

THE SECULAR CHOICE
(A Short Story)

by

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There was anxiety in general in the village. There was mourning in particular for the bereaved. Pastor Joseph Malu grabbed the holy book and rushed to the funeral.

"Go in peace and prepare the way for us too." Then he turned to the widow and the children:

"'I am the way and the life, he that believeth in me shall never die,' so saith the Lord." His voice trembled with holy spirit as he added, "Children, weep not, it is only his body that has departed from us; his soul shall live until the judgement day. Shall we pray: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name . . ."

But Onesmus Ngole had only his Christian name to remind the mourners that he too was once a Minister of God. Later, before his sudden death - a thousand blessings on his soul by the way - he had, by some unbiblical miscalculations, diverged from the holy course, slipped and fell into the sinners' orbit where he had continued on his trip on the accursed road as a reprobate. Then one dark night, in the small hours of the same, he staggered home from a carousing party singing his favourite song:

I caught the firebird by the tail,
yoo ha ha, the sharp knife . . .,
plucked it clean in day-light,
yoo ha ha, the sharp knife . . .,
drank the blood of potency,
and put the bloody bird back to flight ever more,
yooooo ha haaa, the sharp knife;
come let's homeward,
for day-light is dead.

He was finally redeemed when he failed to wake up the following morning.

"I knew it would happen one day," the widow moaned uncontrollably. "I told him, I told him pastor; now he has left us in disgrace." "Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted." It was a firm assurance. He closed the Bible and patted her on the shoulder. "Don't forget that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son to die on the cross

for our sins. Onesmus' sins shall be forgiven."

If the purity of his moral life was in doubt, and there was no doubt that it was, his administrative ability as the village Sub-chief was not. A native son of the village, born, bred and brought up in the proudest tradition of the native wisdom, he had acquired a sense of administrative finality without being a bureaucratic figure-head. The history of his ten years' reign was decorated with his firmness of character. The whole issue of land consolidation was a test of strength. When the Government gave the order to apportion the land in proportion to each and every peasant's present holdings, the Sub-chief simply ignored the order. Word finally reached the Chief himself that at Kavumbuni village the Government's command had not been carried out. The Chief got into his land-rover and drove twenty miles in the accompaniment of his agricultural officer to demand to know why the Sub-chief chose to disobey the directives of the legal Government.

"The people are against it," the Sub-chief gave the answer.

"Why?" the Chief was not satisfied.

"I don't know; I'm not in their minds. I discussed the matter with them and all they said was that they were against the plan."

"But your duty is to implement the decisions of the Government as required by the law, not to discuss them with the villagers."

"I don't have the power to go against the wishes of the people."

"The law gives you that power."

"The Government wants to modernize our country, you see," a plea from the agricultural officer.

"I don't doubt it."

"Then you must see to it that the land consolidation programme is carried out," concluded the Chief.

"If the people ever decide that they want it, I assure you, it shall be done," the Sub-chief promised his visitors.

"It is not the villagers' prerogative to want or not to want it," the Chief emphasized controlling his temper. "It is the Government's decision that the land consolidation shall be operative throughout the country."

"I'm persuaded of that," responded the Sub-chief politely. "But I'm not God. I can't simply say, 'let there be land consolidation.' The people must be persuaded also."

"We are busy men Onesmus," announced the Chief rising up. "We must be back in the office. But one thing must be done . . . land consolidation."

"I hate to repeat," said the Sub-chief also rising up, "but the people will decide . . ."

"It is not for the people to decide . . .," the agricultural officer was in the process of saying when the Chief stormed out of the room. The agricultural officer followed suit.

Rumour had it thereafter that the Sub-chief would be dismissed for disobeying Government orders. The villagers led by the head-men staged a demonstration in front of the chief's office in support of their Sub-chief. They brought with them their sleeping hides and skins and refused to disperse unless the decision to discharge the Sub-chief was rescinded. It was.

It was a diplomatic victory which, unfortunately for the Government, legitimized rebellion within the system. Onesmus ruled happily ever after.

At the burial, many had come to pay their last homage, no wonder. They came from all corners of the village: wise men and women of all descriptions, witch-doctors, sooth-sayers, song-composers, singers and old men whose accumulated wisdom weighed them down so heavily they could hardly walk. And in the midst of them all was pastor Joseph Malu, whose duty was to convince the villagers that Onesmus' death was a divine fulfilment of God's will, not a loss.

"It is a loss for us," somebody ventured to disagree.

"Why? Tell me that," the pastor allowed himself a mundane digression.

"Who will succeed him?" that from another concerned villager.

"God will make his choice."

"Why God?" Yet another defiant voice? "He doesn't live among us, why should he choose a Sub-chief for us?"

"That's blasphemy. I'll not be drawn into it." It was an act of self-defence.

"Well what is your suggestion?"

"I'm a servant of God, not a politician."

"Then the choice is ours."

There was a murmur of approval, which made it obvious to the pastor that his service had come to an end. With that, an unholy feeling of disrespect descended on his soul. He surrendered and waded through the throng of the masses of the people holding his Bible in his arm-pit to protect it from foul play by men of doubtful faith. But before he was safely out of the crowd, somebody accosted him:

"Pastor, will you bear the message of the people?"

"No, I will not."

"The people want . . ."

"I will have nothing to do with earthly matters especially when they go against the laws of God our creator . . ."

"Listen . . . It is important to the people . . ."

"I must prepare my sermon for this coming Sunday. I don't have the time to . . ."

"Look . . . It is even God's calling to serve the people materially as well . . ."

"Son, do I have to repeat . . ."

"If you turn the people's request down, they will turn their backs on you."

The pastor stood still for a moment. He felt as if he was about to be crucified. But for whose sins? He tried to escape; but he had been surrounded by an army of demanding people. So after a brief sacred reflection he surrendered once again.

"What message?" he asked sullenly.

His assailant thrust a piece of paper right into his heart and finished him off. The pastor unfolded it and then crumbled it in his hand with vengeance. "Dear God, not another sinner." It was his heart beating: 'KATHIMATU NGOTH'O, KATHIMATU NGOTH'O, KATHIMATU NGOTH'O, . . .'

"We have already written him telling him he is our choice," a spokesman said. "He is under instructions to resign his job

and return home to become our next Sub-chief."

"But why him?" The pastor hadn't been defeated after all.

"Because he knows the language calamity. When the rains fall and famine sets in, he makes the Government pay attention to us."

"When we didn't have a primary school, he made the Government provide one for us."

"And right now, apart from the famine, there is need for a dispensary in our village."

"We also need another school-building. Our children are attending classes in the open air like birds."

"We want somebody who can fulfil the wishes of the people by carrying out the behests of Onesmus Ngole."

Under the barrage the pastor recognized the weakness of his resistance. So, holding the note with the finger-tips of his left hand, far away from the Bible, he finally broke into the lines of the enemy and fled. The tinkling of his bicycle gradually died away in the open distance. And the people stood there and watched him go.

It was exactly five minutes to eight o'clock in the morning when Kathimatu Ngoth'o entered the personnel officer's office and handed in his resignation. His boss stared at him, not with disbelief, but without pleasure. At least it could be said that this was a moment of grief, not for the management of the International Warehouse Inc., but for those with whom he was in daily contact. Well actually genuine tears were shed, truth to tell. The workers in the forging section gathered around him to wish him another success in his next task.

"It is hard to see a good foreman leave," one of them said fighting tears.

"Well, I disagree," he responded. "There is no such thing as a good foreman."

"You certainly don't mean that Kathima." In a way it was touching to hear your subordinates fondly call you by your short name.

"I mean every single word of it," he was adamant. "All right; I am your good foreman, and above me there is my good section-manager, and on top of him there is his good factory manager, and above that there is the good factory director, and above him there is the good owner and a group of good share-

holders, so that in the end we shall have a string of 'good' blood-suckers who sit on the backs of every body else for the general good, like tick-birds on the backs of tick-ridden cattle."

Oh well, he wasn't serious about that . . . I mean, he liked a good joke, you see.

"Don't forget us wherever you are," somebody changed the subject.

"Well, I suppose I can always come back when all else fails." He didn't believe that either.

"It is our hope. But no use talking about it. You know as well as we do that failure is alien to you."

The bell rang. Lunch-time was over. An exchange of quick hand-shakes, and the workers were back on the assembly-lines. The food-vendors gathered up their plates, cups and all from the benches.

"Good-bye Kathima . . . , good bye . . . , Remember us too."

"Good-bye all . . ."

For it was a loss for them too. Perhaps much more so than it was for the workers, in a way, I mean. He was not just a customer; he was their salesman. The workers in the forging section ate where he ate. He was also the food-vendors' spokesman. He made sure that the Municipality kept its supply of such health facilities as drainage and garbage collection. Under his agitation, running water was kept plentiful. He minced no words whenever the interests of the municipal authorities clashed with those of the food-vendors. At one point he was locked up for holding an unlawful gathering likely to cause a breach of peace. That was when they found him addressing a group of food-vendors who wanted him to warn the authorities that they wouldn't pay their food-stall taxes unless the garbage was collected more regularly. When the food-vendors' demand was eventually met he regarded his one day in prison as paid vacation.

Born of a poor peasant family, Kathimatu grew up under circumstances which guaranteed him complete illiteracy, perfect poverty and early death. But in his teens he had left his home village for the city to try and change his destiny. That was followed by a series of petty jobs mainly as domestic servant. These proved to be short-lived and inadequate. Next he tried private contractors for road and building construction. Mishap followed mishap as he kept being dismissed when the contract

expired or the employer ran out of money. He didn't count the number of times he worked without pay, one doesn't, y'know, otherwise it might evoke moments of personal disaster. When this also proved to be a dead-end street, he borrowed some money from his friends and went back to the village. There he became a petty cattle trader, buying cheap and selling dear, just like us all. Business was not good, especially for a trader whose stock consisted of one cow at a time. So he gave it and became a Christian. They christened him Jonathan, and within a short time promoted him to the position of a church Councillor. He attended literacy classes designed by the church for the benefit of the councillors. His enthusiasm and zest earned him the position of Assistant Pastor, in which capacity he criss-crossed the whole village spreading the good word. That's how they came to learn about his concern for earthly problems. His worry about schools, dispensaries, food, water and shelter for the people robbed hell and heaven of their holiness. And when the people pressed him for the solutions to the problems he had made them aware of, he failed them. It was that failure, that sudden realization of his powerlessness in the face of basic problems that was responsible for his fall. He came to the church one Sunday morning and delivered a political speech instead of a sermon. "Assistant Pastor Jonathan Kathimatu Ngoth'o has fallen," pastor Joseph Malu announced as he snatched the Bible from the sinner.

Kathimatu Ngoth'o fled the village once again without Jonathan. He was back in the city to resume domestic servitude once again.

It was not an alternative. He was predestined for it, like the camel the humpback.

"I tried everything," he later told his own story to his work-mates, "I even married an albino to draw attention of the spirits to my plight."

But it is recorded that it was during the second round of his person to person service that he knocked at the door of one Henry Patterson. Yes indeed they needed some 'help' in the house, Mrs. Patterson explained with that engaging smile that is private property of an American lady. And how long did he intend to keep the job?

"Oh, forever Madam." Then, more composed and self-dignified, "I mean, as long as you need somebody for it."

And so Kathimatu got himself a house-keeping job that promised to be quite stable, to say the most. His neatness and firmness of character impressed Mr. Patterson so much that he offered him a better job in the factory for which he was the

General Manager.

At the International Warehouse, they found him impressive too; so they promoted him almost every year until he reached the top of the ladder. Beyond foremanship all was dark, not so much because he was basically illiterate -- for he had taught himself some rudiments of Arithmetic -- but because there is no road without an end; or if you prefer, there is a limit to everything. Everything?

Well, Hmm, Onesmus' death opened a new chapter in Kathimatu's life. And so, that Market-day afternoon, his wife was waiting for him at the bus station as arranged. She had brought her little daughter to help carry his luggage: a suitcase, two bags of maize flour and a few packets of biscuits for the young ones.

"Any further developments?" he was naturally curious.

"Not quite." His wife wasn't. "I gave Joseph five hundred shillings for the Chief. As I told you in the letter, the land sold for nine hundred shillings. The remaining four hundred went to Ndoto's school fees . . ."

"When is the dead-line for payment?"

"Ndoto said at the end of the month."

"And where is the rest of the money going to come from?"

"How am I supposed to know?"

He knew she didn't know, but there is a sense of redemption in the spoken word.

The ensuing silence was not inimical to his re-adjustment. In the first place there was the disturbing question about his younger brother's school fees. Pretty soon he must find one thousand one hundred shillings somewhere; yes that is what it would take to pay Ndoto's three hundred and fifty, and then Mindaa's seven hundred and fifty. Where was it all going to come from?

"Have you heard from the Chief?" he asked in a non-demanding manner.

"Pastor Joseph said that the Chief would contact me as soon as he could," she said. "You may have to go and see him yourself."

"Well, the people will decide that."

"They have already decided. The head-men tried to pay him a visit to explain their reasons for choosing you. But . . ."

"But what?"

"They were told by the guard that the matter would be decided by the administration."

"Did they speak to the Chief?"

"No."

"What does Joseph say about it?"

"That you stand a better chance if you let the Chief handle the matter peacefully without your influence."

"Good. Now I know why I must talk to the Chief myself."

Pastor Joseph was waiting to meet him at his arrival.

"I'm sure your wife has told you everything."

"Not everything, pastor but something." The hand-shake was short and brisk. The point was well taken on both sides.

"Well, it comes to the same thing," returned the pastor. "It's like the Gospel's story of Jesus' life. St. Matthew tells it in one way, St. Mark in another, St. Luke takes yet another different approach, and St. John adds a personal touch to it. But it's all about the Lord Jesus Christ." He smiled complacently.

"Yet there is some difference, pastor; it is only in Matthew for example, that we read the famous sermon on the mount; and in Mark there are more parables than in any of the other gospels." That reminded the pastor that the devil can quote the Bible too in his own interest. So His Holiness withdrew in an orderly manner, flying the banner of heavenly kingdom and beating sacred drums to the tune: "Onward Christian sooldiers . . ."

"Well I'm glad you are here," said the pastor, "at least my mission ends here."

"You are lucky pastor; I can't help envying you. Your problems are so easily solved."

"It is because I believe in the Lord to guide and lead me away from worldly affairs...."

"Thank you pastor. Now tell me about the Chief. What

does he say about succession?"

"Son, I don't know. I gave him the message as the people demanded, and the money your wife wanted him given. Now from now on you take over."

"In a way pastor you are indispensable."

"Son, don't say that." The pastor's voice was trembling with emotion.

"If I'm going to get this job your assistance will be extremely necessary."

"No, son. I've done what was required of me. And as I told your wife, I think it would be better if you kept yourself clean from the dirty games that go with dishonest ways of acquiring things."

"Look here pastor, I've sold the last drop of my blood for the sake of this job . . ., the land on which my house stands. Now, my brothers, my three children and my old mother will all depend on me. I can't bring myself to imagine what would happen otherwise."

"Son, there is nothing I can do to be of further help. My first duty is to God . . ."

"Good, pastor. I'll see the Chief alone, but promise to stand by in case you are needed."

"I promise to do what God commands me to do."

Hmmm. And so, at the chief's office the guard told him the Chief wasn't in yet. That was nine o'clock in the morning. At two o'clock in the afternoon another guard told him that the Chief was at a meeting which would take the rest of the day. So Kathimatu stayed in town overnight, and early the following morning he was at the chief's office.

"I must speak to the Chief," he told the guard.

"What about?" the gum-chewing guard demanded.

"He expects me. Just tell him it's Kathimatu Ngoth'o."

"But I must know WHY you want to see him."

"It's an official matter. He knows all about it."

"I won't disturb the Chief unless it is important."

"It is."

"Guard!" Somebody was calling from within.

"Avanti!" The guard stood at attention, stamped on the ground with his right foot, spat out the gum, saluted and marched inside the office.

Kathimatu took two steps towards the door, he hesitated. He was a bit confused.

"What do you want?" an officer demanded visibly angry at the intrusion.

"My name is Kathimatu Ngoth'o."

"And so?"

"I want to see the Chief."

"Does he expect you?"

"Yes."

"What's your name again?"

"Kathimatu Ngoth'o."

"Just a moment."

The officer disappeared and then appeared again with the news."

"Our records don't show any such name."

"That's a lie." He was furious. "I've been chosen by the people as the new Sub-chief in Kavumbuni village."

"You have?!" the officer shouted at the lying peasant.

"I am the Sub-chief to be . . . I am the new Sub-chief," he was actually shouting too.

"We know nothing about it. We have already appointed the hew Sub-chief for Kavumbuni."

"You have what?!"

The officer took one long step to his desk, took a file and strode back to Kathimatu.

"My friend," he tried to reason with the intruder calmly, "we have never heard of you before. Nobody ever told us about you." He unfolded the file. "Here," he said showing it to the

old pretender, "see? That's not your name, or is it."

As he stared at the name, Kathimatu needed no persuasion that there was no power on earth, or in heaven for that matter, not even that of the angels whose holiness the name espoused, could ever be an adequate source of consolation. For you need none in your kind of mood, you see. And you knelt by the altar to be offered for an absolution of the sins a whole people in a whole generation committed before your birth, for which you must now do penance? And at the ninth hour of the darkness, you will be cast into the lion's den for doubly evoking the wrath of the heavenly deity: 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? . . . My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' Posterity will be advised to drink at the first well in the spirit of the old tradition, to be sure, as a matter of choice.

"That is your new Sub-chief, my friend," the officer had the last word.

Last Sunday was pastor Joseph Malu's last day as a humble servant of God. His sermon had as its point of departure the holy pronouncement: 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.' It was a tit-for-tat response to the ungodly low attendance of the faithful.