

TO LICK A FRESH GRAVE*

By

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THEME

An embittered old man who believes that some villagers are responsible for his solitude and dishonor charms a snake that he uses to scare or harm his perceived enemies. But the snake quickly becomes uncontrollable and starts killing people. Okuku loses two relatives through fatal bites from the snake and he resorts to believing a myth in order to destroy his malefactor. As matters escalate, evil does not triumph as the real killer is slayed.

CHARACTERS

OKUKU – The protagonist. He is in his early thirties, six feet tall, black and muscular and is a fisherman and a farmer. His world is shattered by the deaths of those closest to him and he is ready to do anything to stop the deaths, including putting a myth to test.

OGADA – The antagonist and Okuku's neighbor. He is an old man in his fifties. He is slightly bent in the middle and uses a walking stick. He is malevolent because the villagers despise him for being childless and unmarried – necessary conditions for qualifying to be considered a man in Luoland. He lives alone and believes that Auma discouraged a woman he desired from marrying him (Ogada). He keeps a charmed snake that he sends to bite his perceived enemies.

NYAR ALEGO – Ogada's wife. She runs back to her parents upon realizing that her husband's strange habits may be linked to his being a wizard keeping a charmed snake.

AKINYI – Okuku's wife. A sensitive woman devoted to her husband. She is twenty eight years old.

AUMA – Okuku's mother. She is a fifty year old widow who minds the affairs of her neighbor, Ogada and who ends up offending Ogada and arousing murderous rage in him through her meddlesome tendencies.

OCHIEN'G – Okuku's brother. He is eighteen years old, slender and with a lean hungry look. His quick temper leads him to get in a fight with a wounded Ogada, who decides to teach him a lesson.

NYABWA – Okuku's uncle. He is the father figure to Okuku. He is in his fifties and supports and advises Okuku.

RACHIER – The charmed snake that fatally bit Okuku's brother. It is dark brown on the upper part and has a multi-colored throat, a crown of scales and a double-ridged tail. It is close to six feet long and as thick as the wrist.

JAYALO – Okuku's friend. He is twenty eight years old, with sharp, penetrating eyes and a quick tongue. He is quick to question superstitious beliefs.

OGADA'S MOTHER: A woman in her eighties who is disappointed in her son Ogada but is too old and mellowed to force Ogada to change his ways.

EXT OKUKU's HOUSE

OKUKU is repairing a fishing net that is spread out on the grass outside his house. He removes twigs and sea plants that are entangled in it and sews gaping holes in the net.

Five boys, aged between five and eight are watching him while playing nearby. One is holding the thread for Okuku.

BOY HOLDING THREAD

(Addressing the other playing boys)

Hey! Watch the goats lest they stray into the garden and damage the crops.

He looks at Okuku for support as the other boys ignore him and refuse to comply. But Okuku goes on working on the net. They pause and watch him intently as he deftly goes about his work. He removes a small eel from the net and flings it away. It twitches and slithers on the grass.

The boys shriek and jump in mock terror.

BOYS

A snake! A snake!

OKUKU

It is not a not a snake. It is an eel.

BOY HOLDING THREAD

(Squinting at Okuku)

Okuku, is it true that there are big snakes in the lake?

OKUKU

(Reassuringly)

No, they are few and are harmless if you do not provoke them.

ONE OF THE BOYS

Is it true that when snakes bite someone in the lake, the victim grows scales?

Okuku pauses and faces them.

OKUKU

Snakes avoid biting people and only do so in defense or if they are sent by a charmer to attack someone.

BOYS

A snake charmer?

Okuku leans towards them.

OKUKU

A snake charmer must wear a necklace of the snakes' skin like a talisman to keep the snake under his spell.

He drops the threading needle and picks a tendril which he wraps round his neck to illustrate the way a wizard wears the snakeskin. They look at him incredulously as if the tendril were an actual snake.

OKUKU

Like this.

He notices that they have stepped back and beckons them to come closer. They do.

OKUKU

Even when charmed, snakes avoid people unless the charms are very strong because the human psyche is too heavy for a snake and crushes a snake when it kills a human being.

This nature's way of preserving order because a man is greater than a snake.

ONE OF THE BOYS

And what if it bites someone?

OKUKU

If it bites someone, and no antivenom is injected in time to neutralize the poison, the victim dies.

(Lowering his voice to a whisper)

To free itself from the weight of her victim's psyche, the punishment for violating the order in nature, the snake has to lick the grave of her victim. It comes in the cover of darkness at night because it is weak and cannot move fast and only regains its strength and freedom after licking the grave.

Okuku moves his hands in a snake-like motion to add drama to the narration and sticks his tongue out. He moves his eyes left and right to indicate that the snake he is portraying ensures that it is not detected.

At this point they are paying rapt attention, their boyish imaginations captured by the prospect of the snake slithering in the dark.

Okuku suddenly lurches his snaking hand at them.

OKUKU

There!

The startled boys fall back in mock horror.

BOYS

Aaaaa!

They evade Okuku's hand as if it were an actual snake. Then they all laugh.

EXT OKUKU's HOUSE

AKINYI steps out and looks at them.

OKUKU's WIFE

Come and eat you playful bunch!

OKUKU

(to the boys)

Those who have worked can follow me. My wife has cooked a very delicious meal, but I will only eat it with those that have worked.

They walk to the house.

EXT RIVERBANK - DAY

AUMA, Okuku's mother, is squatting with a pot next to her at the riverbank. With her right hand, she is holding a calabash with which she is scooping water from the river and pouring into the pot. Ogada's wife approaches. She is also holding a calabash and balances a pot on her head. Auma sees her and pauses to greet the younger woman.

AUMA

Good Day daughter of Alego. Are you well?

OGADA's WIFE

Yes I am well. Have you woken up well at your home?

AUMA

Yes, how is Ogada doing?

OGADA's WIFE

So, so.... are you fetching water?

Auma's brow furrows in concern.

AUMA

Why are you cold? Is Ogada unwell?

OGADA'S WIFE

It is like being part of an Occult...he is like a wizard...there are reptiles in the house...I don't understand! I have never seen...

Ogada's wife sighs deeply and squats near Auma. She places her pot by her side and rinses her calabash. Her brow is furrowed in anguish.

AUMA

What is wrong with him...he still keeps crawling things...

Ogada's wife looks up with interest.

OGADA's WIFE
What crawling things? You know?

Auma avoids her searching eyes and goes back to fetching water. Ogada's wife murmurs her own thoughts.

OGADA's WIFE
(whispering to herself)
That's why...that is why I found scales!...a snake had
shed its skin!...I am living with a...

A twig snaps behind them in the bushes. They are startled and turn round to find Ogada glaring at them.

Ogada looks at Auma with an accusing eye as he approaches them.

OGADA
What are you talking about? What crawling things?

AUMA
This is woman talk. What is the problem?

Ogada turns to his wife.

OGADA
I told you to keep away from her. She will poison you
with lies.

OGADA's WIFE
What are you keeping in the pot under the bed? I
couldn't sleep last night. There was a...

OGADA
I don't want silly questions. Go home and sleep if you
are sleepy. If coming to get water from this river will
bring issues to my house, we will get water from
elsewhere. Just go home.

OGADA's WIFE
If you don't tell me, I will go back where I came from.

Her eyes avoid his glaring eyes. Ogada approaches his wife menacingly. He is shaking in anger.

OGADA

(Biting on his words)
Go home now! I will not repeat myself.

Ogada's wife picks her pot abruptly and walks homewards. He glares at her receding figure then turns to Auma.

OGADA
Why are you trying to knock my head against my wife's? Why foment discord in my house?

AUMA
Don't blame me. I don't want issues. We were just talking.

OGADA
If she leaves me because of the poison you have fed her, I swear you will pay.

AUMA
I don't want a quarrel with you. When I speak, I only speak the truth.

OGADA
Pray hard that whatever you have told her will not make her pack and leave. Women in this village keep sending away the women I bring, from me. This time, I will not tolerate it. Mark my words, if she goes, I will deal with you!

Ogada turns on his heel and storms homewards.

INT OGADA'S HOUSE

Ogada's wife hurriedly packs a few clothes in a kiondo bag. She is partly sobbing and cursing and she keeps glancing guardedly at one pot at a corner of the bedroom. She gives the room one final sweeping look and then walks out.

EXT. OGADA'S HOUSE

Ogada's wife meets OGADA's MOTHER. The older woman notices her luggage and stiffens.

OGADA's MOTHER
Where are you going? What has happened? Why are you crying?

OGADA's WIFE
I am going to visit my mother. I have heard that something has happened.

OGADA's MOTHER

When? Is it a funeral? What has happened? Have you talked with Ogada?

OGADA's WIFE

Please let me go first, I have to rush, we will talk later.

Ogada's wife rushes off.

OGADA's MOTHER

Nyar alego, why are you rushing like that? I am still talking to you...? Nyar Alego? Please come back...

Nyar alego's figure disappears behind the hedge as she takes a turn at the gate.

Ogada's mother walks back to her house, muttering to herself.

INT. OGADA's HOUSE - DAY

Ogada enters and slumps in a chair, breathless. His eyes dart around and he notices a stool that has fallen over. He sits up and starts getting up.

OGADA

Nyar Alego? Nyar Alego, are you there? Come over here...

After calling out a few times, he goes to inspect the inner room and does not find his wife. He rushes outside.

EXT OGADA's HOUSE

He walks to his mothers house and finds her flinging maize seeds to some hens.

OGADA

Mama, have you seen Nyar Alego?

OGADA's MOTHER

She said she was going to attend an issue at her place of birth. Did you fight? She seems to have packed everything...

OGADA

(Pensively)

Say no more mama. Let me handle it.

He walks back to his house, smarting with anger.

INT OGADA's HOUSE

Ogada walks in and slumps on a seat. He slaps his open hands on his thighs and curses loudly

OGADA

This is all because of that witch Auma. She has sent nyar Alego away from me! I warned her. Now she will pay.

He picks a machete and walks out.

EXT OGADA's HOUSE

Ogada's mother sees her son walking out. She turns toward him.

OGADA's MOTHER

Where are you going?

OGADA

(Curtly)

Just nearby. I am returning shortly.

EXT RIVERBANK - EVENING

Auma fills a plastic basin with water and places it behind a bush. She looks around surreptitiously and then removes her clothes quickly and throws them on top of a pile of firewood and then squats. She lathers the soap in her hand and after rinsing her hand, she starts flinging water on her back and applying soap to her body.

A few bushes from her, Ogada stealthily approaches Auma's clothes on the woodpile. As she goes about bathing, he takes her petticoat and cuts a piece of it off with a machete and pockets it. He then takes one last glance at Auma and leaves stealthily, his eyes scanning the entire area.

INT OGADA's HOUSE

Ogada sits next to an open pot. He pulls a necklace of snakeskin from a bag and wears it. He caresses the amulet softly then taps the pot with his walking stick. A snake emerges slowly. It is colored dark brown in the mid section has a silvery gray head. It has a ridged crown of scales and a double row at its tail. It is about four feet long and as thick as the wrist of a man.

It coils between his feet. He retrieves the piece of Auma's petticoat from his pocket and taps the head of the snake. It hisses and faces him, its tongue flickering out. He holds Auma's petticoat close to its head. The snake flickers its tongue next to the cloth and after a while, Ogada taps its head once again. It lowers its head to the ground and slithers out through the door. Ogada sits back, his eyes fixed resolutely to the door.

EXT OKUKU's HOUSE - DAY

Okuku is thatching his house. He sits atop the roof with a bundle of grass next to him. He picks one handful of grass and ties it to an open part of the roof using sisal strings. He pauses and looks toward his mothers house.

OKUKU

Mama, did you send Ochieng somewhere?

INT AUMA's HOUSE

OKUKU's MOTHER

He went fishing. You needed something from him?

EXT OKUKU's HOUSE

OKUKU

No, I just haven't seen him today.

INT AUMA's HOUSE

Auma spreads hand-knitted seat covers on the seats and tables. She is humming a song under her breath. Under one of the seats a snake slithers toward her feet. It is colored dark brown in the mid section has a silvery gray head. It has a ridged crown of scales and a double row at its tail. It is Ogada's snake. It draws its head back and strikes her leg.

AUMA

(screaming from her house)

Uuuuwiiii! Yawa! What evil is this? Something has bitten me!

OKUKU

(shouting)

What is it mother? Okuku pauses for a split second then leaps down from the roof when no answer is forthcoming.

INT AUMA's HOUSE

Auma is screaming and waving her arms at the snake. It is now coiled next to a pile of firewood in the kitchen. Auma picks a wooden club next to the fireplace and swings at the snake. She strikes the floor just beside the snake's head. It raises its head to a knee-length height in a threatening position and strikes toward her. She runs out screaming hysterically as it surges toward her.

AUMA

(screaming)

Uuuuwiiii! This snake is killing me!

EXT AUMA's HOUSE

As he lands, Okuku swiftly grabs a pole lying at the verandah and rams it against his raised knee, snapping the pole into two. He discards the thin, longer end and retains the short, thick end like a club and races toward his mother's house. He meets Auma at the door.

OKUKU

Where is it?

He brushes his mother aside as he rushes in. As he makes to go in past her, she collapses at the doorway. He holds her just as she is about to hit the ground. He notices that her pupils have started rolling loosely and that she is losing consciousness fast.

He springs up with her and rushes out.

OKUKU

(Looking at his mother in amazement)

Mama, are you dying?

His mother gurgles out some foam. Her breathing is labored and her eyes out of focus. Okuku's face furrows in pain. Ochieng comes running toward Okuku.

OKUKU

Ochieng! Ochieng! Run and get Ochola's pick-up now! Mama has been bitten by a snake.

Okuku notices a trickle of blood coming from his mother's leg as he lays her down. He gets a sisal rope nearby and ties it tightly just above the bite and then sucks at the swelling wound and starts sucking at the wound and spitting. He continues the sucking and spitting. Ochieng is momentarily dumbfounded and his eyes are glued to his mother's lifeless body. Tears well in his eyes. His lips tremble.

OCHIENG

Mama...dont die...please...

Okuku spins round and his eyes snap on Ochieng. He barks at Ochieng.

OKUKU

Run! Now! If she dies because you are delaying I will deal with you!

Ochieng rushes off.

NYABWA, Okuku's uncle, comes rushing.

NYABWA

What has happened?

Okuku gestures at the club he has dropped next to his mother.

OKUKU

Take that and rush in. There is a snake in there. The snake that has bitten her must still be in the house. Ochieng has gone for a vehicle...let me try to suck out some poison...rush...you must not let it get away.

Nyabwa enters the house carefully, brandishing the club.

INT AUMA's HOUSE

Nyabwa carefully moves in. He turns over the stools and other furniture nearest the door as he proceeds into the house. He peers at the hanging items on the walls. After searching the living room, he warily walks to the kitchen and notices that the window is slightly ajar and a pile of firewood close to it. He steps forward then tenses when he hears something rustle just beneath the firewood. He guardedly approaches and pushes it over with a stick.

A cockroach scurries away. He sighs in relief. He hears a movement behind him. He spins round to see Auma's cat walk in. He gives it room and it walks past him to the foot of the bed where it stops and starts licking its paws.

A car roars outside and he walks out to see Okuku bundling his mother into the vehicle. Okuku turns to him.

OKUKU

Have you seen it?

NYABWA

Its not there. There is a cat in the bedroom which would have sensed it. It must have got away just after biting her. You rush her to hospital. Let me search for it with hunting dogs.

Okuku gets in the car and they drive off.

EXT. HOSPITAL - DAY

A doctor emerges from the hospital. A group of anxious men, including Okuku, approach him anxiously.

DOCTOR

Where is her closest relative?

Okuku steps forward

OKUKU

(In a dry voice)

I am her son.

DOCTOR

We tried what we could. Everything we could.

OKUKU

Just say it. We are not afraid.

DOCTOR

(Somberly)

She couldn't make it. I am sorry for your loss.

The doctor turns round and walks back into the hospital. Okuku remains staring at his receding figure. He clenches his fists and a gorged vein snakes from his eyes upwards. His eyes start to become red as tears well in them. One of the men approaches the women who are standing a few meters away and whispers to them. Akinyi steps from the group and sees the look in her husbands eyes. She starts wailing. The rest of the women join the wailing and are herded off by a guard.

WOMEN

Aumaaa! Aumaaa! Our sister! You have died so painfully. Sister why has God taken you now? Sister please tell us why you have to go so soon. Sister what have you done? Sister we agreed to go to the market together next week...

They continue mourning, falling into each others arms and wiping their tears and blowing their noses on the open ground.

The men stand watching them sadly. Pain etched in their faces. Some wipe away their tears.

EXT. AUMA's HOMESTEAD – DAY

The homestead is teeming with mourners. Some are sitting pensively; some are weeping while moving slowly to the rhythm of different dirges that they are singing and some just weeping. The homestead is enveloped by a somber mood.

INT. AUMA's HOUSE - DAY

Okuku goes back to Auma's house and walks around it slowly. He squats at the floor and studies the dust. His eyes pick a few drops of blood. He touches the drops with his index finger. He looks under the bed and at the fireplace. Then he opens the kitchen window and looks out at the grass outside. He gazes at the thick hedge a few metres off. His wife, Akinyi approaches him and tenderly places her hand on his shoulder.

AKINYI

(With a pleading voice)

We have searched already. Rest my lord. Take a rest. When one's time to go comes, there is nothing we can do. Please come and have something to eat. The meal is ready.

Okuku walks past her to the living room and flops on a stool, staring at the floor. Then he holds his head in his hands and starts sobbing. Akinyi's moist eyes start flowing into pools that start dripping as she approaches her husband.

EXT. AUMA's HOMESTEAD – DAY

Five village elders are sitting around a table. They are men aged between sixty and eighty. They have grey hair and one is bald-headed. They are quietly discussing some issues. Three are clutching their walking sticks. Okuku approaches them and they greet him

ELDERS

How are you our son?

OKUKU

I am okay, we have already slaughtered a cow as required by our culture. What remains for us is to pick a spot for her grave and other arrangements. She had already been inherited so I don't think we will need to get an inheritor. What are your thoughts?

ELDER 1

You are right that we will not need an inheritor because she was past forty five years. We will bury her just next to her husband, your father Opiyo. Funerary activities aren't many because since she is a woman, there will be no need to collect cows for the tero buru ritual. Otherwise, if she was a son of this home, we would have had a lot of work.

The rest nod in agreement.

They stand up and converge at a place next to Auma's house. Okuku steps forward and points to a mound of soil next to his mother's house. A patch of grass has grown across it.

OKUKU

We buried my father here.

One of the elders steps forward and draws on a spot a few meters from the grave with his walking stick, then he speaks.

ELDER

We can bury her here.

They nod in agreement and slowly walk back to their seats. One of the younger ones in the group speaks.

ELDER

Odongo Ten'g can make her a decent coffin.

OGADA comes and sits next to them. His eyes dart on the ground and avoid meeting the eyes of the elders. At first, they fidget uncomfortably at his presence. Then one of them turns to him and clears his throat.

ELDER 2

How are you Ogada, we were discussing the pending burial of Auma. You wanted something?

OGADA

As an elder, I also would like to give some input towards the funeral arrangements. After all, Auma was...

One elder holds up an open hand. Ogada stops speaking.

ELDER

Please. Do not talk here. You know that you have no wife. You have no child. You are a *misumba*. You are like a boy and so you cannot talk where elders are talking.

Ogada's lips quiver with emotion.

OGADA

But my hair is grey...

Ogada holds his hair in his fingers, a pleading look on his face.

ELDER 4

(Curtly)

Just get out of here. Let us not bandy words. We are addressing weighty matters here.

Ogada sighs heavily and lifts himself up, his eyes lowered in shame and disappointment.

He walks away; his head hung low, a crushed, forlorn figure. The elders go back to their conversation.

As Ogada approaches the river, he sees Ochieng cutting a tree across the hedge. He walks faster toward Ochieng.

OGADA

Why are you cutting that tree?

OCHIENG?

We want to build a shade for mourners...

OGADA

But that is my tree. Who has allowed you to cut it?

Ochieng stands back and looks at the tree and the hedge.

OCHIENG

But it is not at your side of the hedge it is on our...

OGADA

I am not a mad person to tell you it is my tree. The hedge ends there...

OCHIENG

Wrong, it ends here. Are you blind?

OGADA

Leave that tree alone. Please don't provoke me into a fight...I have had enough...please just get out of here.

OCHIENG

I wouldn't fight someone incapable of even getting a wife or a child...

Ogada springs forward and slaps Ochieng across the cheek

OGADA

How dare you! I am old enough to be your father!

Ochieng hits Ogada across the face with his fist and sends Ogada sprawling a few metres off. Blood starts trickling from his nose.

OCHIENG

Never touch me! You want you tree? You have it!
Ogada springs up and threatens to attack Ochieng but Ochieng has a machete raised ready to strike. Ogada pauses.

OGADA

You think that machete can save you if I decide to deal with you?

Okuku comes running and pulls back Ochieng.

OKUKU

What is the fight all about? We have a funeral *yawa*! Ochieng, what is all this?

OGADA

See with your eyes. I am bleeding. And that is my tree he was cutting.

The blood is dripping on Ogada's shirt. He waves Okuku off when he starts to move closer to Ogada.

OCHIENG

He slapped me first!

OKUKU

This tree is what has brought this fight?! I am very sorry Ogada. This is not the tree I needed Ochieng to cut. It is my mistake. I should have been more precise. Please forgive us for this. Let us end the matter. That nose needs to be blocked to stem the bleeding...

Some villagers arrive and somewhat calm the warring parties down. After some persuasion, they both walk to their respective homes.

As he is dragged away, Ogada keeps talking angrily.

OGADA

He thinks that machete can save him from me? Have you seen? He has drawn my blood. My blood is flowing...see for yourselves...my own blood...if I retaliate to this, will I be taken to be a bad person?

INT OGADA's HOUSE

Ogada enters his house and slumps heavily in a chair. His walking stick falls beside him uselessly. At first, his hooded eyes are heavy with sadness. He wipes his bloody nose with an open hand and wipes the blood on his coat.

OGADA

(Muttering softly)

I am the one who is insulted and disrespected even by Children. Even this boy can draw my blood... I will not let this one go. If it is death, let it be death. I cannot allow this. I will not agree...For this, he has to pay, come what may.

The crushed expression on his face transforms into an angry look. A burning look of fury rages in his eyes as his face is contorted in anger. In his paroxysm, he clutches the armrest of the chair tightly in agitation.

OGADA

He has smashed my face and drawn my blood. My face is bleeding now. He will bleed too. He will pay. Even if he dies, let him die..

His shaking body becomes still as he stares ahead resolutely. Jaws clenched tightly, lips tightly closed.

EXT AUMA'S COMPOUND

At Auma's funeral, the local chief is addressing mourners. Okuku and Ochieng are seated to his right and the rest of the mourners are seated on one side. Auma's coffin is resting on a stool next to a freshly dug grave.

CHIEF

My fellow residents one last thing I must remind you is, please get rid of bushes around your homes. You have seen that we have lost a great woman to something that crawls. (He gestures at Okuku and Ochieng). These boys are now orphans. Let us remember them in our prayers.

Okuku stands up and faces the mourners. He beckons Ochieng who joins him.

OKUKU

I will not say much because you all knew my mother who has passed on. She was a happy woman and she took care of us very well (Voice breaking). And now she has died so suddenly... I am still in shock... Anyway, that is how life is. The only thing we can do is to respect her name and escort her to start her next journey. Be at peace.

The mourners rise and start singing Church hymns.

MOURNERS

We will meet again; in heaven with god...we are just visitors in this world. We are just visitors in this world. We will go back home in heaven...

They move her coffin from the house and bury her with the singing going on. Young men pour spades of soil on her coffin. After burying her, a priest leads in prayer.

PRIEST

Let us pray.

God, we pray that you to receive our sister and place her at a good place. We ask that you forgive her for what she may have done or failed to have done. We ask these in Jesus name.

ALL PRESENT

Amen

The mourners then leave in groups and small processions.

EXT. AUMA's HOMESTEAD – EVENING

Okuku is sitting outside his mother's house. He is staring toward the river, lost in thought. The village is quiet. At one point, he notices a movement near the hedge. He pays attention to it and recognizes Ogada across the hedge struggling with a sack whose contents appear to be a live animal. He springs up and rushes toward him. Ogada is looking behind him surreptitiously.

OKUKU

(Voice raised)

What are you carrying?

OGADA

(Without looking at Okuku)

Nothing, just some sweet potatoes.

Okuku slows down but keeps walking toward Ogada to investigate but Ogada spins around suddenly to face him.

OGADA

What do you want?

OKUKU

It looks like what you are carrying is still alive. Are there some fish among the potatoes?

OGADA

If you want fish, you know where the fishermen are selling fish. Stop following me around and asking me silly questions!

OKUKU

Okay, Okay, no need to be so hostile. I grant you your peace.

Okuku walks back to his compound. He keeps looking back at Ogada, puzzled.

INT. OGADA's HOUSE

Ogada places the sack on the floor then opens it briefly and a rat rushes out of it. It is immediately struck by a snake that is colored dark brown in the mid section with a silvery gray head. It has a ridged crown of scales and the double row at its tail. The rat runs for a few meters and then stops. The snake zeroes in on the rat

and starts swallowing it. Ogada looks on, pleased. He mutters the snake's name in pleasure.

OGADA

Rachieeeeerrr. There you are! I have a job for you. There is a boy that disrespects me and who has smashed my face. He thinks he can just smash my face at will. We will show him.

Ogada's mother pushes the door open suddenly and steps in the doorway.

OGADA's MOTHER

My son, what is that you are doing?

Ogada holds a rug to conceal the snake beside him and faces his mother.

OGADA

Mama what do you want? What is it?

OGADA's MOTHER

Are you still feeding the snake? Why are you behaving like a wizard? Where did you get these strange habits Ogada? Are you really my son? What will I do with you?

OGADA

Stop shouting! Leave me alone. You should not barge in like that – what if you find me naked? I am a grown man, respect this house.

OGADA's MOTHER

It is because of your bizarre habits that you cannot find a wife and your strange habits are the reason I will die without ever seeing a grandson.

OGADA

(Angrily)

Those who chased away the woman I wanted to marry have been dealt with and now I will deal with people that disrespect me!

OGADA's MOTHER

What are you talking about? If you hurt anyone, I will tell people the bizarre things that you do like keeping a snake. If I just hear that you hurt someone, you will see what I will do. I would rather die without a grandchild than have people think I raised a wizard!

She walks away angrily, her hands held at her back.

As she leaves, the snake opens its mouth and hisses in her direction in a display of threat.

EXT. VILLAGE PATH - DAY

Ochieng is walking back home from a farm. The path he treads is bordered by trees and thick bush from both sides. He is whistling and carrying a hoe over his shoulder and some fish stuck on a reed, some of which are twitching. His attention is taken by a snake that slithers onto the path before him. It is a black mamba. The *rachier*. It is about six feet long and dark brown in the mid section with a silvery gray head. He slows down and pauses for it to pass. When it reaches the middle of the path however, it raises its head and pauses, facing him. He is startled. The multi-colored spots on its pulsating throat, its ridged crown of scales and the double row at its tail amaze him.

He raises the hoe to scare it away but it surges forward boldly and he brings down his hoe upon its head. It evades the blow and spits in his eye. His hands come up reflexively to protect his eyes but it is too late. He drops the hoe and the fish and lets out a blood-curdling scream.

OCHIENG

Aaaaaargh! A snake is killing me! Heeelp! Heeelp!

He staggers blindly, falling headlong onto the bushes, screaming some more. The snake bites his left leg just above the ankle and slithers into the bushes. Some villagers rush into the scene to find him writhing in agony. They approach him carefully. Eyes roving around for any signs of danger.

ONE VILLAGER

What is it? What has happened?

Ochieng is rolling in agony on the grass and the bushes. One hand is clutching his bitten leg while the other is rubbing his streaming eyes.

OCHIENG

I have been bitten by a snake...My eyes! My eyes are burning! Call Okuku. Call Okuku quickly...

One of the villagers rushes off towards Ochieng's home.

After a while, he loses consciousness and lies still. Okuku comes and they rush him to hospital.

INT – HOSPITAL – EMERGENCY ROOM

The room is noisy with people milling in it. There is a man writhing on the floor with his leg twisted in a bizarre angle. One man seated on a bench is holding a blood-soaked cloth on his forehead, Blood is flowing between his fingers.

Doctors are moving up and down. Nurses are applying bandages and giving directions. Okuku rushes in holding Ochieng in his arms. Ochieng is unconscious and is breathing softly. He is foaming at the mouth.

OKUKU

Doctor, please help us, he is dying!

The doctor gestures Okuku to place Ochieng on a stretcher and Okuku does so.

DOCTOR

What happened to him?

OKUKU

A snake bit him.

The doctor pries open Ochieng's eyes.

DOCTOR

What kind of snake – did anybody see it?

OKUKU

No. Please hurry save him for us.

DOCTOR

We need a description of the snake in order to get an antivenom injection. But let me stabilize him first.

The doctor pulls some drug into a syringe and readies to give an injection. Then he touches Ochieng's wrist for his pulse. He pauses to feel it. Then he sticks a stethoscope in his chest. He pauses as a worried look comes on his face. Then he reaches for Ochieng's neck. He pauses then his hands drop at his sides. He wears a resigned look. They all turn to look at him.

DOCTOR

He has passed on.

OKUKU

What? Can I have two graves within a month?

Okuku pries open Ochieng's eyes and looks into them. Then he feels his wrist for a pulse. He lays a finger on Ochieng's neck then places his palms on his knees, straddling Ochieng.

His eyes well with tears. A teardrop lands on Ochieng's cheek. Okuku wipes it away as if it is a stain.

EXT. OKUKU'S COMPOUND

Okuku joins some elders huddled together in stools. They wear grim faces. One of the elders speaks.

ELDER 1

Since Ochien'g was a grown man, we will have to observe the *tero buru* ritual, to exorcise the angel of death from this home. We also have to mourn for two days.

ELDER 2

My bull can be slaughtered for the mourners during the period. The rest of my bulls can be used in the *tero buru* tomorrow morning.

VILLAGE PATH – DAY

Carrying weapons and screaming war cries, Okuku and the village folk herd the bulls back home. The village path is dusty and the cows are running, followed by young men carrying tree branches and with fresh leaves tied round their heads. They thrust their spears in the air as they weep and curse.

YOUNG MEN

Death you are a coward. You stole Ochien'g from us, you coward, where are you? Show yourself now. Show yourself like a man and face us now. Come now. Today we are killing you! Ayeyeyeyeye! Uuuuwi! Ochieng! He stole you. Where is he?

They swing their clubs at death and spear the air violently. Young boys carrying tree branches trail the frenzied men, enraptured by their antics. Nyabwa, Okuku's uncle is blowing a flute as other men sing and scream. JAYALO, is beating a drum tied round his neck, his eyes boring into the rising dust. Sweat is flowing freely from his face. The village-folk weep and ululate mournfully, engaged in *tero buru*, a ceremony for chasing death away. The pick-up car that carries the coffin trails slowly behind them, amidst the dust kicked by the bulls, and by the people lost in the frenzy of *tero buru*.

EXT OKUKU'S HOMESTEAD – DAY

The group arrives, bulls charging forward. The singing and dancing becomes frenzied as the coffin is placed next to the fresh grave. The death-chasers, some of who are wearing monkey skin-headgears become more frenzied as they run between the houses and attack the air before them. Their tears mingle with their sweat as they mourn Ochieng.

EXT OKUKU'S HOMESTEAD – GRAVESIDE

Some people are weeping and a lowered coffin is being covered by spades of soil by some men. One of the crying mourners is holding a big framed picture of Ochieng. Unnoticed, Ogada, whose compound borders that of Okuku, stands behind the hedge in his compound, hidden from the view of mourners. He is peering across at the mourners. His eyes glint as a cold smile dances on his lips. He is clutching a walking stick, a snake coiled around it stirs. It has a multi-colored throat and a crown of scales and a double row at its tail. There is a puzzled look of concern and worry on everybody's face. Eight elders are huddled together at one side of the compound engaged in hushed conversations. Okuku joins them. He clears his throat and they look at him.

OKUKU

These deaths are very strange and have happened too fast. I have thought about this matter... Ochieng and Auma must have been killed by the same snake...we cannot just sit and wait to be bitten. We must do something...

He narrows his eyes, as if deep in thought.

OKUKU

(Continuing)

We will have to kill the snake that bit Ochieng for us to stop it from killing more people. We will wait for it to come and lick the grave.

ELDERS

What? Have you gone crazy? You believe that silly myth?

OKUKU

Do you have any better idea? If it's a silly myth, we lose one night's sleep. But if it is not...

(He looks at their baffled faces).

If it is not, we stop it and thereby stop any more deaths.

ELDER 2

Is this about the silly myth of a snake that licks the grave? Are you serious?

ELDER 3

This is foolish. We are not so old that we can start believing myths like old women!

ELDER 2

I think its worth exploring

The other elders look at him accusingly but he ignores their incredulous looks.

ELDER 2

Okuku, rally the young men around. Prepare yourselves.

Some young men standing nearby were eavesdropping and as Okuku approaches them, they turn away. Jayalo steps from them and faces Okuku.

JAYALO

That is foolishness. Pure myth. I won't waste my time.

OKUKU

Stop talking badly please. This is serious. Let us give it a try. Help me here.

Some of the young men step forward while others slump down, staring at the distance stubbornly.

After some persuasion, six men agree to wait for the snake. Akinyi lights a bonfire for them and they sit through the spooky, fitful night by the fresh grave. The night closes in on the seven men seated around the grave. The bonfire crackles eerily.

EXT. OKUKU's HOMESTEAD - DAY

It is dawn. Six young men are sprawled around the dying bonfire in the middle of the homestead. Some are lying on flat benches while others are slouching in seats, sleeping fitfully or snoring. Mud-thatched houses surround the group. Their walls are well finished and smooth. Three of them are painted white from the middle section of the walls upwards. There is a fresh grave next to the fire and the men's seats are arranged around the fire in a semi-circle. Okuku prowls round them, eyes narrowed to slits. He surveys the bushes silently. His grip tightens on his club in frustration as he looks at the direction of sunrise. He gently taps a bamboo stick against his leg.

His eyes, reflecting the light of the sunrise, burn intensely like coals. The burning logs are ashen and the bonfire is emitting smoke. One of the men, Jayalo, gets up and stretches. He clutches his spear, walks to the grave, looks at it, then surveys the bushes.

JAYALO

I knew it. The snake will not come.

He then walks out of the compound. The other men begin stirring awake one by one. One other young man yawns, stretches and leaves.

Okuku crushes a bamboo twig between his fingers as he looks at the departing men. The sap from the twig drips on the wet grass. He walks to the men.

OKUKU

Don't go just yet. Have some breakfast before you go.

The men stir and growl their agreements without opening their eyes.

INT. OGADA's HOUSE – DAY

Ogada sits napping in his poorly lit house. Hanging from the roof are paraphernalia that include a leopard's skin, the skull of a hippo, the skull of a monkey, a gourd, small pots, sea shells, human hair, a fly whisk and dried sticks that gnarl eerily amidst them. The worn-out grass-thatched roof is letting the sun

through in some places. A black cat lies doglike at his feet. His eyes snap open when he hears a noise in the next room. He leaps up and inspects a pot that he finds empty. Alarmed, his face begins contorting with fury as he starts flinging items searching and cursing. A puff-adder stirs up in one of the pots, disturbed by the commotion. The sound of a rattle-snake emanates from one of the pots and the cat, hackles raised, snarls and moves toward the pot aggressively, releasing a hissing sound. Ogada points a gnarled finger at it and its puffed look instantly deflates and it walks towards him, becalmed. He clutches at a necklace made of snakeskin that is tied around his neck – the head of the snake still intact - and sniffs the air, eyes darting around furiously. The snakeskin is exactly like that of the *rachier* that bit Ochieng. His dark eyes snap on the door, which is slightly ajar. They light up in realization. He moves toward it purposefully. Cowrie shells tied around his ankles jiggle. He unties them and flings them behind him, eyes glued to the door.

EXT. OGADA'S HOMESTEAD - DAY

In the grass outside, the *rachier* is quickly slithering from the house towards the hedge that divides Okuku's compound from Ogada's. It has a double-ridged tail, a multicolored throat and a crown of scales. It pauses slightly when it senses the commotion back in Ogada's house. It raises its head from the tall grass, its forked tongue darts out and flutters in the wind like a leaf, and then it resumes its flight. A path curves through the grass where it passes, its weight crushing the grass.

Ogada emerges from the house and his eyes light up in recognition as they quickly pick out the path the snake followed.

OGADA

(Under his breath)

What a stupid snake!

He curses and rushes in the direction of the path. A while later, he spots the *rachier*, but it is halfway through the hedge, getting away into Okuku's compound. He runs after it but slows down when he notices that there are people in the homestead across the hedge who might notice his hasty pursuit and his quarry. He crouches and moves stealthily toward the hedge, unable to stop what is about to unfold. He remains hidden from view by the hedge and peers across at the snake's progress as it crosses the hedge. He is shaking in fright and looks for something to lean on or hold onto, which he does not find.

OGADA

(Under his breath)

Now what problem is this!

EXT. RIVERBANK

In the blazing midday sun, Okuku is standing motionlessly next to the river some hundred meters away. His eyes are open but unfocused; lost in mourning. He wipes away a tear drop from his left eye.

OKUKU

(Muttering under his breath)

How do I stop these deaths?

He makes a tight fist. Gorged veins snake around his muscular arms like ropes. The calm water reflects the shimmering sun, and playing catfish cause occasional ripples in the water. A piercing scream from the direction of his homestead rents the air.

WOMAN's SCREAM

Uuuuuuuuuuuwwiiiiiii!

Okuku spins his bulk around and hurtles towards the homestead, twigs snapping beneath his feet as startled cattle flee from his path.

EXT. OKUKU'S HOMESTEAD

As Okuku approaches the homestead, his wife Akinyi approaches him and breathlessly hands him a club.

AKINYI

The snake has arrived!

Okuku glances at the hedge and his eyes pick out the rachier held up by the branches it is coiled around. He swiftly brushes her aside and enters the house. He emerges almost instantly with a bow and arrows.

Okuku's cousin, with a huge stick in his hand, runs toward the grave with his eyes fixed on the hedge. Nyabwa is holding a machete and has a ghastly look trained towards the bushy hedge with his back to the grave. Screaming women and children are fleeing away from the *euphorbia* hedge into the houses, with terror etched in their eyes. The young men are picking any weapon available and rallying around the grave, eyes riveted on the snake.

Okuku rushes to join the men and boys, his eyes never leaving the hedge. He turns to the boys.

OKUKU

Get out of here. Get in the house!

They boys drop their sticks and stones and disappear in the house.

The snake is dark brown in the mid-section while its head is silvery gray. It is held aloft by the *euphorbia* hedge.

Okuku glances at the ghouses and sees the women staring through open windows and some crowded at the door.

OKUKU

Lock the doors and the windows!

They react instantly and grab the children away. Doors slam and locks leap into place. Windows fly closed.

The young men are spread on one side of the grave, with their backs to it, and stand facing the snake, their weapons held. Ready.

At the hedge, the *mamba* starts coming down the hedge, headfirst. The silvery grey scales wrap its head like steel armor and its beady eyes glitter ominously in the shadow cast by the trees. The slit of its mouth runs across its head, making it appear like its head had been cut in half then put back together. For a moment, it appears startled by the flurry of activity then its forked tongue flickers out gently. Okuku's eyes enlarge in alarm as they pick out the crown of scales on its head and its garish, multicolored throat.

OKUKU

(Muttering under his breath)

What a bizarre snake!

The men blink silently in astonishment. A rat runs from the grass at the foot of hedge towards the men and then pauses in the grass a short distance from them. Okuku sees it at the corner of his eye, which jumps back at the snake.

For a split second, the only sound in the homestead is that of the breathing men and rustling leaves as the serpent glides forward effortlessly, looking innocent and unsure. A dog barks in the distance and a slight breeze shifts the hedge. The *rachier* appears like a moving rope of silver, expressionless and unblinking. The men appear entranced, their eyes locked on it, as if in a daze. They do not notice the rat running past the grave. The glinting eyes of the women behind locked doors peer through the cracks, entranced by the macabre scene.

Okuku aims his arrow at the neck of the *rachier*. But just before he releases the arrow, one of the men loses his balance and throws the huddling group askew. As the chaos starts to spread, Okuku swiftly steps aside, aims and releases the arrow and it heads to its target.

The *rachier* suddenly surges forward ominously while moving from the path of Okuku's arrow. Okuku's arrow whizzes past the snake's head and disappears in the hedge.

EXT. THE HEDGE – OGADA'S COMPOUND

The arrow pierces Ogada's chest and he stagger's back from the impact, clutching it. He looks at it in surprise. He starts to scream out in agony as the pain assails him but he immediately closes his mouth and looks at the direction of Okuku's homestead, afraid of attracting attention. **Why? He's been injured. He's totally innocent of what is going on. Why wouldn't he want attention?** Tears of pain well in his eyes as he brings one hand to cover his trembling mouth, which is threatening to scream out in pain. He drops backwards as his feet give way beneath him. He starts writhing and thrashing in the grass in pain.

EXT. OKUKU's COMPOUND

The *rachier* is now on the grass rushing toward them. Okuku's cousin aims at the head of the snake with a club. The *rachier* dodges the club and releases a thin jet of venom that assails the eyes of her attacker who drops his weapon and starts screaming in anguish as the venom starts burning his eyes. He staggers off blindly, screaming like he is on fire.

OKUKU's COUSIN

Uuuuwi! My eyes! It has spit in my eyes! It has made me blind! Uuuwi!

Nyabwa swings his machete to the neck of the snake, holding back his body while bringing up one hand protectively over his eye. The blade zips inches past the steady head of the snake but he loses his grip on the machete and it comes flying dangerously towards Okuku's head.

NYABWA

Okuku, watch out!

Okuku ducks the missile. He is now armed with a spear and he is the only person between the snake and the grave as Nyabwa retrieves the machete.

OKUKU

(screaming)

Dieeeee!

As he releases the war cry, his spear homes in on the snake's mid-section. The snake swings sideways and manages to evade the spear even as the spear tears at its side and opens a wound. In lightning-speed, it raises its head and bites Okuku's wrist before he can retract it.

OKUKU

It has bit me! It has bit me!

As the *rachier* slithers past Okuku and he readies himself to give it another blow, a hair-raising scream of pain bursts from the hedge where the snake emerged.

OGADA

Uuuuwi! Heeelp me! Heeeelp!

It tears through the battling men like an electric current and throws off their concentration for a split second. They shudder momentarily then resume fighting the snake, careful not to let it get away. They approach it once more.

Okuku's uncle brings down his machete and cuts off part of the snake's tail as it sprays another jet of venom at him. He turns away from the deadly jet and it sprays harmlessly in the air. As the *rachier* reaches the grave, its tongue flickers out and Okuku aims a final blow at it but as his spear comes down, the alarming scream from the hedge rents the air again, with more urgency and pronounced agony.

OGADA

Uuuuuwi! Heeelp me! Heeeelp! I am dyyyyyiiiiing!
Heeeelp!

The men turn round and peer at the hedge as the scream becomes a continuous, hysterical cry of agony. As they hesitate, the snake slithers towards the bush. As the snake enters the bush, Jayalo hurls a huge rock at it. The rock crushes the underbrush and lands in a thud but barely hits the snake's tail, which disappears in the bush. They try locating the snake but cannot see it. They decide to burn the bushes and smoke it out. Jayalo produces a matchstick and they use some dry grass to start a fire. But as the fire starts picking, the scream emanating over the hedge rents the air with a raw and frightening urgency. Their feet run toward it.

ACT THREE

EXT. OGADA'S COMPOUND

They force an opening at the hedge and the men squeeze through it. Okuku emerges, staggering slightly as the snake's venom starts to take effect. He is shocked to see Ogada, who is lying belly-up, thrashing on the grass helplessly in great pain. There is an arrow stuck grotesquely in his chest, piercing his lungs. Okuku recognizes the arrow he had shot seconds ago and drops on his knee to help Ogada, mortified and apologizing for the accident.

OKUKU

Sorry, sorry my lord. I am so sorry. What a tragedy... I didn't know... I had no idea...

He holds the arrow to remove it.

OGADA

Uuuuwi! You are killing me! Leave it. Don't touch it!

Okuku hesitates and is at a loss about what to do. He slaps his head with both hands in frustration. Then notices Ogada's strange necklace of snakeskin that Ogada is wearing and his hands reach for it and he examines it. He recognizes the multicolor throat and ridged tail. His eyes rise to meet Ogada's eyes which are now dilated like those of a deer stuck in the headlights. He sees that Ogada is unable to look him in the eye. The onlookers sigh in realization when they see what Okuku has seen. They step back. Okuku holds Ogada's guilty look. His face becomes suffused with anger. He summons all his energy and grabs the old man by the collar.

OKUKU

Are you the one that killed my mother and my brother with a snake? You are controlling the snake that is killing us?

Ogada hesitates and Okuku shakes him more violently.

OKUKU

Is that snake yours?

Ogada stares back, blood spurting from his mouth as a result of pierced lungs. He tries futilely to push Okuku off but the latter shakes him harder. Just when Ogutu is about to release him, he shudders and his nails sink into Okuku's shoulder. Okuku's eyes begin to glaze but he refocuses them on Ogada.

OKUKU

Why?!!

Ogada chokes on his blood and his eyes begin to glaze. Foam emerges from his mouth.

OKUKU

(screaming)

Was it you?!!!

Ogada's eyes roll over as his grip loosens on Okuku's shoulder. Okuku begins to lose focus and struggles to hang onto his slipping consciousness. His grip on Ogada slackens and Ogada falls down as Okuku drops on his knees.

Okuku's vision clouds over and he is held by Nyabwa just as he is about to collapse next to Ogada.

AKINYI

(Hysterically)

Uuuuuuuuuwwwwiiiiiii! What tragedy is this? What evil is this? What kind of death is this?!!!1

Some young men pick Okuku.

NYABWA

Let us rush them to hospital.

EXT OKUKU'S COMPOUND

In a hole nearby the burning bushes, the hungry snake zeroes in on a weak rat and starts to swallow it, headfirst.

INT HOSPITAL

Nyabwa points out the snake to a doctor from a book with snake photographs. The anti-venom is then obtained and an unconscious Okuku is injected with it. When Okuku opens his eyes, his wife Akinyi is by the bed. Beaming in relief.

AKINYI

Praise God. Praise God. Praise God.

She weeps in delight and she hugs him. After a while, they are both composed. The doctor approaches them and they turn to him.

DOCTOR

He will need three days before he can fully recover, let him get plenty of rest.

OKUKU

Where is Ogada – how did he fare?

AKINYI

He did not make it. The arrow could not come out.

The poison killed him

Okuku curses and starts lamenting.

OKUKU

Why did I have to be the one to kill him? I am now a killer. What did I do to deserve a curse like this? I am cursed. I am a killer...

Akinyi puts her arm around him comfortingly.

AKINYI

Please don't do this to yourself. We all know it was an accident. Accidents happen.

OKUKU

He was just an old man who we had isolated.

(Sighing heavily)

Poor Ogada, I have killed you

Okuku sinks to a dark, sad mood; he stares blankly at the wall, lost in thought.

AKINYI

It has already happened my lord and nothing can be done. Just leave it.

Villagers come to the hospital to visit Okuku and they are relieved that he is alive. The women rejoice.

WOMEN

God is great! He has saved our son! Alulululululu!
Okuku is alive!

After the celebration, they notice Okuku's sad mood and ask what the problem is.

AKINYI

He feels bad for killing Ogada.

Some elders approach Okuku and sit next to him

ELDER 1

You are okay. It was an accident. But we will carry out a cleansing ritual on you and the home to cleanse you of Ogada's death. That will settle matters.

EXT OKUKU'S COMPOUND

Okuku is back from the hospital. As he enters his compound, his wife rushes to meet him. Happy villagers stream into his compound and welcome him back. They curiously examine the spot on his arm where he was bitten and are happy that he is back and alive. They pat him and hug him happily.

INT OKUKU'S HOUSE

AKINYI

Did you actually see the snake lick the grave?

OKUKU

I have thought about it and I think that it was just a hungry snake that was after a rat and in the process; it got between me and Ogada.

AKINYI

Aaaaa! So it is a myth!

OKUKU

But it helped us know who the killer was!

FADE OUT