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A STATE OF EMERGENCY

Kudho chuoyo ng'ama onyone

A thorn only pricks the one who steps on it

**Hussein Onyango moves to K'ogelo; Barack Snr goes to school;
and the Mau Mau insurrection creates turmoil throughout Kenya**

The township of Oyugis lies to the south of Kendu Bay and straddles the main A1 trucking route from Kisumu to Kisii. It is a typical ramshackle Kenyan town, and to the first-time visitor it is total chaos. Dangerously overloaded minibuses – the ubiquitous *matatus* – screech to a halt every few minutes to squeeze even more passengers inside; pedestrians risk life and limb every time they cross the road, first dodging a fuel tanker from one direction, then a pair of speeding *matatus* jostling for position from the other. You can buy almost anything on the high street: beautiful ripe fruit, a second-hand T-shirt, a bottle of warm beer, or a woman for the afternoon. Oyugis has a reputation for having one of the highest HIV/AIDS mortality rates in East Africa, and it is also well known as the home of some of the best coffin-makers in western Kenya. It is best not to dwell too long on the connection.

Down the side streets leading off the main road, life is a little safer, as the pot-holed dirt roads force even the most reckless drivers to slow down. This is where you find the smaller businesses – dressmakers, food stalls and corner shops selling telephone credit. On most days you will find an old woman here selling charcoal by the side of the road; on a good day, she

makes \$2 profit. Her name is Hawa Auma Hussein Onyango Obama, wife of the late David Magak and the closest living blood relative to the President of the United States:

'I am the daughter of Hussein Onyango Obama and the sister of Barack Obama Snr and the aunt of the President. His first child was Sarah Nyaoke, the second was Barack, and the third is me. I was born in 1942 in the Kendu Bay area. We migrated to K'ogelo when I was still young. I was still being fed on the breast.'

I first met Auma at the Obama inauguration party in Kendu Bay in January 2009, when she introduced herself in a torrent of incomprehensible Dholuo. She told me in no uncertain terms that it was my duty to write about the forgotten Obamas of Kendu Bay. She has one of the biggest toothless smiles in the world, and she instantly became one of my favourite Kenyan 'aunts'. The day after the inauguration party, I went to see her in her small hut, a half-hour walk from the centre of Oyugis. She told me that she was too young to remember living in Kendu Bay, but she remembers life in the family compound in K'ogelo, which she shared with Hussein Onyango's two wives, Akumu and Sarah, and her two older siblings:

'When my father left the army [in 1941], he came back and became a professional cook. He used to work for the whites in Nairobi until he came back to K'ogelo to retire. My father was a friend towards the British, and they would come and visit us on motorcycles and using cars. They were very good friends. He loved all the whites and they loved him.

'We had a very big home, a typical African home, with all the family there. There used to be so many. Many cousins have since died, which has reduced the number. There were five houses there, five huts, for the first mother, the second mother, the girls, Barack's house and Baba's [Father's].

'In those days there was no water in the compound as there is today. We had to fetch water down by the river. We would have to walk about two miles for the water. So when I went, I could not go alone because of the animals. There were *crocuta* [spotted hyena] – these were very common. In the evening you could not walk anywhere. Even if you went out with two or three others, they would come and attack you. They always went for your buttocks. So we could not go out by ourselves.

'At the time there were also lots of leopards – leopards were everywhere.

They even came to our home, because my father had cultivated lots of fruits – all types of fruit that you can imagine: mangos, lots of passion fruit, lemons, oranges. Baba also had a lot of poultry – he had all the chickens and all the turkeys and other small animals in our home. But then the leopards would come and eat them. One day I was sitting next to our cat – a big fat cat, our family pet. A leopard came and took the cat. I cried so much, I was very little.'



Hawa Auma is aunt to President Obama and his closest living relative; on a good day she can earn \$2 selling charcoal at the roadside in Oyugis.

Soon after moving to their new home in K'ogelo, Sarah Obama gave birth to her first child, Omar, in June 1944. Hussein Onyango went on to father three more children with Sarah: Zeituni Onyango in 1952, and two more sons, Yusuf and Sayid. For much of the time, Onyango was still working as a cook in Nairobi, but when he came back to K'ogelo he worked hard on his smallholding, which is home to Sarah Obama to this day. The land had been left derelict since his brother Ndalo died in the early 1920s and bush had taken over. Yet within a year Onyango had cleared the undergrowth

and started to apply modern farming ideas which he had learned from people in Nairobi. Soon he had enough of a surplus to sell at the local market.

Today his wife Sarah holds court in K'ogelo, sitting under one of the mango trees which Onyango planted soon after he moved to the village. On one of my visits there, Sarah waved her arm across the compound: 'Look at all these fruit trees that he left here – he planted these. He wanted all this to be beautiful. He had lots of paw-paw plants, and oranges, all these mangoes, everything here.'

Life in K'ogelo however, was not a bed of roses. Onyango's oldest wife, Habiba Akumu, had never wanted to leave Kendu Bay, and she did so only because her parents pressured her into going with her children. Now life was as she feared: she was lonely, she was away from her family, and she had the indignity of being displaced by Sarah as her husband's favourite wife. According to Hawa Auma, Akumu and Sarah did not get along well, and this only exacerbated Akumu's loneliness. But Akumu was proud and stubborn, and she continued to stand up to Onyango's excessive demands for cleanliness and tidiness, and this led to their arguments becoming more frequent and more violent.

Auma told me that one day there was a furious row between Onyango and Akumu, and things came to a head: 'My father then went out to dig a very big grave, to go and kill my mother.' I was startled by the revelation, but Auma was tired from sitting in the hot sun selling charcoal all day, and she told me that she did not want to talk any more, because thinking of her mother upset her too much. So I let the matter rest for the moment.

Onyango was a farmer and he must have spent a lot of time in those early days in K'ogelo, digging over the soil, so perhaps Auma had misunderstood the situation. The story, however, was too intriguing to pass up. I knew that Akumu came from a village close to Kendu Bay, so I decided to try my luck at tracing her family. Like many of the small villages in the area, Simbi Kolonde lies some distance off the main road along a bone-rattling dirt road. The track runs around the edge of Simbi lake – a deep volcanic lake which I was told was steeped in myth. One story claims that an old woman was denied hospitality by the locals and in a fit of wrath she created a massive flood which swamped the village, drowned all the people, and created the lake.

Fortunately, my own experience was the exact opposite, and not for the first time during my research I arrived unannounced at a home, only to be welcomed with warmth and kindness. Here I found Charles Odonci Ojuka

and Joseph Nyabondo, both brothers of Akumu. We spent a couple of hours or so chatting about life in the past, then I casually asked Charles if he knew why Akumu left K'ogelo in such a hurry back in 1945:

'Onyango used to love cleanliness, and he being a clean man, he never wanted his face to be touched by dirt. He didn't like anything that is called dirt to be around him. So that is the number one cause which brought the disagreement with Akumu. There was a fight between Akumu and Onyango in K'ogelo – a quarrel. He dug a grave and he was going to cut her up and bury her there. An old man [a neighbour] came and helped Akumu, otherwise she would have been killed – she was being slaughtered!

'The old man came and wrestled with Onyango, then Akumu escaped and walked all the way to Kisumu by foot [64km]. I think there was some problem because having married the other wife Sarah, it might have put a lot of pressure on Akumu. When Akumu came back [to Kendu Bay], Onyango never followed her, to look for her or to be reconciled with her. He just left her.

'When Akumu came over to this side [of the gulf], the man who came to marry Akumu was called Salmon Orinda, and she gave birth to another five children. She was buried here when she died in 2006.'