

# The Confession of a Suckling Mother



Chief Bia Bom was reclined in his hammock, his eyes heavy with sleep. He has just eaten a plate of roasted cassava soaked in palm oil which has been prepared for his breakfast by one of his younger wives, the fifth in a row. Soon, his court messenger entered and stooped before him in salutation.

"Strangers have just landed at the wharf, they are on their way to the court," the young man announced "Strangers?" the chief turned to his messenger, not sure if he heard him clearly.

"Yes, Chief, they said they were running away from the war".

"Go and bring them in," Chief Bia Bom ordered.

A group of people were led into the court yard. They all seemed visibly shaken. One of them, a tall and heavily built man came forward to greet the chief. He appeared to be the head of the group. He suddenly halted his steps and took a straight look at the chief and gave a broad smile.

"So, is this you?" The man stepped forward, his arms wide open and clasped the old man. Chief Bia Bom sat aghast, having surprisingly recognised an old time friend. He sprang up from the hammock and the two hugged each other in firm embrace. They exchanged some pleasantries.

Chief Bia Bom was a retired army sergeant. The two men fought in the Burma War of the 1940s and were seeing each other for the first time since they both retired from the army more than twenty years ago.

"Rogie, the great one! What has brought you to my land? Chief Bia Bom peered into his friend's eyes, hoping to find an answer there. "Sit down first," He pointed to a vacant chair near him.

The man remained standing and introduced his entourage. "These are members of my family," he said as he turned to the chief and went on to introduce members of the family according to their category.

"These are my three wives," he said, pointing at three women standing beside him. "This is the eldest, Ma-Joh, the second, Kemah and this young one is Betty, a suckling mother." He paused,

looking at the faces of the rest of his family members "These are my sons and daughters, the rest are nieces and nephews. We have been driven from our home by the marauding rebels. They have destroyed our farms, burnt down our houses and have forced us to flee". For a while, all remained silent. Mr. Rogers broke up, looking haggard and exhausted. He turned to his old friend and said: "This is our story. We have been travelling by boat for the past two nights just to reach a place of refuge. Thank God, we have arrived at a place I believe our safety would be assured". "Definitely, you are all safe," the chief reassured his new guests, watching the faces around him, his eyes temporarily fixed on the third wife who has her baby clutched under her arm, her breast firmly pushed into the child's mouth.

It was now night fall. Chief Bia Bom has to provide them shelter. He beckoned to his bodyguard. "Go and prepare them one of my huts for the night. In the morning I'll get them a permanently place to stay".

That night Chief Bia Bom could hardly have a sound sleep. His heart kept throbbing each time he recalls the beautiful face of Rogers' third wife. Despite being a suckling mother, Betty was still young and extremely pretty with beautiful eyes and black lips. Even though the stress and hazards of travelling the long distance on a dangerous sea have had their toll on the fleeing family members, it had not altered Betty's buoyancy. She was only in her twenties.

Two months later, Chief Bia Bom summoned his nephew Tua into his private chamber. The sun has just risen, the cold morning wind gently blowing outside.

"I have called you on a private matter," the chief turned to Tua, speaking in a low conspiratorial tone, watching over his shoulders to make sure no one was eavesdropping. He pulled out from under his bed an object wrapped in a piece of cloth and gave it to Tua

"Here, take this piece of yam to Betty, Rogers' wife, the suckling mother. You know her?". The young man nodded.

"Take it to her, but don't let any of my wives know about it, please," he pleaded with Tua, adding: "Those strangers have little to eat, am just assisting her".

Tua was a young energetic but handsome man. He had inherited vast stretch of farm land from his late father who was a prosperous farmer throughout the Mokebe land. With time, the hard working Tua had improved on his father's wealth and was now regarded as one of the few youngmen reasonably well-off in the village. Ever since he set eyes on the young girl he has been her secret admirer unknown to his uncle, the chief. He has not however had the courage to confront her with his secret desire. He saw the chief's errand as an opportunity to declare his intention to the suckling lady.

Betty was alone in the hut when Tua arrived with the piece of yam his uncle

sent him to give to Rogers' wife. As he approached the hut he cleared his throat. Betty turned round and smiled, revealing a set of white teeth with a slight gap between the upper ones.

"I have come to pay you a visit," Tua announced, not sure of the reception he will receive from her.

"You are welcome, take seat". She drew a bench for him and turned her attention to her child. The rest of Rogers' family had gone to the farm which the chief had allocated to them. Tua had all the time to himself.

For a while he sat silent, contemplating his next move, the yam still clutched in his hand. "What did you bring for me," Betty turned to him, her eyes on the the object in his hand. "I sent you a gift, here is it". Tua handed the yam to Betty. "This is just an expression of a wish," he added with a brief smile. "Thank you," Betty said in return and took the yam into the house. Tua stood up as Betty appeared on the door way. "Why are you leaving so soon," Betty threw a glance at him, smiling.

"Well, I thought I should pay you a brief visit,". Tua said, shrugging. "We shall find time for the two of us to meet somewhere, if that would suit you". He paused.

Betty stood in silence for a moment, not knowing what to say. He turned to her visitor. "Give me time to think over it. I'll let you know later. You know my husband is very strict".

Chief Bia Bom has never had a settled mind since the day he first sent his nephew to Betty with the yam. He has made several futile attempts to meet with the village beauty. Tua would always tell him the girl was busy with work. His patience was running low. One morning, when he was sure the rest of the family had gone to the farm, he quietly sneaked into Rogers' compound. Being a suckling mother, Betty would normally stay in the village to tend to the little children while the rest of the family members went to the farm.

In that first encounter, Betty was very blunt and uncompromising. She had asked him to behave himself.

"You know am married with a young child; that besides you too are married with several wives, so why are you bothering me?" she had said to him and dismissed him from her sight there and then.

After that meeting, the chief became more determined to get his way through. Meanwhile, rumours have been circulating in his compound, more so among his wives. The rumours were very disturbing. It was about his nephew, Tua and one of Rogers' wives. It has not been clear to him which one among the wives that was having an affair with Tua.

One evening while returning home from one of his councillors, he saw a shadowy figure approaching from the opposite direction. It was dark, the stars had disappeared from the sky and so he could not figure out the individual, but from its movement he knew it was a woman.

He stood still, waiting to get a glimpse of the person. The figure drew closer. It was Betty carrying a bottle in her hand.

"Hey, come here," he beckoned to her in a subdued voice. Betty was a bit shocked to find the chief at that hour of the night in a dark corner.

"Where are you coming from this dark night," he tried to hold her by the hand.

"I went to buy kerosine for my lamp," she replied, gently freeing her hand from his grip.

"I dont know what I have done to you that you dont want my company," the chief began in a rather soulful tone, struggling with his voice as he tried to sound much younger than he was. "Forget about this talk of being married with many wives. If you are more appealing to me than my wives, shouldnt I say it? Look, Betty, your beauty has struck me most and my heart vibrates even with a touch of your skin. Betty, I love you from the bottom of my heart". He paused, not too sure if he has impressed the girl who was twice younger than his first daughter.

For a split second Betty remained silent. She was trying to work out a reply to the oldman's advances but was short of words. She could not understand why the chief continued to chase her even after she had rebuffed him on many occasions.

She turned to him. "Look, dont you have other women in this village to run after except me?"

"Of course, you are the only one that my heart yearns for," Chief Bia Bom replied, trying to hold her hand for the second time. "That's why upon your arrival I sent you a piece of yam as a show of love..." "You sent me what?"

"A yam. I believe my nephew gave you a piece of yam".

Betty recalled receiving a yam from Tua. Could it be that one, she wondered. But she quickly dismissed the thought and turned her back, "am going, I have stayed much longer, lest Pa Rogers would be asking for me." She turned round, but the chief held her back

"Wait a minute," the chief said. He dipped his hand under his gown and pulled out a note. "Please, take this and buy yourself something."

Betty took the money but rather hesitantly and thanked him. Smiling she turned to him, "next time I would want you to buy me a lappa. I don't have decent clothes, the rebels burnt our house, so we didn't come out with anything while we were running away".

The old man smiled but with much empathy. "Dont worry yourself about clothes. Your problem is over, so long as you accomodate me in your heart". Betty remained silent as she turned round and disappeared into the dark alley.

**Editor's note:**

**Read our next edition for the final part of this episode.**