

# The History and Culture of Abakhero People Of Western Kenya

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*A self-sponsored research work on Bakhero People published in Kenya*

## ABSTRACT

It is worth noting that cultural research is a tedious undertaking that Africa has not performed well in the development of creative cultural industries. This may be attributed to lack of a strong human, financial, and material resource base that is required to facilitate the support and full development of the culture sector. Oral traditions are a very important source of African history and culture which should be documented and preserved as death of knowledgeable old people is a great loss to the source hence the reason for the researcher to write and publish oral books. Also, compiled by him but not produced due to financial constraints are a number of historical and cultural volumes.

In an effort to strengthen the bond and unity among the Bakhero people, the researcher initiated community meetings planned and held in the regions on rotational basis where the members are invited to attend in large numbers. In the old days, the Bakhero clan get-togethers were greater occasions than even Christmas celebrations. The whole extended family members gathered at least once a year to make merry for solidarity. The members met every December, rotating from one family to another and interacted with relatives. The family was united and strong. The people drunk beer and ate as women sang and danced.

The process of assimilation of the Bakhero was accelerated from the late 1800s, by which time the community was surrounded by the Luo speaking people in Siaya District and in the process Bakhero people were assimilated. The arrival of the Missionaries in East Africa in the early 1900s also influenced the assimilation process in Kenya, which served as the last phase of Bakhero assimilation by larger communities.

The aim of clan research was to examine and unravel the past history patterns, kinship ties, cultural practices of Bakhero people to come up with written reference materials to promote culture and enhance its contribution to community empowerment. Researcher's journey on this research project started in 2001 when he began gathering vital information on the Bakhero clan. Through these meetings, the Bakhero people of East Africa have come together to establish their roots in the spirit of clan discovery.

The research used both primary and secondary data to test the hypotheses developed in the research. Primary data was collected using visits and oral interviews while secondary data used in the research was obtained from books and journals. Respondents were chosen from the Bakhero of Siaya, Busia, Bungoma, Trans-Nzoia, Migori, Kisii, and Kakamega Counties in Kenya and those of Uganda and Tanzania.

The objectives of the research led to some predicative relationships whose provisional conjecture was either to confirm or unconfirmed researcher's insightful logical thinking in the light of some established facts such as determining the historical background of Bakhero People and their migration to their first settlement in East Africa, assessing an extent at which the cultural and traditional practices have supported the Bakhero community to this date.

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Researcher/Author

**Key words:** Historical background, Cultural practices, Foresight, Determination, The will to do, Inspiration Challenges.

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## 1.0 CLAN HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

### 1.1 Introduction

In the past, too much interest was placed on the colonial history while pre-colonial history seemed to have been neglected because of scant written materials. The African scholars, Ogot, Kiwanuka, Kimambo, Osogo, Were, etc. made oral history a reality and encouraged other historians and writers to become interested in the subject, so that oral history can now fill the gap before the colonial period. Their work has provided the base for more scientific research. Therefore, African society thrives on values and norms which shape the behaviour of the people. A nation should have cultural and traditional values upon which to develop the characters of its people, especially the young generation. There are about forty-two ethnic groups in Kenya and each group has its own culture and traditions.

### 1.2 Background Information

History for a long time has not been on our side as Bakhero People since the 17th century. It has not been an easy task to trace the origins, organizations and culture of Bakhero. For a long time it has been a complex scenario for Bakhero children looking at one another as lost people in the society not knowing their roots. Oral traditions are a

very important source of African history and culture which should be documented and preserved as death of knowledgeable old men and old women is a great loss to the source.

### 1.3 **Problem Statement**

To understand the importance of upholding African social and cultural values, peoples' culture is a vital resource whose origins are becoming difficult to trace. The greatest gift in life is equably knowing one's roots which calls for everyone to learn from history and appreciate his/her culture and traditions. The study tried to trace the origins and movements of the clan through time until their settlement in East Africa.

### 1.4 **Purpose of Study**

The aim of clan research was to examine and unravel the past history patterns, kinship ties, cultural practices of Bakhero People to come up with written reference materials and cultural Centre to promote culture and enhance its contribution to community empowerment. Researcher's journey on this research project started in 2001 when he began gathering vital information on the Bakhero clan and later organized several regional clan meetings held in the regions Bakhero are living for bonding and unity purposes.

### 1.5 **Objectives of the study**

The objectives of the research led to some predicative relationships whose provisional conjecture was either to confirm or unconfirmed researcher's insightful logical thinking in the light of some established facts such as determining the historical background of Bakhero community and their migration to their first settlement in East Africa, assessing an extent at which the cultural and traditional practices have supported the Bakhero community to this date.

### 1.6 **Significance of the study**

The findings of the study are beneficial to Bakhero clan because they know what they have missed from their history. The study established the areas Bakhero settled in East Africa and also inspired other people to research on the roots and culture of their people. The study demonstrated the ability of Bakhero in rain making activities. The study shows the effect of assimilation trend during migration time and the findings of the study provides an appropriate community cultural material in an all-inclusive and sustainable manner. The study could help the researcher to attain his academic objectives in recognition of his research work.

### 1.7 **Scope of the study**

The research used both primary and secondary data to test the hypotheses developed in the research. Primary data was collected using visits and oral interviews while secondary data used in the research was obtained from books and journals. Respondents were chosen from the Bakhero of Siaya, Busia, Nambale, Teso, Bungoma, Trans-Nzoia, Mt. Elgon, Bunyore, Migori, Kisii in Kenya and lastly those of Bugiri, Lubino, Mbale, Busia and Tororo in Uganda and Tarime in Tanzania.

### 1.8 **Limitation of the research**

Lack of cultural reference books and other materials as source of information for the research and non-availability of Cultural Centre for Bakhero community to organize and hold traditional events are major problems hindering cultural teachings. Lack of market for finished products due to poverty levels amongst the community members who are the main target group and lack of funds for self-sponsored researchers limit research.

## 2.0 **TRACING THE ROOTS OF BAKHERO**

### 2.1 **Introduction**

The researcher went through records in Kenya National Archives, Kenya National Library and bookshops looking for what had been written about his clan without success. Therefore, he relied heavily on oral interviews in order to produce comprehensive historical information which formed the basis of his research.

### 2.2 **The migration of Bakhero**

The community tradition shows that the current Bakhero occupying East Africa and Great Lakes Region are descendants of ancestor Musere who migrated from Misri, the present Egypt between 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Centuries. A generation of our ancestors and fathers that lay the foundation for our clan is passing on, unfortunately, majority of

them are not leaving behind any memoirs that would help the next generation to know our history and culture. Our people and academicians have equally not taken keen interest to document the roots and traditions of the founding fathers of our communities.

### 2.3 Ancestor Musere

The first generation of Bakhero to reach and settle in East Africa from Misri was led by ancestor Musere, who settled at Mbale and Tororo in Uganda. Musere migrated further crossing the River Malaba to Kenya and settled at Butere in Western Kenya which became their ancestral land. His family associated with rain-making activities which was considered unusual to people. They even thought that it was one of the attributes that saw a large number of Bakhero move to the regions they are currently living in East Africa and Great Lakes Region (Rwanda and Congo).

### 2.4 The Bakhero of Nyanza Province

The present homelands of the Bakhero groups in Luo-Nyanza are in Siaya, Ugenya, Rarieda, Kisii and Migori Districts. Alego-Siaya became another dispersal place which saw the two sons of Oluoch, namely, Nyangengo, Mumbiya and his grandsons, Mwakha, Sitanda, Muresi, Kisero, Lusero, Ambayo, Imbaya, Musiekwe and Mwakha Wimbira migrating to other parts of East Africa. They started the journey together thus each group heading to different directions of Kisii, Migori, Nyando and Karachuonyo Districts. Those in Alego-Siaya are called Usere while those in Usonga are known as Uhere whereas those in Kisii Mugisero

### 2.5 The Bakhero of Western Province

Tradition asserts that Mwakha left Alego for Busia through Ibanda in Uganda with his family immediately his father Wimbira died at his new site he had settled after relocating from Bonge. After the death of Mwakha Wimbira and his eldest son Munyekenye around Nasira village in Busia District, the Bakhero became unsafe for a small group such as theirs. Therefore, his children led by Wandukusi migrated from Nasira to Malanga/Lwanyange village in Nambale District where their descendants are currently living. The community research reveals how Malanga became another major dispersal place in Luyialand which saw some families of Mwakha Wimbira migrating to parts of Busia, Nambale, Samia, Teso, Bungoma, Kimilili, Trans-Nzoia and Mt. Elgon where they are presently living. They are called Bakhero.

### 2.6 The Bakhero of Rift Valley Province

After retiring from his employment at Bwana Asa Farm, Kefa the son of Nakhabi Maloba who migrated from Malanga attended a catechism course at an Anglican Church (AC) and thereafter became a Catechist with the Anglican Church between 1925 and 1928. He then moved to Mt. Elgon District and settled at Waito in Sosio and Hoito settlement schemes while performing church duties. Some of Kefa Okemo's family members who were living in Kimilili district were joined by their cousins, Alphonse Tabuke, Asika, and John Wallo from Nambale and Siaya Districts respectively and others from Kisii to Nandi led by Kamusoi migrated to Rift Valley Province thus becoming the founding fathers of Bakhero in the counties of Trans Nzoia and Nandi.

### 2.7 The Bakhero of Uganda

Ambayo and his brother Imbaya (sons of Ogolla) migrated from Usonga in Siaya District to Ibanda in Uganda with their families where they were joined by Mulate. They settled around Kampala, Bugiri, Tororo, Busia and Mbale in Uganda and they became the founding fathers of Bakhero in Uganda.

### 2.8 The Bakhero of Tanzania

Osoko, the son of Kisero migrated further to Tarime District in Tanzania and his descendants are currently living at Shirati village. His descendants in Tanzania are called Kagisero. Since all these sub-clans originated from Musere's name, he sometimes stands out as the founding father of all the Bakhero sub-clans (Usere, Uhere, Mugisero, Basiekwe and Kagisero) in East Africa. Musere is so important that his shrine has been preserved in the clan and sacrifices are still being performed. It should be stressed that although Bakhero are scattered all over, they share a common language and some of the other essential elements of a total culture.

## 3.0 THE BAKHERO CULTURAL AND TRADITIONAL PRACTICES

### 3.1 Introduction

African society thrives on values and norms which shapes the behaviour of the people. A nation should have cultural and traditional values upon which to develop the characters of its people, especially the young generation. There are about forty-two ethnic groups in Kenya and each group has its own culture and traditions. It is difficult to understand the history of all communities living in Kenya, touching on their background, occupation and social values.

The Bakhero clan, just like others, has its strict culture that guides and regulates policies for its people. In the early days, they used to stay together in a homestead. They lived in grass-thatched houses and the leaders were chosen from the clan wise men by the clan Council of Elders who ruled them. The Bakhero are believed to be rain makers because they organize clouds from a clear sky within a short time to realize a heavy down pour.

### **3.2 The clan structure**

Bakhero trace their descent through males and especially an original ancestor. The Bakhero clan is a unilineal descent group of major order in a society acting as a unit in a system of similar groups. It is identified as a separate clan from others and distinguished symbolically by associations of a totemic kind with natural species.

### **3.3 The Bakhero homesteads**

Oral tradition mentions stone walls surrounding ancestral villages, later mud fortifications were common. This indicates that the prevalent insecurity of the past times required more manpower for defensive measures. The houses were two slight variations on general architectural theme recurring in the erection of round walls and conical roofs, the latter projecting considerably to create eaves. They lived in homesteads with their families which comprised the man, his wife or wives, his married sons and their wives and children, his unmarried children and some other close relatives.

### **3.4 The Mukhero man**

Mukhero man is a respectable person. The father is the head of the family and he carries out all the manual work. He builds houses for the family and meets all its needs and demands. He also looks after cattle and ensures that his family members are disciplined and there is always a healthy atmosphere in the household. Traditionally, men are hunters and have a taste for wrestling matches and on occasions, organized bull-fighting events in the village.

### **3.5 Young Bakhero boys**

In Bakhero community the most important job for boys in old days was to look after the cattle in the fields, where they never stayed idle. They assisted their fathers in building houses and granaries, and helped to maintain them and also went fishing, cleared farms in preparation for cultivation and helped with digging, weeding and harvesting crops. There was once a period of training for adult responsibilities to the youth by their parents and grandparents.

### **3.6 The Mukhero woman**

The Bakhero women prepared meals which they served the family members including their husbands. They were also responsible for bringing up their children, fetching firewood and water from the springs and teaching girls roles of a woman in the society. Moreover, they also brew local beer and entertained guests with songs and dances during special occasions.

### **3.7 The Mukhero girl**

The Bakhero girls imitated their mothers, helping them with cooking and taking care of the babies among other things like drawing water from the springs and fetching firewood from forests. They were also vested with the responsibility of teaching the babies how to sit up, eat, walk and speak. Just like the young boys observed their seniors, the young girls also watched the older girls as part of their process of socialization.

### **3.8 Marriage in Bakhero**

Marriage is an institution which is common to all human societies. Marriage in Bakhero is the means by which a man and a woman come together to form a union for the purpose of procreation. African marriages are for just that purpose and therefore a childless marriage in Bakhero ceases to be meaningful in this context.

### **3.9 Payment of dowry**

For every marriage to be legal, certain requirements have to be fulfilled, and it should be preceded by certain customary observances such as the exchange of gifts and payments in kind by the groom's people to the bride's family. The marriage in Bakhero clan confers certain rights on the wife and corresponding duties on the husband and vice versa.

### 3.10 Sex and marriage

The Bakhero society regard sex as the most important factor in marriage and therefore a premium is placed on virginity. Girls on marriage are expected to be virgins and are rewarded accordingly. Among the Bakhero clan, mothers are presented with gifts by sons-in-law if at the first intercourse with a bride, the girl bleeds.

### 3.11 Births and naming

When a baby kept crying after its birth, the parents of the baby consulted the medicine man who would tell them whether there was a dead person whose spirit wanted the child to be named after him/her. The Bakhero believed that if such names were mentioned, the baby stopped crying, in this way family names have been preserved quite commonly among the Bakhero. Strong emphasis is also placed on dreams.

## 4.0 RITES OF PASSAGE

### 4.1 Introduction

The changes which occur in the lives of individuals are marked by special initiation ceremonies. These ceremonies vary from one society to another and they are more dramatic in some societies than others. They may take the form of rites which involve the mutilation of certain parts of the individual. In Bakhero community the ritual of transition takes the form of initiation of boys who are initiated in peer groups. The initiation ceremony takes the form of the trimming of the genital organs of male sex in the form of circumcision.

### 4.2 Grandparents

Besides being moralists, the grandparents also act as historians to the children, acquainting them with stories of the important events, about how they came to settle in their traditional homes, the wars they fought, and the great heroes of those wars. They told the stories of proud people whom they had seen fall, and the poor ones who progressed through hard work. Past heroes were praised through the children who were named after them.

### 4.3 Family festival activities

Those who have active family gatherings testify that the occasions can be quite therapeutic for instance, pertinent issues like rocky marriages and other family crises can be solved amicably by the Council of Elders. A truly united clan has mystical powers that even those who pull out would want to troop back. Dispute resolutions in the nuclear family are enhanced and often cases of turbulent marriages will be addressed.

### 4.4 Oath taking

The oath is sworn when one wants to have an offence redressed by the elders. The persons who happen to be there when the oath is sworn demand some fee called "*Amakata ka Bakofu* or *bakhulundu*", meaning the payment for elders hearing the case, which is not fixed. The paying of the fee by the swearer of the oath confirms his intentions and it gives the oath a legal force.

### 4.5 Rituals and Taboos

The physical distance which one was expected to maintain from these things was controlled by a series of sanctions which constituted an effective deterrent against possible infraction. A person who touched any of these things became taboo himself and was expected to submit himself to prescribed ritual purification. It is a taboo in Bakhero society to have sex with or marry a relative.

### 4.6 Dead man

A dead man was laid on his right hand side and the woman on her left hand side. The leaf from a tree known as "*omurumba*" was pierced and placed on the deceased's ear supported by his/her hand. It was believed that the dead person listened to the living. It was a tradition among Bakhero in those early days that an old man was buried inside the house of his first wife; a sign of honour and respect, for a man of reputable age with many children and wealth was not to be exposed to the outside cold.



#### **4.7 No chicken for women**

The old mothers in the Bakhero clan never ate chicken, a tradition that is now dying. This was to prevent some social behaviour amongst the women by the old men, which scared women from doing so as they feared that their houses would never be well. The main issue was to safeguard some women who perhaps did not get proper training from their parents prior to marriage.

#### **5.0 WEAPONS AND TOOLS**

The practice of traditional crafts has much diminished or died in Bakhero group. Iron-mongering work has succumbed to manufactured metal products. Leather work, particularly the dressing of skins and the sewing of leather apparel, has been out dated by the textile and garment industries. Woodworking continues to be practiced, but today it is limited to carvings tools, basketry and making chairs.

#### **6.0 THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL CHANGE**

##### **6.1 Introduction**

The term social change may refer to the changes which occur in the social structure of societies, a change from a simple stage to a complex and better stage, an upward movement process. But social change in Kenya has meant progress in some parts and abject negation of self-determination in other parts. When the Western powers shared the African continent amongst themselves, they adopted different types of administration and these have influenced the people in different ways.

##### **6.2 Level of controls**

The Bakhero traditional system of government was not elaborate because law and order was maintained through the normative system which was part of the social structure. Every individual learnt things through socialization which he was allowed to do and those which were taboo. There were various levels of social control, each level linking up with another level either of equal authority structure.

##### **6.3 The community welfare society**

Due to its expansion in East Africa and as well as numerous changes in national and regional economic hardships, it became necessary to have an association to assist its members. The researcher invited clan members who converged at Madende village in Nambale District on 17th April 2010 for the community welfare society inaugural meeting. The name of the society is Akherosere Welfare Society and its Headquarters is at Mungatsi Centre.

#### **7.0 IMPACT OF THE CHURCH ON BAKHERO**

African religion was treated by the Missionaries as a bizarre museum item entirely different from other religions found in Western culture. It has been given a conceptual interpretation that betrays their prejudices about African culture which in many ways are not valid and lack rational justification. The study therefore explains why it is believed that some of the spirits are ancestors with whom some people have had personal experiences during the early life and whom they could contact by performing appropriate rites. Research also discusses at length the role played by missionaries and the impact of Christianity on Bakhero community.

#### **8.0 THE ASSIMILATION OF BAKHERO**

The process of assimilation of the Bakhero was accelerated from the late 1800s, by which time the community was surrounded by the Nilotic speaking people. Bakhero who were speaking Bantu language began to make some positive business contracts with the surrounding Luo because it was essential for them to learn Luo in order to communicate while transacting business. Research shows how the arrival of the Europeans in Kenya also influenced the assimilation process in Kenya, which served as the last phase of Bakhero assimilation. The study prove how the Bakhero community among the Bantu and already, partly assimilated by Luo was recorded as an integral part of the Luyia people.

#### **9.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

##### **9.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents a review of different literature in relation to the study which tries to analyze the history and culture of Bakhero people of East Africa. The chapter looks at a few of the historical aspects and cultural views of the Bakhero.

## 9.2 Objectives of the study

The study was analyzed to trace the historical and cultural background of Bakhero people. More specifically the study was conducted with the view of the reader determining the historical background of Bakhero clan and their migration to their first settlement in East Africa, assessing an extent at which the cultural and traditional practices has supported the Bakhero clan to this date, assessing the importance of cohesiveness among the clan members and the effect of social change.

## 10.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 10.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the research method, sampling design and how the statistical analysis of the study was conducted and concluded. The objective of visiting the regions where the Bakhero are living was to collect views regarding culture and traditions of Bakhero in East Africa.

### 10.2 Research Design

The research design was both quantitative and purposive. It tested a series of hypothesis developed in the study and analyzed the data using simple statistics.

### 10.3 Population of the study

The population of study encompassed the total collection of all items, units, cases or elements about which the research conclusions were made (Kothari 2005). In this study the target population was the Bakhero living in East Africa.

### 10.4 Research sample

Because of inadequate time and resources, the researcher was unable to study the whole population of Bakhero clan in East Africa. As a result, the researcher used a sample of nine none randomly selected districts from Kenya and Uganda. As Stocker (1998) points out a sample is used to obtain representatives information in respect of a population.

### 10.5 Sampling design

The researcher cited extensively (Kothari 2005) in the three provinces in Kenya, namely, Western, Trans Nzoia and Nyanza and those of Uganda. Non-probability sampling included convenience sampling, judgment and quota samples. In this case, the researcher used information on the History and Culture of Bakhero People as a criterion in selecting the sample included in the study.

### 10.6 Data collection and techniques

There are two types of sources of data collection, namely, Primary and Secondary data. The researcher used primary data in order to get new information relating to the research problem through the use of visits and oral interviews and secondary data was used by referring to what others have written.

### 10.7 Data processing and analysis

Data was collected from field visits and family meetings and was analyzed in relation to regions. It was processed by first editing, coding, manipulation and classifying so as to make amendable to analysis. The data analysis techniques used in this study was simple summary statistical tools such as ICT and GIS while descriptive statistics was used in analyzing data such as proportions.

## 11.0 SUMMARY/RECOMMENDATIONS/CONCLUSION

### 11.1 Summary



Apart from natural factors which differentiate one individual from another or one tribe/clan group from another, there is the cultural factor. The cultural factor is more marked in human beings than other living things. Culture is an integral part of any country hence it should not be ignored because it creates a sense of belonging. The country should preserve its culture as it gives the citizens a sense of identity. Through this research, the researcher provides a framework through which communities will build a strong and vibrant national identity that ignites pride and patriotism in a country's nationhood as the effort will be geared towards developing national values and promote national cohesion, pride and identity and also solving disputes amongst the families and communities in general.

### 11.2 Recommendations

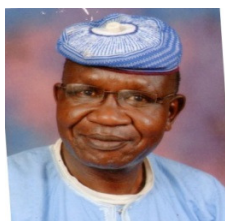
The recommendation of the research aimed at attaining the highest level of cohesiveness among Bakhero members and East African communities at large, while providing a favourable ground for economic prosperity and vibrant social life. Through the development of cultural materials, the communities will be empowered to safeguard, harness, and promote their cultural and national heritage.

### 11.3 Conclusion

It is worth noting that culture research is a tedious undertaking exercise that Kenya has not performed well in the development of creative cultural industries. This may be attributed to lack of a strong human, financial and material resource base that is required to facilitate the support and full development of the culture sector. The problems facing many citizens are largely based on the erosion of the values as a society. The researcher/author introduces his community's rich culture and traditions and takes the reader through the books that seek to encourage and inspire people on the importance of the African cultural values. It is his humble hope that in every home, in every institution and every place where these books will be read, traditional and cultural values will be valued more and more as each day passes.

He has written the following books and also under production are a number of historical and cultural volumes: *The History and Culture of the Abakhero People of Western Kenya* (2008), ISBN 9966-7347-0-8 and *Amakesi ka Bakhulundu* (Wisdom of Elders (2011), ISBN 978-9966-734-71-6 are being used in both local and foreign universities for research work. They are sold at Prestige bookshop, Chania bookshop, Book point, Njigua Books-Kampus Mall, Bookstop, University of Nairobi bookshop, all in Nairobi and Bidii bookshop-Busia (K), etc. Stocking of these books in libraries/bookshops will be of valuable help to both lecturers and students thus strengthening our society and enabling us move forward.

### Bibliography



The researcher/author, Chrispinus Odhiambo Mukhule happens to be one of the sons of the Bakhero people who settled at Madende village, near Mungatsi town, in Busia County, Western Region of Kenya about four centuries ago. He was born at Madende village, Nambale District in 1958 to the late Yohona Mukhule and the late Margaret Nasirumbi Mukhule and brought up in a strict Catholic family. He learnt and joyfully experienced the fact that enormous amount of power comes with standing by honesty and truth. Whilst lies are short-lived, truth lasts forever. He is grateful to his parents as well as grandparents for the values they instilled in him as a child. Apart from military duties, the researcher/author

thought it was appropriate for him to unite the clan and document his motivational philosophy and share it with all those that the information will be able to reach around the world in the form of books.

He joined the Kenya Navy on 1st September 1978, after clearing Nambale High School in 1977, where he works today. He has served the Kenya Defence Forces in different capacities, gaining experience from the military establishment and the United Nations. He has risen in ranks to his present rank of Major and holds diplomas and certificates from both civilian and military training institutions. His is a simple story of an ordinary man with extraordinary determination, a man who grew up in simplicity amidst acute social disadvantages from an early age. Deep down in his heart he believes that there was more to life than what he was experiencing thus he gathered the courage to pursue his big dreams at all costs. With a firm resolution in his heart, he sought to become all that he had the ability of becoming.

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