

short story

The dead man and the medals

By JPR OCHIENG ODERO

He lay there so peacefully, you'd think he was asleep. But the flowers and golden cross on the casket and solemn mourners brought home the sad reality. Senior paramount chief Melchezendiek Oloo Ogeka, VC, OBE, OBS was dead. He had been dead for over a week, leaving behind four wives, 20 children and 76 grandchildren.

The burial was set for two days later, in his village overlooking the placid waters of Lake Victoria, many kilometres from the city.

At the City Mortuary, where his body lay, his kin stood in the long queue of viewers to pay their last respects.

They had organised a funeral service at a city church ahead of the long journey home for the burial. That evening, the cortege would make its way into the night through the scenic Rift Valley past the lush green tea plantations and down into the lake basin town of Kisumu.

His remains would be interred in accordance with Luo customs at a colourful traditional ceremony complete with the famous *tero buru* rite that is performed for respected elders. Side by side would be another funeral service as per the Roman Catholic faith to which he had subscribed.

Chief Oloo had had an illustrious career right from the time he returned from Burma, where he had fought for His Majesty in the legendary King's African Rifles. For his courage in battle during the Second World War, the King awarded him a medal.

Upon his return, he rose through the ranks from being a court interpreter; to a chief in the colonial administration; to a senior chief; then a paramount chief — one of only three in the entire country.

He was then promoted to senior paramount chief on the eve of a visit by the Queen; and was among a select few who lined up to be decorated by Her Majesty.

His second medal was in recognition of his efforts to uplift the standards and education of the native people of Western Kenya. When the country gained Independence in 1963, he was assigned "special duties" in the office of the country's first prime minister. He retired with honours three years later and received his third medal from the head of state — the prestigious Order of the Burning Spear.

The three medals were his pride. He kept them in a glass box above the fireplace of his modern rural home. People came from far and wide to gaze upon them. Men and women would view the medals in wonder as they pondered the presence of this great man who had been born in their midst.

Photographs on the walls illustrated his greatness: Kneeling before the Queen; shaking the prime minister's hand; receiving sacrament from the Pope. He wore the medals once a year, at the traditional end-of-the-year party at State House, hoisted by the president.

It was during one of these visits that the famous garden photograph with His Excellency was taken. The photograph had



Illustration: John Nyagah

appeared in a number of national newspapers under the banner, "Exemplary Service and Dedication to the Nation."

Indeed, the framed picture on the casket was reproduced from that photograph.

Chief Oloo had fallen ill some three years ago. He had consulted a number of prominent doctors and had been admitted to several hospitals on different occasions. But his health continued to deteriorate to

the point he had become almost bedridden. Then a month ago, his condition worsened. One of his wives rushed him to the National Referral Hospital in the city. But the doctors couldn't help him either.

So bad was his condition that Chief Oloo became delusional, at least most of the time. It was on one of those rare days when his mind was clear that, fondly holding the hand of Atieno, his favourite grandchild and the daughter of his fifth son, he made his last wish.

Back at the mortuary where the queue of viewers was almost gone, the Chief's eldest son signalled for the lid of the coffin to be closed and hoisted into the hearse.

Pall bearers were at hand. The Chief's daughters carried the flowers and placed them carefully in the van. The choir began to sing. Atieno was at the head of the cof-

fin carrying her grandfather's photograph. The pall bearers held the silver handles and tried to lift the casket. Nothing happened. They heaved again. The coffin would not move. The bearers were whispering furiously among themselves:

"What is wrong?"

"Are you people lifting?"

"He can't be that heavy, surely!"

They again tried to lift the coffin again. Nothing happened. The crowd stared in disbelief. The choir faltered and then stopped altogether. Something was wrong. A woman began to wail. There was talk here and there. The crowd was fast becoming hysterical.

Then an old woman pushed her way through a flywhisk in her hand. She ordered the men back and dusted the coffin, singing and ululating. She placed her head on the coffin and mumbled something. The mourners were pressing forward, trying to see what was happening. Then everyone went silent. The woman then beckoned Atieno.

"Come here girl!"

Atieno walked to her, trembling.

"Your grandfather wishes to talk to you," the old woman said. "Come, don't be afraid."

Atieno braced herself, then slowly knelt by the coffin and pressed her head on the polished mahogany wood and said, "Babu".

There and then, in front of that uneasy crowd, Atieno held a conversation with her dead grandfather. Sometimes she smiled; other times she laughed. The crowd stared in disbelief, women clutching at each other. She listened again then shook her head earnestly, and finally said, "I promise, Babu; I will make sure it is done before we lay you to rest."

Moments later, she stood up and smiled at the crowds then said: "It's alright. Babu will go home now."

"What did it... I mean what did the Chief want?" someone asked.

"He wants his three medals pinned on his chest," Atieno answered.

"He had made that request to me before he died and is now cross because I had not done as he had asked. I have promised to do it as soon as we get home"

The crowd was dumbfounded. Atieno then pronounced: "He is ready to go now."

She walked back to her place holding the framed picture with tenderness.

The pall bearers nervously took their positions. They looked at each other and then heaved. The coffin lifted easily. A moment of uneasy silence followed, then a cheer. Once again, the choir broke into song.

The funeral procession of senior paramount chief Melchezendiek Oloo Ogeka, VC, OBE, OBS, was finally underway.

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