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DESIGNED, TYPESET AND BOUND BY GORDON MACINTOSH



Mr and Mrs Ngwirimaso live in a mud-walled hut with an iron roof



For MaryAnn

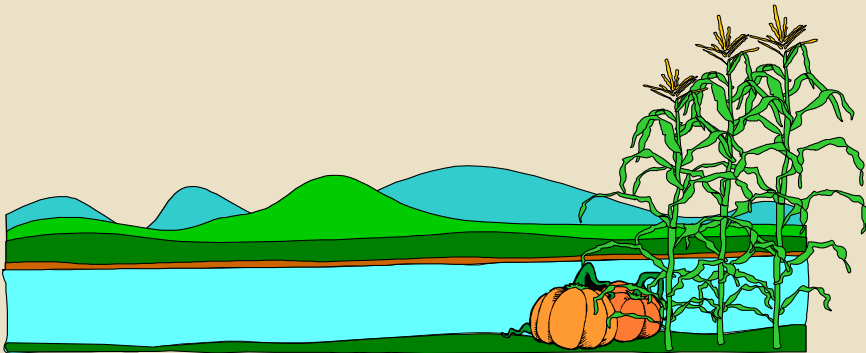
This is a story about Mrs and Mrs Ngwirimaso

I am sending you this brief account about my friends Mr and Mrs Ngwirimaso, their children and grandchildren. I suppose I could really say this is a special kind of letter to you, devoted entirely to the story of this family in Malawi.

It is a true story. Only their names, and the names of their children and grandchildren have been changed, as I expect you may want to share this story with your friends. And although they live in the Shire Valley in Malawi, the town near their home has been given another name. However this is a story that must be told, for what occurred in Mr and Mrs Ngwiremaso's home is taking place throughout the towns and villages of Africa. And for that matter, throughout many other parts of the world.

All the Ngwiramaso's children, excepting George, have died of Aids. Aids is a terrifying disease, which has afflicted Malawi like a plague. Nearly every day, at the hospital across from the home where I lived, I would hear the cries of the bereaved relatives as they carried the bodies of their loved ones back to their villages, to be buried there.

That is something you do not see in America, but it is a unfortunately a reality in Malawi.



There had been good rains in the Shire Valley that year. The rivers were full, while the maize had grown high. And most of the vegetables had already been harvested

How I met Mr and Mrs Ngwiramaso

It was in February 1992. There had been good rains that year. Above the Shire Valley, in the Thyolo district, the tea plantations were rich with green leaves.

When I arrived at my office early that February morning I had found an elderly gentleman waiting for me, together with his wife; both seemed to be about sixty years of age. With them was a pretty young girl of about twenty-six years of age. I had noticed they were treated with deep respect by members of my staff, who were standing talking to them in the reception area.

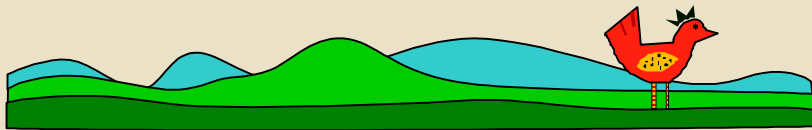
After they had introduced themselves and politely asked after my well-being I enquired where Mr Ngwiremaso might be from, and he then told me he had travelled up with his wife and daughter from a village near Ngabu down in the Shire valley - near the Mozambique border. He, his wife and his daughter had taken a bus up from the valley to Blantyre and then through the Thyolo tea plantations to my office here at Makwassa.

I had asked Mr Ngwiremaso how it was down in the valley. The rivers and the streams were full, he had said, and the maize was high - most of the vegetables which were grown between the maize had already been reaped. Soon the mangoes would ripen and the trucks would arrive from South Africa and the mango harvesting would begin. He expected to have a good harvest that year.

He had come to enquire whether I could perhaps employ his young daughter. She had recently lost her husband and now needed to support her young child.



Mr and Mrs Ngwiramaso's two grandchildren, Thulani and Gift lived together with their grandparents down in the Shire Valley. They would often help their grandparents to reap the mangoes.



What I was told about the Ngwirimaso Family

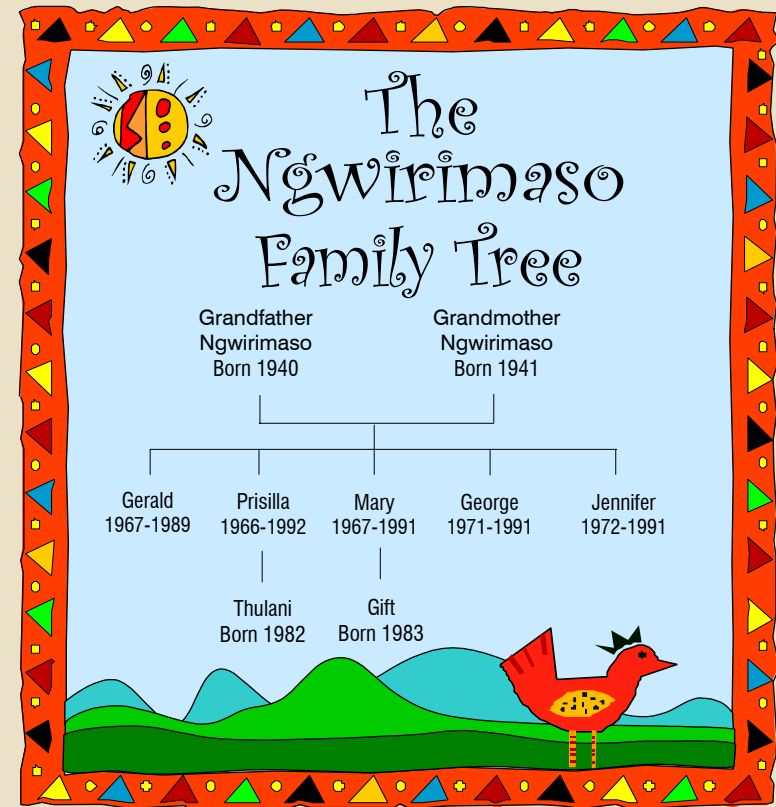
In Malawi it is not advisable to employ anyone without first consulting your staff. So I was told about Mr and Mrs Ngwirimaso and their family.

Mr Ngwirimaso had once taught at the school not far from my office, so he and his wife and his children were well known to the people in the area. He had retired some years ago, and together with a loan from the bank and his meagre savings which he had managed to scrape together over many years he had sent his son Gerald to South Africa to study medicine. Eventually he hoped Gerald would return to serve his people in Malawi, and at that time would also support his younger brother George, while he studied dentistry in Pretoria. Finally both George and Gerald would in turn support their three sisters when they went up to Zomba to take law.

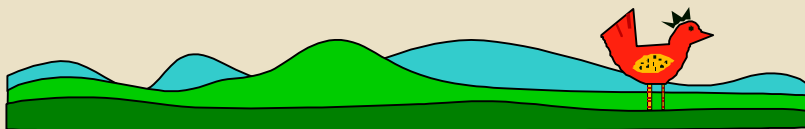
That was Mr and Mrs Ngwirimaso's plan, but it was not to be. In his fourth year of his medical studies Gerald had died at Baragwanath hospital outside Johannesburg, after a short illness. And then George had been tragically killed in a truck accident on the same Thyolo road along which I travelled every week to the city of Blantyre, through the lovely green rolling hills where the tea grew.

Not only had the family lost two sons, both their daughters Mary and Jennifer had died the previous year. So now they had only one daughter - Priscilla.

However they also had two granddaughters, Thulani and Gift, the daughters of Priscilla and Mary. I was told that both Priscilla and Mary had been beautiful girls, and the granddaughters were said to be much like their mothers; both in their looks and in their personalities.



This is the family tree of the Ngwirimaso family. As you can see, only the Ngwirimaso's two grandchildren remain



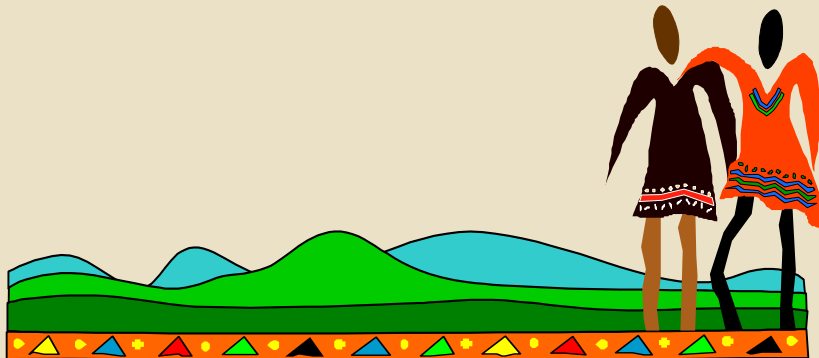
Now only two grandchildren remain

So that was the story told to me about Mr and Mrs Ngwiremaso and their children. It was difficult for me to know what I was to say as I sat at my desk listening to my secretary telling me of all the tragedies which had befallen this family. All she could say was that there were many other families suffering a similar experience . . .

And sadly, Priscilla did not live for long either. We had employed her in our factory and she stayed with us in our own home. However she soon fell ill, and then some four months later she died in the hospital just across from where we lived. When she fell ill Mr and Mrs Ngwiremaso had come up from the valley to stay with us, and so they were able to spend many hours at the bedside of their remaining daughter. Many relatives came to visit with them at our home, and we often had guests remaining for a week or two.

When Priscilla died I built a coffin for her and then we took the body down to the valley in my truck, together with the many relatives who had come up to be with Priscilla during those last days. Once again I was at a loss for words - this tragedy was too immense for me to be able to comprehend. What words could I possibly speak - what comfort could I possibly offer!

So I have sketched a family tree of the immediate Ngwiremaso family. You will notice that there now remain only two direct descendants - Thulani and Gift.



Mr Ngwiremaso told me one day that the leaves blown away by the wind reminded him of his five children

The autumn leaves down in the Shire valley

I visited the Ngwiremaso family whenever I needed to travel down to the Shire Valley. They would always make me most welcome, and the two cousins Thulani and Gift would come in from the garden or the fields to welcome me with their smiles and laughter.

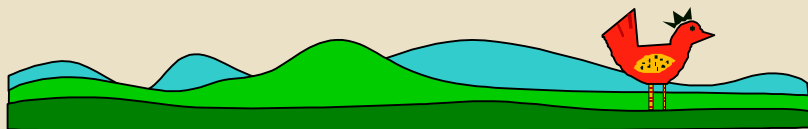
Mr Ngwiramaso had never spoken to me of the deep hurt and anguish he had experienced through the loss of all his children. Hardly had he recovered from one blow when another would fall. He would now be virtually destitute - no sons to support him or his wife and grandchildren - which is so important in Africa. He received a small pension, for which he was grateful.

It was nearing winter, and Mr Ngwiramaso and I walked down to the Shire River together. The leaves were falling from the trees and were blown hither and thither in the breeze. He looked up at the leaves as they floated away in the air. It was then that he told me that his children were just like the leaves - they had all been blown away by something more powerful than himself, something that he was unable to restrain. He said that as each tragedy had occurred he felt less able to bear any further loss. But he told me he was so grateful that his daughters had left two sweet children behind - Thulani and Gift.

He reminded me that although the trees would become completely barren of leaves soon, nevertheless when the summer drew near there would be buds once again, and new leaves would slowly emerge. To him, his grandchildren were just like the tender young buds in spring.



I felt sad that day as Mr and Mrs Ngwiremaso, together with their two grandchildren watched me as I left them down in the Shire Valley



I leave the Shire Valley for the last time

I continued to visit the Ngwiremaso's whenever I went down to the Shire Valley. Whenever you visit friends in Malawi, whom you have not seen for some time, you would be sure to take a gift or two with you. So I would always visit the grocery store and purchase a few items for the family - items like sugar, soap, cooking oil, a bag of powdered milk and tea. And then I would call at the Adra depot in Blantyre and choose a few clothes for Thulani, Gift, and their grandparents. All these gifts would be gratefully received. The Ngwiremasos in turn, would kindly give me some vegetables from their garden, and they would often include a live chicken, together with a few eggs. Should it be the maize season they would be sure to include a basket of maize.

Eventually I had to leave Malawi to return to England. It was hard for me to explain to the Ngwiremaso family that I would be leaving for good. However I think they had grown used to departures, so they wished me well as I prepared to drive up out of the valley for the last time.

I often write to them - they had become dear friends. And in turn I have received numerous letters from Mr Ngwiremaso. He tells me that Thulani and Gift are now working in Blantyre. And Thulani has a small child now - a little boy, who lives down in the Shire valley with his great grandparents.

