

The Chief's Blanket

by Smith Likongwe

Characters

Laika	-	a 15 year old village girl and <i>mwini thezo</i>
Chief	-	a visiting chief
Nagama	-	a village <i>nankungwi</i>
Nachuma	-	a village <i>nankungwi</i>
Ngozo	-	counselor to visiting chief

SCENE 1: AT THE TSIMBA

(On stage there are two pestles and two mortars. There is also some maize on a piece of cloth. Singing of girls' initiation songs is heard. Then a girl enters. She has her face painted and decorated. She walks slowly towards centre stage as two women follow and guide her. She sits down. Nachuma presses on the girl's forehead. She then stands in front of the girl and wriggles her waist in tune with drum beats played from back stage. She signals the girl to perform a similar dance. The girl does so. Then she is ordered to sit down.)

NAGAMA: Laika, this is your day. Remember you are the one who is *mwini thezo*. It is your parents who asked us to give you counsel. It is a few years since you fell in the soil. But your zeal in tackling education was accepted as a good excuse for the continued postponement of your time. Now after your initiation lessons, we are now going to take you back to your parents and the community. But before that, one more thing. We need to be double sure that after all these days, you have really understood and internalised the instructions. Do you understand?

(Laika stays silent and motionless. Nachuma presses on Laika's forehead.)

NACHUMA: *(Seeking permission from Nagama.)* Nagama, can I start?

NAGAMA: Go ahead Nachuma.

NACHUMA: Laika, if a person is asked to choose between a bicycle with handles and a bicycle without handles, which one would the person choose? *(Silence.)* Answer me! *(Silence.)*

NAGAMA: Laika, you should understand this session. Yes, we told you not to respond to adults in a certain way. *Anamwali* do not speak on their graduation day like this one. But this is not such a session. Now and only now, we give you permission to speak. So, answer the questions!

NACHUMA: And answer loud enough for us to be sure of your confidence. I ask again. Bicycle...with handles or with no handles?

LAIKA: With handles.

(Nagama ululates.)

NACHUMA: Now, when a bicycle is going downhill, do you still continue to peddle?

LAIKA: No.

NACHUMA: Good. Does *m'memo* belong to any particular person?

(Laika looks confused.)

NAGAMA: She means... can anyone claim to own communal food served in an open dish?

LAIKA: No.

NAGAMA: Therefore, where there is a choice, would people prefer public *m' memo* served in a *kalaya* to *nsima* served in a covered and individual plate?

NACHUMA: Let me simplify it. Food ... cold...plate... big and made from any metal. Flies...plenty...cover...not available. That is number one. Number two. Food... hot. Plate...individual just for one person. Flies...absent. Cover...available. Choose. One or two?

LAIKA: Two.

(Nachuma and Nagama ululate.)

NAGAMA: In football or netball, is it allowed to start playing before the referee blows the whistle?

LAIKA: No.

NAGAMA: Good. When you want to cross the road in town. You have been there. There are places where there are lamps.

NACHUMA: I understand they call them robots.

NAGAMA: Yes. Those ones. Should people cross when there is red?

LAIKA: No.

NACHUMA: Good initiate. Now, when people agree to go to a destination and get onto a bus. They are going together to the same place. Should one of them get off the bus before they reach their destination?

LAIKA: No.

(Nachuma and Nagama ululate.)

NAGAMA: When you are in a toilet, you are doing what is done there, and *linthumbwi* goes all over the body, should you cry loud and run out of the toilet immediately?

NACHUMA: Answer! Ah, you do not know *linthumbwi*? Those types of red ants that come in groups and bite hard. *(Laika shows that she now understands.)* Those ones. You are seated there. *Linthumbwi* attack. One...cry out aloud and run out immediately. Or two...in spite of the pain...deal with the *linthumbwi* inside and people outside do not know. One or two?

LAIKA: Two.

NAGAMA: Good. *(She looks at Nachuma and signals her to bring the two pestles and two mortars.)* Nachuma... *(Nachuma brings the two pestles and two mortars. She goes back to fetch the maize. Nagama takes two pestles and gives them to Laika.)* Here... the village is hungry and they need food. I want you to pound the maize.

(Laika receives the two pestles and is puzzled. she does not know how to pound maize with two pestles. The women look at her. She looks back at them.)

NACHUMA: Pound! Pound!

LAIKA: It is not possible.

(Then Nagama takes the pestles away from her. She then gives her the two mortars. She receives them.)

NACHUMA: Now, pound. I said pound!

LAIKA: It is not possible.

NAGAMA: *(To Nachuma.)* It looks like she is using her brain to think.

NACHUMA: Now, why do you choose to puzzle a fellow *namkungwi* here? What else is used for thinking?

NAGAMA: Nachuma, don't pretend you don't know. There people who use their mouths to think. Some use their loins to think. And there are also others who use their waists.

NACHUMA: Ah...I see what you mean.

NAGAMA: *(To Nachuma.)* Yes. The next one...

(Nachuma goes out. Nagama starts to sing a song. 'achembere langireni mwana achembere...' She dances and instructs Laika to stand up and dance as well. She changes dancing styles and directs Laika to follow suit. She then changes song and continues to dance.)

NAGAMA: Did you enjoy the dance?

LAIKA: Yes, I did.

NAGAMA: How many people were dancing?

LAIKA: Two.

NAGAMA: Just you and me.

LAIKA: Yes.

NAGAMA: Just you and me. We agreed to dance. And we danced together. And we changed steps and dancing styles. And we changed songs. Just the two of us. It is our dance. Only the two of us. And we were able to have a variety.

Just the two of us. My child, dancing is dancing. Anyone can dance. When I chose that I should dance with you, it was possible to dance. And I was looking at you. If I looked away, the dance steps would have been disturbed. Do you understand?

LAIKA: Yes. I understand.

(Then Nagama takes off her chitenje and remains with a skirt she is wearing inside. At that point Nachuma re-enters. She is wearing a pair of trousers, men's shoes and a jacket. She has also painted her chin to look like she has a beard. She looks at Nagama. Nagama starts to run away. She chases Nagama around. The chase is intense. And almost losing breath, Nachuma finally catches Nagama. Then they embrace. They hold hands and walk slowly together. They stop and look at Laika. Laika nods her head. Then they start a song and signal Laika to dance with them as they exit the stage.)

SCENE 2: IN A HUT

(There is a bed and a stool. A lit 'koloboyi' lamp can also be seen on the floor. Chief Maluwa is just finishing to eat his food. There is a knock.)

CHIEF: Yes, come in.

(Enter Laika in school uniform. She is carrying a calabash of beer. She lays it down. She then takes the water that was there and serves the Chief as he washes his hands. Throughout, the Chief looks at Laika libidiously.)

LAIKA: So, chief, I am going to collect the calabash for the beer in the morning. And I am collecting the nsima plates now so that I can wash them. Good night chief.

CHIEF: Young woman, have you gone for initiation ceremony?

LAIKA: Yes, chief, but what has that got to do with this?

CHIEF: Do you know I am a high ranking chief?

LAIKA: I know. Everyone knows you Chief Maluwa. So, why are you asking such a question?

CHIEF: The behaviour displayed is not befitting that of a chosen girl taking care of a very important visiting chief. That is why I asked you whether you have undergone the initiation ceremony.

LAIKA: I said I have been to the initiation ceremony chief. That was just about two months ago when I was coming out of the *thezo*.

CHIEF: That is why I am surprised that you are not behaving in the right manner.

LAIKA: And how should I behave chief?

CHIEF: How should you behave? Girl, can you remind me your name?

LAIKA: My name is Laika.

- CHIEF: And you come from this village? And you know that I have come to your village from very far? And the ceremony could not have taken place if I had not come. I came here to lead in the ceremony for initiating a new chief here. Your chief... and the ceremony has ended very well. If I had not come you would not have a new chief now.
- LAIKA: Yes, I know.
- CHIEF: Now, Laika, you know that I have come from far. And that it would not have been possible for me and of course other chiefs to leave today.
- LAIKA: You are stating the obvious chief. That is why they have prepared a place for you to sleep. That is why I came to give you your supper. And that is why I am now wishing you a goodnight.
- CHIEF: But can a chief sleep without a blanket?
- LAIKA: That would be disrespectful. But you have a blanket there. There is also a pillow.
- CHIEF: *(Laughs.)* You must be very childish. How old are you?
- LAIKA: I am 13.
- CHIEF: Okay, 13. And look at your chest. Inviting! A girl of 13 is old enough to understand what I am talking about. That is why I pointed at you when you were dancing. That is why they sent you here to this hut to take care of me. 13 is a good age, Laika.
- LAIKA: Chief, you are talking in parables.
- CHIEF: These are not parables, Laika. A chief does not sleep without a blanket.
- LAIKA: But there is your blanket. Maybe I should take the lamp closer to your bed over there. You will see that there is a blanket.
- CHIEF: *(Angrily.)* That is why I am saying you are childish. That is not a chief's blanket!
- LAIKA: I know it may not be expensive enough to match your status. But this is what the village could afford.
- CHIEF: Laika, I have been told that you are the most intelligent girl in the village. And that you are always top of the class.
- LAIKA: That is correct, chief.
- CHIEF: Can you remind me the class you are in?
- LAIKA: I am in Form 1, chief.
- CHIEF: And the only girl who has gone up to that class in the village. The only girl from this village who is at the community day secondary school in this area.
- LAIKA: You are right chief.

- CHIEF: So, you are intelligent enough to understand what I am talking about. You are intelligent and beautiful. From what I hear you should be brand new.
- LAIKA: Brand new?
- CHIEF: Am I wrong? Laika, if it was swimming, I believe nobody has swum in the river of your love. Nobody has plucked an apple from your maiden tree.
- LAIKA: Chief, you continue speaking in riddles.
- CHIEF: Laika, even the local parliament in this village has agreed that I deserve to be treated in the right manner. That is why they sent you here. *(He moves to close to Laika. She gets uncomfortable.)*
- LAIKA: Chief, it is late in the night. I must go now.
- CHIEF: Laika. You cannot go.
- LAIKA: I must go. Do you expect me to sleep in the same hut as yourself? That would be lack of respect for chiefs.
- CHIEF: No. That would be total respect for chiefs. A chief does not sleep without a blanket.
- LAIKA: I am not a blanket! I am a human being!
- CHIEF: Now, don't raise your voice. Come...come close.... Hmmn hmnn Laika, just...just come close. Why do you want to cause problems? This is our culture. The chief's blanket does not give problems.
- LAIKA: No. I must go. Get out of my way. Let me go out! Chief, don't stand in the door way. I want to go out!
- CHIEF: Laika, come on... it's dark. There are hyenas outside. It is not safe.
- LAIKA: Real hyenas would be better than human hyenas. Please, chief, let me go!
- CHIEF: Laika, why are you doing this? It is against our culture.
- LAIKA: Do not hide in culture. You are just lustful. You are careless.
- CHIEF: Come on girl. You are privileged to have fun with a chief like me. Women are crying for this opportunity. You are a very lucky girl. Don't miss this chance.
- LAIKA: Chief, if you want to maintain your dignity, then get out of my way. Or else I will push you and break the door.
- CHIEF: *(Struggling.)* No, you cannot go. A chief does not sleep without a blanket.
- LAIKA: Let me go! ... aha! *(She frees herself and flees.)*
- CHIEF: Hey, Laika! Come back! Come back! The...the plates! ... *(To self.)* Shaa! These girls...they do not understand our culture. I chose her and Nagama the local *nankungwi* did not tell me that this one is a mad girl. She just went ahead

with making the arrangements. Arrangements that end up with me having a blanket smeared with *chitedze!* A sofa with thorns and nails for me to sit in!... With the moon shining in full, I cannot chase her in order to grab her back. People may see me. And the silly girl may tell people what she has done to me. Heh? And my dignity shall sink in a lake of shame. But the night is long. How can I sleep without a blanket?

SCENE 3: ON A PATH

(Outside the hut. Enter Nagama.)

NAGAMA: Aah aah? Who is that girl running towards this direction? It looks like Laika. Laika, why are you running? Is everything alright?

LAIKA: *(Breathing hard.)* No, a Nagama. There is a problem.

NAGAMA: What problem? Were you too strong? Has the chief fainted?

LAIKA: No. He has not.

NAGAMA: Now, what has happened?

LAIKA: *(Starts to sob.)* He...he wanted tohe wanted to...

NAGAMA: What? Foolish girl! That is why we sent you there! You are supposed to take care of the visiting chief and all his needs. Laika, you must be a very rude girl. Does it mean you did not obey the chief?

LAIKA: A Nagama, are you suggesting that I should have obeyed? You mean this was a plot?

NAGAMA: Laika, there is no plot here. This is a culturally accepted arrangement. A chief must be given a blanket. After all, he is the one who presided over the installation of our own chief. Do not put this village into disrepute. The chief chose you on his own as you were dancing. And we had to accept it. So, he needs respect.

LAIKA: Is that the type of respect, a Nagama? So, you are confirming that you are part of this sad arrangement?

NAGAMA: Laika, I am the senior *nankungwi* in this village. So, I know what I am doing. We of the old rains always know better. That is why you have met me on this path at this time of the night. I was just patrolling to see if there is any problem that our visitors may face so that I can assist accordingly.

LAIKA: So, what was the purpose of teaching me all the good behavior at the *thezo*? ... I am not going back there.

NAGAMA: No! As long as I am Nagama, you are going back. Do you want our village to be attacked by strange diseases? Do you want pestilence to haunt us here?

LAIKA: A Nagama, how can strange diseases attack the village?

NAGAMA: Foolish question! It would happen because of rudeness to important visitors. We do not want a plague to attack us just because one girl refused to obey orders. Do you want me to express my milk on the ground? Do you?

LAIKA: No, please. Not to that extent.

NAGAMA: Listen young girl. Your parents have not complained. We know what is good for you. Do not put us in bad books with the senior chief. Now, go back to the chief immediately. *(She tries to push Laika who is resisting.)*

(A cough is heard. Enter Ngozo.)

NAGAMA: Aa aah? Ngozo...

NGOZO: Nagama, I have been waiting for you.

NAGAMA: Ssh, I am with a child here. Can't you see?

NGOZO: I can see. The moon is shining brightly. *(Looks at Laika closely.)* Isn't this the chief's blanket?

NAGAMA: Yes, it is.

NGOZO: And what is it doing here?

NAGAMA: Rudeness. The girl has run away.

NGOZO: My god! That is disaster! My own chief! No. No. No.

NAGAMA: And imagine. You people have come all the way to preside over the installation of our chief and is it fair to be treated in such a way?

NGOZO: No! In the name of Namalenga, no! It is unheard of. I have travelled with the senior chief from afar. I am his counselor and if tragedy like this happens to him it is bad omen.

NAGAMA: Laika, do you hear that? Now, I am going to escort you back to the chief. But meanwhile, can you stand over there and wait for me.

LAIKA: Okay a Nagama.

NAGAMA: *(He moves aside to whisper to Ngozo.)* Ngozo, so you were following?

NGOZO: Yes, Nagama. We agreed you would come. You chose my hut very well. Just like that of the chief... secluded. Not near other houses in the village. I left the door open, but you were not coming.

NAGAMA: I was waiting for the whole village to go to sleep. When I thought it was the right time to come over, I met this girl running away from the chief's place.

NGOZO: Now, where did you tell her you were going?

- NAGAMA: I told her I was patrolling the area. And then you come and say you were waiting for me. Do you want the girl to know about us?
- NGOZO: I am sorry, Nagama. But sometimes our erotic desires overtake our rational thinking. That is what happened.
- NAGAMA: Okay, I understand. Now we have to escort this girl back to the chief and then there shall be just the two of us.
- NGOZO: Shall your husband not catch us?
- NAGAMA: Ngozo, so I did not tell you?
- NGOZO: What?
- NAGAMA: That my husband died some years ago?
- NGOZO: Sorry. May his soul rest in peace. Eternal peace.
- NAGAMA: That is why I am free. But I do not want many people to know.
- NGOZO: Well, it will be a secret. So, let us deliver the chief's blanket first and then...
- NAGAMA: And then the gates of heaven shall be open... *(Both laugh. Now, Nagama turns to Laika.)* Laika!
- LAIKA: *Wee mayi...*
- NAGAMA: Come close...aha...now as I said I am going to escort you back to the hut we have accommodated the chief. The owner of the hut had to move to give privacy to the chief. It is our culture.
- NGOZO: And you see young girl, if the chief is not given a blanket your village shall not only receive some types of sanctions but shall also be affected by natural calamities. I come from the village where the senior chief comes from and I know exactly what I am talking about.
- LAIKA: But only last month there was a campaign against the abuse of girls and a Nagama spoke in support.
- NAGAMA: You mean that NGO that came to talk about child rights? Now, listen, Laika. When government officials or NGOs come to the village we tell them that we stopped these cultural practices long ago.
- NGOZO: Yes, that is how we handle them. We have to tell those people what they want to hear. Drink tea with them. Receive their money. Say what they want. And when they show us their back...we continue enjoying ourselves. we cannot abandon our culture. A chief must have a blanket. And those of us that move with the chief also deserve some good care.

LAIKA: Is that so?

NAGAMA: Yes, and also think of how our own chief would be treated if he went to see the senior chief. And we in this village do not want to look like fools. I am a well-known *nankungwi* and I command a lot of respect among the people here. And our elders could not have left the arrangements in better hands. *(Holds Laika by the hand.)* Let's go. And when we get to the senior chief, you should apologise for your behavior, okay?

LAIKA: Okay, I will. I have understood what you have said.

NAGAMA: Good girl. Don't let me down. Let us go, fast. The chief is waiting for his blanket. I think I should not go with you Ngozo. The chief should not know that others have also known what happened. If I am the only one who knows, that is not a problem to the chief.

NGOZO: Well... a lion does not give its prey time off. But as it is...okay...okay go.

NAGAMA: It is not the case of a lion and its prey. It is two doves temporarily separated. I shall find you. But don't wait outside. Get into the hut and I shall find you.

NGOZO: Okay. I will be waiting.

NAGAMA: *(Moving over to Laika.)* Laika, let us go. I will escort you. It is important to make sure that the bird is in its cage. *(Turning to Ngozo.)* Goodnight, Ngozo.

NGOZO: Goodnight, Nagama, sleep well.

NAGAMA: You too. *(To Laika.)* Now let's go.

SCENE 4: AT THE CHIEF'S HUT

(The Chief is just turning in his sleep. He looks like he is about to dive. Then he falls down. Nagama whispers.)

NAGAMA: Chief... chief! It's me, Nagama. I have come with your blanket.

CHIEF: *(Waking up from the floor.)* Where is it? Where is it?

NAGAMA: Where is what, chief?

CHIEF: The black cat. I was chasing it. And when I fell down, it escaped!

NAGAMA: Chief, you are just having a nightmare. There is no black cat anywhere.

CHIEF: Alas! Within this very short time, I had nightmares.

NAGAMA: No nightmares now. There is good news. I have brought your blanket. Chief, I am not staying long. But my apologies. You know some of these children are a bit childish.

CHIEF: I can see. But have you talked to her? And how did you know?

NAGAMA: Chief, I was patrolling just in case there any problems. Then I saw her running away. But do not worry chief. I have plucked the wings and the bird will not fly away. I have talked to her and she has understood. She has repented of her sins. Once again, chief, my apologies.

CHIEF: Really? Enter, fast! With the moon shining in this way, people may see you.

NAGAMA: Laika, see to it that you come out very early in the morning. People should not see you coming from here. Goodnight chief. *(She goes. Laika stays and looks around the room with discomfort.)*

CHIEF: Laika, it is good that you finally came back to your senses.

LAIKA: Yes, chief. I realised my mistake. Chiefs should be treated properly.

CHIEF: Exactly. You are now speaking with maturity. That is how things should be.

LAIKA: I know chief.

CHIEF: Good girl. You said you are 13?

LAIKA: Yes chief. I am 13.

CHIEF: And in Form 1.

LAIKA: You are right chief. And how old are you?

CHIEF: Well, I am not old. I am quite young. I am only 54.

LAIKA: 54?

CHIEF: Yes, only 54. And I have only two wives. Very reasonable... Now, you should not be asking me questions. If I am answering it is just because...just because it is you... Is the door locked?

LAIKA: Locked? Is there any lock here? Well, at least I banged it as soon as a Nagama left.

CHIEF: Good girl. Now, put off the lamp.

LAIKA: Phh! There!

CHIEF: Marvelous.

- LAIKA: And I shall obey everything you say, chief.
- CHIEF: Excellent. Now, come...
- LAIKA: Chief, when you are not part of a netball team, are you allowed to score?
- CHIEF: *(Laughs and speaks to himself.)* Ah... children! Enough proof that what is on the menu is *chiunda* *(squab or baby pigeon)* and not old *nkhunda* *(pigeon)*. We even eat and swallow all the bones. *(Turning to Laika.)* Scoring when you are not part of the netball team? That would be madness. Anyone who is not in the team playing cannot be allowed to score. In fact if were the referee...
- LAIKA: The person is called umpire.
- CHIEF: Alright. Referee... umpire or anything. If I was that I would give the intruder in the pitch a red card. And another red card to the parents and everybody related to the savage. That is savagery. That is what it is. Do you play netball at school?
- LAIKA: Yes, chief. I am a defender.
- CHIEF: *(Clears throat.)* Enough of netball. To serious business now.
- LAIKA: Chief, I thought I should give you treatment you have never thought of before.
- CHIEF: Yes, that is what I want.
- LAIKA: So, you really want to see what you have never seen before?
- CHIEF: Exactly. I want to see what I have never seen before.
- LAIKA: So, chief, allow me to tell you what to do just for now.
- CHIEF: Okay...
- LAIKA: Like I said, I want to do something you could never imagine in your life.
- CHIEF: I am waiting, Laika. I am waiting.
- LAIKA: If you have never experienced it you will experience it the whole night.
- CHIEF: *(With admiration.)* Wow! Laika!
- LAIKA: And you shall remember for the rest of your life.
- CHIEF: *(With admiration.)* Hee? Wow it is good to be chief. Come on, Laika, come on. I want something to remember for the rest of my life.

- LAIKA: I want you to take off all your clothes.
- CHIEF: Is this part of the experience?
- LAIKA: That is just the beginning. Please, take off all your clothes.
- CHIEF: *(Lovingly.)* With pleasure. Who would not want to experience what I am about to experience? *(He goes under blankets and obeys orders.)* Aha...there... there is my shirt, vest...pair of trousers....everything...
- LAIKA: Bring them here.
- CHIEF: Yes. And why are you not taking off your clothes?
- LAIKA: That is a phase on its own. That time will come.
- CHIEF: I see. You said I am going to see what I have never seen before. I am going to experience what I have never experienced before.
- LAIKA: *(She wears a serious face.)* You got me right chief. Now, you have said a lot of things that undermine us. Some of you hide behind culture to cover for your promiscuous lifestyles. You smear the image of exemplary elders and chiefs with dog's faeces! In my school, I try to follow what children's rights say. Now, I am taking everything with me to the appropriate organisations. This shall be tendered as evidence in court. This is attempted rape! We shall meet in court! *(Takes the clothes and runs away. Chief dives for her and as he realises he is only wearing a boxer, he stops at the entrance.)*
- CHIEF: *(Shocked.)* Aa aaah!? Eh! Girl! Bring my clothes back! Please come back! This is unheard of! *(To self.)* Phew! She is gone. I have never seen anything of the sort! The moon is shining and I am in my birth suit! I cannot follow her. The devil! How can she do this to me? Nagama! Where are you? Instead of bringing me a blanket, you brought me a nightmare! No. No. No. I have never seen anything like this. And what will she say to the court? *(Almost crying.)* God ... Chauta ... Namalenga ... Chisumphu ... if you are there in heaven or anywhere, please, intervene. Your son, the chief is facing tribulations. Now, what do I do?

(The rest come and look at him. He falls down. They lift him and bow.)

THE END