Connecting the dots...

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Philip Mataranyika
Nyaradzo Group,
Chief Executive Officer

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My bones shall rise...

The girl children of the Makoni people, have always played an important role both at household and clan level, from the days of our great patriarch and ancestor, Gunguwo, to the current generation. The roles assigned to them transcend everyday routine duties such as helping with household chores, resolving squabbles that, if left unattended, could easily tear families apart, to smoothing paths for long-lasting peace within families and communities. With regard to the latter and despite how society now frowns upon customary practices, it was quite common back then that families would marry off their girl children to advance collective interests at a family or clan level, such as to make peace with enemies after a war or as gratitude for great deeds. While this was largely part of the power play that strengthened my forebearers' hand over their adversaries, many a time, it is heartening to know that these daughters went on to play prominent roles even within families into which they got married, in addition to their role as peacemakers and trouble shooters within the families from which they came.

Parallels can be drawn with what was happening in Europe in the 15th century, for example, when Pope Alexander VI was head of the Catholic Church and ruler of the Papal States from 11 August 1492 until his death in 1503. Born Rodrigo de Borja, Pope Alexander VI married off, four of his daughters to the various rulers of Europe in order to secure peace. As if they were cut from the same cloth, Gunguwo and his descendants were masters at this game, with Gunguwo starting the tradition when he gave his daughter's hand in marriage to Chirariro as a show of gratitude for the reception they had received from Chief Mangwende and his people, when they so warmly received him and his entourage in their area, before proceeding to their final destination in Maungwe, although Gunguwo would die soon afterwards.

In line with the same customs and traditions, Sabarawara would also give his daughter – sister to Muswere's hand in marriage – to Mutwira who was ruler of Maungwe at the time – again as a gesture of goodwill meant to build strong relationships with their host who had graciously received them, giving them shelter and land to settle on, many miles away from home, in Ciciri, Tanganyika.

Mutwira had reciprocated the gesture by giving the hand of his own daughter in marriage to Muswere, although the irony of it is that, the visitors would eventually pull a fast one on their host thus, assuming the reins.

In the same spirit and in line with family traditions, my aunt, Ziganga Maingeni – half-sister to my grandfather, Kurauone Kurai Mazikana Mataranyika – would be married off to Mapupa Garikayi Magosha, as a sign of gratitude, for the role the legendary warrior had played in defending their territory in the civil tribal war with Chief Mutasa's men on the east. On her husband's death, Maingeni would have another dance with married life, becoming second wife to Mudyachuma Kaisi, following in the footsteps of her mother, who had been Chakadeyi's second wife, following the death of her spouse, Marimira, uncle to Chakadeyi. Ziganga must have been ridiculed, if not publicly, definitely in private, for gate-crashing the pair of lovebirds, Chakadeyi and Dambudzo.

Marital bliss in the union of Chakadeyi and Dambudzo may have been as rare as hen's teeth, given the many stillbirths Dambudzo had suffered. No doubt, the coming in between them, of a second wife, must have been seen by Dambudzo as a serious threat to her marriage. As a result, the two women must have engaged in covert and overt combats as well as serious arguments, which is not uncommon in polygamous relationships. The cat fights would rear their ugly head in the public domain through the naming by Chakadeyi's wives of their children, with names that were laden with meaning, beyond just being labels. The first brickbat would be thrown by Chakadeyi's second wife when she gave birth to her first child, a girl, whom she named Maingeni (why hate me). When Dambudzo had her baby, also a girl, she responded in kind, naming her newly-born daughter, Masodzi (tears).

A number of meanings could be ascribed to the name Masodzi, all of which are an expression of underlying pain and discomfort. First, Masodzi, (tears), could have been because of the many stillbirths that Dambudzo suffered and thus wanted all who cared to listen, to know that the flower she had now been blessed with, was a product of pain. Another interpretation could be that the Johnny come lately – Chakadeyi's second wife – made Dambudzo feel so insecure, that when she went to bed at night she would wet the pillow with her tears from crying. For that reason, she wanted the world to know, that the accidental triangular relationship was no bed of roses.

Knowing the names of, especially their girl children, didn't require rocket science, for one to realise that the waters were pretty much muddied, setting the stage for perpetual disagreements, hate, accusations and counter accusations, especially where poverty stalks one side of the family for whatever reason.

Usually, it is the girl children who take sides with their mother in polygamous settings. Daughters have been known to take a cue from their mother in such arrangements, on whether to have a good relationship with their stepmothers together with their children or to have pretty much nothing to do with them, altogether. It surely must have been difficult for these two girls growing up to decide which side to take. The good thing though, or the saving grace for us as a family is that, as Maingeni and Masodzi grew up and got married, they would choose to close ranks; forget about their possibly toxic upbringing and rise above the matrimonial jealousies of their mothers for the greater good of the family. Each one of them would go on to play crucial roles of shaping the future of generations to come in the Mataranyika bloodline.

Having read about Mbuya Nehanda's courageous resistance to white supremacism and her last but profound words before she was hanged at the hands of the colonial masters, "Mapfupa angu achamuka" (my bones will rise), I have always thought that each of these two women, heroines of our family (Tetes Masodzi and Ziganga) may have made the same bold statement, "Mapfupa angu achamuka", because they have.

Masodzi had taken the bold step, of taking into her custody her brother's orphaned children even though she knew she didn't have enough to look after all of them, given she already had six children of her own. Her younger brother, Johanes, who could have come in to assist, didn't have much to his name, often relying on his elder sister for handouts. It must be against this background and out of respect that when her half-sister, Maingeni, asked if she could have the custody of twelve year-old Tongai, she couldn't resist the offer.

It was ultimately this arrangement, that would lay a fertile ground in subsequent years of massive opportunities for all of us, the descendants of Kurauone Kurai Mazikana Mataranyika, to not only survive, but thrive.

It was the wonderful tutelage and careful guidance of Tete Ziganga that shaped my uncle, Tongai's character, and paved the way for him to facilitate the return of my father and his brother back to our village in Gwangwara, and for that I am eternally grateful.

Because Masodzi was married to Mapaya Mujegu, in Nyatwe, Nyanga which is several miles away from our village in Rukweza, the role she played would be limited to that of taking into her custody, her brother's other orphaned children, including my father. Without that intervention, life would have turned out differently. When she eventually relinquished custody of my father and her two sisters into the hands of my uncle, Tongai, each one of them must have gone through moments of awakening on their part, and the groundwork had been laid for their coming back to Gwangwara, with each of them pursuing their dreams and visiions.

Once she had played her catalyst role, Masodzi would be out of the picture, mainly because of the distance between Gwangwara and Nyatwe, as well as the challenges of travelling back then, I never got to meet Tete Masodzi. By the time she died at a relatively young age, I was not old enough to appreciate, nor understand the gallant role she played in preserving the family legacy. Like Nehanda, Tetes Masodzi and Ziganga must have wanted their bones to rise for the benefit of future generations.

I would be fortunate enough to see Tete Ziganga who died in June 1969, five years after I had been born. Even though I was young when she passed on, I still have vivid memories of the interactions we had. I recall Tete walking with a stoop and with the aid of her walking stick. She would often come to our house and with each visit, my mother would dutifully prepare meals for her and I couldn't understand the basis for the high regard and respect that she had for her. At five, how could I have understood the critical role she had played, other than my occasional opposition to sharing food with an old lady whose importance was not yet understood by my young but inquisitive mind.

Tete Ziganga used to live in a round hut about hundred metres east of our house. There was a service lane between her house and ours, which the villagers from the northeast used when going south and vice-versa.

Our house was at the end of the service lane to the south, towards the common waterhole from which all villagers fetched water. No-one back then had a borehole at their house.

Growing up in the village, the elder boys would make it their business to lead us into mischief. My cousins, Blessing and Gift, were the main culprits. One of the things they enjoyed doing was to hide Tete Ziganga's cane. They would sneak into her house, undetected, and conceal it for fun. Tete would look everywhere for her walking stick when she wanted to go out, hurling insults and calling out names of those she thought were the culprits, much to our amusement and we would laugh our lungs out.

When Tete Ziganga died, I remember seeing multitudes of people turning out for her funeral. The numbers were so huge they overflowed to our house, which wasn't too far from hers. On the day she was buried, we were instructed by our parents to stay indoors and behave ourselves. Regardless, we had to catch a glimpse of the funeral procession, peeping through the windows, while trying to process and make sense of what was happening to Tete.

Because I was still very young, and Tete's funeral was probably the closest I had been to a funeral, I did not immediately realise what a loss her passing was to our family and how important and central she had been to the Mataranyikas. But through enquiries and research in my adulthood, I would get to know that it was Tete Ziganga who had played a significant role in bringing a great number of the descendants of Mataranyika back to our roots in Gwangwara village.

I will digress a bit, to put this into perspective. One of the thirteen sons of Zendera, Mataranyika, our patriarch, had a couple of wives with whom he had a number of sons, including Rakafa, Chakadeyi, Chigwada, Shumbayawonda and others.

Over time, the Rakafa and Chakadeyi wings of the family would settle in Gwangwara village, while the Chigwada wing would settle in Mugomba, which is about 15 kilometres (km) south-east of our village in Gwangwara. Because it was easy for the descendants of Gunguwo to settle anywhere within the Maungwe area, the descendants of Rakafa had moved away from Gwangwara to settle in Chimene, which is approximately 15km south-west of Rukweza.

Rakafa had built his family with three wives. With his first wife, Lydia, he had two children, a boy, Julius and a girl Dorcas. With his second, he had a girl, Ruth, while with wife number three, he had two children – both of them boys, Amos and Herbert.

Julius Mangezi, Rakafa's first son had four children with his wife, Naume Kurira of the Humba totem, three boys, namely, Matthew Chabarwachii, Stanley Zvavamwe and Benjamin Chakanyuka, and a girl, Faina.

Amos, his half-brother got married to Eunice Kambarami of the Gwai Mukuruwambwa Gumbi totem with whom he had five children, four boys Gibson, George, Patrick and Julius. The only girl, Clara, would get married to David Mukeredzi of the Humba-Makombe totem. Herbert would cross the border to South Africa as a young boy seeking greener pastures, never to be seen or heard of again.

Matthew Chabarwachii, would get married to Loice Mudede of the Chihwa totem with whom he had five children, two girls, the late Gertrude – mother to Chido Shava and Rudo Charity, married to Tirivangani Chaza of the Shava Musimuvi totem and three boys. Samuel, married to Fiona Moyo, Joseph Tanyaradzwa, married to Lyn Marima and Kumbirai Charles, married to Mary Maneswa.

Faina, the only daughter of Julius, would marry Tagarira Glover Charauga, with whom she had three children, a girl, Margaret Manetswa, who got married to Joseph Masango Tinapi of the Shumba Nyamuzihwa totem, and two boys. Dennis who got married to Joyce Mbodza of the Soko Nehumba totem. The youngest of Faina's children, Abel Fungai, got married to Mahwina Muchenura, of the Ngara Nungu Maphosa totem. When they divorced, Abel would get married to Fortunate Chadyemhunga of the Soko totem.

Stanley Zvavamwe, third child of Julius Mangezi, married Ella Sachiti of the Shumba totem, and the couple would be blessed with five children, three boys, all married. Godfrey Tendayi to Dorothy Chimeura of the Humba-Makombe totem; Richard Tonderai to Ethel Muvezwa, of the Shava Mhofu totem, while David is married to Lianne Zuze of the Soko totem, and two girls. Norma married Robert Godoka of the Soko totem, while Ruth Paidamoyo got married to Andrew Nyabvure of the Humba-Makombe totem.

Benjamin Chakanyuka, last born of Julius and Naume got married to Eubbah Mungazi, of the Soko totem and the couple was blessed with five children, a boy Lazarus, married to Winnie Muchimika and four girls. Dorcas, married to Wilfred Kamutepfa and Tracey married to Lordwick Mushawa of the Moyo Chirandu totem. Hilda Chenai and Stella Tsitsi complete the list of Benjamin's children with his wife Eubbah.

Benjamin would have two other children, both of them girls, Odette, married to Tichaona Chipunza of the Ngara Maphosa totem and Loice, who married Matthius Dudzai Gorogodo of the Soko totem.

In the mid 1950s, the descendants of Mataranyika from his son Rakafa's bloodline, would all return to settle in Gwangwara village from their temporary base in Chimene, as a result of Tete Ziganga's influence of organising and co-ordinating.

Through her singular interventions, she was able to bring us all together within less than 500 metres of each household, which is where we all still stay to this day.

I have had time to look back at how all this played out and realised that these two women – Tete Ziganga and Tete Masodzi – played huge roles in laying the groundwork for the person I am today.
As you shall see later, I would have a dance with Chiduku Tribal Trust Lands, when my father decided to settle there, in the village of his maternal relatives and away from the rest of the Mataranyika clan in Rukweza in the seventies, at the peak of our war of independence.

Chiduku was not as developed as Rukweza in the 1940s when my grandfather died and Mbuya Sophia had taken all her children to her Chinyama family. In the seventies, Chiduku was still comparatively under-developed, when my father decided to settle and we stayed there with him for almost two years. In my view, it was akin to turning back the hands of time to the 1940s and 1950s.

To have had my siblings and I grow up in Chiduku was therefore similar to consigning us to some unfamiliar territory, tucked away at the back of beyond, given what we went on to achieve with a supportive family all around us once we were back in Rukweza.

Unfortunately, I didn't get to live in Nyatwe, Nyanga to see and assess for myself what life would have been for my siblings and I, assuming fate had had us born and grow up there. While I have my uncle, Tongai, to thank for taking over the responsibility of taking care of his siblings from Tete Masodzi, nothing will ever erase my aunt's name from the annals of our history.

Also, without the matriarchal support of Tete Ziganga and the catalytic interventions of her son, Aaron, whose tea and coffee business in Nyazura provided the income and driver training that my uncle, Tongai, got and his desire to want to support his siblings, I develop goose bumps when I imagine what my life could have turned out to be.

The spirit of Tete Ziganga has always been among us as a family. We often remind each other of the legacy she left us, especially when we think about the fact that this was a woman who had very little in terms of formal education, if any. She was married twice, and in her second marriage, she was a second wife, which may have been a reason for her to be ridiculed and lose her step in the process. Not Ziganga. She would rise like a phoenix, and go on to become a real matriarch, a regent, bringing our three families together, starting with Magosha into which she first got married, Kaisi into which she got married as a second wife and Mataranyika, from which she came. It didn't matter who it was, Tete influenced all of them positively. I know that, even when children and grandchildren of her brothers and half brothers had gone to school and occupied important positions in life, they always came back to pay their respects and in gratitude for the role she played in their lives.

In her memory, members of these three families have come together under a grouping, MAKAMA, representing the first two letters of each family name, whose main purpose is to remind us of where we have come from and acts as glue to keep us together, going forward.

All we have to do is to stay together as a unit, given it's been five hundred years since we first settled in Maungwe and more than hundred and fifty years when the first person called by the name Mataranyika in our long history first appeared. Such heritage must never be lost on our watch. We must build on it.