

Declared dead at five and saved by a sneeze, Stephen Odunge went on to become one of Karamoja's first trained teachers. At 92, he credits discipline, a traditional diet, and a life of service for his extraordinary longevity.

BY SIMON PETER EMWAMU

His phone rests firmly in his left hand. A walking stick is planted between his legs. A black cap sits snug on his head, and a neatly kept grey beard frames his chin. At 92, Stephen Odunge chuckles with the ease of a man in his 50s.

His memory of both past and present defies his age. Visitors to his home in Kiru Town Council, Abim District, are often struck by his ability to weave stories of long ago with current affairs, his warm smile rarely leaving his face.

Ask him the secret to his long life, and he does not hesitate: fate, discipline, and life-style.

"An indigenous diet, no smoking, no alcohol, God's grace," he says, before adding with a mischievous laugh, "and last to say, womanising."

Saved by a sneeze

Long before he became one of Karamoja's first trained teachers, Odunge nearly never made it to adulthood. At just five years old in 1939, he was declared dead.

"From the tales of my late parents, I became unconscious after a strange sickness attacked me," he recalls. "In the following days, I was declared dead."

At the time, much of Karamoja had no hospitals. Death was determined by appearance alone. "I was wrapped inside an old animal skin. The grave was already dug," he says. "As my father walked in to carry the presumed dead child to the grave, I sneezed while still inside the skin. That is how I was saved from being buried alive."

He laughs at the memory, a moment that could have ended his story before it began.

The cleansing rite

His family quickly unwrapped him, but the incident left a deep impression. According to Ethur culture, a cleansing rite had to be performed within two days. Sausage tree fruits were placed near the grave that had been dug for his burial, goats were slaughtered, and the home was purified.

The Ethur, an ethnic group in Abim, are part of the wider Karamoja agro-pastoralist community.

"That experience stayed with me," he says. "But it does not mean I will not die someday. That is for everyone. The important thing is to live in a way that does not send you to the grave early."

No alcohol, tobacco, compromise

For Odunge, longevity is rooted in discipline.

"Since my childhood, I have not taken alcohol. I have not smoked," he says firmly. "That is why, among thousands of people of our time, only a few of us managed to study and were selected by the White government to train as teachers."

He trained at Bishop Kitching College in Ngora and later in Boroboro in Lango.

Now a retired head teacher, he remains uncompromising. "I do not tolerate drunkards or smokers near me. You have nothing to share with me."

"I do not eat to fill my stomach"

His discipline extends to diet.

Odunge: 92-year-old teacher who defied Karamoja odds



Stephen Odunge, 92, Karamoja's veteran teacher, is still sharp and active, and credits his long life to discipline, a traditional diet, and a life of service. PHOTO/SIMON PETER EMWAMU

"I do not eat to fill my stomach," he explains. "I eat food that sustains my mobility and mental ability."

He shakes his head at modern eating habits.

"Some people eat too much. When they sit, they feel pain in their stomach. That is wrong."

His meals remain rooted in tradi-

ucts common among agro-pastoralists. Processed and modern foods rarely appear on his table. "We, the Ethur, are known for growing grains and legumes. This is the food that keeps us

naturally healthy," he says.

Be good, stay busy

Beyond diet and discipline, Odunge believes character matters.

"Be good to people," he says. "A happy community comes when society is free of wrong characters."

He has also lived an active life.

"It is only lately that my children stopped me from working in the garden," he says with a hint of protest. "I still feel I can be productive."

Even now, his eyesight remains strong. "When my phone rings, I can see who is calling."

COMFORTABLE OLD AGE

Today, he lives a modest but stable life, supported by a government pension and rental income from a commercial house he owns in Kiru Town Council.

He is also a father of seven surviving children, two having passed on.

"I am proud," he says. "My children are fairly placed as teachers. That makes me an elder who is cushioned from shocks that may need money."

Walking miles for education

Born in 1934, Odunge grew up at a time when education was rare in Karamoja.

After completing Primary Six at Kiru Primary School in 1952, he joined Lotome Missionary School in 1953.

Reaching school was no small feat. From Abim, he walked for three days through Nyakwae, Apetolim, Rongom, Lopei in Lokopo, then to Kangole, before the final stretch to Lotome.

"We attended school as big boys because there were no schools," he recalls. "Many Karimojong were not interested in education. Boys spent their lives in the rangelands looking after livestock."

The last man standing

Odunge was among the first six people from Karamoja trained as primary teachers under colonial administration.

"In 1960, we were six," he says. "Nelson Awiko, Jackson Owili, John Aben and I from Abim, and Joseph Aliat and Zackaria Longole from Bokora."

Today, he is the only one still alive. "All my college mates and former teachers have died," he says quietly.

A life of service

After training, he qualified as a Grade II teacher in 1963 and was posted the following year as head teacher at Orwamuge Primary School, at just 30 years old.

He went on to teach across southern and northern Karamoja before retiring in 1998 at Kiru Primary School at the age of 65. At 92, the grave that was dug for him at five years old remains unused. And Odunge is still, in his own words, "sneezing at life."