Mrs. Johnson: A Reflection of Ugandan Traditional Women, in Alice Walker's "*Everyday Use"*

Dr. Kizito Mary Nakizito (Sr.), Dip. Edu, MA, PHD.
Associate Professor
Martin University
Indianapolis, IN 46218, USA.

After reading and teaching Alice's short story, "*Everyday Use*," I realize that there are some basic traditional Ugandan women characteristics that I would like to share with the readers in this article, especially mothers. Being a Ugandan woman, I find that Mrs. Johnson, an African American woman character, echoes some physical, mental, and social qualities, which are worth exploring and appreciating in this narrative. In this paper, I will discuss and compare Mrs. Johnson's physical strength, sharp intellect, motherhood qualities, and cultural values with those of the traditional Ugandan women. In addition, I will cite some examples of women from other parts of Africa to emphasize the importance of those qualities and the role they play among their families and communities. Through Alice's convincing first person narrative, I am proud of my African heritage and I am thankful for what the Uganda conventional women do as they struggle to keep their families together, in a primarily poor and still prejudiced society, just like Mrs. Johnson does in "Everyday Use."

Physically, Mrs. Johnson (Mama), as the narrator, describes herself as "I am a large, big-boned woman with, rough, man-working hands. . . . I can work outside all day . . . to get water for washing" (24). This statement reminds me of the Uganda traditional women who work daily from morning to dawn without complaining. However, they are not literally "large [and] big boned" as Mrs. Johnson identifies herself, but I consider their largeness in the way they take care of their families. In fact, their family chores comprise of the following duties: they till the land, prepare the meals, go to the well, collect firewood from the forest, cook the food, bear and take care of the children, and above all, they carry the most burdens of the families as their men expect them to be the primary bread winners.

In fact, my mother did the same type of jobs with exactly the same strength and total dedication, before she became sick. Today, when I look at her once magnificent, but now rough and worn out hands, I clearly see and feel what the women from the South experienced in "*Everyday Use*", where Mrs. Johnson represents that historical period in the United States, when black women in the South lived in poverty, struggled to take care of their families in a racial as well as a discriminative female environment.

In "*Every Day Use*", Mrs. Johnson narrates that she cleans her yard, which is almost like a home. The yard is where she waits for and entertains her visitors. It is a place of happiness and tranquility and "anyone can come and sit and look up into the elm tree and wait for the breezes that never come inside the house" (23). Conversely, Uganda traditional women also go past beautifying the inside of their living quarters; they make sure that the compound is spotless because this is where most of the family activities are performed. These include: preparing and eating meals, drinking local beer, holding and celebrating family gatherings, storytelling, and even gossiping about women's domestic issues. As Kimani Njogu and Orchardson-Mazru affirm: "in Uganda . . . story- telling, which is predominantly female art is skillfully used to point out the evils of male violence and the injustices inherent in polygamy" (15). In addition, it is in the yards where the Ugandan women watch the sun disappears into the west and enjoy the harmonious colors of the setting sun. In the yard, the moonlight shines on Ugandan women after their tiresome day is done. Consequently, the Ugandan women's yard relates to that of Mrs. Johnson's compound in the way that this is where everyday things happen for "it is like an extended living room" (23).

Indeed, the yard in most African societies is seen as a sacred spot, where women perform most family activities. As John Mbiti one of well-known African philosopher puts it, "Because traditional religions permeate all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life. Whenever the African is, there is his religion. . ." (2). Therefore, in the African culture, one cannot separate the sacred from daily life; every activity is religious and so the yard becomes a sanctuary as the traditional women carry of their daily duties.

Moreover, when Mr. Johnson deals with Maggie's inferiority and Dee's superiority complexes, the reader becomes aware of her superb intellectual and cultural approaches. At the moment when Dee wants to take the "lavender" quilts, her mother clarifies, " I promised to give them quilts to Maggie, when she marries" and when she sees Maggie cowers as her sister wants to have the quilts saying, "She can have them Mama. I can 'member Grandmas Dee without the quilts", Mrs. Johnson reveals her understanding of the human emotions with a reflective response:

> I looked at her hard. She had filled her bottom with checkerberry snuff and it gave her face a kind of dopey, hangdog look. It was Grandma Dee and Big Dee who taught her how to quilt herself. She stood there with her scarred hand hidden in the folds of her skirt. She looked at her sister with something like fear but she wasn't mad at her. This was Maggie's portion. This was the way she knew God to work (34).

No wonder when Dee insists to have the quilts, Mrs. Johnson decides to hand them to Maggie: "snatched the quilts out of Miss Wangero's hand and dumped them into Maggie's lap. Thus, Mrs. Johnson's sense of mental abilities, fairness, and decisiveness are clearly revealed.

In comparison, a lot of traditional Ugandan women are also mentally, socially, and morally awake. They are able to make good decisions for their families and communities. They use the gift of telepathy along with the guidance of the women elders, who Mbiti describes as those "[who] take charge of communal rites, ceremonies, weddings, settlement of disputes, and initiations, etc (184-185). [The women educate their [fellow women] about ethnic groups, kinship and the individual, birth and childhood, initiation and poverty, marriage and procreation, death and the hereafter" (107-174). For example, when I was initiated into adulthood (during my first menstrual circle), my mother invited one my great aunt who was a clan elder of the family to talk to me about pregnancy, marriage, and how to behave when I am with the opposite sex, since by that event I had grown up and was no longer considered a child. I remember my great aunt's careful, but serious pieces of advice:

> Now you are a grown up woman, ready for marriage, do not hang around boys, you can have a baby . . . you are now ready to join the women folk . . . and remember, do not shame our clan by getting pregnant before marriage because this will be a curse to your young sisters and our family traditions (Aunt Angela Namutebi).

I took all that to heart and acted accordingly. The latter ceremony also reminds me of Mrs. Johnson's cautious approach to the change of Dee's name. Her sharp intellect and tradition concerns help her to deal with the quilts when she says, "no" to Dee for the first time. I also admire the witticism when she explains to her materialistic daughter, what her name and these quilts mean to the family: "You know as well as me you was named after your aunt Dicie . . . Dicie is my sister. She named Dee. We called her ' "Big Dee' " . . . I said. . . . Though, in fact, I probably could have carried it back beyond the Civil War through the branches" (29). Therefore, Mrs. Johnson, like the traditional Ugandan women who educate their daughters and communities about their family traditions and beliefs, she narrates her ancestral history in a clear, forceful, intelligent and chronological order.

On the other hand, when I juxtapose Mrs. Johnson's sharp brains to that of the Uganda traditional women, I clearly see that even though they never had formal (school) education, they still show their intellectual aptitudes when they make strong, family judgments. It is always their duty to make sure that their children are brought up in the right way. They guide and train them as they grow up socially and emotionally. In return, the children make sure they emulate their mothers' behavior and listen to them. In Uganda, mothers are blamed for the mistakes of their offsprings. One example is a proverb that my mother always whispered to me as I was growing up: "*Mwana mubi avumya nnyina*" (The bad child makes the mother be despised, beaten, condemned, and abused).

Like Mrs. Johnson, the tradition women take care of their families as much Mrs. Johnson did for Dee and Maggie. In fact, there are various proverbs in Uganda that explain how women are expected to be role models to their children. When a daughter or son behaves badly, they will always go back refer to the mother's behavior: "*Akaliba akendo okalabira ku mukonda"* (You recognize a good drinking guard from its roots). Further, rebelling against or not obeying ones mother is regarded as the rudest act towards the elders: "*Eriiso lyo mukulu, awaddugala we walaba*" (It is the dark part of an elder's eye that sees best) and Chinua Achebe in a Nigerian proverb says it best: "Mother is Supreme"(133). Again, Kimani Njogu and Elizabeth Orchardson-Mazrui also argue and stress the significance of "women . . . [who play] the role of bringing up families and teaching . . . their children . . . add to the social and cultural role of child rearing and socializing" (9).

Indeed, in many of the African nations, "it is women who rear children; teach them manners, respect, and social obligations," conclude Njongu and Mazrui. As a result, Mrs. Johnson stands out to be the sore role model of her family, which is what the Ugandan traditional women do.

Furthermore, Mrs. Johnson signifies the best qualities of motherhood. She is a compassionate, home organizer and tolerant "Mama." Almost on every page, the reader follows Mrs. Johnson as she tries to be kind to Maggie, Dee, and Hakima-a-barber. She is very hospitable and even tries to pronounce his complicated Arabic name. She admits: " Asamalakin had a name twice as long and three times as hard. After I tripped over it two or three times, he told me just to call him Hakima-a-barber" (30). When Maggie had been burned and scaled by the fire that burned their house, her mother consoles her and encourages her to be herself: she accepts in a loving and joking manner that "like good looks and money, quickness passed her by and even though "she stumbles as she reads," she thinks her as a sweet girl, a daughter with whom she sings and praises with at church. As a mother, she understands her daughter's fears and treats her with kindness, dignity and patience. Certainly, Mrs. Johnson does not condemn Dee's excessive aloofness towards her and Maggie; she depicts the highest quality of motherly love. This is how she describes Dee's dishonesty and indifference:

> She used to read to us without pity; forcing words, lies, other folks' habits, whole lives upon us two, sitting trapped and ignorant underneath her voice. She washed us in a river of make-believe, burned us with a lot of knowledge we didn't necessarily need to know. Pressed us to her with her serious way she read, to shove us away at just the moment, like dimwits, we seemed about to understand (26).

Indeed, Dee disrespects her family but despite her disruptive moves, the mother still begs money from the church to take her to school; she is willing to welcome her back home; and she is hospitable to her new lover. Certainly, Mrs. Johnson's determination to deal with the flowerily and annoying personality of Dee in the story with that kind of acceptance and calmness is a sign of affection capable of a remarkable mother. Incidentally, when Dee changes her name to "Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo, her mother tries hard to pronounce the name with respect, reminding the reader that a good mother is patient, kind and understanding. As Mrs. Johnson concludes: she will "get used to it" and she asks her to "ream it out again" (30).

Likewise, the Uganda traditional women's practice of motherly love also deserves great appraisal when juxtaposed with that of Mrs. Johnson. They, too, are concerned about the welfare of their families: they manage their households with patience, love, perseverance and excellent organization. Despite their many jobs, they are always present to the children's necessities; they listen to their immediate and future plans and problems, such as marriages and other life commitments. Even when they have more than ten children, like my aunt Tereza Naggayi, they make sure the siblings take care of each other and do not have fights or disgrace the family. Once, one of my cousins was pregnant before marriage; my aunt did not get upset like the rest of the family. Also, when my uncle died at an early age, she still kept the home, and educated my cousins by hard work. My highest impression and admiration of how enduring of a woman she is when she lost six of her twelve children because of the AIDS disease (all of them in their twenties); she still kept on struggling and surviving as a strong mother. To date, she has raised over twenty grandchildren of my dead cousins. There are other Ugandan traditional women who have lost their husbands and children and are still coping with the same depressive situation, which my aunt had.

In comparison, it is the same poverty that Mrs. Johnson's historical south indicated in Walker's short story. Through the courage of motherhood, Mrs. Johnson and the Uganda traditional women as well as the African American mothers continue to survive and thrive today. Mrs. Johnson's understanding, compassion, hard work, and perseverance, clearly demonstrates the same kind of spirit of motherhood that the Ugandan women show as they struggle to keep their families together, in a primarily, poor and male dominated society, where women are supposed to take on more responsibility than the men do.

Finally, Mrs. Johnson's appreciation of the cultural values heightens her to another level of a mirror of Uganda's traditional women. Uganda is one of the African countries that are proud of passing on their society beliefs and traditions. There are numerous beliefs about objects, family ancestors, names, and gods. For Mrs. Johnson, the African American culture is part of her strong principles. Names of her ancestors and quilts that are made by them mean a family bond that will never be alienated.

She explains to Dee the whole history of who made the quilts: these quilts were "pieced by Grandma Dee and then Big Dee", both traditional and family pillars who transferred their culture to their children. The patterns they sewed in them were symbols of their family tree and roots.

In fact, Mrs. Johnson compares her daughter Maggie to someone who represents the traditions when she promises to give the quilts to her when she marries, which signifies that Maggie will carry on the Johnsons traditions and cultural heritage. She is willing to "snatch" them from Dee who has sacrificed her traditions to the modern ideas that are in conflict with her family values. Dee's personal attitude towards them is just self-centered and with no cultural attachments: she wants to "hang them on the wall" instead of using them for "everyday use." It is not a surprising that after Dee and her boyfriend leave Mrs. Johnson and Maggie spend some time together in the yard and her mother asks "Maggie to bring me a dip of snuff" [and] then the two sat there just enjoying, until it was time to go in the house and go to bed" (35) because she is the one that represents her values and proper training. This is the place where she belongs: to love, choose and be answerable to her true and noble African American cultural values.

Similarly, the Uganda traditional women put great emphasis on cultural ideals as well. They carry on these standards through ancestral spirits as gods, mediums and medicine women. Ugandan children are educated in tradition values by their mothers. They teach them how to respect objects such as clothes that are worn or made by their elders. For example, when a mother dies, she leaves objects such as 'gomesi" (traditional costume for the Baganda women) "mikeeka" (hand woven mats from local palms) to be given to her children. Like the quilts in Walker's story, the Ugandan women share their cultural experiences through artesian activities, such as beadwork, hair braiding, basketry, needlework, and mat weaving. For the mentioned reasons, they get a chance of voicing their personal concerns as well as passing down traditional values to their families. Also, these objects are made by the grand-grandparents of the mother. They usually hold memorable messages or family stories that are woven on them so that whoever inherits them carries on the ancestry morals. If anybody desecrates them, there is always a consequence. One Ugandan saying is that the dead are not dead but are watching over those that remain behind. Mbiti, emphasizes this when he writes: "These are the 'spirits' with which African peoples are most concerned: it is through the living-dead that the spirit world becomes personal. . . . They are still part of their human families, and people have personal memories of them" (82).

Equally, when Dee decides to look at the quilts as mere material for decoration and fashion, she is disrespecting her ancestors. In Uganda and in many African tribes, this is a taboo, which divides one from the family, and for the Ugandan traditional women; this means that the African philosophy of "because I am, therefore, we are" is dissolved. In the African society, one cannot separate oneself from one's community because this is the heart of the matter: "the Africanness" or "Togetherness." Traditions carry weight because they are part of the divine plan, which bring to mind the epiphany that occurs when Mrs. Johnson hands the quilts to Maggie. She says: "it is like when I'm in church and the spirit of God touches me and I get happy and shout" (34). Consequently, both daughters are enlightened after the moment the quilts are given to the one who deserves them. Dee kisses her sister and Maggie is at peace. She has a "real smile" and is no longer "scared" (35).

By contrast, in other African societies, women also pass on traditional principals to their families. Margaret Mead, points out that it is through the women's "sex role . . . people explain their successes, come to terms with their fears, enshrine their past, and stamp themselves with a sense of "people hood" (9). Njogu and Mazrui sum up the sense of African oneness as being carried on by women:

> Communal work was a strong tradition which enabled the women . . . to take care of their community, as well as to improve their status. The communal sharing created solidarity, unity of purpose, collective efficacy and a sense of social support among members of the community. For example, during the Mau Mau war (1952-1960) [in Kenya], women were able to manage their families even after their men were detained or killed. Equally in Rwanda women have been working together to assuage the pains of genocide (17).

By portraying Mrs. Johnson as a representation of the Uganda traditional women, I have shown that they both have similar qualities that make them strong, black dedicated women and mothers. These include strength in body, mind, and spirit; and they stand firm for their cultural beliefs. This short story greatly enlightened my perception about the relationship between the historical African American women of the South and the Uganda conventional women, whereby both parties are totally committed to their families and society traditions.

Works Cited

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. New York, Random House Inc., 1994. Print.

Christian, Barbara T. "*Everyday Use*" Ed. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994. Print.

Mead, Margaret. *Male and Female*. New York: Marrow Publishers, 1968. Print.

Njogu Kimani & Orchardson-Mazrui Elizabeth. "*Gender Inequality and Women in the Great Lakes: Can Culture Contribute to Women's Empowerment*.

Velazquez Juana R "*Characterization and Symbolism in Alice Walker's* "*Everyday Use*." htt://www.lonestar.edu/13778.htm

Walker Alice. "*Everyday Use*." *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry and Drama.* Ed. X. J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia. 8th ed. New York: Longman, 2002. 88-95.