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Daughter(s) of *Rubanga*:

An Author, a Student, and Other Stories in Between

Eldoret, Kenya, 1983. Kaptagat Girls High School

“Open your books. *Land Without Thunder*. Go straight to the story with that title,” Miss Polie said at the beginning of class. She never had to raise her voice, but there was something about her that exuded this authority, something mysterious. Perhaps it was the grace in her gait as she walked through the classroom interacting with us, forming a rapport that was only peculiar to her style; or perhaps it was her unjudging smile as she guided us through the themes, ideas and nuances in a book or story. Her very presence in the classroom filled it with an aura of positive energy, and we responded to it eagerly. Today was no exception, and we were ready to read more stories in *Land Without Thunder*.

But for me, it was not going to be a start. I had already stayed late yesterday, and the day before yesterday, to read the stories in this collection. My candle flickering in the darkness of the dormitory, I had curled my entire frame close to the single flame, squinting as my eyes tried to discern the letters of every page in the glimmering, dim, single flame of the unconcerned candle. The darkness around me had not scared my soul or mind. Instead, it had seemed to shine brighter than ten candles, its presence obscured by the task at hand. My heart had focused on the book. Every word had resounded in my head, and the more I had read, the more I had relished the story: “To cast doubt in the minds of people going fishing in the mighty waters was like casting doubt in the minds of people going to war...” I had read. I was fishing in the mighty waters of education, not ready for even the darkness around me to intimidate me. The author was addressing me directly...

“Anyango,” Miss Polie interrupted. “Why, your mind has traveled. It is not with us. What is going on?” She was at my desk, and I had not noticed her approaching, nor had I noticed her presence so close.

“Sorry, Miss Polie,” I said. I opened my book and got ready to read the story aloud with the rest of the class.

“Stop!” she would call from time to time. “I do not approve of that kind of reading,” she would say any time a classmate hesitated while reading. “This is what I want you to imagine. Close your eyes first!”

There was a reason why Miss Polie’s classes were different. She was not only gracious, but she wanted us to be the best. In “Inspirations from Mama’s Two Wisdoms,” I described her thus:

She taught with pomp and vigor, and she never let anyone or anything convince her that we were not capable of achieving anything we wanted to. We were her girls, and to her, we were the stars, dropped down from the heavens, only temporarily in order to brighten our shine and soar back up again, stronger and ready to take our definitive places in conquering the skies. I devoured her personality with valor, and took in her enthusiasm at every turn of it (80-81).

“Now take your imagination to a stage with the greatest splendor,” Miss Polie said. “You have been selected to meet the author and read her work in her presence. You are ushered into a room where she is sitting, waiting for you. You introduce yourself, tell her the portion you want to read, and pull together your best self for the show.”

My heart quickly carried my mind to that space. I felt chosen, selected, transported, and ready for the task at hand. Will I stretch my arm in humble greeting? Will I curtsy? Will I say anything? How will I address her? Madam author? Mrs. Ogot? Mrs. Grace Ogot? I would not call her Akinyi, although I would want to. That was the name Mama and Papa called me at home. I was born in the morning, and I was also named after my grandma, Anyango. Two names close in meaning. Perhaps I would say nothing much and go straight to my reading. Or perhaps I would say something.

“Mrs. Ogot,” I would start, and struggle not to shake or stammer. Or maybe she would not mind if I did. But I would not. I was only fourteen but armed with a mind that did not tremble or fear. I was a girl looking up to her, and she would be pleased that I was studying hard in school to one day write like her.

“Mrs. Ogot, nice to meet you...” I would say with a slight curtsy, stretching my right arm with the left one placed at the elbow of the right arm as a sign of respect among our people; yes, our people, Grace Ogot and me.

“Mrs. Ogot, I would like to read from *Land Without Thunder* where the lake is raging and yet in the middle of all this, Owila thinks of his wife Apiyo...”

“Read, my child,” she would probably say to me, endearingly, because, after all, I had shown my respect from the beginning and I had known what to do and say in her eminent, authorial presence. Maybe she would ask me why I wanted to read that part of the book. I would tell her that in the roughest time of his life, Owila is thinking of someone who brings joy to his life. I would then try to impress her by analyzing it further. I would say that Owila saw a ray of hope even in the valley of death. I would then read. “*Owila thought of his wife Apiyo, beautiful, young and devoted.*” Minding the commas and the full stop at the end, I would make sure I did not read in a staccato manner, but with feeling and thought. “*When prophets foretold that the lake was rough and thirsty for human blood, Apiyo had pleaded with Owila not to go fishing. Such warnings in Uyoma never passed without incident...*” Uyoma. Would I have a chance to pose a little and tell her that this is where my Mama came from, where I had visited my grandfather, traveling by boat in those very waters that were now raging on Owila? Would I...

“Anyango!” I heard Miss Polie call again, this time with small agitation in her voice. “We are reading. Are you following?”

“Yes...No.” She had disrupted my visit with Mrs. Ogot, without warning, without mercy, without apology. “I am reading to Mrs. Ogot. You told us to do so...”

“Imagine. I said imagine,” she said again. Exactly. That is what I had done. I had imagined everything in a way that Miss Polie herself would be impressed with. Did I not lay out everything perfectly? Did I not read with courage, and without hesitation? Now, imaginary Mrs. Ogot, yet so real in my imaginative mind, was not going to listen to the rest of the paragraph. Someday, I thought, just someday, I would make this a reality.

Grace Ogot’s stories always resonated with me. As soon as I started reading them in school, I realized that there was something particularly special about them, and the study of oral literature. Then it dawned on me that this was how Mama had always told her stories. Mama, having no knowledge of English, reading or writing, had told us stories all the time in Dholuo, our mother tongue. Ours were storied lives, as we listened to Mama in the only language that she spoke well. Later, I would write in *Stories of Living and Learning*:

Growing up, I was always in awe of Mama’s wisdom. She was confident, and when she believed in something, it was hard to sway her in any way. She always had conviction and determination in her voice, and her love, laughter, admonition and grace all rang through the words she spoke. Mama owned a Bible in our ethnic language, Dholuo. I always knew she could not read English, but she read the Dholuo Bible fervently. Still, she was the best teacher I knew. Through her stories, proverbs, songs and anecdotes, she would teach us all the lessons we needed in life. She had a story for everything, and they always started with a proverb or an idiomatic expression. The characters in the stories had their dwelling in our family, and we would speak like Mama when we wanted to correct one another. Therefore, a person who was not clean was “*Manya*,” the character in Mama’s story who had to be urged by friends to go to the river and take a bath. The person who did not fulfill their duties would be “*Oyundi*,” Mama’s infamous character who feigned illness during work

but showed up during meals. Any person who was witty and cunning would be “*Romb K'Oyugi*,” Mama’s legendary sheep who never behaved like sheep at all. While sheep are known to be meek and humble, “*Romb K'Oyugi*” were the opposite. They would cunningly leap behind women who carried bananas to sell, snatch the bananas and sit down to eat them while the women watched in disbelief. I did not know that these sheep truly existed until a few years after Mama passed away when I actually saw them at Oyugis market, the small town they inhabited, doing exactly what Mama had described to us for many years. Mama’s way of knowing became my way of knowing. In a culture where knowledge was transmitted through oral forms, she passed on her knowledge to me the best way she knew how. She did not have to read a book. Her storytelling became the way I framed my writing, and I saw and felt her influence in my way of thinking and writing. I learned about oral literature in high school with an indescribable passion and enjoyed the novels of African writers who depicted their influence from oral literature in their writing. (3-4)

One of these African writers was, of course, Grace Ogot. Mama had been to me what Mrs. Ogot’s grandmother was to her. Having heard her stories from her grandmother, she celebrated them and later used them in her work, as told in *Days of My Life*:

My interest in writing... may have started at a very early age, stimulated by my childhood keenness to listen to my grandmother’s folktales. She was a renowned story teller. The artistic creations of our people, like our myths, legends, epics, poetry, proverbs, riddles, and music reveal a very old imagination which formed an essential part of the education of the Luo girl-child... She was the person, for example, who introduced me to the famous Luo myths such as *Simbi Nyaima*...My grandmother was thus a living library of oral literature. (91, 92).

After Miss Polie's challenge in class that had us close our eyes in imagination, I never stopped imagining that I would find myself talking to her one day, telling her how great it was to read her books full of an oral culture that I had deeply related to.

The Surprise: Pittsburgh, PA, USA, 2011

On this September Pittsburgh day, the air was crisp, and the sun teased its presence below some scattered clouds that had not made up their minds whether to form decidedly for rain or not. I felt uplifted and joyful as I strode toward the school's main door in time to pick up my daughter.

"Hello!" I stretched my hand to greet a fellow parent I was meeting for the first time. I had never seen him before, as I was a fairly new parent at the school.

"Hi." He replied joyously. "Ogot. Milton Ogot."

"Wow! I only know one Ogot." I did not even stop to ask if he was Kenyan, as we were accustomed to asking each other when we saw signs that someone could be a fellow country man. In this land away from home, we were united in a peculiar sense of patriotism. Or was it a sense of belonging to one place, one country? All that was not important now. I had something else to find out. Was this happening to me? I did not know what to think. I had no time, either, to wait for the conversation to continue without my quick response. "Are you related to Grace Ogot? You know Grace Ogot? *Land Without Thunder*?"

"That's my mother."

"*Ei yawa!*" I resorted to exclaiming my surprise in our mother tongue. I was too surprised to exclaim in English! Don't they say that you resort to your mother tongue, the language dearest and closest to your mama, when the most emotional times come? Now, I believed it more than ever. It came so naturally I was surprised at myself. I had a reputation of "saying hello to everyone," but exclaiming in my mother tongue to someone I had met for the first time was not second nature to me. This was different. I

had kept the hope alive, to one day meet the author that had authored my love for writing, validated my heritage and given me permission to use my identity in my writing. I just had never known where to start, or where I could ever find her. Now I could see a ray of hope flashing in front of my eyes menacingly, urging me not to waste any time. “Your mom has mentored me since I was in secondary school.”

“So, you know Mama?” he asked, with the same tone of surprise and look I had when he had first introduced himself.

“No,” I said, suddenly realizing that I had claimed a mentor whom I had known as an author but had never met.

“Okay!” He looked puzzled.

“She mentored me through her writing,” I replied with an obvious unwavering confidence.

Her stories had inspired me and stirred in me the love for writing stories, and for celebrating and keeping my identity wherever I went. She had germinated a seed in me at a time when I had not read anything from a female African writer. My love for literature and African Oral Literature was intensified through her writings that brought more life to life in vivid, interesting and challenging ways. They were based on her own real, rich and realistic experiences from a varied and vast world that she had lived in: Kenya, Uganda, Britain. She traveled with us to these countries through her writing, showcasing her contagious, positive relationship not only with words but also with people in her family, village, and professional life. Her stories planted and watered in me the love for non-fiction, seeing that experience was, indeed, the best teacher of writing. Later, she was to celebrate her tapping into experience for her writing in her autobiography, *Days of my Life*:

I wrote “The Hero,” for example, from very close personal experience. Dr. Sserwada, the hero of the story, was a renowned African doctor of his time, who was very highly respected by the nurses at Mengo Hospital. I knew him personally, but soon death took him away from the midst of

student nurses who loved him. His death had such a profound shock on the emotions of the nurses at the hospital, that it lived with me for over ten years until I wrote “The Hero.” (103)

These early readings showed that she had always tackled life’s terrain with courage. Any difficulties she may have encountered being raised a woman in Kenya did not seem to have scathed her path, but it had only intensified the warrior within, not only through the pen but also through life’s own journeys of fighting for people’s rights, especially women and children.

The Books: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA, 2018

The Ogot family became our family friends and we met often at our children’s schools and functions. They updated me on how my mentor was doing. Now we all referred to her as Mama, and this made me feel even closer to meeting her and fulfilling my dream. We started talking about one day meeting up in Nairobi and visiting the rural home. I was overjoyed when the first present I got from the family was Mama Ogot’s autobiography, *Days of My Life* (2012), immediately after its publication. Unfortunately, she passed on three years later in March 2015. Even so, I at least had the opportunity to teach her granddaughter Swahili in college.

During the third anniversary of her memorable life in March 2018, I wrote a poem, “The Unknown Mentor,” that was read at the function by Grace Ogot’s son, Milton. In the poem, I drew from the titles of her works and wove them to form what I wanted to convey:

Dear Mama Grace Ogot,
I knew you when I was only twelve
In secondary school in Eldoret
Never seeing you, but cherishing your wisdom
Never meeting you, but trusting your guidance.

Never hearing you talk, or sing, or even read
Never holding your hand or listening to you
But
Always responding to your loving words of knowledge
Always feeling your reassuring squeeze in my hands
Always hearing your soft, encouraging voice
Always letting you lead the way
Always
With strength you held your pen
With simplicity you wrote your way into my heart
You taught me who I was
You showed me who I could become
You praised the power of my people
You showed me that I belonged
And that if I knew who I was
I could become who I wanted to be
We may never have met
We may never have heard our voices ring in unison
We may never have known of the admiration
We could have ended up having, one for another
We may never have seen our reassuring smiles
Lingering under the beauty of the sunshine of our land

Now you know me

Now you see me

Now you shake my hand with firm reassurance

Now you say to me

“Did you ever know, that you would be *The Graduate*, and teach my granddaughter,

In a land far, far away?”

“Did you ever know, that my granddaughter, will attend the same school as your daughter, and be a sister to her?”

“Did you ever know, that my son was the one to hand you my story, the *Days of My Life*?”

“Did you ever know that my daughter-in-law, would share stories with you, of our cherished time together?”

“Did you ever know, that while I am in the *Land Without Thunder*, you would write this poem, to pay tribute to me?”

“Did you ever know?”

And now I say to you

Mama, now that you are in *The Promised Land*

Where *The Green Leaves* never turn brown

Where *The Rain Came* and never formed *The Island of Tears*

Where *The Empty Basket* is filled with grace and wonder

Where *Miaha, The Strange Bride*, celebrates her powers with *Were Nyakalaga*

Mama, now you know you mentored me

To hold the pen like you

To dare become what I want to be

To write in words however simple

And to say I thank you

For with your pen
 You dared urge me on
 And with my pen
 I proudly say, *Erokamano*, Thank you
 Mama, now I say to you
 You are no longer
 The Unknown Mentor
 Right, Mama?

My poem was received positively by family members and guests alike, they told me. My gratitude, however, knew no bounds when I received three books that were launched on this, the third memorial of Mama Grace, all published posthumously. The release of these three books prompted a news report in a Kenyan newspaper, *Standard Digital*, entitled “Author Grace Ogot won’t keep her pen down, even in death” (Oywa 2018). Simbi *Nyaima*, the story of the village that sunk, is a novel translated from Dholuo, the first language of author Grace Ogot, who wrote in *Days of My Life* that she “felt most at ease when writing in Dholuo, in which I produced several literary works” (108). The second book was, *The Royal Bead*, a novel based on “the famous Luo legend of migration...the legend of Labong’o and Gipir” (Ogot 2018). The final book also based on the history of the Luo kingship was *Princess Nyilaak*. This last book particularly caught my attention because I wanted to know the story of the princess who eventually became the “King” of the Luo people at a time when the community had a patriarchal succession history. In fact, there was only one name for King – *Ruoth* – and if Princess Nyilaak was to become King of her people, she would have to use as her title also.

Clear in all these titles was Grace Ogot’s fascination with the history of her people, and the quest to preserve this history while presenting it in more interesting and accessible ways to a wider variety of readers. My hope was that, as I had gained so much from the stories in *Land Without Thunder*, other

students in my country would find opportunities to study these books and get to know more about their own histories and cultures while curving their own spaces to read and write.

I was ready to embark on the journey of learning more about this Princess, but before that, I wanted to still trace more about the beloved author, my friend and mentor. I arranged with author Grace's son Milton to assist me in visiting his parents' home. Even though she had departed, my dream to "visit" her never waned. I thought of her continually felt presence, of her spouse who knew so much about her and how her books had come about, of her resting place, and of all the artifacts associated with her lifelong career as an author, a politician, a mother, a women's rights activist...It was still worth it to make the journey I had always wanted to make and, yes, it would be a research journey, to gain more understanding and to behold the places and spaces that were this author's abode, and the place where her pen had churned all, or most, of her works.

Then, as though to confirm my curiosity, and to stamp the legitimacy that authors were not crazy, after all, to be fascinated by other authors who made a mark in their lives, I read some of it in *Assay Journal*: an author being celebrated with gusto by those who knew and admired her and her works. I was mesmerized! In the wake of author Louise De Salvo's passing, various authors who were close to her or knew her work paid tribute to her in *Assay Journal* 5:2 (Spring 2019). I got to learn that De Salvo was "an essayist, memoirist, teacher, mentor..." She "gave courage to countless beginning writers. She was fierce in her belief that personal stories had dignity, that 'ethnic' writers needed to claim their place in the American canon..." I was pleased to read that DeSalvo had left behind "students of writing, some of whom she had never met but whom she emboldened to put words on the page" – the same way Mrs. Ogot had encouraged me to write without my even meeting her.

In his tribute to author Louise De Salvo entitled "The Shared Richness of Life Itself," Joshua Fausty, Professor of English and Director of General Education at New Jersey City University, reflected on how De Salvo's "had learned to make room for whatever experience happened—not only internally, or with her

most beloved family and friends, but with the larger community of people who read her books.” This further prompted him to note that it’s “not what you hold onto, hide away, or take with you when you go; it’s what you discover and create and share and leave behind for others to find that counts. It’s the healing you enable; the connections, the contributions, the shared richness of life itself, spoken, written, represented, an offering to the future—to oneself, one’s loved ones, and the world.”

This shared richness of life is something Ogot had also learned from an early age. She gleaned from her grandmother and her people the stories and language she shared with others. In *Days of My Life*, she writes this of her grandmother:

The respectable old lady who took charge of this education was known as *Pim*, and she was the person whose responsibility included the introduction of young girls to this rich, imaginative, world of our forefathers. In my case my grandmother played the role of *Pim*. She introduced me to our artistic inheritance and *encouraged me to use it in defining who I was* (91). [Emphasis mine].

It was no doubt that Grace Ogot took great pleasure in creating and curving her space, on her own right, that would define who she was. Her literary prowess, showing her as being a custodian of her people’s culture and way of writing, was one of these ways. There were many other ways, and other than reading about them, I wanted to discover them from the person who knew her best and shared these experiences every step of the way. This was none other than her husband, esteemed and eminent historian and author in his own right, Prof. Bethwell Allan Ogot.

At Home with the Author(s) in Yala, Kenya: May 31st, 2019

The air was cool and calm as my friends and I approached the home. This was, indeed, an epic moment for me. The gate swung open to reveal a giant full-sized statue of Mama Grace Ogot standing in her signature African outfit with her intricate head gear. Sitting next to her was her husband, Prof. Ogot, in his

full academic garb. I knew I would survey this spectacular centerpiece of the home later. Meanwhile, my mind was racing. Soon, I would be home with Mama Grace Ogot for the first time. Yes, I would be with her here, even though not physically, but the memories would come flooding. I would be touching her authorial life in many ways. I would probably see many of her works. I would speak to the very person who had supported her life for many years, and one who knew a lot about how her books came to be and watched them become, one after another. She had written with deep respect and admiration for her husband, and the statue outside the front door of the home was a visual testimony of the life and times they had spent together. She had celebrated him in her autobiography as a person who had taken excellent care of the family while she was ill. At that time, he had proven himself beyond being an academician and author; he was also "...the father and mother of our three sons whose ages ranged from about one year to five years who needed parental love and care" (Days 161).

"I want to know about Mama," I announced after the introductions which included a chat about his son and family in Pittsburgh, the connection that had got me here. His face lightened up in an instant.

"Now, speaking about the historical facts of the Nile Valley with my friend and student here, was interesting; but talking about Mama is more interesting," he announced with glee, widening his smile that in itself revealed years of satisfactory intelligent conversations. His excitement intensified. He had just finished speaking with one of his former students who had also accompanied me to the home to know more about his special area of expertise: The History of the Nile Valley. One thing I had noticed was the joy with which he had spoken and the free spirit with which he had shared his knowledge. I was amazed at how his facts were organized in his mind, and the clarity with which he had answered every question.

"Are you excited about your upcoming 90th birthday?" I had to ask this question, because Professor Ogot, despite his age, had a clarity of mind and a wealth of knowledge that was intact and rich. This persuaded me that he was still capable of returning to a university classroom and successfully teaching any class in History.

“I am really excited,” he replied, and then continued quickly, without much pause, “After Mama passed away, I stopped thinking about my own birthdays and concentrated on memorializing her...”

This was a good place to ask more about Mama. It would give him great joy as a part of the special memorializing, I thought. I had many questions, but found myself asking, “Did you read all her books?”

“Of course. And I enjoyed them a lot. Even her essays. What was interesting was how she took the most common things and made them special with her writing style.”

“Can you give me a specific example?”

“The most interesting was when we both visited the Taj Mahal. I was busy thinking historically. How old is this? what are the artifacts in it? Then Mama comes up with this fascinating essay entitled “Love Immortalized in Marble,” and I ask her, “Where is the love here?” and she replies, “You don’t see it? It is everywhere!” I laughed so hard but relished every minute that we spent discussing these literary works. I would have wanted to read that essay about Taj Mahal, which Prof. Ogot described as a “masterpiece that endeared her to the Indian writing groups that had invited her.” Indeed, Mrs. Ogot referenced it in *Days of my Life*:

...we saw one of the wonders of the world, the Taj Mahal, a mausoleum built for Queen Mumtaz Mahal by one of the Mughal rulers in 1653. I was inspired by what deep love could do. It inspired me to write a short story called “Love Immortalized in Marble,” which was initially published in *Famina Magazine* of India in 1979 (Days 141).

Talking about Mama’s work was clearly an event of much joy to Prof. Ogot. The home had an aura of ease and relaxation. It was obvious that this space was a place that many a conversation, scholarly or otherwise, had happened. The blend of home and intelligentsia had effortlessly co-existed in this space for many years. I imagined how Mama would have added to this conversation, then I asked about something I had really wanted to know, given her myriad achievements.

“Please tell me about Mama’s work ethic.”

“Oh, that’s an excellent question,” he said with a hint in his voice that seemed to add that this was a part of Mama’s life that was as important as her success in writing, parenting, leadership, and all else that she did. “Mama had a pattern. Her general day ended at about 6.00 pm. Even as a Member of Parliament, she was highly disciplined with her time. Early evening was family time. At night, she wrote, sometimes to early morning. She kept this pattern with precision.”

I needed to hear that, and perhaps many of us longing to be writers needed to hear it. It was extremely difficult to have a rhythm of life that included writing with such discipline, but now I was partaking of the winning recipe, one whose fruits I knew well.

“And did you know that Mama spoke many languages?” Prof. Ogot said with an obvious admiration for his wife’s linguistic skills.

“Wow! What did she not do? That is so amazing!” I wanted to hear more about this, as I also spoke several, and had special interest in, languages.

“Yes, she was great as a research assistant, an unpaid one for that matter,” He laughed at this joke while I was still digesting it. “In Uganda, I took her everywhere with me, and since she spoke several local languages, it worked well for me as a researcher.”

“I think she also gained a lot and got plenty of raw material for her own stories.”

“Absolutely! Her books, *“The Royal Bead and Princess Nyilaak* are based on the history of the Luo people. I have extensively done research in this area.”

“Thank you, Baba. You have taught me so much about Mama. We could talk and talk. I feel better now, having wanted to meet her since my secondary school days.”

My secondary school days...I remembered something that welled my heart with regret. It was this small town of Yala that I had visited during the school holidays. I had walked the paths around this town, having visited my father who was working at the Yala Railway Station. During the time when I was reading *Land Without Thunder* and promising myself that I would visit the author someday, I was so close, yet so

far. I consoled myself that, after all, it was meant to happen just the way it was happening now. Then I thought of the one thing that I wanted to do before leaving that day.

“Baba, may you please permit us to see Mama’s mausoleum?”

“Yes, David will take you there.” His son David was the co-host with his father on that day. “But first we shall have something to eat. David, go to the library and bring a copy of *Simbi Nyaima* and *Miaba* in Dholuo.”

Professor handed the books to me, including the ones he had prepared and placed on the table for me to have. I had met both authors in the most special way. I in turn gave him an envelope from his son Milton containing pictures of an event where he had been the guest speaker.

“What a special day this is for me. We historians like pictures. They make us remember. I had not thought I would be a guest speaker on this day,” he commented, looking at the pictures nostalgically. “Tell my son I said thank you!”

It was now time to behold my eminent mentor, Mrs. Grace Emily Akinyi Ogot, at her resting place.

We made our way around the house to the back. And there, revealed immediately we took the slight bend, was the magnificent mausoleum. Written on its entrance for all and sundry to see as they entered its gates were the words “*Nchi Bila Ngurumo*,” *Land Without Thunder* in Kiswahili. The letters were clear, with an *italic* look, bold but not imposing, having an inviting softness to them. The *italic* look spoke volumes. Mama’s life would always have an emphasis, an influence. The story that she was well known for, the very work that had me looking for her, would always be a part of her story for generations beyond her life. In her own words:

My stories thus became widely known throughout Kenya, and especially among the younger generation. So much so that *Land Without Thunder* became my nickname. I was delighted. In 1979, the Kiswahili version of *Land Without Thunder* (*Nchi Bila Ngurumo*), was published... (*Days* 99).

The mausoleum was meticulously laid out. It had the feel of a living room, with annotated pictures gracing its walls, telling the story of a life well lived, well celebrated, well written. Even though I did not ask, I had no doubt that Baba, Prof. Ogot, had a lot to do with this. While he did not accompany us, he had earlier said that he went there every day, and sometimes even took his tea there. “I talk to Mama there every day,” he had said. The beauty of the mausoleum reminded me of the Taj Mahal story and how Mrs. Ogot had seen immense love in it. Now I was seeing her husband’s love here, and I knew that perhaps he would no longer ask, “Where is the love here?” It was everywhere.

I talked to Mrs. Ogot that day. I told her how it had been my dream to meet her since that day in Ms. Polie’s class. I thanked her for inspiring women everywhere, and for taking her time to mentor me, and others like me. I thanked her for living a full life of respect, love and hard work. I thanked her for allowing many of us into her life, and nurturing the blossoming author in me. Then a silence ensued, and I knew she had listened, and she had appreciated my gift of gratitude. My visit with the author had been fulfilled. As we left the home, the hanging clouds quickly released the rain that they had been holding in patience. Darkness was quickly approaching, leaving behind a day that was full of the fulfilment of a dream of youth.

Now I had the quest to spend time reading one of her works that had been published posthumously. *Princess Nyilaak* was my choice. I wanted to see how Mrs. Ogot had put together the story of a princess who had ruled the Luo people, a historical figure that had defied gender stereotypes of the time. Her own work with women made me curious about her rendition of this historical succession story.

Princess Nyilaak: Pittsburgh, PA, June-July 2019

It had to be one of Grace Ogot's epic works yet. *Princess Nyilaak*, as I knew the writing style and themes of her works, was the type of story that she would run with and stop at nothing to display her all-time literary prowess. Armed with the deep knowledge of Luo culture and history, and her relentless work fighting for women's rights, this was a story that probably would have had her life intertwined in it so intricately. Reading it would reveal a lot about this prolific writer's desire for women to have a voice, a say in society that would elevate them to a place of dignity.

Princess Nyilaak is not the choice of the people. She is the choice of Rubanga, the great God of the Luo people. Her mother, Achol, is the first wife of *Ruoth* (King) Kwanga, who never bore a son or daughter for a long time. She eventually bears Nyilaak, who is born with the royal bead of her great grandfather, Ruoth Akunga, in her left ear. Princess Nyilaak is therefore literally "earmarked" at birth to be the King of the Luo community, succeeding her father. Till then, Kingship had been patriarchal, and therefore *Ruoth* would inevitably be Nyilaak's title also. She would be King of her people.

This does not come easy at all. The patriarchs in the family, including Nyilaak's own father, turn against her at one point or another. At first, Ruoth Kwanga is proud of his daughter and raises her as a boy by having her become a herdsman and not a girl who has chores in the homestead. The other boys in the family are jealous of her strength and courage, and plot to humiliate her several times. Her father turns against her after her secret marriage. When the oracle reveals that the man responsible for her pregnancy must be eliminated, he starts to plot how he would eliminate Nyilaak and her twin boys. The women in the family eventually unite to support Nyilaak even though they at first had fought for their own sons to inherit the *Ruothship*. Through pressure and attitude, they decide that they will not support the elimination of Nyilaak.

The oracle must eventually be contacted to decide who inherits the *Ruothship* since Nyilaak is considered to have angered the ancestors. Two of her cousin brothers are contesting the seat with her. In a public ceremony, the bull can only kneel to the chosen one. Nyilaak's courage, contrasted surprisingly with

her humility to the Deity, distinguishes her from the men, with one cousin even trying to beat up the bull for it to kneel forcefully. Nyilaak goes last, and her only tactic is to offer a spirited prayer to Rubanga:

Listen, I beseech thee oh Rubanga
Whose hands moulded Atyak hill
And cut the great Nile in the valley.
And when you cut it
Tears fell like rain
To fill the mighty Nile
That water Atyak cattle
To mother the very young
If I have not erred against you
Or contaminated the land of Atyak
That bore me
Let the Red Cow kneel
Before the shrine that
Rubanga gave to our Ancestors! (288-89)

Disbelief engulfs the air as the oracle declares that “Rubanga has spoken! She who will succeed Ruoth Kwanga has been confirmed before your very eyes!” (289).

Against all odds, Nyilaak is slated to be the King, the ruler of her people. Growing up, she is strong and confident, yet endowed with a kind heart that radiates through her being as if in preparation for the task ahead of her. She battles the boys who bully her and refer to her as “just a girl.” Ogot relishes this scene, painting it with literary precision:

Nyilaak walked without looking back, her mind certain of only one thing. From now on, none of those boys, not even the bullies among them, would ever dare say that Kwanga had no son – for she had proved she was better than any son anyone could ever have in that homestead (111).

I could not help but juxtapose Mrs. Ogot's description of Nyilaak as a "boy" with her own experiences growing up. Her father defied traditional gender roles by taking such pride in his daughters that he sent them to school just as he might send sons. His Christian faith propelled him to change his ideas about how to bring up girls:

...our father started to refer to his three daughters as his "boys", and argued that there was nothing boys were doing which his "boys" could not do. We were thus gender liberated from childhood. True to his word, he decided to send all of us to school, at a time when most parents in the area preferred to send only their sons to school. And since our mother Rahel was sickly...our father undertook the woman's job of fetching water from a nearby river, so that his "sons" could go to school. For a Luo elder to do this was abominable. They laughed at him, and wondered what other woman's chore he was next going to perform" (*Days* 23).

With a father who defied tradition to elevate the status of his girls, Grace Ogot got an early head start with differences, struggles and gaps that set the stage for her to fight for most of her life. Born at a time when the girl's place was in the home and not at school, she got a nudge from her father that this was not right in the first place. This inner strength from her upbringing, early life and career was the same one displayed in *Princess Nyilaak*. An avid proponent and defender of "good" tradition and culture, she saw in Nyilaak what she wanted to support: that Luo tradition was not against women ruling or having status in society. Rubanga himself had set them apart to be such, and no one would stop them. This kind of knowledge and respect for Luo culture and tradition was the one she radiated when she wanted to show that it was important for her to fight for women's issues in the context of her family: her role as a wife, a

mother, a sister and a community leader. She was only free to perform her duties as a women's activist to the extent that she had support from her husband and her immediate family. Then, undeterred, she would move into full action without inhibition or doubt in her mind. She lauded her husband for providing this fertile ground:

Since my husband was fully occupied with academic matters, the responsibility of managing family businesses rested squarely on my shoulders. My husband was thus demonstrating in a very practical way, his full support for women empowerment. He justified the full trust he bestowed in me by quoting a Luo proverb which states that *Dhako en muandu* (an empowered wife is wealth). I was not only being empowered, I was in reality being installed in power. With such a solid base in the family, I now felt strong enough to go out into the world to fight for women's rights as part of human rights (*Days* 163).

And fighting she did. In *Days of my Life*, she dedicated the fifth chapter entitled "Women's Empowerment" to her efforts in working with women. This detailed and longest chapter of the book chronicled her work with women in Kenya. From radio programs to the United Nations to Beijing, she was a trailblazer in women's affairs in Kenya. She took on leadership positions in business sectors and government in order to set an example for women and show their capabilities to the country leaders and the world. She started businesses, one after another, to prove that "an African Woman can be successful in business given equal opportunity in access to credit" (160). She took up the challenges women faced, including their access to education and credit, and their positions in political leadership. In her position as the Assistant Minister for Culture and Social services, she continued this work with passion. She showed, indeed, that she was a true daughter of Rubanga. Just like Nyilaak, she had been "earmarked" for this work, and her own people chose her to be a Member of Parliament to represent them. Beyond her authorial voice, she had an unmistakable presence in the community that stamped her as an unmatched leader with many firsts.

The kind of leadership that Mrs. Ogot displayed was akin to what proponents of African feminism have been fighting for. Explaining that feminism in the African context takes a different shape than the one in other global contexts, they emphasize the elevation of the family as a place of contestation and tensions that must be celebrated and overcome in those very spaces. No relocation needs to happen for an African woman to be a feminist. The family space is her space to lead, to grow, and to thrive. In their discussion of African feminist theory and methodology, Bagele Chilisa and Gabo Ntseane, , postcolonial scholars of indigenous research and knowledge in Africa, explain the need to “emphasize the centrality of motherhood in African households and family organization and the agency and power of mothers as the source of solidarity” (618). They further add that girls and women have “used the relational gender roles as sites for resistance and sources of empowerment” (618). Fainos Mangena suggests that these community spaces are the ripe ground where, as mothers, women can still “fight patriarchy from within” (25) by forging relationships and dialogue with men and seeking decision-making roles in community. Indubitably, these scholars share the same course and thought with Mrs. Ogot. What they describe is what she did, and in so doing, they unite with the same voice, daughters of Rubanga, marching on.

Daughter(s) of Rubanga: Aluta Continua

Grace Ogot was nominated a Member of Parliament in 1983 when it was rare for a woman to get such a post. She was later elected a Member of Parliament and appointed Assistant Minister for Culture and Social services. In *Days of my Life*, she wrote:

I felt my election to Parliament was a culmination of the UN Decade Conference on Women which had just ended in Nairobi. I now felt I had the full mandate to assume a major responsibility in the development of Gem, and also in representing the interests of women throughout Kenya.

My appointment as an Assistant Minister in Government, the second Kenya African woman to hold that post, also increased my responsibility to the Kenya women (254).

She continued to carry that responsibility to the end, trailblazing as other women saw her strength and took on the responsibility also. There may have been only two women during her time, but she would be pleased to see the numbers rising, with almost eighty women Members of Parliament in the country and six cabinet secretaries. Mrs. Ogot would be glad to see the progress compared to her days. She would be proud of women who are finding stronger voices to protest for better representation in government and to illumine other issues of concern to them, including addressing violence against them and prevention of early marriages for teenage girls. She would be thrilled to see women not resting until they see that they fill the one third of the total representation accorded to them by the constitution, which will in turn influence decisions made in parliament concerning them.

There are many reasons to celebrate the life and work of Grace Emily Akinyi Ogot, but her production of *Princess Nyilaak* stands out as a labor of love that demonstrates her lifelong fight for equal rights for women and girls. She brings to fore the fact that this struggle is older than any woman fighting now, older than Princess Nyilaak. Yet it is not Rubanga, the creator, that willed it this way. It is literally *man-made*, and the fight must continue.

And so, I pay tribute to Mrs. Ogot for all that she did on behalf of all daughters of Rubanga. This was not only done for Asembo or Gem in Kenya. It was not only done for Kenya or Africa. Her voice was tapping into all the struggles and fights around the world. By bringing forth Nyilaak the way she did— as a courageous, smart, compassionate, and talented leader of her people — she was bequeathing all of us, daughters of Rubanga around the world, these same qualities, willing us to take them gracefully so that we could wear them nobly and march on. Girls, women, wives, sisters, aunties, grandmas. Now with that courage I remember her work. *Princess Nyilaak* is more than a story based on history, it is about all of us,

and the fact that Daughters of Rubanga, too, are preordained, predetermined and predestined to lead.

Therefore, I sing in tribute:

Grace Emily Akinyi Ogot

Daughter of Rubanga

You who saw the struggle

In many a daughter of Rubanga

I salute you

You who gave us courage to fight on

You who wrote, and acted, and worked

You who went ahead of your time

And saw more than could be seen

I salute you.

Daughter of the people of Asembo

Daughter of Nyanduga

Sister of Jalang'o

Mother of the sons and daughters of Gem

You paved the way with courage

Ah, Daughter of Rakombe

I sing you

May you remember us to Rubanga

As we remember your words and wisdom

To all of us

Daughters of Rubanga

Everywhere

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