

The Soil of My Soul

M A U R I C E O G U T U



The story of a man is often written in the soil from which he rose. My soil was dry, cracked, and unforgiving. People saw a boy covered in dust, but they didn't see the fire burning beneath the surface. This is a story for anyone who has been told they are "nothing."

The Evening Sun and the Watering Can

The evening sun in our village didn't bring the cool relief of rest; it brought the heavy weight of the watering can. At nine years old, while my schoolmates played in the dusty paths, I was already in the dirt of my father's small farm. My small hands would grip the handles, hauling water to the crops that represented our survival. We lived in a small thatched-roof house, a humble dwelling that smelled of dry grass and woodsmoke. It was a struggle to "catch the warmth"; on cold nights, the wind would whistle through the gaps in the mud walls, reminding us how thin the line was between us and the elements. My mother was the heartbeat of our struggle. On market days, she was at her stall, selling what little we cultivated. On non-market days, she took any "ordinary job" to keep us fed. But home was not a sanctuary. The nights were often loud with insults and the terrifying shadow of abuse. Many times, we were chased out into the darkness, forced to find safety in the cold night air by our own father, who was meant to be our shield. With no relatives to lean on, our only strength was the prayers we whispered in the dark. It was then I realized that education wasn't just a choice; it was my only weapon to change the story of my life.



Maurice "middle" with friends

The Charcoal Boy and the Nickname "Ratego"

In 2013, the world turned gray. My father died, leaving my mother a widow and my siblings, including a three-month-old baby brother, orphans. The cruelty of the relatives showed itself just three days after the burial when our only cow was taken from us. We were starting "from scratch," hoping for a shred of grace. I became a man before I was even a teenager. To assist my mother, I did every job the village offered. I burned charcoal, a grueling, dirty process of stacking logs and covering them with sand to smolder. I mudded other people's houses, my feet sinking into the cold clay as I smoothed walls for a few coins. I sold firewood in the market before the sun was fully up.

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Because of this, my classmates nicknamed me **JAMAKA**, the charcoal seller. They laughed at my torn clothes and bare feet. But the village elders saw something else; they called me **RATEGO**, meaning "the strong one." I would report to school late, my skin stained with soot, knowing a punishment awaited me from the teachers. Yet, despite the exhaustion and the insults, I outshone them in class. My mind was the one place where poverty could not reach.

The Walls of Grace

By 2016, the thatched house was falling apart. It had become "unbearable," leaking during the rains and offering no protection from the world outside. That was when God's grace appeared in the form of my uncle **Thomas Agutu**, director of the **NYOGAYA Foundation**. They saw our desperation and built us a real house. For the first time, we had four solid walls, but our stomachs remained empty. We still had to "scratch" the earth for every meal. When I sat for my KCPE exams that year, I passed, but I had no hope of joining high school. I prepared myself for a life of odd jobs, thinking my education had reached its end. But the **JEWELS OF OBAGA** through the Nyogaya Foundation, led by Uncle Thomas, stepped in again. They offered me a full sponsorship for my secondary education. As I walked toward high school, I carried more than just books; I carried the hopes of my mother and the silent prayers of a boy who was no longer just a charcoal seller but a student with a future.

The Harvest of Envy and the Broken Hand

Success in our village did not bring respect; it brought enmity. As I progressed through secondary school under sponsorship, the air at home grew heavy with jealousy. We lived in constant fear. Relatives who should have protected us instead planted **euphorbia**, a toxic, thorny plant, directly into our crops, claiming they "needed a path" through our survival. The threats escalated from words to weapons. I remember the terror of being chased with machetes and the sight of my mother being struck with a hoe. In the midst of this, in 2021, I sat for my KCSE national exams. I walked into that exam room with my hand broken, wrapped tightly in a white bandage. Every mathematical formula and physics equation I wrote was a victory over the physical pain. When the results came, they were a miracle: **I had qualified for university.**

The Gates of Rongo university and the Mjengo (construction) Comrade

Hopes for university were almost stranded by empty pockets. I spent my days knocking on the doors of politicians, seeking support that rarely came. But the community saw my hunger for a better life. They organized a fundraising ceremony, and with those gathered coins, I paid my first semester's fees at Rongo University.

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University life is often described as “sweet” from the outside, but for a “comrade” like me, it was a battle. To survive, I lived a double life. In the morning, I was a student of mathematics and physics. In the afternoon and on weekends, I was at “mjengo” (construction) sites, carrying heavy stones and mixing cement to buy food and books. My dignity was in my sweat, not my clothes. Thanks to my uncle Thomas Agutu and aunty Merab, through the Nyogaya Foundation, I was offered a university sponsorship in my time of need; the beginning of a victory commences.

The Darkest Shore

As I approached the final stretch of my degree in 2025, the storms grew fiercer. Back home, my mother was publicly humiliated and caned by the **Mijikumi**, the community leaders, over false allegations. The shame was a poison; she fell into a deep depression, her health failing as doctors struggled to find a name for her suffering. My younger brother, blackmailed and broken by the village lies, was forced to drop out of school. Then, my own body began to fail. For two months, **typhoid** ravaged my system, followed immediately by another two months of **septicemia** (blood poisoning). I was worn out, nearly "capsizing" just before graduation.

But the "Jewels of Obaga" appeared once more. Uncle Thomas, Aunty Merab, and my sponsor CJ stepped in, paying every medical bill and praying me back to health.

Ratego Reborn

On November 27, 2025, the “charcoal boy” was gone. In his place stood a graduate. As I sat at the 10th Graduation Ceremony of Rongo University, hearing the choir and seeing the sea of gowns, I realized I had attained a **Bachelor of Education (Science) in Mathematics and Physics with Second Class Honors UPPER DIVISION**.



Grandmother, Maurice & Mother

I hold this degree today with no grudges. The nicknames “Jamaka” and “Ratego” no longer define my poverty; they define my power. My mother’s dignity, once stripped by the village, is restored by my success. This is not just the end of a book; it is the hope for an end of a cycle of struggle for my family.

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As I look back at the soot-stained hands of the charcoal boy and the bandaged hand of the exam candidate, I realize that the title “Ratego” was never just a nickname. It was a prophecy. I have survived the storms of illness, the pain of village enmity, and the weight of manual labor to stand here today as a graduate of Rongo University’s Class of 2025. My journey proves that while poverty may determine where you start, it does not have the final say on where you finish. To anyone starting “from scratch,” let my life be your evidence that grace is real, and **education is the key that unlocks the heaviest doors.**



Maurice now a Teacher at Dominion Model School

Mom - you are the true definition of resilience. You bore the hoes and the humiliation of the Mijikumi so that your children could have a name. Today, your dignity is restored.

To the directors, Uncle Thomas Agutu, and Aunty Merab - thank you for being the “Jewels of Obaga.” You didn't just build us a house; you built me a future. Your sponsorship was the bridge I used to cross from despair to a bachelor of education science degree. Your support has not just earned me a degree but also the spirit of community and the desire for change for a better future.

CJ - my health was failing at the shore of graduation; you stepped in. Thank you for paying every hospital bill and ensuring that typhoid and septicemia did not have the last word in my storm.



Maurice after Graduation

Acknowledgments

This milestone was built on the shoulders of giants who refused to let me fail. My deepest gratitude goes to:

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To the community - you held a fundraiser to get me through my first semester; you proved that it takes a village to raise a graduate.

To God - our only strength when we were being chased away in the night. You are indeed a God of hope and an ever-present help in times of need. My desire and my prayer to be changed and meet the wishes and dreams of my family and the community still lie with you.

Faith That Never Died

My story is not just about suffering; it is about faith, resilience, and hope. I was born in dust, but I refused to die in it. Every insult strengthened me. Every fall taught me to rise. Every closed door prepared me for the one God would open. I was born in the dust. I have been insulted, beaten, and forsaken by kin. But the dust did not bury me; it grew me. To the person reading this: your current “house” might be leaking. Your “relatives” might be throwing stones. Your “hand” might be broken. But as long as you can breathe, you can climb. I am Maurice Ogutu, and I am living proof that destiny cannot be cheated by poverty. This is not the end of my story. It is only the beginning.



Maurice Graduating