36). Radcliffe-Brown in “Bride-Price: Earnest or Indemnity” (1929) held the view that “Marriage ... in African communities involves an infringement of the rights that a group of relatives of clansmen have over the members of the group, and the primary function of payments of cattle or other forms of wealth is to compensate the group for this disruption of its solidarity”. He argues that “The payment of bride-price is an indemnity in just the same sense as blood-price or war gold” (p.131).

A notable aspect of this discourse is the lack of any discussion of what a woman gains – or loses – from bridewealth payment. The major conclusions can be summarised as follows: bride price exists to secure legal rights for the husband over his wife (Evans-Pritchard, 1934; Radcliffe-Brown, 1960); to secure for the husband rights over the domestic and sexual services of his wife (Radcliffe-Brown, 1950); to secure for the husband rights over the offspring of his wife (Evans-Pritchard, 1934); and to compensate the woman’s male kin for the loss of her labour (Radcliffe-Brown, 1950). The debate continued well into the 1970s, as can be seen in John Ogbu’s article, “African bridewealth and women’s status” (1978), which is critical of the anthropologists mentioned above for approaching bride price “from the point of view of what is important to the men ... (possibly attributable to an anti-feminist bias) that is, in terms of interests of the male in African societies” (p.241). He asks: “But what does bride-wealth do for the woman? What rights does the woman achieve in

marriage in African societies?” (p.242). According to him, in the continuing debate on the functions of bridewealth, women figure mainly as one of the commodities of exchange. He departs from this traditional approach by looking at the functions of bridewealth from the point of view of both sexes. However, he concludes that bridewealth serves to enhance, not diminish, the status of African women (p.242). Thus, there was no gendered critique of bride price until John Ogbu took it up; and even he was in tune with the other anthropologists in seeing it not as a commercial transaction, but one that benefited women because it validated marriage.

It was only in the 1990s – widely viewed as a key decade in advancing the discussion of human rights – that bride price began to be recognised as a harmful practice. In 1992, the UN General Assembly passed a Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, after the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women (CEDAW) in 1989 had recognised gender-based violence as a form of discrimination and thereby a human rights issue. At the Vienna Conference in 1993, Hillary Clinton famously declared, “Women’s Rights are Human Rights”. In 1995, Uganda, together with other UN nations, endorsed the Beijing Platform of Action and Beijing Declaration.

In 2000, Uganda took violence against women as a priority area in its National Action Plan on Women: the government pledged to join other states to eliminate violence against women, and human rights violations that resulted from harmful traditional practices. Payment of bride price was regarded as one such harmful practice. Moreover, the Poverty Eradication Action Plan (2005) highlighted bride price as the most significant factor holding back women’s empowerment.

It was within this context that MIFUMI came into being. And in the new millennium, I launched the MIFUMI campaign on bride price to give a platform to a new breed of activists who saw it as a human rights issue. A key milestone was the MIFUMI international bride price conference, the first of its kind, in 2004. This brought together delegates from 18 countries in Africa, including NGO workers, human rights activists, health practitioners, academics and scholars. They presented over 100 papers on bride price from many different angles, bringing out its implications for health; for economic, legal and social rights; and above all, for women. Among the keynote speakers were opinion leaders in positions of authority. In her paper “Bride Price And Violence Against Women” (2004), Justice Oguli-Oumo linked bride price to poverty, and showed how “many people have had to lose their

homes and land to repay dowry or end up in prison as this is treated as a civil debt". She also highlighted the fact that some young men and women resort to cohabitation or elopement to avoid paying bride price. Miria Matembe, a leading feminist in Uganda, demonstrated the link between bride price and domestic violence, quoting a woman interviewed for a report on domestic violence by Law and Advocacy for Women in Uganda (April 2002):

I have been married for five years during which time my husband has consistently battered me. And when I went back to my family, my father rebuked me because my husband threatened to claim his bride wealth he had paid. I have been hospitalized several times and my body is visibly mutilated.

Margaret Sekaagya, then Chairperson of the Uganda Human Rights Commission, added to Oguli-Oumo's voice by linking bride price to poverty, stating that "In rural areas where the poverty levels are high, the practice has increasingly become commercialised in nature, with the parents of the girl or woman extracting as much as they can from the prospective groom". She linked bride price to forms of slavery, and declared that the practice of bride price can and should be challenged as a custom incompatible with the 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, as well as making reference to the more recent Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women. Sylvia Tamale, a law professor, discussed how the reconceptualisation of bride price led to the commodification of women. Commenting on the "Report on the Study of Inheritance Laws and Practices in Uganda" by Women and the Law in East Africa (WLEA) (1996), she said the study findings showed that infused within inheritance practices was the common notion that wives were part of the inheritance estate. A remark by one male respondent was very telling indeed. When asked for his views on women's rights to inheritance, his brief retort was "How can property inherit property?" (WLEA, 1996, quoted in Tamale, 2004, p.9). Patrick Ndira, MIFUMI's deputy executive director, highlighted the impact of bride price on children's rights. According to him, many children experience psycho-social stress as a result of bride price violations, through feeling rejected by their parents or relatives or because of torn loyalties. He cited the following case to make this point:

Achieng had divorced and left for Busoga for a period of one year. When she returned for a funeral the community saw her seated on a bicycle passing by. One man alerted Achieng's husband saying, "Have you seen your cows roaming about?" That's when the husband picked up a panga (machete) and pursued. Getting closer he wanted to cut her neck, but she put the child she was carrying as a shield thinking that he would refrain. He did not. Instead he cut the child on the head. MIFUMI intervened and the baby survived, however the child has developed retardation as a result. The case was taken through Police and Court. The perpetrator was arrested, however he was released on court bail, which he skipped and is now on the run.

Ndira also highlighted cases relating to the denial of burial to a woman who dies before bride price is paid, arguing that this impacts on moral dignity and integrity.

Another important paper (later published elsewhere) emerged from the collaboration between the Makerere University departments of Medical School, Public Health and Gender Studies, in the form of a qualitative study that found links between bride price and women's reproductive health. In their findings, they concluded that "payment of bride price emerged as one of the key factors associated with domestic violence", and that "bride price has implications on gender relations in different socio-cultural contexts and impacts on sexual and reproductive health" (Kaye, D. et al., 2005, p.300). David Bashai and Shoshana Grossbard made a similar point in their paper "Far Above Rubies" (2010), while Hague and Thiara in their study "Bride Price, Poverty and Domestic Violence in Uganda (2009, p.18) observed that "the majority of interviewees in all the data-sets believed there was a connection between bride price and domestic violence", a finding since confirmed by Muthegheki et al. (2012) in their paper "An Exploratory Study of Bride Price and Domestic Violence in Bundibugyo district, Uganda".

Many scholars concede that bride price would be difficult to eradicate because it is embedded within people's lives (Oguli-Oumo, 2004) and is perceived as being of cultural and religious importance by both men and women (Sekaakya, 2004). Women in particular support the practice, despite the fact that it violates their rights, as they erroneously believe that it reflects their value and enhances their respect in the community. Matembe (2004) writes that legislating against bride price will not be a solution to discrimination against women, which can only be eradicated through the

promotion of women's status through education and economic empowerment – and only then might women begin to equate their value with their skills and achievements, rather than the bride price they can fetch.

While changes are taking place in society, the law has been slow to catch up. It is through the campaigns by the Uganda Women's Movement, which stretch back over 40 years, that a potential change to the law on Domestic Relations is now under consideration. While allowing for the retention of bride price, the proposed amendment states that "Marriage gifts shall not be essential requirements for any marriage under this Act, but where marriage gifts have been given by any party to a marriage under this Act, it shall be an offence to demand for the return of the marriage gifts" (Domestic Relations Bill, Section 15). The bill is currently awaiting its passage through parliament, but if enacted it will be an important step towards the abolition of bride price.

In my opening address at the MIFUMI bride price conference, I said that women had been silenced for too long on the subject of bride price, and that it was now time for us tell our stories – to shout them from the rooftops and treetops until our voices were heard. I now turn to how my mother's story on bride price spurred me into action, and how I later went on to write a novel.

Chapter One: Telling My Mother's Story: From Auto/Biography to Fiction

There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.

Maya Angelou, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, 1969

Sometime in the late 1930s, an incident happened in a small village in the east of Uganda. A girl was subjected to sexual violence in public, as a punishment. Evelyn Alowo, my mother, then about nine years old, witnessed the scene of torture. She learnt from her aunt that the girl was being punished because of bride price: a wealthy man had paid many cows to marry her; but then it was found she was already pregnant by her sweetheart, a poor village boy, so the cows had to be returned and her parents missed out. My mother watched as my grandmother broke into the crowd and cut the girl free. I learned about this episode only in 2000, after my mother made a chance remark to me: "If you want to put a stop to domestic violence, you need to address bride price," she said, and went on to narrate the story, thereby breaking a sixty-year silence.

The above account encapsulates the focus of my research: to explore the strong linkage between storytelling and actions, comprehensively described by Schaffer and Smith (2004), whose work I shall discuss in further detail in Chapter 2, and which includes issues such as context and space, agency, collective narratives and their potential development into other genres (Smith and Watson, 2010). My mother's story is important for two reasons: it led to my activism on bride price through the charity MIFUMI, and it inspired me to write *The Price of a Woman*. This is why I use the sub-title *From auto/biography to fiction* for this chapter, borrowing the forward slash from Laura Marcus in her *Auto/biographical Discourses* (1994).

Marcus takes issue with recent critics, who, "attempting to open up the modes of autobiographical representation, ... have coined neologisms intended to redefine, extensionally and intentionally, 'autobiography' away from the limits of its component parts, self-life-writing" (p.294). She argues that "The term auto/biography,

which I have used throughout this book, is one such attempt to indicate the affinities between biography and autobiography as traditionally defined” (p.294). I use extracts from my mother’s story in this chapter in a way that contains a considerable amount of story telling. This is a deliberately chosen method to illustrate how her oral memoir intersects at points with my creative project, particularly in the early parts of the novel, which is why I recount the interviews (See Alowo 2008, p.3, Nyapendi 2016, p.2) to show how the remnants of her story are used in plotting *The Price of a Woman*.

My mother’s remark led me to co-found MIFUMI, and prompted a campaign that resulted in the court case discussed in Chapter 2, which in turn developed into the autobiographical novel; this is a demonstration of how life narratives and human rights campaigns, previously thought to exist mainly in the different domains of politics and literature, can exist as multidimensional domains that “merge and intersect at critical points, unfolding with and enfolding one another” (Schaffer and Smith, 2004, p.2).

Until my mother’s chance remark, bride price had always seemed to me a harmless, even charming, tradition. And it wasn’t the focus when MIFUMI was first registered in 1994, or when in 1997 it established a project to provide loans to women in rural areas, so that they could set up small businesses. But over time we found that these businesses were suffering because the women couldn’t repay their loans. My mother, then Chair of the Nagongera Women’s Guild, explained the reason: “They can’t repay the loans because their partners borrow from them, then beat them up when they ask for their money back.” At the time, gender issues were rarely discussed in Africa, least of all by the post-colonial male authors whose novels were then being published. In Uganda, particularly in rural areas, the concept of domestic violence as a serious matter, let alone a crime, was virtually unknown. We were unaware that in the same year, UNICEF’s “State of the World” report had ranked Uganda as having the highest rate of domestic violence in the world, with 59 per cent of women having experienced domestic violence in their lives. But as my mother showed, the struggle to end women’s oppression in Africa does have a voice. Without knowing it, she had taken domestic violence out of the private sphere and introduced it into the public domain. In her words, when I interviewed her:

To Piny wire to wach ma dhou me wok, kothi wach ma goyo moni. Woki kisi adechi wach nwango woki ni chal moro ogoyo chege puneko. Moni megi oneki kir kwongi wach ma dwoko nywom. Kadhano moro okidho theko jo, chwo ju wacho ni, “Mara goni agoyin? A goyo dhoki paran. To wa wegi wapenjere ni, to dhoki mene me mi luwo kwonge? Dhoki no ma nywom. Kisi ka jachwo dhou gi dhako wacho ni bedi ki go, dinyo ku firiwa dhoki pere abich. Dinyo onyalo nwango lim ma go ido mito.

The world changed and the issue of fighting came out, especially the beating of women. From every centre, word would come that the man had beaten his wife, almost killing her. Some women have even been killed over the issue of refund of Bride Price. Whenever anyone went to mediate, the men would say: Did I beat you? I was beating my cow. So we asked ourselves what are these cows they are talking about? The cows were the Bride Price. Whenever the man felt aggrieved about the woman he would say that if it was not for her, he would not have given up his five cows. He would have been able to get what he wanted. (Alowo, 2008, pp.8–9)

My mother’s ideas were shaped by the event described earlier, which happened when she was nine years old. It occurred in the small village where she lived, Mulanda, in the late 1930s. What she witnessed is described in the opening of my novel. A girl of about 13 years is tied down to the ground, naked. A woman rushes through the crowd and cuts the bonds. Achieng, the protagonist in my story, asks her aunt why the girl is being punished. “It is all about bride price,” her aunt responds. The woman who rescued the girl was my grandmother, and the young girl asking the question was my mother.

When a girl, or a woman, is physically and sexually violated in an act of torture calculated to destroy her body, it is also an attempt to silence her; and as such, it is the kind of human rights abuse that Slaughter (1997) characterises as an infringement of the modern subject’s ability to narrate her story. Voice is fundamental to human rights, which is why freedom of speech is provided as the first human rights principle. The story of the torture parallels what Schaffer and Smith (2004, p.4) describe as

being "... enlisted with and attached to a human rights framework – strong emotive stories often chronicling degradation, brutalisation, exploitation and physical violence".

Why did my mother only break her silence many years later, despite attending a conference in Kampala in 1965 where bride price was debated? Probably because the mechanisms of human rights law, and the platforms which empower subjects to speak, had changed in the 1990s (Slaughter, 1997). It was in this context that MIFUMI established the first domestic violence advice centre in Uganda in 1999, and that my mother found the "space" which led to her narrating a human rights abuse. In so doing, despite the silence of male authors on the subject, she took domestic violence out of the private and into the public sphere.

My mother used her agency to portray the mistreatment of women by men in the name of bride price; and that is how, with her support, I began a campaign in 2000 to reform or abolish bride price. In the meantime I began following up on my mother's story and how it affected her life as a young girl. Slowly her story unfolded, told to me over several sittings by herself and by her sister, my Aunt Berita. Sometimes we talked while sitting under a tree, sometimes at the dining-room table over several cups of tea. At other points it was after a defeat or temporary setback in the campaign that mother would come out with another aspect of the story, thereby encouraging us to soldier on.

On one occasion she narrated the story of the young girl's torture to Ewan Ormiston, then First Secretary of the British High Commission, who had come to Mifumi village to monitor our project. I can still see him, sitting on a tree stump under the umbrella tree in front of the house. He was quiet for a long time after the story ended, turning a twig round and round in his hand. He did not comment at the time, but afterwards he went beyond the call of duty to support our campaign.

The first time I interviewed my mother was on her veranda on Sukulu Road in Tororo. She'd had a bath and put on a fresh traditional dress called a *gomesi*. She brushed her hair nicely and sat in an armchair, as if with a sense of occasion. Then she began to tell me her story.

She was born in 1930 in the village of Mulanda in eastern Uganda, the daughter of Siras Ondowa and Maria Athieno and the youngest of five children. The eldest child was Berita Nyapendi, a stepsister; they shared the same mother but not the same father. Berita's father, Surumani Okongo, my grandfather's older brother, had died

during the plague epidemic that occurred in Uganda between 1910 and 1919. He left behind a wife – Maria Athieno Nyamiland. At the time, my grandfather was away fighting in World War One in Egypt for the British, when Uganda was a protectorate of the British Empire. When he returned from the war, he found that not only had his brother Surumani died, but also Surumani’s five out of six wives and all their children. My grandfather took her to be his own wife. The widow was my grandmother, Maria Athieno Nyamiland, and she was pregnant with Surumani’s child. When the child, Berita Nyapendi, was born, Ondowa raised her as her own. He went on to have four more children with Maria: James Ochola, Alina (Helen) Nymawenge, and a child who died in infancy. Then came my mother – Evelyn Alowo – followed much later by a boy called Lepodo.

Berita was the first of the children to be married, being the eldest girl. She was enrolled at Dabani Girls’ School and, according to her, had reached Primary Four when her father took her out of school and married her off, using the bride price he gained to educate her younger brother, my uncle James Ochola. Berita had been a very bright girl, but one abruptly deprived of education: as she put it, *Nwango anitye Dabani to jafongi wacho rigo ni, Eeh Jadwong: weyi nyathinin wusoma, gono nyathi maber, aka wiyi go ryek. Dhimba di teri mani. Meno woni ama’mito, apaka odwoko.* “I was at Dabani, the teacher told him [my father], Eeh gentleman: you should let your child study, she is a good girl, and her head is clever. At least you take someone else. I want that one, he said” (Nyapendi, 2016, p.4). The consolation, she told me, was that my mother *did* have an education, which she would not have had without the cows their father had gained: *Nwango mito juko nyathi achoko no kisoma, paka okwanyan wok school ma panyir Dabani. Bedi ki ani, nyano diko soma.* “He had wanted to stop that girl from studying just as he had taken me from Dabani Girls’ School. If it wasn’t for me, that girl wouldn’t have gone to school” (Nyapendi, p. 4).

By this she meant that her cows had educated Ochola, who was later able to educate my mother. Thus I came to learn, in the course of these sittings, that my mother was lucky to have received an education at all. This happened through a circuitous route, as will be described.

When she reached puberty, my grandfather made it clear he wanted her married off. He disapproved of the “white nuns” schools because, in his view, they trained girls to become nurses, and once they were nurses, he claimed, they turned into prostitutes. (Nursing to him was synonymous with prostitution, presumably because of the short

skirts the nurses wore.) He also feared sending my mother to school because many girls died in the nuns' care. This could have been due to outbreaks of cholera or TB; but according to Aunt Berita, their father's real fear was that girls would "get spoilt" at school by becoming pregnant. This would mean they could not be properly married, and would make their father miss out on bride price: *Nyare nwago yalokere musawo to nywol maku miyogo gikpiny*. "His daughter was going to be turned into a nurse and give birth without giving him things" (Nyapendi, 2016, p.5).

However, my Uncle Ochola, who had by then graduated and was working as an administrative official in government, devised a plan together with his mother (my grandmother) and his sister (Aunty Berita) to steal my mother away to St Clare's girls' boarding school at Sesera in Nagongera. First they took her to my grandfather's eldest sister, Balvina Ayunda, and hid her there. If Grandfather turned up looking for his daughter, Ayunda was to deny all knowledge. Mother emphasised to me the role her brother Ochola had played in her education: *Manyo oneno ni Baba founjo go kende, rupiri chwo nwango ju ki yeyi nyiri ju soma, omin ani to kwalan to teran pa waya iy'Abweli*. "When he saw that my father was educating him alone, because men wouldn't allow the educating of girl children, my brother escaped with me and took me to my auntie's in Abweli village. *Rumachen ju teran pa wabikira ma Katulika aka kenyo to juwiro kiri nyingan*. They later took me to the Catholic nuns and there they even changed my names" (Alowo, 2008, p.2).

Aunty Berita became the key player in keeping their father ignorant of the plan, and she had to find various ways to deceive him: *Manyo odwoko pecho, openja ni, Nikune go? Ani ta wacho ni, Ah Baba, anwango ni nyathi p'Asisiro two tek tek aka ni go okidho gi jo i dwaliro. Weya akidhi a dwoki gine, ini ti omo go dikin*. "He came back home and asked me, Where is she? I said, Ah Daddy, I found Asisiro's child very sick and she has gone with her to hospital. Let me go and get her then you can come for her tomorrow" (Nyapendi, 2016, p.2). Grandfather's sister Ayunda was also a crucial ally in the plot. Grandfather kept sending word to inquire when my mother would be returning, but the response was always vague. After a few weeks, Grandfather in exasperation set off to fetch his daughter. While my mother was hiding in the hut, quiet as a mouse, Ayunda lavishly entertained Grandfather before he was escorted home. Thereafter Grandfather kept asking whether my mother would return, but the answer was always "not yet". Finally, Grandfather's suspicion was confirmed: his youngest daughter had been enrolled in the nuns' school. Thus my mother's female

relatives connived with her brother to thwart her father and ensure she received an education.

My mother received her education for six years in primary, then a further two years in junior school. After that she trained as a teacher, and her class was passed out after only one year because there was a shortage of teachers in the country. She became a primary school teacher, teaching in English because she had attended junior (higher) school. (Other teachers who had only attended primary school taught in the vernacular.) *T'adongi kenyo oro chiel maki dwoko pecho i ywomirok.* “I stayed there for one year without coming for holidays,” she told me, *rupiri omeran Ochola ongeyo ni ka odwokan pecho i ywomirok, kiya yeyan gik.* “because my brother Ochola knew that if he returned me for holidays, I wouldn’t be allowed to return. Until people spoke to my Dad and he told my brother, *Ini dwoki achoko nani a lam go aka nyaka wu giki.* ‘You return my daughter so that I can bless her and then she can go back’”. She duly returned home in a car, and when she got out her father, seeing a tall, sophisticated lady stepping out, was moved to tears. He sat down and held my mother on his lap and blessed her. He died shortly afterwards.

I sense that my mother always regretted that she had spent so little time with him. In the years before she went to school, she had developed a close bond with her father: *Nwango go omaran paka akuro rigo dhoki pera aka paka 'ki ja jayi. Aki ngiisa tich moro jie. Ka geto oti abende akonyo go.* “He loved me for looking after his cows because I was not disobedient. I didn’t look down on any work. And when he was building a house I also helped him” (Alowo, 2008, p.3). These early experiences gave her a sense of independence: she did things that convention did not normally associate with women. After qualifying as a teacher, she built herself a hut and bought herself a bicycle and a watch. And when she married my father, she already had the things she needed for a new home.

My Uncle Ochola had meanwhile risen to the position of a cabinet minister, J.S.M. Ochola of Regional Administration, in the Milton Obote government, and employed his older sister Berita as his special assistant. She travelled around the country with him and his entourage, usually by road but sometimes by plane. Her duties were menial, as befitted someone who had been married off early and received little education – she was to oversee his catering and accommodation facilities and care for his personal needs. Although giving Berita work suited my uncle because she was of use to him, she also arguably derived some benefit from the oppressive custom of

bride price. (The gender analysis would be that she gained employment but at the cost of education, whereas he enjoyed both). Uncle James Ochola was later killed in tragic circumstances under General Idi Amin's regime; but along with the womenfolk of his family, he acted as a counter-patriarchal force to ensure my mother received an education.

Aunt Berita's experiences of bride price are also instructive. Pretty and petite, she was the first of the children to be married, being the eldest girl. A man with protruding teeth and feet that pointed outwards when he walked had been chosen to be her husband. In despair, Berita ran to Fr Heptonston, the missionary Irish priest at Siwa Catholic Church Mission. It was common for girls being forced into marriage to run to the Church and seek the intervention of the priest. Fr Heptonston called Grandfather and persuaded him not to marry Berita to the man. Grandfather reluctantly agreed, and the man's cows, which he had already paid, were returned to him, while Berita returned home from the relative's house where she had been hiding. It was agreed that another more agreeable suitor would be found.

Chwo ma ju bino nywoman nwango ja bich ama aka ani – nyako achiel. ...Juje to juyeyo chungo neno ni anuyeri nga. Ani ta kidho ri nyiyach jachandi ma ilwongo ni Ochwo. Apodho i chinge tawacho ni “Chworan ye ee” Ju mudong jie ju Makerere, maju chowo kir nywomo moni – a kweru jo. Ti wacho ri nyiyach kelo dhoki apar. Jie je ju uro ni, “Onyali?” Nyiyach me ma thin a thina pa suna, ma fodi ngich aka ma kusoma kada?” Ju paro ni juya dhiero go, to onwango nitye gi dhoki pera. Nyamin go onywom to weyo rigo dhoki aboro, aka nwango won nitye gi agwen, mara bich odhuro...

The boys who came to marry me were five in number and I – one girl. ... They all agreed to stand and see who I would choose. I went for a poor boy called Ochwo. I fell on his hands and said, “My husband is here”. All the rest were from Makerere and already had wives – I refused them. The boy was told to bring ten cows. Everyone wondered, “Will he manage? This young boy who is just so small, young and has not even gone to school?” They thought

they were going to defeat him, but he had his cows. His sister had been married and had left him eight cows, and on his own he had four and a fifth with a calf ... (Nyapendi, 2016, pp.5–6)

Berita was evidently proud of the role she had played in educating her siblings and, later, her children. It added to her self-esteem and sense of worth.

My mother's sister Alina was also affected by bride price. She was only 12 years old when they married her off. After her death in October 2013, I interviewed her daughter (my cousin) Immaculate Akello, who told me about her mother's experience: *Otero go paka ngata kidho wendo. Ti tero go i ott p'Adha mera. Onyogo kinyiang rigo ni go onywomere, dhoki chango otiek tero pa bai mere de chon.* "They took her as if she was going on a visit. The house was her mother-in-law's place. She didn't know she was being married off but the cows had already been taken to her father's home" (Akello, 2013, p.1). Alina went about her life as any other child might until she reached puberty and the marriage was consummated: *Manyo onywom go, ido go ja oro apar ga ryo, ti tero i samba pa chwore manyo otundu oro apar ga wuchel. Munyo ogamo iye nyathi pere marapena – Balvina, nyaka to nyiang ni kere, ameno go onywomere aka otanna go.* "She was married off at 12 years and taken to her husband's house at 16 years. It was only after she conceived her first-born, Balvina, when she understood that all along she had been married and sold off" (Akello, 2013, p.1).

These various stories from my family expose different aspects of bride price – of its place within patriarchy and its damaging effects, but also how the seeds of resistance were sown; and how, with resourcefulness or courage, it could be circumvented. All of them, in one way or another, were incorporated into my novel.

*

My mother's narrative could be described as "memoir" because it captures a dynamic postmodernism in its movement between the private and the public, and between subject and object (Miller, 2002). It involved her agency, since she was the one telling the story orally, and it also involved me, as the person who transcribed and later

transformed the raw material of our interviews. In their book *Reading Autobiography* (2010), Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson regard “agency” as the cultural script available to a person to tell the story of their life, which may be conceptualised as changing the terms of one’s social relations or as an oppositional tactic of resistance.

When she gave “voice” to her story, my mother became an agent of change, empowered to speak against women’s oppression (Schaffer and Smith, 2004). “Her story” was echoed by other women, because “the fate of the individual is tied to the fate of the group and tradition” (Slaughter, 1997); and “the situation of the narrator, in *testimoni*, is one that must be representative of a social class or group” (Kennedy, 1997). Thus, my mother’s story became the *ur*-story or collective narrative which MIFUMI used to petition the court. Survivors’ personal narratives are often sought out by the press as stories of the “little person” struggling to survive violence (Massumi, 1993), or as stories of “excluded” and “colourful” embodied subjects who have “talked back” to the “universal subject” of bourgeois male authority (Smith, 1993). Breaking the silence involves acts of remembering, because stories are not only vehicles for understanding; they are also means of remembrance. To remember the past is also to reform the present or change the future (Attwood and Magowan, 2001).

My mother’s story was the genesis of my novel *The Price of a Woman*. The novel was written both as a quest for truth and to expose the invidious effects of bride price. While writing it I looked at several works with which it has features in common, including Sally Morgan’s *My Place* (1997), the story of a young woman coming to claim her identity as an Aboriginal Australian. Both books have a hybrid narrative; both “construct a story of detection” (as Sally reflects on her childhood and questions her reluctant elders about certain family secrets); both involved fact-finding in the field and oral testimonies transcribed verbatim from relatives; and both can be understood in terms of cultural memory as a human rights story, concerned not with the development of the individual self but with a problematic collective social situation (Kennedy, 1997). Two other memoirs that resonated with me are Aminatta Forna’s *The Devil that Danced on the Water* (2003) and Hisham Matar’s *The Return* (2016), both of which can be described as narratives that “construct a story of detection”.

Though written as a novel, *The Price of a Woman* can also be viewed through the lens of life writing. In his Introduction to *On Life-Writing*, Zachary Leader (2015, p.1)

treats life writing as “a generic term used to describe a range of writings about lives or parts of lives, or which provide materials out of which lives or parts of lives are composed”. In their book *Reading Autobiography* (2010, p.4) Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson understand “life writing as a general term for writing that takes a life, one’s own or another’s, as its subject”. In considering the agency of my mother, I made use of questions posed by Smith and Watson, such as, “Given constraints, how do people change the narratives or write back to the cultural stories that have scripted them as particular kinds of subjects? How is this ‘writing back’, this changing of the terms of one’s representation, a strategy for gaining agency? How might they gain agency through the very choice of life writing practices, many of which have the potential to intervene in existing social and political formulations?” (2010, p.235).

The more I thought about and worked on it, the more my mother’s narrative became my narrative, or felt as if it corresponded to the kind of collaborative autobiography defined by Smith and Watson (2010). The questions they pose are exactly the ones I asked myself: “Is the narrative a product of more than one person? What kind of collaborative involvement has there been? Is this an ‘as told to’ or ghostwritten narrative? Has there been an editor, a transcriber, an amanuensis, or an interviewer involved in the project? What role has each person played in the making of the narrative, and what are your sources for knowing this?” (pp.240–41).

In traditional African society, knowledge is passed on through oral history. My mother had passed on knowledge to me, and it was now left to me to do what I could or would with it. Eventually I wrote a novel based on her story; but I first responded to the narration of a human rights abuse by taking up the campaign on bride price through MIFUMI. This is described in the next chapter.

Chapter Two: The MIFUMI Case

Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,

Or what's a heaven for?

Robert Browning

In August 2015, the MIFUMI project held a celebration in Tororo. Ugandan women and girls and their supporters began a march through the streets of town, passing the District Council Buildings and ending up in the grounds of the MIFUMI offices, where a crowd of people and dignitaries sat in colourful tents. The celebrations taking place were to mark the ruling by the Supreme Court on bride price. Its verdict was a significant victory for reformers – and the culmination of a fifteen-year campaign by MIFUMI.

The campaign was a direct result of my mother's story and began with the establishing of the first domestic violence advice centre in Uganda, in Mifumi village in 1999. Within a year, MIFUMI's research revealed that 60 per cent of domestic violence cases reported were related to bride price. Armed with this knowledge, I checked out the Uganda Constitution and learned that it allowed individuals to hold social referendums. We had failed with the politicians – they had asked me to wait until their new term of office, five years ahead. There was no joy with the cultural leaders either, so we decided to hold a referendum under the auspices of the district administration. The Chair of the Electoral Commission gave his approval, provided that we used closed ballot boxes. Newspapers camped in our offices to cover the event, and a British High Commission attaché and several other diplomats came as observers.

The referendum took place in the Tororo district in December 2001, while the world was still reeling from 9/11. Sixty per cent of those voting said “Yes” to reform. The

Nation newspaper reported that MIFUMI had outfoxed its opponents. But we had decided on the referendum only as a last resort. And in our subsequent submission to the Legal and Parliamentary Affairs Committee, we were referred back to the local district as the right forum to decide “cultural matters”. Their position exemplified the position described by Charlesworth and Chinkin as “the assignment of particular issues to the 'private' realm”: the state, they argue, “can devolve some of its powers to centres of authority in the private sphere that may have no concern with the unequal position of women or indeed may have an interest in maintaining it” (Charlesworth and Chinkin, 2000, p.57).

Undeterred, MIFUMI stepped up its bride price campaign, “enlisting stories as a form of moral suasion to reach potential advocates and persuade government to honour its commitments” (Schaffer and Smith, 2004). We lobbied political and religious leaders, some of whom were receptive, others not. A meeting we had arranged with cabinet ministers of Tieng Adhola, the cultural union, was called off at the last minute; I was told instead, in no uncertain terms, to drop the campaign. I also wrote to the head of the Peace and Justice Commission at the Vatican; his response, while encouraging, was in line with Church policy of non-interference in cultural matters. After several such failures to prompt others to take up our cause, MIFUMI decided to act for itself and take the Ugandan government to court.

The case began with a petition to the Constitutional Court in 2007 (which was decided in 2010), in which MIFUMI and 12 other parties challenged the constitutionality of bride price and the practice of demanding its refund in cases where the marriage breaks down. By a majority of four to one (with one of the two male judges, Justice Twinomujuni, dissenting) the court dismissed the petition, and held that although *some* elements of the practice of bride price were not only unconstitutional but also criminal in nature, the custom and practice of bride price overall was not unconstitutional.

Though disappointed by the outcome, we also believed it to be flawed and therefore open to appeal. While preparing the ground for this, we made *What Price Bride Price?*, a documentary film that, after our defeat in the lower court, was a direct appeal to the court of public opinion. The film featured survivors of bride price telling their stories of suffering and abuse. Among them were women who had been beaten and had attempted to commit suicide because they could not afford to refund bride price; women beaten when they failed to perform hard labour; children removed from

school and forced into marriage; and men on the run to avoid imprisonment over failure to refund their daughter's bride price. The film prepared the ground, so that by the time MIFUMI's case came up for hearing in the Supreme Court, there had been a shift in attitudes towards bride price.

After several years of preparation, the case finally went to the Supreme Court in 2014, with MIFUMI and the other appellants filing 12 grounds of appeal, which our counsel combined into four broad groups. The claims we made were:

(a) that the learned Justices of the Constitutional Court had erred in law and fact when they declined to make a finding that the custom of paying bride price and its refund at its dissolution is so notorious that the court should have taken judicial notice of it.

(b) that the learned Justices of the Constitutional Court had erred in law when they failed to make a declaration that the demand for, and payment of, bride price fetters the free consent of persons intending to marry or leave a marriage; this is in violation of Article 31(3) of the Constitution, because the demand for bride price makes the consent of persons who intend to marry contingent upon the demands of a third party (the parents).

(c) that the learned Justices of the Constitutional Court had erred in law when they declined to declare the demand for a refund of bride price unconstitutional, despite their finding as a matter of fact and law, that the practice undermines the dignity of a woman, contrary to Article 33(6) of the Constitution, and may lead to domestic violence.

(d) that the learned Justices of the Constitutional Court erred in law when they declined to make declaratory orders under Article 137(3)(a) and (4) of the Constitution and decided that aggrieved parties may file a suit in the High Court under Article 50(1), despite their finding that a demand for a refund of bride price was inconsistent with Articles 31(1) and 33(6) of the Constitution.

The significant conflicting evidence related to whether the custom of payment of bride price by the groom's family to the bride's family promotes inequality in marriage contrary to Article 21(1), (2) and (3) of the Constitution.

Previously in the Constitutional Court (2010), MIFUMI had adduced evidence to show that there were cases where bride price had led to the mistreatment of women, and domestic violence. The respondents argued that the practices of demand and payment of bride price as a prerequisite for a valid customary marriage and the refund

of bride price as a prerequisite for the dissolution of a customary marriage were not unconstitutional, and were protected by Article 37 of the Constitution (MIFUMI Petition, 2010, p.6). They added that the practice of bride price is “intended to show appreciation to a woman’s parents for taking care of the woman” (pp.6–7), and that though there were “isolated cases of men treating their wives as mere property, such a perversion of the purpose of bride price does not negate the noble aims of the practice, let alone render the custom unconstitutional” (p.7). The respondents also argued that what was being practised in Uganda was “bride wealth” as opposed to “bride price” – the latter term, they claimed, was “derogatory and racist, having been coined by white slave traders, adventurers and missionaries who had no knowledge of African culture, norms and traditions” (p.22; see also p.39).

By a majority of four to one (with Justice Kisaakye dissenting), the Supreme Court held that bride price does not fetter the free consent of persons intending to marry, and consequently, is not in violation of Article 31(3) of the Constitution. However, it also ruled that the demand for refund of bride price after the breakdown of a customary marriage is unconstitutional as it violates Article 31(1)(b) of the Constitution, and is accordingly prohibited. Accordingly, our appeal partly succeeded and partly failed.

Both the Constitutional and Supreme Courts first raised their objection to the use of the term “bride price”, arguing that it had been coined by colonialists and arose out of their failure to appreciate African customary marriage. Justice Tumwesigye noted that “this position was maintained for many years during colonial rule”, and that the “idea that customary marriage is ‘wife purchase’ is promoted by the continued inappropriate use of the term ‘bride price’”. He suggested that terms used by African scholars, such as “bride wealth”, “dowry”, “marriage payment”, “marriage consideration” and “marriage gifts”, were more appropriate (MIFUMI Case, 2015, pp.6–7).

On the issue of whether bride price promotes inequality in marriage, Justice Tumwesigye stated that “payment of bride price in customary marriage is overrated by the appellants as a significant factor in the promotion of inequality and violence against women” (p.28). Nor did he consider that payment of bride price fettered the free consent of persons intending to marry. He entirely agreed with Deputy Chief Justice Mukasa-Kikonyogo of the lower court that “the cultural practice of bride price, the payment of a sum of money or property by the prospective son-in-law to the parents of the prospective bride as a condition precedent to a lawful customary

marriage, is not barred by the Constitution. It is not per se unconstitutional. The Constitution does not prohibit a voluntary, mutual agreement between a bride and a groom to enter into the bride price arrangement. A man and a woman have the constitutional right to choose the bride price option as the way they wish to get married” (p.32).

While the MIFUMI appeal failed on such grounds as these, the Supreme Court judges unanimously declared the demand for refund of bride price to be unconstitutional. Justice Tumwesigye further held: “In my view, it is a contradiction to say that bride price is a gift to the parents of the bride for nurturing her, then accept as proper demand for a refund of the gift at the dissolution of marriage” (MIFUMI Case 2015, p.44). He added that:

The custom of refund of bride price devalues the worth, respect and dignity of a woman; ... ignores the contribution of the woman to the marriage up to the time of its breakdown; ... is unfair to the parents and relatives of the woman when they are asked to refund the bride price after years of marriage; ... may keep the woman in an abusive marital relationship for fear that her parents may be in trouble owing to their inability to refund bride price; ... and makes marriage contingent on a third party. (MIFUMI Case 2015, pp.44–46)

Justice Kisaakye agreed: “Given the dire consequences that a woman, her family and partner may face from a husband who is demanding refund of his bride price, it is not far-fetched to envisage that the requirement to refund bride price may force women to remain in abusive/failed marriage against their will” (p.68).

The majority ruling was that, as Justice Tumwesigye put it, “The Constitutional Court, having found that the custom and practice of refund of bride price violated women’s constitutional rights, should have taken the next logical step to declare the custom unconstitutional” (p.42). Justice Kisaakye (dissenting from the view that bride price is constitutional) held that it undermines the dignity and status of women and, as such, violated several articles of the Constitution. In her words:

Article 31(1)(b) of the Constitution guarantees equal rights for men and women “at and in marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution”. Furthermore, the payment of bride price is also inconsistent with *inter alia* Article 21 of the Constitution because only one party to the marriage is obligated to pay bride price. It therefore discriminates between man and woman on the grounds of sex, yet under Article 21 of the Constitution, all persons are equal before and under the law and a person shall not be discriminated against on the ground of sex, among others. Bride price also promotes inequality in marriage in as far as the custom only subjects men to paying bride price. This also runs contrary to clear provisions of Articles 21 and 31 which provides for men and women to have equal rights in marriage, during marriage and its dissolution; as well to Article 33 which provides for women to have full and equal dignity with men. (pp.68–69)

The decision of the Supreme Court to outlaw bride price refund was a major step forward in the advancement of women’s rights. This was a landmark ruling that set a precedent throughout Africa, where bride price had not been challenged as a human rights issue in a court of law. Though the decision was conservative in upholding that bride price *per se* is constitutional, and in this regard yielded only incremental progress, its outlawing of bride price refund will act as a catalyst for other human rights demands that are implicit in such issues as polygamy, wife inheritance and FGC. The earlier decision of the Constitutional Court in 2010 had set MIFUMI ten years back, to when we began our campaign. However, the Supreme Court’s ruling restored us to the position we had been in at the height of our campaign, when we won the referendum. The outcome lent weight to the argument that society is the first to change, and it’s only later that the law catches up with it.

The Court stopped short of achieving justice for women, particularly poor women living in rural communities, who are entrenched in traditions that work against their interests. In the first instance, the Courts expended considerable effort on technicalities rather than on substantive justice, adding weight to the argument that “cultural relativism” dominates social, political and academic thought today (Charlesworth and Chinkin, 2000). The Court also discussed at length the issue of whether the custom of paying bride price is commonly practised in Uganda by all

cultures, even though the issue had only been argued by the second respondent, Kenneth Kakuru, a city lawyer. The Attorney General had not contested this issue. However, in ruling that the custom of bride price is so notorious that judges should take judicial notice of it, the Supreme Court has at least opened the way for a more uniform interpretation of bride price to be developed which might incorporate some of the best practices from different areas.

Substantive issues that did not receive sufficient attention included the question of whether the custom of bride price promotes inequality in marriage, contrary to Article 21(1), (2) and (3) of the Constitution. These issues were hardly addressed except in the dissenting judgements of JC Twinomujuni in the lower court and of JSC Esther Kisaakye in the Supreme Court, despite the overwhelming accumulation of testimony from survivors and victims, which MIFUMI adduced as evidence in the form of 26 affidavits. These were mostly from women who had suffered such violence and abuse, but also from men adversely affected by the custom. The affidavit evidence on record detailed cases where fathers had forced their daughters to get married “simply to collect bride price”; where young girls were being removed from school and forced into early marriage; and several cases where a wife’s corpse had been denied burial pending the refund of bride price to the husband (MIFUMI Petition, 2010, p.6). There was also the evidence of a young woman who was assaulted when bride price had been paid but she had not produced any children, and who then attempted suicide; and of a priest who had been imprisoned for marrying a couple in church before bride price had been settled.

Justice Twinomujuni, in the lower court, reproduced my affidavit in full, and held that it substantiated the claims made by the other petitioners of “horrific experiences they have personally gone through because of the custom of payment of bride price” (MIFUMI Petition, 2010, p.71). However, the lower court trivialised the issue of inequality and the mistreatment of women, thus signifying that they were not interested in gender issues. Instead, Justice Mpagi-Bahigeine (MIFUMI Petition, 2010, p.18) held that “the deponents of the affidavits in support of the petition concentrated on incidences of domestic violence allegedly consequent upon failure to effect refunds of bride price. I found this evidence lacking in data”. She thus declined both the women’s experiences and my affidavit as corroborative evidence.

The courts' refusal to recognise a link between bride price and so-called "social ills" is indicative of an injustice characterised by Hesford and Kozol (2001, p.5), who argue against the un-interrogated dependence on certain kinds of evidence to document oppression. Other scholars, however, argue that privileging women's experience is an authoritative location from which to begin enquiry, positing that it is the "only way of closing the memory gap between the catastrophic event and the discourses available to us to make sense of the catastrophe" (Lentin 2000, p.94). Anne Cubilie discusses the silencing of witnesses who challenge traditional structures of knowledge, power, community and violence, contending that violence against women and women's lives is about silences and silencing, and that "much political organising is directed toward or in the name of those who are silenced" (2005, page xi). She argues that the gap between critical theorists and practitioners and grassroots political organisers is wider than ever. Into this gap, she argues, the voice of the survivor of human atrocity can intervene. This argument would seem to support the merits of the genre of testimony over the use of scholarly works, in line with Lentin (2000).

In the Supreme Court, Justice Tumwesigye, who in his lead judgement acknowledged that the commercialisation of bride price "has also served to undermine respect for the custom" (MIFUMI Case, 2015, p.26), nevertheless made reference to Professor Tibatemwa-Ekirikubinza (1997, p.51), to argue that "there is no doubt that inequality and its attendant issues of violence and abuse of women is common in customary marriage as well as in other forms of marriage". And yet in the same text, Tibatemwa-Ekirikubinza makes clear the link between bride price and domestic violence (1997, pp.83, 89).

On the issue of whether the demand for and payment of bride price fetters the free consent of persons intending to marry or leave a marriage, in violation of Article 31(3) of the Constitution, MIFUMI's main concern was with early and forced child marriage, which is a topical issue in Uganda. Justice Tumwesigye acknowledged that the issue of parents in some Ugandan communities removing their under-age daughters from school and forcing them to marry in order to get their children's bride price had been widely reported by NGOs concerned with children's welfare, and given extensive coverage by the media; he agreed that it reflected poorly on law enforcement agencies. Despite this, the courts supported the arguments of the respondents that "If people choose the customary marriage option, they will be taken

to have agreed to observe the customs and rites that go with it, and this includes payment of bride price” (MIFUMI Case, 2015, p.30).

But concepts of freedom of choice are complex: one may legally have the freedom to do something but not the ability to exercise that freedom. And the argument the respondents used – that people have a constitutional right to practise their culture under Article 37 of the Constitution – does not acknowledge that “laws, cultures, customs or traditions which are against the dignity, welfare, or interest of women or which undermine their status” are prohibited under Article 33(6) of the Constitution. Furthermore, culture is not static, but keeps evolving. What might have been right in the days of our ancestors is not necessarily right now.

In his analysis of the MIFUMI Petition, the legal scholar Chuma Himonga (2017, p.2), comparing bride price to *lobola* in South Africa, concludes that “Essentially, the judgment confirms that bride price has both positive and negative consequences with respect to women’s rights”. However, whether bride price *can* be a positive thing remains questionable. On the judgement’s holding that adults have a choice of which type of marriage to contract, it could be argued that although Uganda has a dual (or even plural) system of laws, the majority of women are subject to customary law, in which the subordinate position of women, especially in marriage, is reinforced by customs such as bride price.

I would support Mujuzi (2010) when he says that to protect such women, it is important that Uganda “domesticates” international law. Although Uganda ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1985, at the time of writing it has yet to domesticate that treaty. Mujuzi argues that unlike the constitutions of South Africa and Malawi, which expressly require courts to refer to international law when interpreting the respective Bill of Rights, the Ugandan Constitution has no such requirement. He recommends that Uganda should amend its constitution accordingly. Such an amendment would ensure that one need not rely on the discretion of the presiding judge to decide whether or not to refer to international law.

Certainly one of the opportunities lost in the bride price ruling was the chance to bring Uganda’s domestic law in line with international human rights law on women’s rights. In my affidavit I argued that the practice of bride price violated those “International Human Rights Conventions to which Uganda is a signatory” (MIFUMI Petition, 2010, p.75); but the Constitutional Court was not interested in this line of

argument; indeed, the judges did not even discuss Uganda's international human rights obligations, except when Justice Mpagi-Bahigenie quoted the General Assembly Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against women; he did so in order to dismiss MIFUMI's argument that bride price contributed to violence against women (MIFUMI Petition, 2010, p.18), arguing that violence against women is worldwide and occurs even in countries that do not practise bride price. This was a missed opportunity to advance African Jurisprudence, especially as Uganda had ratified the Maputo Protocol in the same year.

The only positive reference to international instruments was in the dissenting judgment of Justice Kisaakye (MIFUMI Case, 2015, pp.59–60), who held that “Uganda is a signatory to all the major human rights Conventions which require it to put in place laws and measures that prevent discrimination and perpetuate inequality”. She accepted MIFUMI's argument that the demand for and payment of bride price as a condition precedent to a valid customary marriage violates human rights.

It is clear from the above arguments that the court “pandered to the will of the people” against the interest of women's rights and dignity. An example of this came from Justice Byamugisha (MIFUMI Petition, 2010, p.26), who held that it would be “unjust for the Court to declare bride price unconstitutional without giving the communities affected an opportunity to be heard”. As Mujuzi comments, this argument is problematic because “laws and customs that violate the dignity of women are contrary to the Constitution. These laws and customs have to be declared as contrary to the Constitution whether they are supported by the majority of the communities that adhere to them or not. Whether the judgment would have been construed by members of the communities that practise this custom as unjust is immaterial” (Mujuzi, 2010, p.427).

As well as failing to observe the constitution and bring Uganda into line with international rulings on the treatment of women, the court failed to revisit arguments relating to bride price put forward during earlier family law reforms (Kalema, 1965) and constitutional reforms (Odoki, 1995). During the Commission of Enquiry into Women's Status in Marriage and Divorce (Kalema, 1965), only one of the six commissioners was a woman, and the sampling of opinions on the issue was heavily biased in favour of men. This was reflected in one of the main recommendations of the commission, namely the retention of bride wealth, despite strong complaints by women about the practice (Tamale, 1993, as cited in Oloka and Tamale, 1995, p.725).

The second opportunity where law reform could have had a positive impact was during the constitution-making process in the early 1990s, when the Constitutional Commission recorded the arguments for and against the practice of bride price, but recommended its retention as a cultural practice. Again, some delegates, especially women, called for bride price to be abolished, but their arguments did not attract much attention, and most men supported its retention. All the ingredients whereby MIFUMI was to challenge the constitutionality of the practice of bride price had already been laid down during this consultative process, but women's voices were silenced.

Legal scholars have also argued that women were "doubly jeopardized" in the transition from colonialism to independence, because patriarchal attitudes entrenched in customary law were imported into national law (Oloka and Tamale, 1995, p.724). Even more problematic was the fact that women were excluded from the process of legal reform, when they could have been involved. Indeed, the very structure of law, according to Charlesworth and Chinkin (2000), has been built on the silence of women. Within international law, as in national laws, women's rights are often sacrificed in the name of culture. Miria Matembe, a leading Ugandan feminist and women's rights activist speaking at MIFUMI's conference, defined culture as "the excuse men use when they want to punish women", and in the MIFUMI documentary, she described bride price as "belonging to a cultural museum" (MIFUMI, 2013). Even those scholars, such as Maureen Owor, who uphold communitarian values over individual rights hold that "another area for concern is the patriarchal nature of African society, meaning that the traditional justice system is "sometimes prejudicial to women and children" (Owor, 2005, p.46).

In the same manner, there are critics of the approach of international NGOs, "whose methods of work (some have referred to them as abolitionist) remind one of the methods of the missionaries of old. They spotlight evils and demand their eradication. For them there is no middle ground or moral dilemma. This may be true in certain instances, but not in all, as for example in the case of female genital mutilation, in which many African women activists in this area have expressed reservations about the methods and style of execution adopted by international organisations" (Oloka-Onyango, 2002, p.289). Oloka concludes that: "In the final analysis, the abolitionist strategy must be informed by much more: a sensitivity to the cultural context in which one is operating. The agenda for the struggle against such heinous practices must, in

the first instance, be established and prosecuted by African women and activists” (ibid). Other African scholars have voiced the same concern over the abolitionist tendency of not just international NGOs but also regional ones. As discussed before, Banda (2003) raised concern over the recommendation by Women in Law and Development in Africa (WILDAF) to the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to abolish polygamy.

Sally Engle Merry (2006) writes that: “Many human rights activists who write about women’s right to protection from violence identify culture as the source of the problem.” Commenting on female genital cutting as the poster-child for this understanding of culture she writes:

Although the language of civilisation is rarely articulated in human rights discussion or documents, notions of what it means to be a civilised nation linger, particularly in the field of international law. Nineteenth-century narratives of evolution and concepts of racial difference have been smuggled into prevailing theoretical models by maintaining the binary distinction between tradition and modernity. These terms subtly juxtapose modernity and savagery and locate culture in the domain of the later and civilisation in the former. (p.13)

It is interesting to note that even when African women activists take such a critical stance against culture (see for example Nahid Toubia, *Female Genital Mutilation*, 1993), they are criticised. Although FGM is now illegal in Uganda, Frances Khuka who led early attempts to abolish FGM in Uganda was vilified and persecuted. Charlene Smith (*Proud of Me*, 2001) received hate mail for speaking out against the culture of rape and sexual violence in South Africa. Yet the fact that female genital cutting is harmful can be seen in several African texts. For example there are several African examples of human rights writing particularly on female genital cutting and mainly from French-speaking West African countries by both male and female writers. To mention but a few: Ahmadou Kourouma’s *Les Soleils des independences* (*The Suns of Independence*, 1968) from Ivory Coast; Mamadou Samba’s *Lonely la file de l’aveugle* (*Only the Blind Man’s Daughter*, 1995) from Senegal; and Calixthe Beyala’s, *C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlé* (*The Sun that looked upon me or the sun that burnt me*, 1987) from Cameroon. Some of these texts, along with Khady’s *Mutilee*

(*Mutilated*, 2005) also from Senegal, overtly advocate for changes in FGM legislation in the way that Smith (2001) did against rape and sexual violence. According to Norridge (2007, p.113) “The author, who is named only as 'Khady', now works as an activist for the *Reseau Europeen pour la Prevention et L'Eradication des Pratiques Traditionnelles Nefastes ala Sante des Femmes et Enfants* and GAMS, organisations which are campaigning against excision and forced marriages, particularly of young girls”. (For further discussion on these texts, see Norridge’s doctoral thesis, “Perceptions of Pain in African Literature”, 2007, Chapter 3).

In terms of harmful cultural practices it seems the question should not be who the players are; rather, as Chia Longman and Tamsin Bradley suggest in their book *Interrogating Harmful Cultural Practices*, we should ask, “why (dowry) sustains itself within the wider patriarchal order despite global, national and local efforts to eradicate it” (2015, p.155). Even Oloka (ibid) cautions against cultural relativism or reductionism – the phenomenon that reduces every human rights problem to an issue of culture versus imperialism – and suggests that activists for women’s human rights must learn how to negotiate this issue, because “rights of a social and cultural character, which it may be argued are the rights that most greatly affect women’s status in society, are very often not given due attention” (p.289). I also agree with Charlesworth and Chinkin (2002) that international human rights law has “retained the deeper gendered public/private distinction” which obscures and overlooks women’s experiences of rights violation.

Schaffer and Smith (2004, p.66) distinguish different kinds of truth that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission sought in South Africa. They write that “Personal or narrative truth comes from witnessing to the subjective experience of suffering and victimization, a truth based on people’s perceptions, stories myths and memories”. In contrast, the courts in the MIFUMI Petition sought “Factual or forensic truth which provides corroborative evidence for establishing the ‘what’ of what happened in the past ...” (TRC1: 112, as cited in Schaffer and Smith, 2004, p.66). In this they were relegating women to “self-help” and treating their objections to bride price as a private matter, not one to be dealt with in court. In her article “The Violence of Privacy” (1996), Elizabeth Schneider writes that “in the so-called private sphere of domestic and family law, which is purportedly immune from law, there is always the selective application of law. Significantly, this selective application of law invokes

‘privacy’ as a rationale for immunity in order to protect male domination” (pp.950–951).

A selective and inconsistent application of law was also found in the lower court, and would seem to lend weight to the argument that women are treated as second-class citizens. Steiner and Alston, in *International Human Rights In Context* (1996), comment on the degree to which rights abuses are strongly correlated to the victims’ lack of power. They write: “Those who are most vulnerable to human rights abuses often lack the favour of protection of the state, as well as the power within their communities to protect and further their basic needs and interests” (p.894). Many of these women are subject to customary law; an observation also supported by An-Naim (1997, p.47), who writes, “For the majority of Africans, customary marriage law is the most important source of law and the type of law with which they are likely to have first and foremost frequent contact”.

A less patriarchal legal system would certainly have allowed MIFUMI to achieve a better outcome, though ironically it was the female judges who were the most dismissive of our case. In the Constitutional Court, composed of three female judges and two male judges, it was a male judge – Justice Twinomujuni – who supported us. And in the Supreme Court, *composed of five men and two women*, the only judge to rule to abolish bride price was Justice Esther Kisaakye; she is a human rights lawyer who has written before on the ways in which practices such as female genital cutting, polygamy and bride price deny women their human rights (Kisaakye, 2002). Fortunately, we did succeed in getting the refund of bride price abolished.

Perhaps that outcome was the best that we could have hoped for, given that Ugandan society is not yet ready for radical change. The legal scholar Fareda Banda, commenting on the legality of polygyny as a form of customary marriage, writes that “Perhaps the most controversial of the family law provisions is the injunction that polygyny (or polygamy) be prohibited”, since “Most legal systems on the continent recognize polygyny, either as a customary or religious ‘right’ of men” (Banda, 2003, p.8). She argues that, rather than seeking to “prohibit” polygyny, a general recommendation to “discourage” might be preferable, and would recognise that any change will necessarily be gradual. Himonga (2017, p.3) concludes in a similar vein that when courts are under pressure to consider human rights, especially those affecting gender and marriage, they “should not lose sight of the critical role

customary law plays as a source of law and justice for the majority of people on the Continent”.

Many people were angry at the Supreme Court’s ruling on bride price, especially traditionalists, who felt that it went too far. However, feminists and survivors were jubilant, despite being aware that it didn’t go far enough. But it certainly had an effect, setting in motion newspaper features, scholarly articles and legal case studies, as well as inspiring films, music, dance, drama and literature. The *Monitor* ran an editorial about the importance of the ruling in protecting girls from early and forced marriage. The *New Vision* was similarly positive about the ruling, and a law student from the UCL Centre for Access to Justice set up a radio programme in Uganda for her *Legal Minds* programme. Overall, “there was greater visibility for an issue that has been largely stifled in the mainstream press” (Kulubya, 2016). A search for “bride price Uganda” on AllAfrica News yielded over 60 articles linking bride price to forced marriages, domestic violence, murder, refusal to bury women, and polygamy. Moreover, the issue went beyond the borders of the country, with Reuters, the *Huffington Post*, the *Guardian*, CNN and the BBC being among those to take up the story. Law schools in both Uganda and overseas (including Warwick, SOAS and Cornell) taught students about the case.

All this was highly encouraging; but for me, it was not enough. Something more needed to be said – which is why I went on to write a novel.

Chapter Three: Literary Activism

The first step in the campaign to abolish or reform bride price was to make a case linking it to discrimination and violence against women. In the previous chapter, I showed that despite it being a landmark ruling, the MIFUMI appeal was only partially successful in the Supreme Court. In this section I analyse how people use novels to make changes at societal levels. I also attempt to locate my work in the context of other literary activists, including the Ugandan women writing on gender issues who are published by FEMRITE, and those published by WRITIVISM, the recently established literary NGO engaging young Ugandan writers. Through telling stories and publishing books, literary activists are increasing our understanding of shifts in society.

Resistance literature has a long history. It is particularly visible in various periods of African-American literature: from the height of production of fugitive slave narratives (1830s–1860s), including *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845), to the protest fiction of the 1930s–1950s, such as *Native Son* (1940) by Richard Wright. In the former, when Douglass witnesses the flogging of his Aunt Hester, his reaction is so similar to that experienced by my protagonist Achieng when she witnesses the torture of the young girl Nyawere in the village square, that I adopted his words: “I was so terrified and horror stricken at the sight.”

Another story to resonate with me was that of the West Indian slave Mary Prince (Sara Salih, ed., 2000), whose petition to the parliament of England is similar to my petition to the constitutional courts in Uganda. Prince detailed “the horrors of slavery – the pain suffered on being separated from her family, ... the punishments to which she was subjected to by a succession of owners, the physical hardships she was forced to endure” (page xii). Such violations arising from slavery resemble those listed in my petition to court: beatings, humiliation, domestic violence and child abuse, rape, lack of consent in marriage, coercive labour, and the imposition of maximum obedience. As Salih writes, “By publishing her life story, Prince engages in two kinds of ‘life-saving’, writing herself and her people into existence and thus preserving ‘the life of the race’, and writing to save her own life” (page xii). Though MIFUMI’s case was opposed to the institution of the culture of bride price, and Prince’s to the institution of slavery, the similarity is evidenced by words common to both petitions, such as

“chattels”, “property”, “articles of trade”, “buying and selling”, “bondage” and “obedience”. However, the authenticity of such narratives is always likely to be called into question. To counter this, Prince’s text was “bolstered by an editorial supplement and appendices” (page xiii), designed to validate her testimony, just as our petition was supplemented by the affidavits of 26 survivors and the use of case law to support the claim. Both petitions fought for liberty, and neither would have been possible without the lobbying and support of the human rights organisations.

The above examples illustrate how throughout the ages there has been a melding of human rights and literature. In their book *Human Rights and Narrated Lives* (2011), Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith make the connection even stronger, showing how literature and politics have intersected at various times to form a powerful cocktail for social change.

Amit Chaudhuri, in the introduction to his book *Literary Activism* (2017), discusses literary activism as seeking to reinvigorate the force of the literary, rather than as a tool for advocating socio-political issues; and Jon Cook expands Chaudhuri’s discussion of literary activism as “an activism on behalf of an idea of literature” (2017, p.298). According to Chaudhuri, literary activism arose in response to another phenomenon, the “market activism” that has become an increasing force over the last two decades and more, whereby a book is judged for its commercial as opposed to its literary value. But literary activism is a fluid concept that takes several forms, and as Jon Cook (2017, p.297) writes in the epilogue, “it harbours an element of resistance, and not just in the way the literary market currently operates, but also how literature is taught, researched, and valued within the academy”. While some of the essays in Chaudhuri’s collection offer the beginnings of an analysis of the literary world at a moment of “globalisation”, there is equally a series of questions about whether such a thing as “the literary world” exists, and if it does, where its current boundaries lie.

One key point is the place of translation in literary activism. As Cook (p.320) puts it, “The idea of a literature written between languages, crossing different cultural boundaries and genres while it resists the imperatives of the market, illuminates another aspect of literary activism, the role of the translator”. The importance of translation is highlighted by Laetitia Zecchini (2017) in her essay “Translation as Literary Activism”, which argues that “in the translating practice of so many poets, activism on behalf of literature and activism through literature become indistinguishable”. This convergence of “through” and “on behalf of” can be linked to

my translation of my mother's and aunt's stories, which meant transcribing the recordings from the Dhopadhola vernacular before translating them into English and making them ready for presentation to a wider public; in this process, storytelling and literary activism intersected. FEMRITE, as shall be discussed, carried out a similar project in the interviewing, recording, translating and editing of the stories narrated by illiterate (but by no means unintelligent) rural women, in order to collect them within anthologies. Translation became a tool which allowed me to bring a difficult subject hidden under culture and only experienced by a marginalised group of people (rural poor uneducated women) to the wider public and to people with influence to change the custom (influencers). My mother's narrative was oral. Through my translation I was able to reinvigorate literature (advocacy of an idea of literature as Chaudhuri (2017) put it), by translating her story in ways that accommodated the nuances of the original language.

In his essay "Forms of Fidelity" (in Chaudhuri, 2017, p.257), Jamie McKendrick writes that "the translator's task is to listen out for what is happening on as many levels as possible and tentatively to move the target language in the right direction"; and Cook (in Chaudhuri, 2017) sums it up when he writes that:

The work of translators reminds us that the mental maps we carry in our heads are often highly selective. Without the work of the translator we might not know of, let alone be able to read, the work of contemporary novelists writing, for instance, in Afrikaans. As with Laetitia Zecchini's translation of Kolatkar's poetry into French or Jamie McKendrick's translation of Italian poetry into English, literary translation can open up a new horizon for our understanding of both of where contemporary literature is being written and what it means to be contemporary. (p.320)

However, translating literature so as to meet the demands of a global readership is not without its critics. Tim Parks in "Globalisation, Literary Activism, and the Death of Critical Discourse" (2017, p.158) questions "what happens to literary style in a more international environment?", and maintains that "you cannot have a strong style without a community of readers able to recognise and appreciate its departures from the common usages they know" (p.160). Otherwise, as Cook says, "we lose some of

those particularities of knowledge and idiom that make literature worth reading” (Cook, 2017, p.302). The example of FEMRITE is important here, since it targets a particular community concerned with gender issues and translates the work of women from within the community: in doing so, it “avoids an uncoupling of writer and community” (Parks, 170) and retains the “particularities of knowledge and idiom”.

In her essay “Transnational vs. National Literature”, Dubravka Ugresic (2017, p.200), discusses the importance that translation plays in the lives of writers who are living in the “outside nation zone” (ON-zone) and who write in “the small language” of their mother tongue. Her essay also makes a thinly veiled criticism of discrimination against women writers (p.205): “Women make up forty-nine per cent of the migrant population. It’s a fair assumption that in this imagined state, there would be at least a negligible percentage of writers, half of whom would be women.”

The case for marginalised women writers is highlighted by Derek Attridge in his essay “The Critic as Lover” (2017, p.51), which discusses literary activism in the form of “an affirmative criticism, one that operates – with as much sophistication and care as any other approach – to understand, explore, respond to and judge what is of value in works of literature”. Attridge proves the point by championing the work of Zoë Wicomb, “who grew up under the official racism of apartheid as ‘Coloured’... in the context of a literary establishment that was dominated by white male writers” (2017, p.60). This has parallels with FEMRITE’s championing of women writers whose voices were silenced within a male-dominated publishing industry.

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Around the time I was founding MIFUMI, FEMRITE was being founded by Mary Karooro Okurut, a lecturer at Makerere University. It began, says Strauhs in her book *African Literary NGOs* (2013, p.33), as a protest against current publishing practices: “When I was a lecturer at university, a lecturer for literature, one of my undergraduate students had a manuscript and she tried to get a publisher, but the publishing house said: ‘No, we don’t publish women’s literature’.” This was the trigger that led to her calling a group of women together to her office to discuss setting up an organisation that would promote women’s writing.

In her essay “FEMRITE and the Woman Writer’s Position in Uganda”, Susan

Kiguli, a Ugandan poet and one of the founding members of FEMRITE, attributes its successful establishment to the “National Resistance Movement’s general philosophy of affirmative action for women and the acknowledgement of women’s participation in the guerrilla war which led the NRM to power in 1986” (Kiguli, 2007, p.174; see also Strauhs, 2013 and Kyomuhendo, 2015). Having just attended the World Women’s conference held in Nairobi, “they returned buoyed up with the idea of feminism and activism to promote women’s status and reduce gender discrimination” (Strauhs 2013, p. 73). Just as it was on the back of the World Women’s Conference held in 1995 in Beijing that I set up the Mifumi Domestic Violence programme, so it was on the back of the Nairobi World Women’s Conference that Mary Okurut returned with the idea of promoting women’s literature.

FEMRITE was established formally as a non-governmental organisation, and in her book *African Literary NGOs*, Doreen Strauhs (2013) coins the term LINGO (Literary Non Governmental Organisation) to describe organisations such as the Kwani Trust in Kenya (Kwani meaning “why?” or literally “so what?” in Swahili to indicate a stance or reaction) and FEMRITE in Uganda, which sprang up in Anglophone Africa. It was during the time of the colonial government that Makerere University was established as the centre for writing in Uganda, and with FEMRITE it acquired a new lease of life. Its mission was to build a sustainable platform for Ugandan women to contribute to national development through creative writing. FEMRITE are currently debating whether in going forward they should publish male writers as well, or stick to promoting writing by women.) When I interviewed Hilda Twongyeirwe, FEMRITE Coordinator, she felt it important for FEMRITE to remain focused on writing in relation to women’s empowerment, because there is much to be addressed in this area. Although it has been argued that women writers in Uganda have overtaken the men, Twongyeirwe said that men still dominate the important spaces for literary engagement, such as the school curriculum. She said it was okay for more literary initiatives to also come up and address other issues, instead of FEMRITE trying to do it all. That way, she felt, FEMRITE will remain effective and Uganda will have a more vibrant literary sector.

FEMRITE’s impact has since been documented by several scholars, who describe it variously as challenging the dominant male narratives (Hunsu, 2015); as a political vehicle to address women’s issues (Gichanda, 2012, 2014); and as contributing to the sustainability of African literature, because “it is such small publishers that are critical

of neo-liberalism and keep current the range of discussions linked to the legacies of negritude and black consciousness ...” (Ojwang and Titlestaf, 2014). Strauhs (2013), meanwhile, examines the impact of FEMRITE on both literary and socio-political arenas in Uganda.

Despite such achievements, FEMRITE has not been without its critics. In 1998, FEMRITE published five novels, the most to have been published by a Ugandan publishing house in a single year. But in part because those novels included criticisms of Ugandan men’s behaviour towards women, their authors experienced hostility (Kiguli, 2006). There were also criticisms of the use of explicit sexual language in describing the rape and defilement of women and girls, as in Mary Okurut’s *The Official Wife* (2003) and Kyomuhendo’s *Secrets No More* (1999); and also of the portrayal of women as sexual beings who might actually enjoy sex. According to Strauhs (2013), FEMRITE writers were described as “that emerging club of women whose pastime is literature through sex” (Strauhs, 2013, p.142), with FEMRITE taking on the image of a gangster LINGO. Contributing authors (Kiguli, 2010), Baingana (The Guardian, 2013) and Kyomuhendo (Hunsu, 2015) discuss the challenge of male hostility that impairs serious debates on women’s writing. MIFUMI also faced similar criticism when it embarked on domestic violence work and, later, for its bride price campaign. For instance, in 2007, when the MIFUMI Petition was heard in the constitutional court, I was interviewed by the BBC and accused of attempting to destroy African culture.

Another criticism was that FEMRITE was a women’s human rights project rather than a literary project; the implication being that “serious” writers would back away from being published by FEMRITE. “Paradoxically, the promotion of women’s issues might be what might jeopardize its mission” (Strauhs, 2013, p.82). Regardless of these criticisms, FEMRITE has to date managed to avoid direct political confrontation with the government. Strauhs suggests that the titles published by FEMRITE have tended to be restricted to its core members, the first generation of FEMRITE writers, which could explain why it reflects more traditional values. These first-wave authors also hold the view that one writes because one has a social message to impart. In this, their views are no different from those of the founding fathers of African literature. In his essay “The Novelist as a Teacher”, Chinua Achebe “assigned a public role and social responsibility to African writers”, while Okot p’Bitek in “Artist as the Ruler” proposed that artists “create ... the central ideas around which other leaders ...

construct and sustain social institutions”; and Ngugi considered “every writer [to be] a writer in politics” (Strauhs, 2013, pp.92–93).

Some of the work of FEMRITE’s contributing authors deal with gender issues similar to what I engage with in my novel “The Price of a Woman”. Mary Karooro Okurut’s *The Invisible Weevil* (1998) shows how writers are “reclaiming and re-evaluating women’s participation during the oppressive regimes of civil war in Uganda” (Gichanda, 2012); Goretti Kyomuhendo’s *Secrets No More* (1999) describes the impact of war on women, focusing on the civil war in Rwanda; Susan Kiguli’s poems in *The African Saga* interrogate violence against women, and use culturally specific images and situations. The short story “Bride Price for my Daughter” in *Tears of Hope* (Wangusa and Barungi, Eds., 2003) deals specifically with bride price: Nyambuga describes how, after her husband abandons his family, he appears when their daughter gets married and claims the bride price, and Jane Kaberuka’s *Silent Patience* (1999), tells of the arranged marriage of Stella to an older man whom she has never met; she is withdrawn from school and married against her will.

FEMRITE has made commendable achievements, particularly as a LINGO that is opening up spaces for women to voice their experiences. I agree with Yvonne Vera when she writes that: “The woman writer in Africa is a witness: forgiving the evidence before her eyes, pronouncing her experience with insight, artistry, and a fertile dexterity. Her response to theme, ...taboo, is vital and pressing” (Yvonne Vera, Ed., 1999, p.5). This idea of bearing witness is one I will turn to in my concluding chapter.

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In the conclusion to her book, Doreen Strauhs (2013) questions the future of LINGOs in Africa, debating whether they will thrive or die out. In Uganda, the recent establishment of WRITIVISM would indicate that LINGOS are a growing rather than a dying phenomenon, particularly as the focus moves forward to the next generation of writers.

WRITIVISM is the literary initiative of the Centre for African Cultural Excellence, founded in 2012 by two Ugandans and a Zimbabwean. In the introduction to the first anthology, *Odokonyero* (2018), the editors Madhu Krishnan and Bwesigye Bwa

Mwesigire write that the founders were “drawn together by a shared interest in the power of literature and storytelling as a means of expression and a mode of engaging with contemporary realities” (page ix). WRITIVISM decided to interrogate the theme of conflict, but not “to contribute to the tendency, particularly in the Western media and media press, to view Africa generally, and Uganda specifically, as sites of violence; rather we wanted to show how emerging Ugandan writers engage with conflict, in the fullest sense of the word, as a theme, but also as a literary element that drives a story and advances a plot” (page x).

The contributing authors pinpoint modern-day issues or issues that could not previously be openly discussed, such as lesbian and transgender problems (Edna Kansime’s “Finding Freedom” and Godiva Okullo’s, “Breathing Complications”); the debate around abortion (Birungi Kakinda in “Which Season is This” and Esther Mirembe’s “Tendo”); the taboo subject of infertility (Gladys Oroma’s “Do not dare God”); and the increasingly visible phenomenon of child abduction (Shelah Owino’s “He Blames Me”) in Uganda for ritualistic purposes.

Out of 18 authors, 12 are female, and many of the issues they cover relate to gender concerns demonstrating that the subjects of violence against women are still very much a part of modern-day gender concerns. Rachel Aboda Aber’s “The Beautiful Tradition” and Patricia Bigirwa Twasiima’s “Muhanguzi’s Daughters” deal with succession and inheritance issues for children under traditional justice. Another issue closely related to inheritance is that of women’s property rights as seen in Irene Abalo Otto’s “A Trek for Atubo” and Fred Sunday Mugisha’s “Candano” stories that both deal with land wrangles and the impact these have on the women.

Through WRITIVISM, young Ugandans are writing about issues that affect them and are bringing them into the public domain.

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To situate *The Price of a Woman* within the wider feminist movement in the African corpus beyond Uganda, I examine Yvonne Vera’s *The Stone Virgins* (2002) because of its theme of sexual violence meted out to women and its focus on women’s pain; Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* (1988) because of its theme of the domination of women under a patriarchal system that is also set largely set against a

backdrop of rural domesticity; and Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1980) because the subject of polygamy is a custom very closely linked to that of bride price.

The three books discussed here are quite different in style. *So Long a Letter* is an epistolary novel. *Nervous Conditions* is a first-person narrative that nevertheless gives us access to the thoughts of other characters. *The Stone Virgins* tells its story in a prose that aspires to poetry. All three, however, not only place women at the centre of the narrative, but also deal with difficult and taboo subjects. They're widely regarded as important bench markers for African feminism.

Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins*, published in 2002, was the last of Vera's four novels to appear before her death in 2005. The book, which won a MacMillan Prize for African adult fiction, is set in Zimbabwe and focuses on the personal cost of war to women, told mainly through the perspective of two sisters. Using the 'instrumental attitude to literature' described by Derek Attridge in his book *The Singularity of Literature* (2017, pp.9-10), *The Stone Virgins* gives us an index to the political history of Zimbabwe in the period leading up to independence and the liberation struggle that followed in the 1980s. In her review of the novel, Ranka Primorac (2003, p.995) describes Vera's narrative as having the "potential function of an alternative, unofficial history" of Zimbabwe.

Vera's focus on sexual violence through the rape and mutilation of Nonceba is explained by Zoë Norridge in the introduction to her article "Sex as Synecdoche" (2012), where she explores the trend among female African writers (Forna, 2010, Adichie, 2006) of "interweaving explicit sexual descriptions and graphic violence... that forms both a language and strategy with which to explore and contest violence against women" (p.18). In examining this legacy of conflict-based feminist approach, we see that Vera makes women's personal experience of war, wounding and survival the central feature of her novel. Through her signature lyrical style, Vera finds a method to express women's personal pain and suffering in all its different shades. Like other second-wave feminists her objective is to put the personal cost of conflict to women, particularly rape as a weapon of war, firmly on the public agenda.

Although the central character in *The Stone Virgins* is Nonceba, an omniscient narrator tells the story from multi-perspectives that include Thenjiwe, the older sister who was beheaded, and Nonceba her younger sister, who was raped and had her lips cut off. We are also given access to a lesser extent to the minds of the murderer and

rapist, Sibaso, and of Thenjiwe's lover Cephass Dube. Overall, the result is an absorbing set of character portraits told from these different perspectives.

The story begins with a description of the city neatly laid out in grids, to contrast with the rural randomness of Kezi where chaos exists. This is followed by a bar scene which Vera uses to introduce the uneasy relationship between men and women that is to come. Her text focuses on tactile experiences. The description of bodies touching is a foregrounding of the story's focus on "sexual touching as fundamentally bound up with descriptions of violence" (Norridge, p.31). We see bodies in close proximity: the man and woman in the bar sit at a table with "Her toe touching his knee" (p.9). At Ekoneni, a rendezvous for lovers, prostitutes and their clients, Vera introduces men and women who are in intimate situations yet hostile to each other. Thus, the omniscient narrator tells us, "Their fingers touch...but without joining hands" (p.13). There is also a hint of force and urgency: "Her hand moves slowly up his arm and holds him tight" (p.13). Such close images of the body are used throughout the novel. For example, the narrator dwells on a description of "knees" from multiperspectives. In the bar she uses it to portray seduction: "Her toe is touching his knee" (p.9); in regard to Thenjiwe's thoughts when she is with Cephass Dube, she uses it to show sensuality: "A man around her knees" A man touching her knees" (p.36). During the rape of Nonceba she uses it to show force exercised in the most subtle of manners - "A knee lifts up to touch the bottom of her legs...Sit here, on my knee..." - the latter being words often voiced by a parent to a child, but used here by one whose intent is to harm. Here Vera renders the victim as powerless in the face of violence, but later the knee image is used as a sign of hope: "I am alive, waiting on these strangers' knees..." (p.76).

Vera's repetition of key words with a different emotional import - as when Thenjiwe says "A man around her knees, that is all she wants..." (p.36), a portent for the time when Sibaso asks Nonceba to sit on his knee after violating her - is evident again in the recurrence of the word "bones". Dube thinks of bones as follows "Does she know that bone is the driest substance of being like all substantial forms that give form, that support wet things such as flesh and water and blood?" (p.37). Bones in this regard is a metaphor for the deepest love that one can feel but also for the deepest harm that one can inflict: it signifies the bone we will later glimpse when Sibaso severs Thenjiwe's head. We are exposed to the bones of a man in the caves. Thereby, Vera effectively uses bones, stones, caves and the skeleton as metaphors for life and

death, love and hate. The stone cave becomes a shrine where the stone virgins, from which the title of the book derives, commit suicide and are buried. Yet as a bomb crater, it is for Sibaso “the safest dwelling place...” (p.103).

Reading *The Stone Virgins*, one cannot help but be struck by its poetic style which, (although not being an easy read) gives the reader “the experience of immediacy and vividness” (Attridge, 10). This is what Primorac (2017) means when she writes:

The Stone Virgins presents this narrative material with unprecedented compositional balance and clarity, and in a style that is more measured and controlled than in any of Vera’s previous novels. Her usual deluge of ‘poetic’ images and figures of speech...is here carefully restrained. Images are embedded within the text with great precision, for example the recurrence of the word ‘bone’. One of the most shocking events in the novel – the murder of Thenjiwe – is told with extraordinary grace and economy of language. (p. 996)

As the story unfolds before our eyes we understand that a man has come out of nowhere and attacked two sisters, Thenjiwe and Nonceba. However, the story does not follow a chronological order but shifts forwards and backwards, to function as a retelling of events in different sequence, even within the same scene. Take, for example, the scene of the murder of Thenjiwe and the rape and mutilation of Nonceba. This is the central event around which the story revolves. Sibaso starts by beheading Thenjiwe who has just returned from the well and has a jerrican of water on her head, which falls off as she is decapitated. Nonceba watches as this happens before she too is raped and her lips sliced off with a razor. However, the story is not described as one straightforward action but rather as it must have been experienced by a Nonceba, in shock, agitation and confusion. Thus, the action is sometimes speeded up and sometimes depicted as though in slow motion. Actions jump from place to place giving us a sense of the chaos of the event. Despite this, the tone adopted by the omniscient narrator manages to remain detached and objective (almost clinical), yet it leaves the reader with an overwhelming tenderness for the lovers Thenjiwe and Dube and for the living sister Nonceba.

The power of Vera’s poetry is seen in the description of the murder of Thenjiwe which is described like a dance with death (pp.73-76): “He is absorbing Thenjiwe’s motions in his own body, existing where Thenjiwe was, moving into the spaces she has occupied” (p.73). We read how he beheads her, takes up position behind her,

catches her when she stumbles forwards, flips her from side to side, carries her on his back, “stepping sideways, and back, forward and sideways”, (p.76) before finally abandoning the body where he is standing. The act of rape is given from the first-person perspective, affording the reader direct access to Nonceba’s thoughts and emotions: “I am waiting. I am alive, now, a companion to his every thought. My temples beating...” (p.68). The present continuous tense also adds immediacy and urgency. And the thoughts of Nonceba allow us to feel her despair when she “almost believes in him,... almost removes him and his lullaby from this scene,... almost” (p.71). The rapist offers her words that could “heal”, but this is quickly contrasted with: “Then his legs close and hold her tight”, and we are reminded of the intimacy of bodies amidst hostility that we saw in the earlier chapters.

The style of slowing down or speeding up time and showing events in a non-linear manner is repeated in the hospital scene where Nonceba is taken, barely conscious, after the rape. When she wakes up in a hospital bed she fixes her eyes outside on the hibiscus trees with their red flowers, which is where she first spies Cephas Dube. The image is repeatedly played in Nonceba’s mind so that the reader understands she is delirious. And it happens again after she is discharged from hospital and is at home when she sees Dube striding towards her. The description of the meeting is told in a haphazard manner and Vera leaves the reader with the vivid image of the disjointed state of mind of a person in pain.

Earthly artefacts are used in a way that entwines the lives of the women with the harshness of nature and earthly elements. Thus “The women expect sudden and spectacular fissures on the rocks. They expect some crack, some sound that will wrap over them like lightning and they will not need to ask if independence is truly here, or if indeed this is a new day” (p.50). Vera uses fine brush strokes to paint a detailed description of a harsh environment: Thus “tumbling rocks rest between trees...sliding along the sides of the small hills” (p.17) and “elongated boulders of granite perched on flat ground rise among the sedate huts....” (p.18). This is in contrast to the picture that her compatriot Dangarembga paints of Tambu’s rural village that is full of warmth and in which the river Nyamarira is a place of enjoyment and healing. Such use of metaphors has been aptly described by Quayson (2003), regarding another of Vera’s novels *Under the Tongue*, as “ex-centric symbolisation compulsion” which “designates a situation where the novelistic discourse insistently proliferates metaphorical categories even when these do not seem to promote either the plot, the

description of character or of spectacle, or the narrative flow directly”; according to Quayson, “the latency that drives them is shaped by trauma” (p.87). While describing one of Vera’s characters, he comments, “It is only when we understand the traumatic roots of her state of mind that we can recontextualize the features of symbolisation compulsion that proliferate in the text” (p.89).

Vera repeats similar scenes using different characters to achieve maximum contrast. The scene of Thenjiwe taking the stranger (Dube) home (p.36) is repeated when Nonceba walks into the hut inviting the stranger in. Nonceba’s and Dube’s meeting is in stark contrast to the romantic and seductive scene of Thenjiwe guiding Cephas to her home. In this scene, Nonceba experiences astonishment and confusion (p.148) and even hallucinations: “She can smell the hospital room” (p.149, because that is where she first saw Dube. However, the passage is evocative of the meeting between Thenjiwe and Dube. It is described as *déjà vu*: “She will turn back and look again...she almost believes...” (p.150). It is like her sister before her, who knows without looking back that Dube is following her. Norridge writes that the “principal technique for generating psychological depth in her novels is through narrative anchors of repetition. She overlays different characters’ experiences over time and by returning repeatedly to particular actions and places she builds up a multi-textured knowledge of these experiences” (p.103).

The Stone Virgins is set in the rural enclave of Kezi. Structurally this is different from Bâ’s *So Long a Letter*, which is largely contained within Bâ’s mind, and the letter she is writing. Although like Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*, Vera also moves between the city and the rural village, the main concern with *The Stone Virgins* is the rural place of Kezi, which was home to the two sisters and where they were violated. Vera gives a heightened sense of nature as a living and breathing force and indeed as participating in the events that unfold. Quayson describes it as “the coupling of abstract concepts with animating and anthropomorphizing details” (2003, p.87). Thus we “listen to the river sulk,... the granite rock is tranquil” (p.19). The prose is melodic with a strong rhythm, like the verse or stanza of a poem when read aloud: “To end the unsure sunsets, the solitary loveliness of the hills....The trees are bare of leaves and carry a stunned and lethargic silence...” (p. 50). The effect of the poetic description of persons and events results in “a surreal stream of consciousness that makes little concession either to plot or setting” (Quayson, p.88), while contributing

greatly to the aesthetics of the story, despite it creating a “severe demand for total participation by the reader” (ibid).

Thandabantu Store is the strategic choice that links city and country. The veranda, the pillars, the wall on which people sit and the routine around visits to the store lend permanency and stability to the people’s lives. The marula tree like the Thandabantu Store provides a shade under which people sit (p.60). The passage of time is denoted by the Kezi bus that “arrives in the late afternoon as usual” (p.59). The story’s short chapters serve to give an impression of “slices of life”. For instance, the burning alive of the storekeeper Mahlathini and his Thandabantu store could be seen as a stand-alone event with no lead up or follow-up. It is also the first time we are put in direct contact with the army men of the liberation war. It is tidy and contained yet it is also connected to the story of violence and “draws a parallel between the destruction of Mahlathini and the Thandabantu store, and Sibaso’s act of mindless brutality” (Primorac, 2003, p.996).

A device used by Vera to continue her theme of gender violence and women’s bodies is the collective. The narrator discusses how the women give birth in the same period, “children conceived out of this moment of emancipation” (p.54), resulting from intimacy between the women and soldiers returned from the war. It illustrates the moment of celebration of independence and is seen not least in the names they give their children: “Happiness, Prosperity, Fortune, Joy, Ceasefire....” (p.54). The other collective is the female soldiers. Returned from the war, they represent hope and strength: “These women, alive now sitting on the edge of this smooth wall, are the most substantial evidence of survival there is, of courage, of struggle” (p.60). In this description of the collective, there is no longer the same intimacy: “The men keep their distance, lean even further way from these women....unsure of words, the tone of voice necessary to be tolerated, to be indulged, to gain the response of these mighty and serene women whom nothing seems to disturb” (p.60).

In her book *Perceiving Pain in African Literature* (2013), Zoë Norridge explores “pain meanings” and “how literature can provide a rich field for the examination of the complexities of the signifying processes” of pain narratives (p.99). She refers to four types of meaning: personal, cultural, symbolic and appropriated. She understands cultural meaning to refer to “a social group’s shared understanding of the causes and importance of pain, which in turn affect socially accepted behaviour in response to suffering. For example, the role of culturally determined meaning can be seen in rites

of passage such as male circumcision” (p.101). She adds, “although pain experiences may be largely determined by accepted cultural meaning, there is also space for individual autonomy in their interpretation, which leads to the creation of personal pain meanings”. *The Stone Virgins* is a literary text that deals overwhelmingly with the type of pain meaning described by Norridge as personal pain. The narrator allows the reader access into the personal interpretation of pain experienced by Nonceba throughout the book. Vera uses the hospital scene where Nonceba regains consciousness and finds herself in a hospital bed to illustrate sickness, pain and death, but also healing, when Nonceba is supported by the pain in the voice of another patient in the room adjacent to her who cannot stop screaming and who has perhaps experienced worse than she has (forced to kill her husband to save their sons, (p.88)). The image of the red hibiscus that Nonceba can see outside her window (p.88) represents blood and the violence the sisters have just experienced. But employing paradox, Vera illustrates that it is from this hibiscus bush that Dube (who represents life and peace) emerges. Vera also exploits the hospital scene to describe the fundamental change brought about by rape: “Her own arms have changed, her body. Kezi her birthplace is no longer her own” (p.90). Silence is a dominant motif in the description of pain. Thus the narrator writes of Nonceba, “She is mute. A voice dying” (p.90). Pain affects language as we understand from Nonceba: “She would like to know the language of all wounded beings. Where do they begin when everything is ended?” (p.91). Yet, in the poetic style of Vera, even this pain has rhyme and rhythm: “Everyone in this dormitory is bandaged,..damaged” (p.95).

Further employing contrasts, Vera contrasts the beauty of the blossom and wedding bouquets of pink carnations in the city with the barren rocks in rural Kezi. In the city, we are told of the euphoric aroma of eucalyptus (p.3), the flamboyant trees with blistering red blooms (p.3), the cassias flowering in resplendent yellow cones (p.4) and the bell-shaped petals of the jacaranda. This is contrasted with Kezi, a rural enclave (p.17), with descriptions of towering boulders of rock to demonstrate the chaos that exists. Also, in contrast, Sibaso the killer is described as having hair like “cemetery flowers...” (p.77). Thus flowers denoting health and life are contrasted with those denoting death and decay. In describing the tray brought by the man and woman who “have returned to the village” to Kezi, the narrator writes: “It has one yellow rose on it, and no thorns” (p.30): Perhaps this portends the forthcoming love between Thenjiwe and Cephas Dube which will contain love and no harshness. As

Primorac writes, “A further dimension of the uniqueness of *The Stone Virgins* is the presence of a male character who makes no attempt to appropriate or control a woman’s body” (p.996), not unlike the character Obel in my story *The Price of a Woman*. “The novel may therefore be said to associate him with the kind of nationalism that is positive and emancipatory because it is non-violent and pluralistic. Nationalism’s dark violence and destructive face is in part embodied by Sibaso” (p.996).

From Vera, I next turn to Tsitsi Dangarembga, another Zimbabwean author, whose novel *Nervous Conditions* has already secured its place among Africa’s literary canon. It won the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1989 and was named among BBC’s 100 books that changed the world in 2018. Its handling of gender, class, poverty and its description of post-colonial conditions in Zimbabwe are undertaken in a serious tone yet with a sense of wit. Dangarembga takes the lives of ordinary rural poor women in order to highlight the pervasiveness of women’s oppression in a male-dominated society. Her novel resonates in many ways with the situation African women face throughout the continent, which is perhaps a reason why it is widely regarded as a classic.

Nervous Conditions is about a young girl’s struggle to receive an education. It is told through the central character Tambu, whose family are poor rural folk who can’t afford to keep both her and her brother Nhamo in school. Tambu is withdrawn from school in favour of her brother who is taken up by their rich Uncle Babamukuru to be educated at the Mission school. When her brother dies, Tambu is given the opportunity of replacing her brother and moves to the town full of excitement. However, there she witness her uncle’s domineering personality and the impact it has on her cousin Nyasha, leading her to question patriarchy and the effect of colonialism.

Dangarembga uses a first-person narrative approach in *Nervous Conditions*. In this, she makes the reader privy to the protagonist Tambu’s thoughts, kicking off with the shocking first sentence: “I was not sorry when my brother died” (p.1). The strategy of the protagonist using her senses - “I feel many things these days” (p.1) - takes the reader deeper into Tambu’s thoughts and enables us to become emotionally involved with her predicament. Dangarembga thereby describes the developing “nervous conditions”, which, according to Ato Quayson in *Calibrations* (2003), is a title that

“recalls Fanon’s words in *Wretched of the Earth* about the condition of the native being a nervous condition, but in the novel it is the women of the story who suffer from that condition, and what generates the nervousness is not colonialism but patriarchy” (p.42).

Tambu’s tone is questioning and tentative, searching but also sceptical. The overall impression is of a person seeking answers by questioning herself. As the book progresses, the reader can discern a more critical tone in the developing adolescent seen, for instance, in her reflection of her uncle: “... if I grew more used to my Uncle, would I stop deferring to him?” (p.131). Quayson describes Tambu’s story as “a straightforward female bildungsroman” which “shows us the way in which her intelligence and critical consciousness are aligned with the manner of her progressive socialization into modernity” (p.42). Thus Tambu’s thoughts are “complex and dangerous” (p.39) as she dwells on her dislike for her extended family, and are centred on women’s oppression under a patriarchal system represented by Babamukuru, the elder brother to Jeremiah, Tambu’s father.

Dangarembga also portrays patriarchal domination through the use of imagery. The image of Tambu kneeling to offer water to visitors for handwashing, including kneeling before her brother Nhamo, stresses the unequal and unfair treatment she experiences and provokes outrage in the reader. Resentment of the ritual is hinted at when Tambu spills water onto one of the visitors. This is juxtaposed to its equivalence in modernity with Maiguru holding the plate for her husband Babamukuru, the patriarch (pp.81-83). But this hierarchy has a pecking order which includes women. Hence, Anna the housemaid kneels before Nyasha and Tambu (p.80), even though she did not kneel before Tambu while Tambu was living in the village.

Dangarembga touches on the issue of bride price without overstating it, but illustrating how it treats women as property. First, it is through the story of the two sisters Mainini and Lucia, with their impoverished background - “there were no cattle at all in my grandfather’s kraal” (pp.127-28, 133) - and the hope that they will bring income through bride price. “See now, the daughters will bring cattle, the cattle will enable the old man to work his fields, the family will prosper...” (p.127). Next the layabout Takesure, a cousin to Babamukuru and Jeremiah, comes to work on the family farm at Nyamarira apparently to earn money to complete the payment of bride price for his second wife but instead he starts a liaison with Lucia. That bride price objectifies women can be seen in the choice of words Tambu as narrator uses such as

“payments” (p.128) and “possessing a woman” (p.129). Additionally, the reader can only be shocked when Jeremiah is happy to accept as his the child his sister-in-law Lucia is carrying, in disregard to his wife’s feelings and despite knowing that Lucia has been sleeping with Takesure. The sexual objectification of women here sees them valued perhaps only as sexual objects or for their reproductive capacity.

The recurring themes of women’s oppression and discrimination is conveyed through the description of them working in the field, with the double burden of carrying a baby on the back while digging (p.7), a trope of the African woman’s burden (not unlike the beast of burden – the cow – that she is often equated with through exchange or sale as bride price). Yet, against this silent labour, Tambu hints at her mother’s strength, which is there in the “ferocious swings of her arms”. A visit to the field by Babamukuru disrupts the day’s work and the men leave in the car. The women are hurrying back on foot, following the tracks of the car (p.7), so that “we would not be late in preparing the evening meal” (pp.135-136). Dangarembga contrasts the women on foot with the men travelling by car to heighten the sense of female oppression. Use of the words “My mother, lips pressed tight” portrays Mainini’s disapproval of the interference into her family of her rich, educated brother-in-law Babamukuru (which we read more of later), while the description of the “ferocious swings of her arms” also hints at rebellion.

A constant thread that runs through the story is Tambu’s struggle for education, which she sees as the route out of her poverty and that of her family. This is illustrated by her literally fighting to go to school. Dangarembga uses the plot of the maize Tambu plants, in order to sell the produce for fees, to illustrate her struggle to go to school and also to help the reader appreciate the impact of poverty on education. The sense of injustice to Tambu reaches its highest point in the clash between her and Nhamo her brother. It’s there first in a war of words as Nhamo explains why education will not be prioritised for Tambu - “Because you are a girl” (p.21) - and then in a physical fight between the two when Tambu is outraged to discover that it is Nhamo who has been stealing and distributing her maize (p.23). When Babamukuru announces he will take Nhamo to the Mission, Nhamo comes to gloat at her in the crop fields, enraging her even further: “I picked up a rock and flung it at him” (p.49). Yet Dangarembga counter-balances the outrage we feel at the discrimination against educating girls by using Jeremiah’s explanation: “Have you ever heard of a woman who remains in her father’s house. She will meet a young man and I will have lost

everything”. The plotting of the maize planting, its theft by Nhamo and the drama around attempts to sell it demonstrate Dangarembga’s skill in packing several issues into one plot, so that we see the brother’s callous disregard for his sister contrasted with the kindness of Mr Matimba, the misreading of her situation by Doris (pp.28-29) who sees Tambu’s situation as “Child labour. Slavery!” (p.28), and finally, to the reader’s astonishment, the father’s demand for money from the headmaster where it has been deposited as fees (p.30).

Dangarembga uses vivid scenes to advance the plot of patriarchal authority drawn from “various images of the domestic sphere in both the rural home-stead and at the head teacher’s house” (Quayson, p.42). The sitting room at the Mission epitomises the difference between poverty and wealth, the educated and non-educated, but most importantly patriarchal authority and female subordination. It is also the place where discipline is taught, indiscipline punished and Tambu educated on the virtues of womanhood. Here it is that Babamukuru attempts to indoctrinate Tambu: “To be good, to listen to what we your parents, tell you to do, to study your books diligently and not let your mind be distracted by other things”. Tambu begins to appreciate that this is the gratitude she is expected to show in return for the education she receives. Dangarembga allows the reader to appreciate the contrast when Tambu reflects on the difference between her “new self” and her mother. While she was an “intelligent girl” and would develop into a “good woman”, her mother at the bottom of the rung suffered from being “female and poor, uneducated and black” (p.91).

It is also in the same sitting room that Nyasha suffers fourteen lashes for staying out late with the Baker boy after the school dance. Later the same fate befalls Tambu: when Babamukuru organises a wedding for Tambu’s parents, to stop them living in sin, Tambu feels it is a mockery of her parents and she receives fifteen lashes for refusing to go to the wedding. The sitting room is also the scene where Tambu’s education is fought through a battle of wits between Babamukuru and his wife Maiguru – it’s where Maiguru, usually silent and timid and in agreement with her husband, speaks out to oppose him, thereby endorsing Tambu’s struggle for education and steps towards a privileged lifestyle (p.184).

The figure of Babamukuru represents the macro level of society, that is, the public and the political, while the women’s struggles enacted in the privacy of the home represent a personal struggle for autonomy. The different domestic settings can also be seen as representative of this public-private divide. Thus, the sitting room

represents the public space appropriated by the men, where “political events” take place, while the kitchen and bedroom, spaces dedicated to women, are where the private and personal struggles happen. Commenting on this, Quayson (p.44) writes: “Even though there is no represented public sphere in Dangarembga’s novel in the sense in which we see it in many male-centred novels, it must still be noted that Nyasha is positioning her own crisis of identity as precisely an encounter with a public sphere that is sedimented with the private sphere of domesticity”. This is because she “interprets her father’s authoritarianism as being ultimately over determined by his location as a conduit of the civilising impulses of colonialism, one that comes perforce with a series of hierarchies and authority positions” (Quayson, p.44).

The dining room is the setting for the battle of wills between Babamukuru and his daughter Nyasha. It is here that her lifestyle is questioned: the choice of books she reads, and the food she is forced to eat. Nyasha’s resistance to her father’s domination ultimately manifests as anorexia. The scene shifts to the bedroom where Nyasha fights with her father (pp.116-117) and loses her mind. Likewise, it is in the bedroom that Tambu finally rejects her uncle’s authority, physically, going into a form of induced stupor and when she regains her senses stating categorically that she will not be going to the wedding. The bedroom is thus set up as the scene of resistance where the girls reclaim their space and assert their independence albeit at a price.

Commenting on this, Quayson (2003) writes that “even with (Dangarembga’s) novel that is widely regarded as a major example of African feminist writing, there is an inescapable sense that the redefinition of the female role comes at an incredibly high cost...The novel is notable for what might be described as the ethnography of the private sphere in the movement between tradition and modernity” (p.42). The wedding issue is also used to demonstrate the extent of elitism and interference into the lives of poor people, as well as being used as the occasion for Tambu’s resistance and coming of age when she finds her identity and resists and rejects patriarchal authority.

Christmas, a time of celebration and family reunion, is used as the climax in the battle of wills between the sexes. The scene of the men hearing the case of Lucia (again in the sitting room) is juxtaposed with that of the women plotting the dare (in the kitchen), that becomes their “opposition to the system” (p.139). The dare (of confronting the men) involves the women first discussing it as a “collective” followed

by Lucia individually storming the men's meeting. Dangarembga uses the collective and the individual to show that the personal struggle of the individual is linked to that of the group.

Characters are also contrasted and compared to highlight key themes. Tambu is depicted as the questioning and tentative rural girl, while Nyasha is depicted as a sophisticated western-educated girl who is vigorously exploring ideas and experimenting. The girls at school dislike her because "She thinks she is white" (p.95). Yet the two become very close and Tambu thinks of her cousin as "Shocking and funny; disrespectful and irrepressible" (p.97). Later, when Nyasha is at her weakest, having had a nervous breakdown and spent time in hospital, the narrator uses the words "cornerstone of your security" (p.203) to describe just how much strength Tambu has derived from her cousin. Nyasha's anorexia and hospitalisation become for her "the signature of an impossibility" (Quayson, p.44). Illness, as a metaphor of or a tool for resistance, is also seen when Mainini becomes ill, thin and depressed when faced with the fact of Tambu's imminent departure to the nuns' convent school. The scene of admission in a hospital for Nyasha is contrasted with Mainini sitting on a rock at the river Nyamarira, sunbathing and surrounded with friends: "It was all very good medicine" (p.189). This is Dangarembga's criticism of the negative effects of post-colonialism, especially when the white psychiatrist refuses to treat Nyasha "because Africans did not suffer in the way we had described" (p.206).

Dangarembga also uses the characters of the two wives, the illiterate and poor Mainini and the elite and educated Maiguru, to depict the idea of marriage as completing women's subordination. Of the female characters in the book, the two wives are the ones who show the least resistance to the domination by the patriarchal authority embodied in Babamukuru, illustrating that marriage underscores women's subordination under patriarchal systems. The author chooses the illiterate and unmarried Lucia to convey this concept, when she challenges Babamukuru's harsh punishment of Tambu. To his assertion that even his wife would not disobey him in the manner that Tambu did, Lucia replies, "Maybe when you marry a woman, she is obliged to obey you. But sure some of us aren't married, so we don't know how to do it" (p.174). Consequently, because they are not controlled by, they manage some leverage against, men. Commenting on this Marta Sofia Lopez in her article "Creating Daughterlands: Dangarembga, Adichie, and Vera" (2007) writes: "Lucia stands as the only female character who can offer Tambu an appropriate role model:

maybe the clue to this distinctive position of authority lies in the fact that she alone among the female characters in the novel has managed to effectively evade the trap of patriarchal motherhood, and has thus effectively delinked mothering from (wifely) victimhood” (p.88).

When Mainini rails, it is against Maiguru (p.142) and we can deduce that this is because they are mirror images of each other – both women trapped in marriage. The narrator hints at this by use of words such as “the sensitive images that the women had of themselves,...images that were merely no more than reflections” (p.140). Quayson explains it well when he comments that, “...in reality women are situated within specific hierarchical structures that work to disempower them,...reproducing instead certain ambivalent ideas about their power/powerlessness” (p.45). Hence, the women oppress each other each other, seeking to resemble the oppressor rather than striving for liberation, rather than challenging patriarchy that as a concept is too difficult to define or grasp.

Dangarembga signals to us that it is only a woman like Lucia who is taken as an equal by men. As Babamukuru put it “she is like a man herself” (p.174). Others, like Tete Gladys, are also treated as an equal, “because of their patriarchal status” (p.134), yet even Gladys is only consulted in matters pertaining to women. Thus, when Lucia mounts her battle, the men are hapless and turn to Gladys: “You should know how best to handle a woman. What do we do in a case like this?”.

Another device in the novel is the repetition of motifs such as the rides that Tambu takes, which symbolise her journey towards a more privileged life. The first ride is in the truck with Mr Matimba to sell her maize, the second is to the Mission in Umtali (in which she leaves behind “poverty, hunger, illness, apathy, lethargy”, and the third is to Sacred Heart, where she attains her dreams. Tambu has a vested interest arising from her ambition to gain an education. This means she decides which battles are worth pursuing and which she can leave alone. It is this self-preservation instinct that here cousin Nyasha lacks. With her sights set on education, she is single-minded in that pursuit. The final ride back to the Mission with Babamukuru leaving a sick Nyasha behind in hospital (p.206) signifies Tambu’s independence. She is no longer under Babamukuru’s control, so he has nothing to say to her.

Mariama Bâ's, *So Long a Letter* stands in stark contrast to Dangarembga's realist style. Set in the Francophone Senegal and published in 1979, it won the first NOMA award in 1980 for and was recognized as one of Africa's 100 best books of the twentieth century in an initiative organized by the Zimbabwe International Book Fair. Bâ tragically died in 1981 just before her second novel *Le Chant Écarlate* (1981) was published. While *Nervous Conditions* discusses the general oppression of women under patriarchy, *So Long a Letter*, in an almost sacrilegious act, dwells on polygamy, a key Islamic concept, and approaches it as an institution that is deeply oppressive.

So Long a Letter is a semi-autobiographical novel in which the narrator Ramatoulaye writes to her friend Aissatou recounting the distress she felt when her husband Modou Fall married a second wife. The occasion for the letter is the death of Modou. In the letter we learn that Aissatou has also suffered a similar fate. While Bâ treats it from the basis of religion, I treat bride price from the basis of traditional culture. Yet, regardless of the ideology from which an oppressive practice derives, they are interlinked and the impact on women is similar. For as Ramatoulaye says, "We suffered the social constraints and heavy burden of culture" (p.19). The fact that Muslim law allows the practise of polygamy does not lessen its burden on or contempt for women. Bâ's tone is one of scathing criticism.

The novel takes the form of a long letter. The epistolary mode of address brings the reader in close intimacy with the narrator: it is almost as though she is addressing us rather than her friend. Within the letter to Aissatou, the narrator discusses other letters so that she is able to tell several stories at once. Thus Ramatoulaye quotes the letter Aissatou writes to her husband to level criticism against the excuse men give for having a second wife: "You want to draw a line between heartfelt love and physical love. I say that there can be no union of bodies without the heart's acceptance...." (p.32). There's also the letter that Ramatoulaye writes to Daouda Dieng rejecting his proposal for marriage, where she states that it would not be right to marry "simply because of the high esteem in which she held him" but she also takes the opportunity to list the injury it would cause to his wife and children: "Abandoned yesterday because of a woman, I cannot bring myself between you and your family" (p.71).

She describes Aissatou's case as that of many women: "despised, relegated, exchanged, who were abandoned like a worn-out or out-dated boubou" (p.42). Yet, she still affirms the institution of marriage, not divorce or separation, saying, "I have never conceived of happiness outside marriage" (p.58) and is still faithful to Modou

despite everything, “I remain faithful to the love of my youth” (p.59). Her quarrel is more with the culture than with the men who fall into its trap: “Madness, weakness? Heartlessness or irresistible love? What inner torment led Modou Fall to marry Binetou?”.

The role of the mother/mother-in-law in breaking up a monogamous union is a motif that runs through the story. It is Lady Mother-in-Law, Binetou’s mother, who urges her daughter to marry Moudo, “She begged her daughter to give her life a happy end, in a proper house, as the man has promised them” (p.37). Mawda gives a similar reason for marrying the young Nabou: “so as not to see his mother die of shame and chagrin” and to “fulfill a duty” (p.31). The same motivation is voiced by Douba Dieng, who, failing in his bid to marry Ramatoulaye, marries his cousin (whom he does not love) to “fulfill his duty to his country” (p.31). The narrative tone is sarcastic, exposing the feebleness of such excuses. Of Mawdo, Ramatoulaye writes: “Thus to justify himself, he reduced young Nabou to a ‘plate of food’. Thus for the sake of ‘variety’ men are unfaithful to their wives” (p.34).

The three men who visit Ramatoulaye to break the news of Modou’s second marriage (his best friend, his brother-in-law Tamsir and an Imam) serve to represent an oppressive patriarchy. They arrive with an air of repressed excitement and show of piety, but the words used by the narrator portray the sense of assault on her person: the Imam “attacked” (p.60) and “announced a storm”. Later the same three men return to make a case for Tamsir to “inherit the wife” (p.60). The repetition of this scene serves to reinforce the oppressive nature of patriarchy, particularly when the narrator contrasts her forty days of fasting and praying to that of Tamsir whose “dreams of conquest...have lasted forty days” (p.61).

The fact that the narrator is still in mourning as she writes her letter elicits the reader’s sympathy. We slowly appreciate that she is grieving not just for her husband’s death but for what could have been had he not remarried. The past tense “I loved this man” is cleverly ambiguous: it’s not just that he is dead but rather that love itself has died.

Bâ was a teacher by profession and her narrator addresses the issue of the education of women and how the practise of polygamy curtails it, especially for young girls. This is observed in the fate of young Nabou, her co-wife, who is withdrawn from school to be married to Modou, who to please or appease Nabou pays her a monthly stipend. This could be regarded as “mahr”, a form of bride price given to the bride

directly. (It could also be taken to be compensation for the loss of Nabou's education.) The fate of young girls withdrawn from school is a theme that I address in my novel *The Price of a Woman* and is another reason I chose to discuss Bâ's book. By contrast, education manages to liberate Aissatou who, after leaving Mawdo, proceeds with further education, gains a professional job outside the country and ends up doing very well for herself.

Towards the end of an otherwise sombre story, Bâ looks towards a more hopeful future, through the narrator's daughter and son-in-law to be. Daba, the daughter, favours a collective where there is no hierarchy (no head of home) and displays a feminism that her mother can only dream of when she says, "The wife can take the initiative to make the break" (p.70). And her fiancé Sall Ibrahim, exhibits more egalitarian attitudes towards women when he claims: "Daba is my wife, not my slave" (pp.77, 89). Polygamy is here to stay, the story seems to suggest, but women need not accept it.

The three books discussed here are quite different in style. Yet they have something crucial in common: they're works of advocacy, passionately contesting injustice and the denial of human rights, especially in regard to women. Pain and suffering are at the heart of them but as Zoë Norridge writes in *Perceiving Pain in African Literature* (2013, p.3) "If description is fundamental even to the definition of pain, and representation has a pivotal role to play both in pain's infliction and its cessation, then it is not hard to see why literature, particularly literature from places and periods of time associated with confluences of violence, environmental hardship or political oppression, resounds with depictions of suffering."

Jessie Kapasula, in her doctoral thesis *Transnational Feminist Agency in Africa and Afro-Diasporic Fiction and Film* (2010), seeks to illustrate the diversity of woman as a category, prioritising a comparative subject-centred approach. As will be seen in the next chapter, my approach to writing fiction is what I think of as a woman-centred or perhaps survivor-centred approach, which seeks to hold the prevailing culture accountable for its injustices. It is to such women that my project speaks, and it is their rights that I seek to safeguard and promote.

Chapter Four: Reflections on My Writing

There is nothing new about the idea of a woman being a property or commodity. It appears, for instance, in Thomas Hardy's novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), which has a scene in a pub where a young woman is sold by her husband to a passer-by: "'A joke? Of course it is not a joke!' shouted her husband, his resentment rising at her suggestion. 'I take the money: the sailor takes you. That's plain enough. It's been done elsewhere – and why not here?'" (p.8). The scene is also comparable to one in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1983), where Celie's father makes her more marriageable by adding a dowry: "Mr – say, That cow still coming? He say, Her cow" (1983, 17).

Explorations of this theme of woman-as-commodity can also be found in many cultural media today. Nigeria's Nollywood has sitcoms, cartoons, comedies and dramas on the subject. The films, mostly posted on YouTube, depict bride price in a tragi-comic way. For instance, in *Igbo Kwenu, The Bride Price*, the groom's family, coming to meet their in-laws, are faced with an exorbitant demand for bride price; and when they protest, the father of the bride fetches a gun and fires at them (Funny Videos, 2015). Angella Emwuron's radio play *The Cow Needs a Wife* (BBC World Service – BBC World Drama, 2010) is a comedy on bride price that has also been performed at the National Theatre in Kampala. More recently, a South African advertisement, "50 kettles to pay bride price!" (Lilly Degreat, [The Great] 2018), illustrates the misunderstanding that arises when two cultures clash. A four-part documentary series *The Tribe* (Channel 4, 2015) depicts bride price in a rural setting within an intergenerational family in Ethiopia, and links it to polygamy. There are also films on "India's missing girls", depicting the impact of dowry on girls (in a culture where the woman's side has to take a dowry to the man's side).

The long history of dowry, along with these recent interrogations of woman-as-commodity, makes it surprising that bride price does not feature more often in fiction or memoir. But there have been some notable exceptions over the last 50 years, including Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* (1975) which is critical of the custom of bride price as a practice that curtails girls' education and encourages child marriage. By contrast, and despite its title, David Rubadiri in *No Bride Price* (1967) endorses bride price as a practice that bestows value on women. Okot p'Bitek's *White Teeth*

(1989) speaks of the burden that bride price places on men, against a background of poverty. Of all these various books, Ian Mathie's non-fiction memoir *Bride Price* (2011) is quite pertinent to mine. Although Mathie appreciates the benefits of bride price as compensation for the loss of a woman's labour and to cement loyalties between two families (p.11), he recognises it as a tradition that oppresses and subordinates women.

Bride price also features in several of the novels, poems and stories published by FEMRITE and WRITIVISM, as discussed above. Issues related to it – including polygamy, women's property and inheritance rights – also appear in the title story by Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi in the collection *Let's Tell This Story Properly*. In this story, Nnameya (or Nnam) is the breadwinner – she has made a successful life in the UK – and gives her husband Kayita money to build them a house in Uganda; but unbeknownst to her, he installs his previous “wife” in the house and pays her rent with Nnameya's money (p.146). It is only after Kayita dies and the “story” is “properly told” that the mourners understand that there is another woman involved. Under a patriarchal system, we infer, it is always the women who pay the price.

Why did I choose to write a book about bride price? And why, in particular, a novel? Why after running an NGO, taking the government to court, and making a documentary film on bride price, did I feel I still needed to say more? It is partly because, as with the authors I examined in the last chapter, I see my writing as a continuation of my activism. There's also the wish to continue my mother's legacy. But why a novel, rather than telling my mother's story factually? And why locate it within a creative writing PhD, when I might have intervened as an anthropologist or lawyer?

My writing started at a moment of crisis when I had reached what was for me an anti-climax of the MIFUMI bride price campaign when the constitutional court in 2010 dismissed the MIFUMI petition and upheld bride price as a cherished practice. I decided to write with the activist agenda of presenting bride price from my perspective. I was trying to give an answer to the judges' ruling, which upset and disappointed me to say the least. My novel was going to expose all the evil about bride price and all the ways its excesses reduce women to property and subject them to violence and abuse. I wanted to highlight the hidden issues that could not be represented in court including domestic violence, early child and forced marriage,

refusal to bury women, harassment over property, wife inheritance and polygamy, along with rural poverty and its impact on education. My novel was going to be the antithesis of the bride price judgement - and to tell of my mother's own experience of bride price within her family.

When I embarked on writing, however, there was a shift in the creative process. My characters began to lead the plot. Ambiguity set in as I tried to see issues from my characters' viewpoint. The protagonist who would have been expected to refuse the refund of bride price instead went out of her way to work in order to repay it and free herself from its bondage. Her lover, Obel, who would have been expected to understand her sentiments against bride price, wanted to refund the bride price to her ex-husband Raja, and to pay bride price for her. It began to occur to me that rejecting the culture in its entirety for my protagonist (or abolishing the culture for myself and MIFUMI, the NGO) was not going to be that simple. It is because of these unresolved questions that Achieng does not solve the bride price dilemma in the story. My activist agenda therefore shifted, moving away from a black and white issue where I wanted to see bride price abolished to a more grey area with issues facing real people. It also needed to serve the aesthetics necessary in a literary text through the characterisation and plot.

In the end, I managed to reclaim the activist agenda in two ways. Firstly, by providing a positive role model in Achieng, who works to secure her independence and refuses bride price to be paid for her by Obel, the man she loves and marries. And secondly by introducing the demand for women's human rights through the words of Aunty Nyarua when she is educating Achieng, and in the defence that Achieng raises in court when she is in the dock.

I grappled with several key issues when writing the story. The first was establishing the divide between where my mother's story ended and where my fictional story began. My starting point was the vivid image in the story my mother narrated to me of the girl who was tortured in her village. The event seemed a good place to begin the novel because the question in the young protagonist's mind was how can bride price cause such suffering? That seemed to be the question I set out to answer. Next, I turned to my mother's story. Bride price had played a key influence in her life and in that of her sisters Berita and Alina and my cousin Akello. The early parts of my novel – particularly the first chapter – were biographical for another reason: my mother died

while I was writing the novel and the emotions I felt drew me closer to her, especially since she had been the brains behind the bride price campaign.

The loss of a parent is a recurring motif in memoirs but I soon realised that the story I'd embarked on had to change. My mother's story was a success story. She was secretly taken to school, not removed from it, and she received an education, graduated as a teacher and married the man of her choice. This was not the reality for the hundreds of women and young girls with whom I worked, and who suffered because of bride price, who were denied education, forced into marriage, subjected to violence and sometimes death. Moreover, I was also drawing from the collective story of the women I supported through MIFUMI. So my protagonist Achieng is a composite of real women. I combined all these sources to produce her character, which made it difficult at first to see her clearly – a point further discussed below.

Translation was another problem I experienced throughout the writing process. I wanted what Tim Parks (2017) describes as “that particular use of a particular language in a particular moment to suggest a particular vision of the world the reading community shares” (p.166). I had written the book with a community in mind, whose readers would know where I am coming from. Dhopadhola is a culturally rich language with different nuances placed on words and where the same word has different meanings depending on where the emphasis is placed on syllables. It was difficult to capture such richness literally as the phrases did not translate well. For example, the strict (or literal) translation of bride price is “welo mweha” meaning the price of a (new) bride. However, bride price is now a synonym for “nywom” or “marriage”, which also refers to the verb “to marry” or the noun “marriage gifts”. The following example will serve to illustrate the difficulty in translation. I once overheard my cousin saying, as he stepped into the house, wet from a heavy downpour, “Koth ogoyan pu nywoman”. This could be translated in two ways: “The rain beat me as though it had married me” or “The rain beat me as though it paid bride price for me”. However, I translated it as: “The rain beat me as though it owned me” (Chapter 12, p.113) because it seemed less awkward. Yet, such a translation loses the nuances that link bride price to domestic violence thus weakening the argument.

Other Dhopadhola sayings are straightforward and need no explanation, such as when a man beating his wife says, “I am beating my cows”, which can be understood as equating his wife with the cows he paid for her, similar to the ease with which we understand phrases like “break the egg of his stomach” (Bâ, 1985, p.39) to denote a

big stomach, or “faded in the smoke from the wood fires” (Bâ, 1985, p.36). However, others are not so simple. The title of Chapter Twelve is “Ochodo Pingo” meaning “She broke the chains”. It can be translated as “divorcee”, as in Charles Olwenyi’s booklet, *Dhopadhola Proverbs and Similes* (2010), as an old-fashioned way of describing a woman who has separated from her husband. But, in the context of my novel, the protagonist is not just a divorcee. She is trying to break the chains that bind her to the custom of bride price and this comes at a price. “Breaker of chains” is a more animated way to translate the phrase because linked to this is the idea that she is a fugitive from cultural justice.

Some words, especially nouns, do not have the equivalent in English, such as *gomesi*, a traditional form of dress in Uganda, or *adheri*, a flat basket made of reeds and held together by cow dung commonly used in the east and north of Uganda. In the novel I used italics to denote they were vernacular words. I have since been educated about the politics of language in relation to the use of italics. In his article, “Bilingual authors are challenging the practice of italicizing non-English words”, Thu-Huong Ha (2018) states:

But the practice reinforces a mono-linguistic culture of othering, some writers believe, and it simply doesn’t sound natural. For the world’s bilingual population, by some estimates more than half, it’s not the way people really talk. Over the last decade, there has been a shift away from enforcing italics on non-English words in publishing. And the decision to italicise or not has prompted authors and editors to ask for whom they’re writing, and to question assumptions about the experience of reading. “To whom am I writing?” Trust your readers, even non-native ones. In some ways, not italicizing backs an editor’s impulse to create as clear and smooth an experience as possible for the reader.

Daniel Jose Older (2104), in his funny video titled “Why We Don’t Italicise Spanish”, says, “It’s a question of culture and whether or not we get to be our own true selves, or have to translate ourselves for an outside audience.”

Because of my love for culture, I initially included folklore and songs, dispersing them throughout the novel when the protagonist and her co-wife are grinding or pounding millet, fetching water from the well or digging in the crop fields, in order to depict the lifestyle in rural areas. I had to cut most of them from the text because, while idyllic, they interfered with the flow of the story and did little to drive the plot forward. One example is the sombre riddle (or enigma) ‘Awori nya pa Nera’, which I reproduce here in full:

Awori nyapa Nera	Awori, uncle’s daughter
Nyoro itedo ango rin	What did you cook yesterday?
Nyoro atedo kwoni beli	Yesterday I cooked kwon beli
To nyoro I ki kani re	Why didn’t you save me any?
Na kidho kano	When I was about to keep some away
Gwok omaya rani	The dog snatched it from me
Nyoro I ki ryemi	Why didn’t you chase it?
Na kidho ryemo	When I was about to chase after
Koth ochako chwe	It started raining
To nyoro I ki bwoki	Why didn’t you take cover?
Na kidho bwoki	When I was about to take cover
Malaika owok I polo	The angel (lightening) came from heaven
To goran bul di dek ni	And beat the drum three times
PYA LA LA	PYA LA LA

This riddle (which is sung) is about the meaning of life, its futility and how one thing leads to another and continues ad infinitum and yet it is against such meaninglessness that we must find the answers we seek. In the early draft, the protagonist sings

snatches of the song throughout the story and is humming the last few lines, her mind troubled, when Raja invades her in the hut.

The riddle ‘Imeri Ango’ was also used by the girls as they dig, because it is a light-hearted song and sung to a lively beat. An excerpt is produced below:

Imeri ango? What are you high on?

Ameri tego I’m high on tego

Tego ango? What tego?

Tego gongo Tego gongo...

Gongo ango... What gongo...

Another song that I cut out proved to be useful to me in another context. ‘Agwera Afoyo Nenin’ is a song remnant of the way people used to greet each other, still sung today among the older generation:

Agwera afoyo neni, Ee Friend I’m glad to see you

Ee, Hey

Asangali I am happy

Ee Hey

Cerina Mo Woodo Cerina Mo Woodo

Wach mi weyo pecho Say how are folks back home?

Ju ber (the men sing this) They’re fine

Jumotho win They greet you

Ni yoga (the men sing this) They say “Yoga”

I asked my mother what Mo'Woodo meant and she described the Vaseline that had been the rage in her day. I decided to use it in my story and send the protagonist off to the market in search of it, which triggers the chain of events that lead to Min Kilo's death.

In the early draft I had dedicated a whole chapter describing life in a rural countryside, which included such songs, proverbs and folklore, particularly the much loved stories about clever hare and stupid elephant. Perhaps I will revisit them later and write them up as well as translate them, so they are available to a wider public.

Regarding the process of writing *The Price of a Woman*, I see it in terms of the different seasons that mark the passing of time in the story: the clearing of the land, the ploughing, the planting and weeding and finally the harvesting. In clearing the land, I had to cut back bushes and shrubs to have a good overall view. In the ploughing season, the acres of land stretched out before me and I ploughed on to over 180,000 words, because I wanted to write everything I had to say in life, the kind of ambition that is parodied in the following limerick:

There was a young man from Japan

Whose poems never would scan

When they said but the thing

Doesn't go with a swing

He said yes but I always try to get into the last line as many words as I possibly can.

Ploughing was followed by the planting season. This was the creative part of the writing, when I waited to see what became of my characters, how they developed a life of their own. During the weeding season, the words I'd written were reduced to 62,059 through an editing process which involved five drafts. This period also

included making decisions on plot and characters. Finally, I harvested the story. This was a time for me to polish the manuscript and make final touches before submission.

I learnt about the process of editing through tutorials with my supervisor. I also learnt that, however interesting some of the events in the novel (such as the history of Idi Amin's regime, for example, or public executions), if they didn't move the story forward, I needed to cut them out. There were also decisions to be made around translation. Originally, as touched on above, I wanted to translate the material verbatim, i.e. literal translation, but that didn't seem to make sense. Instead I used Professor Olwenyi's *Dhopadhola Proverbs and Similes* (2010), so that sayings in Jopadhola (my vernacular) could be translated into English and form subtitles to each chapter. I had been disappointed to find that the few cultural sayings about women were derogatory or defeatist (such as "A woman can't win").

I started the process of writing by developing a synopsis, which gave the book some rough structure, with a plan for 20 chapters of 5,000 words each. Initially, the first three chapters were based on true events depicting my mother's early childhood. I decided to add a prologue when she died in February 2015 as I was redrafting the novel. However as discussed above, I realised that the two stories were separate: there was my mother's story, which is non-fiction, and which I hope to return to later as a straightforward biography, and then there was the fiction. A key decision I had to make was at the end of the novel. Initially I had the protagonist being killed, but to turn victims into survivors and give some sense of hope to women I decided to kill the perpetrator instead. It also seemed a natural ending to the book. In the early draft, I also had Obel die during the bombing of the barracks at the end of Idi Amin's regime. The protagonist Achieng digs him out by hand from the rubble. I changed all this to have the protagonist kill the defendant in self-defence and eventually reunite with her lover.

Keeping to Achieng's perspective was a useful device in telling the story. In terms of plot, as I learnt to pace the story, I realised there were too many scenes of beatings between Chapters Five and Ten. I varied these with lighter moments; hence it was not just one brutal scene after another. The risk was that my literary activism was impeding the novelistic craft. The story had to be educative, but also entertaining. In relation to this, I reworked the characters so they were more rounded. For instance, Raja was shown to have his lighter, more human side when harvesting millet with his

wives in the fields in Chapter Six. Achieng, while seemingly quite passive, was also portrayed standing her ground, such as in the last fight with Raja, in Chapter Ten.

Fiction can be entertaining while also being educational. You can avoid being didactic, but still put the issues across to the reader. However, for a novelist, expertise isn't enough: you have to be brave and say the things that are problematic to say. There were difficult decisions I had to make during the writing and dilemmas that I puzzled over. Regarding courage, Vera (1999) writes: "I know the intense risk a woman takes in the sheer effort of writing, placing herself beyond the accepted margin, abandoning the securities of less daunting, much approved paths. It is an act of courage that she writes and releases those vital secrets" (p.3). I felt the weight of her words in writing *The Price of a Woman*. Finally, I based my notion of truthfulness on whether my characters would do as described or not.

Morality was one issue that I had to address. In the story, the protagonist leaves her aunt's place with Damasio and, though he is married, ends up cohabiting with him. I was worried about the impact of this on young readers who would want to regard Achieng as a role model. However, I reasoned that this was the lived reality for many girls who, because of poverty, were often powerless at the hands of those whose help they were seeking and were forced into prostitution, cohabitation and polygamous unions. Therefore, I included it but allowed Achieng some agency when she negotiates the terms of her relationship with Damasio and also tries to resist sleeping with him. A similar dilemma was whether to include the scene when Super takes Achieng on an apparent visit to their cousin and sleeps with their cousin's husband. I was hesitant to destroy the protagonist's innocence so early in the book by exposing her to adultery even as a third party; however, I argued that the incident would portend future events. Not only did such an event happen to the two cousins in real life but I have also encountered it in real-life stories of survivors who were often ousted from their beds in the middle of the night and left to sleep in the corridor or outside in the cold.

I debated whether to include Chapter Six where the boy Kilo is punished. The hanging of Kilo by the wrists from the roof is based on actual events in two ways. First, it happened to a survivor when her husband (a well-respected teacher in the community) hung her to the wooden beam of the roof; then she was suspended in the latrine (it could have been on the same or at a later occasion). She gave oral testimony

to this at a seminar for survivors that we held. Further evidence for the kind of child abuse experienced by Kilo came from my sister Dr Jane Okoth, who, during ward rounds when a medical student at Mulago hospital, witnessed the doctor telling a father and a son that the young boy's hands would need to be amputated because gangrene had set in. The man had tied up his son to the ceiling as punishment for stealing food. That said, I reasoned that it would be too much to subject the main protagonist to both a hanging by the wrists and a suspension in the latrine. I changed the plot so that the hanging happened to the boy Kilo instead.

There was also what I considered to be all the failed material that I ended up removing from the final texts. There was the lively description of how my mother's brother Ochola and her sister Berita hid her from their father for several months until they could secretly enrol her in school. This was part of the biographical material I finally removed. A sample is reproduced below:

They hid her at their father's eldest sister Ayunda's, then at the younger sister Asisiro's. Each time the father came to look for his daughter, they hid her under a bed and pretended she had gone to help another Aunt. Then he was lavishly entertained and escorted home with meats and drinks. Once he asked Berita to escort him to look for my mother. En route, Berita pretended she needed to "use the bush as her tummy was burning" then she ran all the way to warn her Aunt that their father was on the way. When she returned to where her father was waiting impatiently, he fumed asking what kind of a tummy ache it was that took one so long!

There was other material that just didn't work. For example, in a fairly late draft, I had the protagonist walking on foot through the forest with her baby and maid on her way to take her sick baby home to her village (Chapter Sixteen). She is stopped by a soldier who kicks her so hard that the baby on her back somersaults and falls in front of her on the tarmac. Although this is based on an event that happened in real life, it felt rather melodramatic in the story. In the final draft, Achieng travels home in a hired car and although the trip is filled with apprehension of army men patrolling, the drama shifts to getting Blessing home to have the curse removed and the fact that they

find Uncle Jagwe dead – killed by protagonists’ favourite bull, which has been slaughtered.

The scope of the novel was contained within the reign of Idi Amin’s regime that lasted from 1971 to 1979. In the early summary of the chapters I had included key events of that regime, such as the expulsion of Asians and the brutality of the soldiers. In the redrafting I deleted these scenes because although they gave a sense of the brutality of the army men and the terror that seized the population, they were not within Achieng’s experience of the war and did not advance the plot in any way. This included executions by the state that took place around the country, which originally formed a whole chapter on one that occurred in Tororo. For the same reason I also cut out a description of the local Indian shopkeeper Mujerbhai who actually lived in my mother’s village, Mulanda, and who only left when the Asians were expelled in 1972. I also removed large descriptions of the coup that ousted Idi Amin and how it affected Tororo. The fleeing army men passed through Tororo – a gateway to the north of the country from which Amin and many of his army men hail, and also to Kenya to the east of Uganda through the border at Malaba. The town was bombed in several places, shops looted and the fleeing army men necklaced. In an early draft there is a scene where the protagonist is in court during the hearing of her case before a male judge who would have found her guilty, when one of the bombs shatters the courtroom and she escapes. However, this seemed rather fortuitous and unsatisfactory because it left her a fugitive. I wanted the case heard and decided in her favour. I decided to juxtapose the unsympathetic female judges we encountered through the constitutional petition with a more sympathetic one. The female judge who presides over Achieng’s case does have the necessary empathy: whereas a male judge had found her guilty, she is now acquitted of the killing of Raja.

Later, the fiction turned to truth when we experienced sympathy from a female judge, Justice Esther Kisaakye, in the Supreme Court. By contrast the female judges in the constitutional court had trivialised MIFUMI’s petition. From reading *Australian Feminist Judgements* (Douglas and Bartlett, 2014), I was aware that being a female judge does not necessarily make you sympathetic to women’s issues; one also needs to be gender sensitive. However, it is noteworthy that the sympathetic female judge in the novel was partly inspired by Justice Laetitia Kikonyogo, the first female judge in Uganda, who as deputy Chief Justice was the lead judge in MIFUMI’s constitutional

court petition and found in our favour on the issue of refund, although she declined to make a judgement.

If my novel were revised, I would make Achieng bolder, smarter, tougher and more resourceful, with a burning passion to attend school and learn to read and write. Someone once said that the burden of an unfulfilled life is the hardest thing to carry inside you. I would make Achieng more passionate about fulfilling this potential for an education. I would also change the way the story ends for Super and create a stronger character in Obel. I now understand that telling a true story does not necessarily lend itself well to fiction – not unless there is a memorable central character to drive the plot.

The court scenes also required much consideration because there were several kinds: the family court, the sub-county court and the courts of law. I had envisioned only one court, the clan court, where Achieng fights her case. I imagined her facing a hostile crowd and cultural leaders, and winning them round. Eventually I discarded this idea for two reasons: firstly, I could not envisage any way she could sway and change culture in the way that say *The Whale Rider* (Caro, 2003) was able to. Secondly, the plot began to resemble my own fight with culture, which had not been my intention.

Norridge writes that human rights organisations need to “make wider audiences feel the human injustice of rights violation, rather than simply ask them to think through legal issues” (Norridge, 2014, p.101). Fiction has a similar role to play, especially where based on autobiographical writing or testimonies, the latter being something human rights campaigners often draw on. Fiction, like human rights reports, “moves from the factual to the personal” (ibid) and allows room for what Norridge refers to as “unreliable narrators, tangled relations and ethical grey zones...As such, fiction allows us to negotiate different ways of knowing...that is a different manner of producing, or rather of communicating knowledge” (Norridge, p.102). In courtrooms justice involves fact-finding and the hearing is evidence-based. But there are certain kinds of truth that do not easily translate into fact. For example, a woman might swear in an affidavit that her partner beat her but then remain silent in court because words fail her. In fiction such a woman can be made to “speak volumes”, so that truth can be revealed. I can make the voice of Dangaremba’s “rural, black, female, poor woman”

count. I can allot her centre stage and highlight her issues, recasting them in a new light. The gaps, silences and crevices are filled with her voice and thoughts. She becomes a three-dimensional figure, not the stereotype silenced in court. Fiction allows me to challenge the way women are presented as victims, and to portray them as survivors instead. Yvonne Vera, in the introduction to the anthology *Opening Spaces* (1999), notes that “If speaking is still difficult to negotiate, then writing has created a free space for women, much freer than speech. There is less interruption, less immediate and shocked reaction” (p.3). It is crucial for a writer to have the space to develop and articulate their story without fear of interruption or criticism.

Fiction allows licence. You can develop your case; introduce an element of surprise; withhold information to intrigue the reader; and achieve dexterity through what Vera (1991) calls “more suggestive language, a more rhythmic, more lyrical tone” (p.84). Fiction allows you to discuss taboo subjects in a way that other media cannot. Writers interviewed by Lizzy Attree in *Blood on the Page* (2010) discuss some of these taboos. The Zimbabwean writer Tendayi Westerhof (2013) calls them “bedroom issues”, and another writer from the same country, Luta Shaba (2013), talks of “the sexual act as seen from a woman’s point of view”. Strauhs (2013) describes it as “the cracks and crevices that fiction allows you to fill”.

For the Ugandan poet Susan Kiguli, “Writing creates and encourages debate and even though it is imaginative writing, it will always inevitably project certain perceptions and ignite various debates” (Kiguli, 2012). This is a sentiment I share, but in terms of readership it raises the question of who I am writing for. Yvonne Vera (1998), in an interview with Eva Hunter, says that “... your audience finds you, rather than you writing for an audience”. As a child I selected the books *Heidi* and *Jane Eyre* from the shelves in the little library in my hometown, and they spoke to me. In the same way, I hope that young people who read my story will find it speaks to them.

In conversation with Goretti Kyomuhendo (2018, p.40), Jennifer Makumbi explains her readership: “My immediate audience is Ugandan, then the rest of Africa...I dream of writing a book where a Ugandan was made aware as they read that this book was for them”. In the opening scene of *Kintu*, Makumbi paints a vivid scene of the bustling Bwaise slum with which I am all too familiar. Like Makumbi, I too had a Ugandan audience in mind, albeit a gendered one. Primarily, I was writing to the women who have spoken to me about their suffering - to show they were not alone and there were ways of overcoming their experiences. But I hope that my writing will

also be read more widely, not just in Uganda, but also by women in South Africa, where *lobola* is practised, and by women in India, who suffer because of dowry practices. I hope it will be read by mothers who can tell their stories to their daughters, in the way my mother finally told me her story at the age of sixty. I hope it will be read by young men, who, when they grow up, will have to make decisions about how to conduct themselves, and also by girls who might be removed from school and married off because of bride price. Some of the material in my book, especially parts concerning the history of Uganda under Idi Amin's regime, is quite "adult", though my hope is that it will appeal to young people. I see it as a "crossover" story, similar to other stories such as *The Book Thief* (Zusak, 2005).

One reason for composing my novel as part of a creative writing PhD was the opportunity to combine critical and fictional discourses. I also wanted to coalesce the fields of law, gender studies and literature, so that they would be mutually informing. Locating my novel within a critical context has changed its redrafting in ways that would not have happened had I been writing it purely as a literary activity. For instance, I was influenced by Susan Kiguli's approach to human rights in her poem *I am Tired of Talking in Metaphors* (1998). Likewise, Sally Morgan's extensive project of interviewing and translating her mother's, great uncle's and grandmother's stories of aboriginal abuse and dispossession enabled me to apply the same method with my mother and her sister, as well as other family members, thereby transforming it from an informal conversation to a more structured documentary and testamentary project. There are many examples of writers blending life writing with fiction, as I do. John Edgar Wideman's *Writing to Save a Life* (2018) takes one tragic incident – the murder of Emmett Till, a young black boy – and builds a fiction around tracing the father of the iconic Civil Rights martyr. My tale has its roots in the African tradition of oral storytelling, where women were the custodians of culture, since I acquired the initial story from my mother. I see it as illustrating Laura Marcus's concept of the movement from auto/biography to fiction.

In my teens, I had read James Ngugi's *The River Between* (1965), in which Muthoni, the younger sister of the protagonist, dies as a result of female genital cutting (FGC). Later, when the issue of FGC became a public debate (see, for instance, Toubia and Sharief, 2003) it was the death of Muthoni that was foremost in my mind. Influential

too was Goretta Kyomuhendo's *The First Daughter* (1999), which has a scene in the second chapter where the protagonist's father beats his second wife for visiting her parents despite his refusal. "Kamanywa had beaten her thoroughly until she cried for mercy. After that, he had led her to bed and ordered her to spread her legs wide apart, then he spent a full month without visiting her bed chamber" (p.5).

All these books resonated with my experience of working for an NGO, where I heard about the mistreatment and violence that women suffered at the hands of their partners. As Yvonne Vera (1999) says, with witnessing comes a responsibility. For instance, though MIFUMI presented over 26 affidavits in court, the judges only referred to eight of these; and there was still so much to be made public in the stories that the women had told. The documentary I made has now gained 829,000 views (hits on YouTube as of 17 January 2019); but who are the people accessing it? Many are based in the diaspora; many belong to an urban, educated elite; but few are representative of the subjects of that documentary. Fiction, I hoped, would allow me to employ creative means for polemical ends – to work in the tradition of storytelling, and while doing so, change hearts and minds.

The Price of a Woman resists dominant patriarchal discourse to reframe bride price as a human rights issue. The action occurs in a rural setting, amidst poverty and illiteracy, and demonstrates how a woman in such a milieu has no claim to property since she herself is considered property. She cannot lay claim to her children or the crops she has produced, because her husband has proprietary rights over her labour and reproductive capacity. When Achieng sells the crops she has grown and harvested, Raja punishes her and says, "Everything here belongs to me, including you". And when she escapes to the Mission Church and Father Hepton turns her away, she is left without refuge or sanctuary.

I trained as a lawyer, but the law court is a restricted audience. My aspiration is to find ways to reach schools and the general public, and to encourage people to ask questions about bride price and tradition. There is a particular need to reach girls in rural areas who are most at risk of being married off for bride price. It is therefore my ambition to see my novel given a place on the school curriculum in Uganda, so that it accesses the readership of young people, on whom the future depends. To get past the National Curricular Development Council, the gatekeepers, a morality tale with a happy ending is desirable. The downside is that the girls who should be reading it will sometimes have been taken out of school to be married. However, if you can educate

the boys as well as the girls, then the next generation of men won't buy into bride price in the same way.

I have also given some thought to further avenues for writing and research. First, my mother's story has been etched out and now just remains to be filled in to tell the story of the impact of bride price on her life and how her story led to my story. I would write it as a straightforward memoir, linked to the mystery surrounding my uncle's murder. I would like to write an article about literature and law related to legal theory around the concepts of truth and justice. And I would like to conduct further research into the ramifications of bride price, including its impact on child marriage, refusal to bury, polygamy, wife inheritance and property rights – so much remains to be said.

Afterword

“The purpose of art” James Baldwin wrote, “is to lay bare the questions hidden by the answers”. According to Claudia Rankine in *Citizen* (2014, p. 115), he might have been channelling Dostoyevsky’s statement that “we all have the answers. It is the questions we do not know.” In this commentary I set out to search for the right questions to interrogate the practice of bride price. There were also other issues to address. What was my original contribution to bride price going to be? How have literary activism, literature and human rights informed my fiction? What would the impact of my work be on readers in Uganda and elsewhere? And how would I describe my mother’s impact on me as a writer and activist?

My doctoral thesis has the theoretical underpinning of literary activism and feminism and I have engaged with critics who bring together the fields I work in – that is law, gender, and literature. Two critical books – those by Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith (*Human Rights Narrated Lives*, 2004) and by Amit Chaudhuri (*Literary Activism*, 2017) - were especially important to me. The specific experiences and cases studies that Schaffer and Smith examine (such as the “Truth, Reconciliation and the Traumatic Past of South Africa”, and “Indigenous Human Rights in Australia”) are concerned with racial issues but I found them relevant to my work on gender issues in Africa. The literary activism discussed in Chaudhuri’s volume was also instructive, though his work is based on the written texts of intellectuals – their poems, essays, and novels – whereas my work draws on the oral tradition of passing on knowledge in Africa, using the narratives of illiterate women. I have also engaged with the work of Lynda Gichacha Spencer (*Writing women in Uganda and South Africa*, 2014) and on FEMRITE and WRITIVISM as key players in terms of literary activism in Uganda. Throughout the exercise, my reading of literary activism has been mainly pragmatic because of my legal training. My approach was to describe the multiple platforms in which I have interrogated, narrated and challenged bride price in Uganda, as well as reading bride price literature elsewhere. I have also drawn on key literary texts from the wide African feminist writings for literary criticism.

Through my doctoral thesis, I have aimed to add to the existing knowledge about bride price. From a practice that is usually generalised I have mapped out how it varies widely within the same country and how issues arising from it are dealt with through different legal definitions and interpretations. Furthermore I have demonstrated how it impacted my own family and how it affects the education of women. The material my mother gave me was a primary source that could be corroborated by other texts from the history of bride price in Uganda. I have also aimed to give readers a wider knowledge of Uganda, showing how key political, local and national moments, including during the Idi Amin regime, intersected with turning points in attitudes to bride price.

My work contributes to auto/biography by using interviews with my mother, aunt and cousin in the vernacular and translating these into English. An account of the proceedings of the MIFUMI court case offers further original primary material about a precedent-setting decision. My aim has been to acknowledge the role of the extraordinary women who preceded me and to discuss how I collaborated with them to document the complexity of bride price. As I've shown, even within family networks respect for tradition can co-exist with the desire to create dramatic change for generations to come.

Without my mother's influence, there would have been no court case, I would not have studied for a doctorate and my novel about bride price wouldn't exist. It was she who gave me the resources to carry the experience of bride price not only into the courtroom but also into a film-documentary and a novel. Most important, it was she who enabled me to ask the right questions about the oppressive practice of bride price.

I hope that the combination of my novel and the critical commentary has provided some of the answers to those questions.

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Appendix 1

Map of Uganda showing bride price areas

