

The Riddle of Yayeri the Great by Michael Ogutti

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Abstract

The story, *Lwaki Yayeri Muzira?* (Ogutti 2013), translated as *Why is Yayeri Great?* (Gulere 2014), takes the form of a riddle whose answers are left to the reader to reflect and articulate. It is one of the Uganda Community Libraries Association (UgCLA) Local Language Literacy project books sponsored by Comic Relief under the African Storybook Project/South African Institute of Distance Education (SAIDE). Ogutti is the promoter of Busia Community Library, which is a member of UgCLA and one of the 20 writers who gathered from among the Eastern Library Cluster of UgCLA to create stories that would change the local literacy environment in Eastern Uganda and Africa as a whole. The UgCLA project produced 40 stories and about half of these were translated into English, illustrated, approved, and published on the creative commons African Storybook website. This critical study seeks to analyse the efficacy of the story to transform its audience basing on the understanding that stories transform society. The story portrays an ideal village girl child who stands prominently above his brother by acting independently and responsibly against all odds. She is an enigma and that is why she is a heroine like her biblical namesake Jael.

Key words: Lusoga, children, girl child, prayerful, cleanliness, time keeping, greatness

Introduction

The title of the storybook, *Why is Yayeri Great? – Lwaki Yayeri Muzira?* Takes the form of a riddle rhetorical questions whose answers are left to the reader to reflect on and articulate.

The original storybook, *Lwaki Yayeri Muzira* is written by Ogutti Michael, in 2013 and translated by Gulere Wambi Cornelius, as *Why is Yayeri Great?*, in 2014. It is one of the Uganda Community Libraries Association (UgCLA) Local Language Literacy project books sponsored by Comic Relief under the African Storybook Project/South African Institute of Distance Education (SAIDE). Ogutti is the promoter of Busia Community Library, a member of UgCLA. He was one of the 20 writers who gathered from among the Eastern Library Cluster of UgCLA to create stories that would change the local literacy environment in Eastern Uganda and Africa as a whole. The UgCLA project produced 40 stories and about half of these were translated into English, illustrated, approved, and published on the creative commons African Storybook website¹.

Methodology

As indeed meaning is set in the words, imagery and context; my first impressions about the story will be based on the original text in Lusoga. Then we shall see how much of the original intention and meaning is carried over into the English translation. The title itself is multifaceted making Yayeri the riddle of her time. The paper is a close reading of the storybook and making textual and discourse analysis to understand the meaning and possible impact of the story on the target audience. It seeks to answer the question as to why the protagonist is presented the way she is presented. Did the author have this ideal character in mind? Is she a prototype of the Christian setting? Or is she an idealised form of the girl child

¹ <https://www.africanstorybook.com>

desired in school? By reading around the name of the Yayeri (Jael) and her situation will hopefully guide us in unravelling this riddle.

Results

Allusion to the Riddle of Jael

Yayeri, in Hebrew Ya'el, יַאֵל, means Ibex or mountain goat. In Kisoga culture, a goat is known to be stubborn and obstinate. Jael or Yael is a heroine cited in the Book of Judges, who killed Sisera to deliver Israel from the troops of King Jabin.² In Lusoga, the name Yayeri is a tactile, sight and sound riddle as it has a sense of motion or mobility in the vowels a e i o u Ya-Ye-Li [O-m-U-zira] signifying motion, progression and a sense towards completeness and celebration perceived in the character of the girl so described. She is progressive in whatever she does. She is on the move. She is aiming to reach high up there [eri/ere]. “Yayeri Omuzira” has all the five vowel sounds thus making the name convey vitality, completeness, valour, and enigma.

Similarly, the other words used in the title also carry multiple meanings. *Lwaki* means why and when, *Muzira* has six meanings – hail stones, there is nothing, heroic, ululation, name of a person; and it could be modified to I don't have her, being rooted, you reject - and so, while reading the story, and every reading being a new reading, raises new interpretations. The riddle nature of this story makes its very meaning making multi-layered. One might ask, when and why is this progressive girl as cold as ice? When and why is she nothing to reckon with? When and why is she heroic? When and why is she a celebration or ululation?

² Judges 4-5 of the Hebrew Bible.

It seems that this kind of person is not easy to find and yet she is firmly fixed in her resolve in spite of the looming rejection and confusion (cold) she causes. Her life is much the same as that of many a people regardless of their gender. There are times when we are low (yaa), medium (yee) and high (rii) as the name sounds. Psychologists have argued that, the individual sounds making up the name may have a “systematic relationships with particular meanings.”³ In this case, the “vowel sounds in words are associated with, and activate, a group of different concepts or physical attributes (e.g., sharpness/dullness, thinness/thickness).” The way one pronounces the word influences the meaning they perceive. It “induces a sense of representational precision” and “concrete construal of the target under consideration.” This means that the name Yayeri is understood in perspective with the owner as represented in the picture illustrations on the page and in the mind of the reader against the background of what they know of such a personality in their community. It is further argued that, “establishing a connection from vowel to physical associations to construal,” affirms that, “different vowel sounds lead people to think in different ways (i.e., more or less precisely), in turn leading to differences in the way objects with labels containing different sounds are represented.” (MAGLIO, et al., 2014:1084)

In writing this story, Oguttu Michael had in mind the thematic curriculum being followed in Ugandan primary schools. He was interested in sharing the typical life of a village child who wakes up in the morning to go to school. Above all, he was evidently concerned about the gender disparity between the boys and girls in his community. By creating a character that is so simple yet enigmatic, Oguttu shows that in the simplicity of the girl child is the real emancipation of the woman. She does not wait to be told that she is great. She ensures

3 MAGLIO, RABAGLIA, FEDER, KREHM, AND TROPE. Vowel Sounds in Words Affect Mental Construal and Shift Preferences for Targets. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*. American Psychological Association 2014, Vol. 143, No. 3, 1082–1096
<http://www.psych.nyu.edu/tropelab/publications/MaglioFeder2014.pdf>

greatness and whatever she thinks, says and does. Her mother is astounded by her character and as usual, the father is not there to bear witness or to support his children. No wonder the brother is so inclined to sleeping till late and does nothing to show that he is committed to his studies. In fact, the boy derives his inspiration from the sister who like all girls in most homes, do the chores to give life and beauty to the home.

Yayeri moves and inspires the brother, mother and the entire school. She keeps time, she is clean and tidy, she is courteous and well behaved, and she plays and entertains others not as a duty but as part of her life. She enjoys herself in the way she does her things thus building a character that is worth emulating. Oguttu seems to suggest that greatness is a given to those who behave in certain ways and are able to do certain things.

Yayeri is known for waking up early every morning (1) and being prayerful and thankful to God for the night past (2). Besides, she exhibits some unquestionable marks of a great girl child such as laying her bed well (3), greeting her parents and grandparents (4), washing her face with locally made soap (5), brushing her teeth with a local toothbrush from the famous lughano tree (6), bathing cold water in the morning (7), dressing herself up in her bright colourful school uniform (8) and putting on her black school shoes (9). But there is more that makes Yayeri great, she runs to school (10) and reads science, social studies and mathematics (11) and she also participates actively in “singing, dancing and playing football”. (12)

Discussion of the story

By this description, Yayeri is a typical village girl who makes good use of the rich environment around her. She wakes up very early, and this has proven benefits to her body.

Such as “reduced stress levels” as she needs no rushing in the morning she can then start the day on an optimistic note that keeps with her the whole day.⁴

She has no luxury of heaters to warm her morning bath nor does she rely of bicycles, motor cycles, cars, buses or trains to take her to school. In particular, let us reflect on this point about the cold shower in the morning. Bathing cold water has many proven benefits some of which include feeling more awake and mentally alert and therefore more productive and looking good because of the enhance intake of oxygen occasioned by the shock of cold water on the body. This affects the whole nervous system and makes a person more resilient and able to control their emotions and manage anger, stress and frustrations by thinking straight. By bathing cold water, you gain more will power and can make stronger decisions which are a sign of disciplined health. In this way, you will not get embarrassed or frustrated easily and that cuts out stress and depression because of the reduced uric acid in your body. The cold shower helps to burn fats because of the increased metabolism due to shivering hence weight loss of fats while maintaining muscle power. It helps remove body cell wastes by flushing out wastes when the pores close and open again. This leaves the hair and skin looking better with small pores that will not allow waste accumulation. Cold showers boost blood circulation, muscle recovery and stimulates happy hormones thus making you positive and active.⁵

She reflects a sense of independence, self-reliance, contentment, reliability and an inner joy that makes her greater than the average child of today. Her morning prayer is a sign of

⁴ 5 golden benefits of waking up early - Times of India
timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/.../5...benefits...waking-up-early/.../53739864.cms

⁵ <https://www.positivehealthwellness.com/beauty-aging/9-scientificallly-proven-benefits-cold-shower/>

gratitude to God.⁶ Appreciation affects the totality of our lives by keeping us always mindful of the Lord's closeness to us. Paul teaches that, "In everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." 1 Thessalonians 5:18. Appreciation inspires us to look for God's purpose in our lives and by submitting "Not my will, but Yours be done" (Luke 22:42) reminding her of her constant reliance on God. The disappearance of pride, adequacy, and independence makes her strong and great. Gratitude creates way to "rejoice always" (1 Thess. 5:16). The ungrateful people like her young brother are so irritable because he lacks the inner sense of contentment that joy gives from within a thankful heart. With the world filled with difficulties making people angry, frustrated, and disillusioned "a grateful attitude is like a light shining in a dark place." And that is what makes Yayeri great. Thanksgiving energizes her and transforms her "anxiety into peace, which passes all understanding (Phil. 4:6-7). She is therefore contented and has no feelings of anxiety, complaining, getting angry, and arguing. She probably uses the short, simple, small magic phrase: Thank You to breathe in and out of her heart the radiant joy that lights the darkness and desperation in the new day.⁷

While other children may be dancing to rumba and rap music, she is dancing to her traditional Kisoga dance, *otamenhaibuga* signifying her attachment to her roots. This story addresses the child in all worlds by inclusion and exclusion as riddling does. In riddling, the object of contention is demystified to become knowable to different people in different ways. In the various interpretations of "*omuzira*", her cultured nature is also brought out. She dances to the tune of the traditional drum beat and the ululations that are sung to her prowess that constitutes her personality. She is the celebration and the celebrant. Indeed, she is

⁷ <https://verticallivingministries.com/2014/11/24/10-benefits-of-giving-thanks-by-charles-f-stanley/>

presented as a force to reckon with in her home, school and social environment. The dance and dancing of *otamenhaibuga* signifies stability, sociability, peace and unity. The parabolic guard that should not be broken is implied in the pact of togetherness between the members of a family and the community at large that is guarded by mores. Yayeri is “Endeavouring to keep the Unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace⁸ through her exemplary conduct.

Yayeri’s rootedness is enforced by the reference to her use of *olughano* shrub to brush her teeth and the blue soap to clean her body. The *lughano* (scientific name) is mostly used as an ornamental plant but also as a boundary marker. The Kings of Buganda have from time immemorial given a dry branch from this plant to the Prime Minister as the symbol of authority; meaning that this plant is considered authoritative.

As such, Yayeri has been brought up to respect God, her parents, grandparents and siblings at home and social norms; her body and herself by keeping pure and clean. She also maintains a good relationship with those outside of the home by participating along with them in class and leisure activities. It is from these general observations that a point could be made that this story is not only about Yayeri the girl child from Busoga but every child.

The statement: “Twebuuza, Lwaki Yayeri muzira?” -- “We ask ourselves, why is Yayeri great?” is repeated 12 times in this short story. The impact of this collective question is its ability to mobilise the reader to come to terms with what greatness or heroism actually entails or is expected to entail. For an urban child growing up in the luxury of books to read, taking a vehicle to school, warm water and toilet soap for bathing, toothpaste, wake up alarm clock, and parents to wake her up and pumper her, house helpers and video and television to play

⁸ Ephesians 4:3 talks about the actions that keep one’s spirit in one body of peace which increases hope in the oneness

with and often nothing to be thankful about because it is never enough to have all these things around. Just like the little brother, many well to do children of the present generation depend not on their own initiative but that of other people and objects within their surroundings. We note that Yayeri does not even rely on the cock crow to wake her up. She has a sensitive time watch in her body that makes her tick. She is not a burden to her mother as she does all her chores without being pushed or asked. This is the kind of child that Ogutti presents in his story and would like us to think reflectively on those traits that make her the envy of many people.

Conclusions

This story therefore passes the test of being local to global; it speaks to a cosmopolitan audience as espoused in the rhetorical question of what makes Yayeri great. This question is the window that allows the other who is not part of this family and ultimately who is not Yayeri to discover her inner drive and real self. Yayeri is unknowable yet she is known. She is indescribable yet she is described. The story presents to us an innocent child and ends up with a mature character who is the epitome of civilisation. The story can be discussed from a multiplicity of disciplines ranging from arts to zoology. Her enjoyment of the game of football for example, brings to mind the hunting game where the boys would be inclined to chase the animal for its skin. Even the drums would not sound without the skin of the animals namely the cow and the monitor lizard.

That is Yayeri the great one. She is spiritual, physical, and conceptual.

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