

## **Granny, Please Tell me the Truth**

**By Njaga Leonard**

Douglas Ragai, Dagi, felt quite privileged to get a job in Spring Valley, a whites-only neighborhood. Dad had used his military connections with a white ex-soldier to secure the job, a highly commendable achievement. But elsewhere, a dark cloud hang over Dagi's beautiful country.

Under the choking yoke of British colonialism, Africans, 'natives', entering whites-only neighborhoods required *kipande*, passbooks to demonstrate permission to be in the vicinity and stating nature of business. Non-compliance with such rules invited dire consequences. Elsewhere in the 'white' highlands, land was forcefully excised; and mass relocations from fertile ancestral lands to marginal and disease-prone lands, mostly in areas owned by other ethnic communities to incite internecine conflicts; overnight turned proud landowners into paupers. Widespread gross human rights abuses and atrocities were wantonly perpetrated on the 'natives' in their own country! The whispers of a liberation war reached a deafening crescendo, dismissed by the colonial administration as, *"The mere whinings of natives, utterly incapable of mounting an effective rebellion against His Majesty's Empire"*. Only time would tell those out of touch with reality; grossly underestimating and miscalculating, and hence totally unprepared.

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Ragai wa Gichane was proud of his son's performance at the new job, "Another chip from the old block!" Was the latest addition to his huge bragging-self, physically towering above his peers.

The story about his height was that during one of the never-ending 'mouse-and-mouse' raids between this part of Central Kenya and neighboring Maasailand, Ragai's great-great granddaddy's eyes had locked-on and beheld a tall and most beautiful woman he had ever seen, and the rest was history. The mission's prime objective forgotten, he had taken his treasured jewel home. Left without leadership, the mission was a total disaster, including the loss of one warrior. Ragai had taken the severe admonishment and stripping of leadership status like a man, and then turned his attention to enjoying his spoils of war. *'Helen'* of Oleporos' husband was fatally wounded during the incursion, and unlike in Greek mythology, *Agamemnon and Menelaus* delayed their war against Troy. But as sure as the rising of the sun, the Maasai would surely strike back; their prime objective: Women who could bear ten kids!

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All job-performance credit went to the extremely hard-working Dagi, now a trained gardener, and eventually top chef for his employer, a position reserved only for the very best and most trusted. His star had risen exponentially as if driven by an invisible hand. No wonder then, the world couldn't even begin to imagine that Dagi was a deeply disturbed man; precariously torn between love, dread and deep hatred for his dad.

*"What really happened to maitu, mummy"* had been the unanswered question mercilessly and relentlessly hammering young Dagi's heart and mind. *"She died in a freak accident while walking to her shamba when a large branch suddenly broken off*

*a blue-gum tree and landed on her, crushing her skull and causing instant death.”* Well, that explanation was plausible enough up to a certain age, but as time went by, nagging doubts snowballed.

Ragai’s behavior was probably the first clue. A man with upwards of 25 kids from five wives, and yet he seemed to always have time for Dagi and paid extra attention to his wellbeing, way beyond the other boys. For some time, he had associated this ‘favoritism’ with his ‘orphan’ status. But there was another clue; occasionally spying his *cucu*, maternal granny, discreetly and keenly looking at him, and then sadly shaking her head. He pretended not to notice these things.

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Dad continued to go that extra mile for Dagi, including top preference for a job-offer. To Ragai, Dagi was the embodiment of the only woman he had ever really loved. No one could ever guess his deep regret for the inability to control the events that led to Ngendo’s untimely death. He had continuously relived those moments, and the verdict was always the same, *“Guilty as charged!”* As a form of atonement, he had vowed to become the best dad ever. Fortunately, custom and tradition were squarely on his side.

When the fifth wife died, the fourth wife immediately stepped-in without any reservations, and wholeheartedly raised Dagi as her own son, giving him equal status with her own. She happened to be nursing her two-year old girl, and so she brought them up together. Throughout his early childhood, Dagi had no idea or any reason to think that she was not his biological mummy. She treated and disciplined him the same as the others. He loved her so much.

At ten years of age, Dagi’s uncle cautiously informed him that his biological mummy had died when he was very young. Now, as a member of a Christian church, he wondered who would have taken care of him if his dad had followed the Christian teaching of one-man-one-wife, *“How could my ancestors allow such important aspects of our rich culture to be compromised by Christianity/colonialism?”*

His other blessing was Ngatha, his eldest *maitu*. She made it a point to always be on the lookout for his wellbeing, and probably loved and cared for this boy more than her own biological sons, *“After all, it was my decision that resulted in his mummy joining this family as my ‘helper’?”*

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Having notified them in advance, Ngatha, had made sure Ragai was safely out of the homestead before calling a meeting of all the wives. After the usual chatter and mischievous jokes about Ragai, she informed them that the time had come for her to start relinquishing her matrimonial duties on age grounds. She then requested them to propose a fifth wife as her ‘replacement’. These younger women actually loved, respected and trusted their motherly leader for the way she treated them, and ensured peace, harmony and order in the home. They were also quite aware that she had played a crucial role in their getting married. Without hesitation, they had respectfully thrown the question of choice right back at her, according her that prerogative.

Earlier in their married life, Ngatha had hinted to Ragai that she could no longer cultivate the 25-acre farming area all by herself. A frank discussion about a possible ‘helper’ had ensued. She agreed to his choice of the second and third wives, both from

neighboring-village families she knew quite well. The balance tilted to her favor for the fourth wife, and she now had a strong candidate for the fifth, supported by the other three wives. Without a doubt, Ngendo would be a great addition to the homestead.

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During Dagi's most memorable visit to his *cucu's*, and after fully enjoying lots of attention and goodies, she had unexpectedly and directly given him that odd look, "Dagi, have you been getting enough to eat or has something been bothering you? You look a bit thinner."

He had tried to convince her that he was ok, but she was having none of that. Her fixed look continued, making him quite uncomfortable. Eventually, he had given in and opened up, "*Cucu*, tell me the truth, what really happened to *maitu*? Did she really die after being hit by a falling branch? Please tell me the truth."

With glistening eyes, she had hugged him very closely, "*I knew one day it would come to this. But is he ready for the revelation?*" She had always prayed for the timing of this moment to be just right. If given too early, its gravity might completely derail the direction of her dear grandson's life, and probably result in deep depression and/or provoke a tragic reaction. But based on years of watching and assessing his development and demeanor, she knew it was time to bite the bullet, "Come Dagi my dear let's sit over here."

Together they sat down under the mango tree, his favorite spot in this home that occupied a special place in his heart. Being on a higher ground, it gave a clear view of the breath-taking surroundings, and on a clear morning, the snow-capped and awesome summit of God's mountain, *Kirinyaga*, Mt. Kenya.

Still cautious, *cucu* had started off with, "Dagi, how old are you now?" She had asked while rubbing his head, and thinking, "*Oh how his features remind me of Ngendo?*"

"13 years!" She smiled appreciatively, "*He's now a young man!*"

"Dagi, I want you to promise me that our discussion today will remain our secret, and that should you tell anyone, I shall deny everything!"

Both startled and surprised, he had wondered, "*What could possibly require such secrecy?*" But had gone ahead and vowed. Then after another prolonged look, she had started off at a fast pace, almost forgetting the age of her audience. The outpouring came with both relief, and sadness from the full awareness that Dagi's life was forcefully being moved into another phase, "*In a way, this is an inescapable part of his rites of passage to manhood and the burdens and heartaches of life.*"

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That morning, there was a violent altercation between Ragai and Ngendo; apparently, part of a continuing disagreement over the cause of her miscarriage. Of course, given that we are talking about a very violent man, I rest my case.

Later that morning after her domestic chores, your mummy had gone to work in her *shamba*, leaving you with the other kids.

As you know, the homestead is on the upper side of the 30-acre land, from where it flattens out before joining River Kitisuru's valley. The wooded sloping section provides

building material, firewood and honey. The homestead has a separate *nyumba*, hut, for each wife, a *thingira* for your dad, and sheds for the animals, and the farming section is divided equally between the five wives. The *thingira*, is near the main entrance, set slightly apart from the huts. Ragai's nickname, *mzungu*, comes from the European-look around his *thingira*, reflecting his worldly experience from World War II fighting under British forces in Burma. The purple-blue jacaranda and reddish-orange Nandi-flame trees as well as several colors of bougainvillea vines hanging on tree branches are definitely not the picture of a typical African home!

Dagi, according to our tradition, when you are of age, your mother's whole parcel of land will automatically become yours as her only surviving male offspring; sons inherit matrimonial land allocated their mothers.

Shortly after Ngendo had left, Ragai also took his machete and headed towards the wooded area, mentioning to one of the wives that he needed boles for some repair work. But out of sight, he changed direction and headed towards your mummy's farm, and started pruning trees along the fence. The wife continued working between her chest-high maize stalks.

Unknown to your parents, your eldest *maitu* and my dear friend had arrived much earlier at her *shamba* and had just taken a break under some banana trees. She noticed your mummy, shortly followed by Ragai. Ngatha soon lost interest and focused her attention elsewhere or dozed off.

But all of a sudden, she sprang up! "Was that a scream?!" Hairs on her nape were standing up, something had definitely scared her to the core!

With a high adrenaline rush, she listened keenly, and robot-like scanned the surroundings, starting with where she was convinced the unusual sound had emanated. Nothing in that or any other direction, "*Is my mind playing tricks on me?!*"

Then, she had turned towards the direction of your parents, and almost fainted! An overwhelming weakness came all over her. She had to tightly clasp both her hands over her mouth to stop herself from screaming. She sat back down heavily and peed herself. Shaking all over, she forced herself to get up again to confirm what she had just seen!

And sure enough, using a sizeable piece of wood, Ragai was clobbering Ngendo, "*Oh dear God, this couldn't be happening. I must be dreaming!*" But her doubts were soon put to rest.

Apparently, Ragai had stealthily crept on the unsuspecting victim, busy working and softly humming a tune. Detecting some movement behind her at the last minute, she had screamed out in terror, before being viciously smashed on the back of the head. Once down, more blows had followed.

The murderer had quickly grabbed the limp body, placed it facedown under a huge *grevillea* branch he had cut, smeared the nearest edge with blood, removed all traces of blood from the murder weapon, and turned the soil over before climbing back up the tree to start shouting for help.

Had Ragai detected her presence, Ngatha had no doubt that she would have faced the same fate. Therefore, she just sat down again, feeling sick and weak, and shaking all over. She had immediately sealed her mouth about this tragedy to anyone else except

her best friend. Much later she had mustered enough courage to use a long detour home giving the impression of returning from another village. She could never come to terms with being married to a murderer. The very sight of him made her sick. When her turn came, she only entered his thingira to deliver food, feigned sickness, and completely removed herself from all other matrimonial duties.

Wiping bitter tears from her eyes, *cucu* concluded, “The area colonial chief briefly visited with some *askaris*, but without any evidence of foul play, *the* matter was quickly closed as an unfortunate accident, and in the customary way, her body was placed in the forest for nature to determine her final destiny.”

Tears of grief had rolled down Dagi’s face as he mourned his mummy like never before, mixed with gratitude to his *cucu* for trusting him.

She had watched him carefully and at last satisfied, she had spoken to him lovingly, “Dagi, listen to me very carefully. By taking another life, the killer also loses a vital part of himself, forever, which can be even worse than physical death.” He had nodded his confused understanding.

But what followed really scared him. He had never seen his *cucu* like this. His presence momentarily forgotten, her hurt and anger became clearly visible. Her eyes flared fiercely for a split second revealing what lay beneath this kind and loving woman’s exterior! She was no pushover, but a tigress ready to fiercely defend her turf!

“Please promise not to change your attitude towards him. It’s vitally important to always remember that Ragai is still your dad. I will continue praying for you to continue the same way, treating people with respect, and quick to forgive. The grace of God, *Ngai wa Kirinyaga*, will carry you through this new paradigm.”

“Granny, have you forgiven him?” He just had to ask.

“I would like to think so, but ultimate forgiveness and the grace to forgive both come from *Ngai*.”

She had disappeared into the hut and reappeared with a package of some take-away goodies before lovingly bidding him goodbye, “*Oh, how I love my cucu?!*”

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As Dagi reluctantly dragged himself homewards, feeling emotionally numb and confused, his thoughts mysteriously switched to images and joys of a future wife and daughter. Pushing aside the painful awareness that his first son’s name would have to be Ragai, the image of his beautiful daughter, Ngendo, looking at him with those large beautiful eyes reigned supreme. A cheeky smile appeared on his face as he contemplated ‘Mary’ as her baptism name, “*And what would that make me, the father of the mother of Jesus?!*” His smile broadened as he confidently walked home.

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