Depiction of African Indigenous Education in Akiki Nyabongo's *Africa Answers Back* (1936)

Danson Sylvester Kahyana

Abstract

This paper examines the depiction of African indigenous formal and informal education and instruction in Akiki K. Nyabongo's novel, *Africa Answers Back* (1936), and how his African characters try to protect what they have learnt from their elders (norms, customs and beliefs) at a time when they are threatened by the activities of European missionaries.. I examine how Nyabongo portrays the threats, mostly through confrontations between his main character, Mujungu (the Chief's son and heir apparent) and Reverend Jeremiah Randolph Hubert (the missionary who propagates Western notions with the aim of destroying African indigenous ones). The major finding of the paper is that while Nyabongo sees Western education as a threat to the survival of African indigenous education, as well as the norms, customs and beliefs it passes from one generation to another, at the same time, he presents this hallmark of Western culture as having something positive that African people need to acquire in order to improve their living standards, that is to say, Western medicine.

Keywords: Mission, Hubert, Mujungu, education

Introduction

Africa Answers Back is a novel by Akiki K. Nyabongo, who was born in 1904 to Omukama (King) Kasagama, King of Toro Kingdom, which had come under Britain's influence in 1891 when Captain Fredrick Lugard of the

Imperial British East Africa Company signed a treaty with the monarch, in which he promised to 'protect' him against Kabarega, the powerful king of the Bunyoro-Kitara kingdom, from whose forces he had fled (Kabwegyere 1995: 23-27). Nyabongo studied at Harvard University for an MA and Oxford University for a PhD in Philosophy, and worked at Tuskegee University and North Carolina A&T University in the 1940s and 1950s, returning to Uganda after the country became independent in 1962 (Gikandi & Mwangi 2007: 126-127). It can be seen from this biographical sketch that this pioneering Ugandan novelist lived during a dramatic period, when pre-colonial Ugandan kingdoms lost their sovereignty and became 'protected' dominions of imperial Britain, which ruled Uganda from 1894 to 8th October 1962[1]. This rule, which was marketed in colonial parlance as a civilizing mission, used education as one of its major weapons to produce particular subjects who would serve the interests of the British Empire (see Fabian 1983: 70-74; Comaroff & Comaroff 1986: 13). These subjects would look at Britain's presence in the country as an act of philanthropy, or, to use Empire poet Rudyard Kipling's oft-quoted phrase, as a 'white man's burden' (1977: 128).

The novel contains four parts. Part I is an account of Europe's incursion into Buganda, starting with the arrival of Henry Morton Stanley at Kabaka Mutesa's court in 1875, and of the missionaries, specifically the Reverend Alexander Mackay of the Church Missionary Society in 1877 and Father Lourdel Mourpel of the White Fathers in 1879. In this section, we see how the Buganda Kingdom is soon plunged into chaos as different religious groups strive to control the Kabaka's court, leading to the 1892 religious wars between Christians and Muslims, and later, between Anglicans and Catholics, in which a powerful chief, Ati, fights on the side of the Anglicans. Part II depicts Ati's return from the war and the birth of his son, Abala, whom he also names Stanley (after Henry Morton Stanley) and Mujungu (after the missionaries who, to him, 'roam' throughout the land).

Part III centres on missionary education in Buganda, and details how ten-year old Mujungu's receives education at the Reverend Randolph Jeremiah Hubert's school. Whilst there, the young Mujungu constantly challenges the missionary about what he believes to be incorrect subject matter (e.g. the missionary's view that Africans are savages) and authoritarian pedagogy (e.g.

[1] Uganda became independent on 9th October 1962.

the missionary's unwillingness to listen to his students' views).[2] Hubert eventually dismisses him from the missionary school, and Ati takes him to a private school where he completes his secondary education. The last part of the novel depicts a chiefdom in crisis: there is a smallpox epidemic that Ati does not survive. With the help of European medical personnel, Mujungu manages to contain the epidemic, and after being installed as his father's successor, he tries to introduce far-ranging reforms in the kingdom, which his wife and other subjects resent.

The author portrays an African society that is rich in indigenous knowledge, which is communicated through a 'curriculum' that includes oral literary performances (telling folktales and actively participating in riddling sessions, for instance), playing traditional games, and socializing with relatives, among others. In the section that follows, I explain how Nyabongo portrays this education, particularly its usefulness and the mode of its transmission from one generation to another.

African Knowledge Education as Portrayed in the Novel

African indigenous education refers to the 'process through which the mature members of the society sought to prepare their children and adolescents for the responsibilities and opportunities which existed in their environment or society' (Ocitti 1973: 90). Aliu Babatunde Fafunwa (cited in Adeyemi & Adeyinka 2003: 429) identifies the following as the cardinal goals of African indigenous education: developing the child's latent physical skills; developing character; inculcating respect for elders and those in position of authority; developing intellectual skills; acquiring specific vocational training and developing a healthy attitude towards honest labour; developing a sense of belonging and participating actively in family and community affairs; and understanding, appreciating and promoting the cultural heritage of the community at large.

In *Africa Answers Back*, traditional indigenous education is portrayed as happening at any time and in any place, not necessarily in a home since, as Mark Bolak Funteh (2015: 139) observes, the process of traditional education in Africa 'was intimately integrated with the social, cultural, artistic, religious

[2] Nyabongo portrays Mujungu as a preconscious child, which is why he is able to engage Hubert in arguments although he is young.

and recreational life of the people', which is to say that 'the learning of skills, societal values and norms were hardly separated from other spheres of life'. This is why, in the reading I offer below, I find instances of African Indigenous education in diverse situations, such as Mujungu's visits to his uncle and to the King of Buganda, the killing of a lion during the walk to his uncle's home, the rebuke he receives from one of the men accompanying him from school, and another rebuke from his mother later in the novel. In other words, I see instruction and learning as taking place whenever Mujungu is in communion with other people: his parents, his relatives, his King, his friends, and his people.

The visits that Mujungu makes to his relatives during the school holidays are portrayed as a form of training in keeping him one with the ethos of his people, despite his Mission education. The visits are portrayed as a big inconvenience to him and his father: to him, because he hardly gets time to rest, as he is required by one relative or another to visit him/her; to his father, because Ati hardly gets time to talk with his son. However, the visits are portrayed as very important for at least two reasons, two being important; the first being that they allay his people's fears that the Mission education may be corrupting him, and the second that he is able to demonstrate to the relatives he visits that despite the Mission education, he has remained one with them as far as language use and respect for them, are concerned. In all the visits, Mujungu treats everyone graciously and receives compliments and the acknowledgement that Mission education has not changed his regard for his people and their values, norms, customs and beliefs. Mujungu does not commit a crime against his culture, such as imprisoning a sacred python (the way Oduche, son to the priest of Ulu, Ezeulu, does in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* [1964: 42]), or against his race, and be ashamed of his black skin, as does Okot p'Bitek's University-educated Ocol, who cries out in pain, 'Mother, mother, / Why, / Why was I born / Black? (1984: 126). Instead, he remains deeply steeped into the traditions of his people, as several illustrations show.

Two of the visits Mujungu makes during a holiday are to his uncle and to the King of Buganda, the former becoming an occasion for learning about animal life. As he and his men walk through the countryside, one of them tells him, 'Wait! There is an animal in front of us' (1936: 178). When Mujungu asks him how he knows this, the man gives him this lesson: 'Did you hear that noise? Whenever you are in the woods and hear that noise, always be careful. You'll know then that there is something nearby' (Nyabongo 1936: 178). Indeed, after about twenty yards, they see three lions charging towards them.

When Mujungu suggests that they should climb a tree, the men explain to him that if they do this, they will certainly be devoured by the animals for they (the lions) will 'pee-pee' on the men till they fall down, as their pee itches so much that one cannot continue holding onto a branch. They kill one of the lions, which allows Mujungu to see how men protect themselves from dangerous wild animals, and is a practical lesson in human survival. A python attempts to attack them during the same journey, which becomes an occasion for Mujungu to learn that when a python swallows an animal or a human being, it remains in one spot for many days as it digests its prey.

The novel also shows that Mujungu is educated in the area of social etiquette. When he meets his uncle after the arduous journey, he goes into 'a complicated procedure in greeting him . . . because he had not seen his uncle for a long time' (Nyabongo 1936: 185). The narrator renders this procedure thus:

> First they embraced each other, each resting his chin on the other's shoulder, and shifting shoulders with each word.
> *Uncle:* 'Ndaba kuki, who is it I see?'
> *Mujungu*: 'Kunzesebo, it is I you see, Sir.'
> *Uncle*: 'Otyanosebo, how dost thou do, sir?'
> *Mujungu*, in deprecation: 'Aa. No, No.'
> *Uncle*: 'Otyano, how dost thou do, son?'
> *Mujungu*: 'Ye sebo, yes, sir. Osibyeotyano, how dost thou do, sir?'
> *Uncle*: 'Bulungi, well.'
> *Mujungu*: 'Agafaeno, what is news?'
> *Uncle*:'Nungi, good news.'
> *Mujungu*: 'Aa.'
> *Uncle*: 'Aa.'
> *Mujungu*: 'Um!'
> *Uncle*: 'Um!'
> And so they went on, grunting at each other loudly, then in a lower tone, until at length they were scarcely audible, although their lips kept working (Nyabongo 1936: 185-186).

This greeting, in my view, serves at least three purposes. First, it is a sign of affection and respect that the uncle accords Mujungu, as he greets him in the formal way he would have used to greet his brother, Chief Ati. Second,

it helps the Uncle to find out if Mujungu remembers how to greet his people in a formal way, despite the Mission education he is receiving. Most importantly, the greeting is a form of training in social etiquette offered by his uncle. His wonderful performance at the greeting (just as at telling folktales, answering riddles and remembering proverbs as I explain later) is further proof that he is not alienated: he is still one with the people. He is not like Okot p'Bitek's University-educated and brainwashed Ocol, whose wife, Lawino, ridicules thus:

> And you cannot sing one song
> You cannot sing a solo
> In the arena.
> You cannot beat a rhythm on the half-gourd
> Or shake the rattle-gourd
> To the rhythm of the *orak* dance!
> And there is not a single *bwola* song
> That you can dance,
> You do not play the drum
> Or do the mock-fight;
> At the funeral dance
> Or at the war dance
> You cannot wield the shield! (p'Bitek 1984: 50).

Likewise, his active participation in storytelling evenings, both as a listener and storyteller, shows that all is still well with Mujungu. He continues to hold his oral literary tradition with high regard, even after being introduced to the works of William Shakespeare, for instance *The Merchant of Venice* and *Romeo and Juliet* (Nyabongo 1936: 209). The message in the folktales he hears or tells is one befitting an heir-apparent to the chieftainship. In one of the folktales entitled 'How Kyikaraba Killed a Cannibal', two children, who are abandoned by their parents on account of their disabilities (the girl has a bump on her belly-button while the boy has a rash on his face), end up becoming royalty upon killing a witch who devoured newly born males. The folktale proposes that people should be treated equally, irrespective of their physical abilities, the lesson being that the abandoned boy and girl distinguish themselves even when they are physically challenged. In another folktale, parrots pay homage to a certain King because he makes their wish of having

their tails turn red come to pass. Not only does this show Kings to be benevolent people who are concerned about their subjects' wishes (contrary to the missionaries' and colonialists' views that they were evil people), it also extols the important virtue of loyalty to the monarchy.

In both cases, the tales can be considered a medium through which important lessons on Kingship are passed from one generation to another. They also provide a practice in language use through which Mujungu is able to hone his skill of public speaking, a skill that later becomes important when he mobilizes his people to fight the smallpox epidemic that kills his father and many subjects. Had he been alienated from the language of his people, he would not have been able to communicate, through drum language, to the medical doctors from Kilimi (Tanganyika), Mombasa (Kenya) and Zanzibar and request that they come to Uganda and fight the epidemic. Likewise, he would not have been able to convince his people to accept being treated by strangers using European medicine. Owing to his knowledge of how to talk to people in a persuasive way, he explains to his people that it is important to listen to the western doctors' advice, such as banning visits among people during the epidemic. 'I'm not asking you to do a thing which I'm not doing myself,' he informs them: 'Everything we do, we will do together' (Nyabongo 1936: 248). All his listeners reply to him, 'Yes, yes, yes, we will support you . . . Yes, yes, yes, yes. We are all willing to be scratched. Anything you do, we will do' (Nyabongo 1936: 249). In addition, the novel demonstrates how language is central to the survival of a community in the sense that it is 'the producer of a community, for it is language after all which enables humans to negotiate effectively their way into and out of nature and indeed that which makes possible their multifaceted evolution' (Ngugi 2000: 2). 'Without a language,' George J. Sefa (2014: 62) observes, 'a people are stripped of an identity, a culture and sense of self, collective and history'.

Apart from using the indigenous education he has received to deal with people politely, according to established social etiquette, there are other uses to which Mujungu puts what he has learned from his people. One of these is to defend African values, norms and traditions from the onslaught directed against them by European colonialists, who are represented in the novel by the missionary, the Reverend Jeremiah Randolph Hubert. It is to this use of indigenous education – defending African values, norms and traditions – that I now turn.

The Portrayal of Threats to African Indigenous Education

There are at least two threats to the practice and survival of African indigenous education that Nyabongo identifies in his novel, these being the activities of the missionaries (represented by the Reverend Hubert, who runs a boarding school) and the people's conservatism. The first threat arises from Chief Ati's decision to take his son and heir-apparent to a Mission school with the hope that he will learn knowledge and skills which will be helpful to the chiefdom. His decision is similar to that of Chege, an old man in Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo's second novel, *The River Between*, who takes his son, Waiyaki, to a Mission School and urges him to '[l]earn all the wisdom and all the secrets of the white man. But do not follow his vices. Be true to your people and the ancient rites' (1965: 24).

Generally, Nyabongo portrays Mujungu's people as being suspicious that the Mission education he is receiving is doing him more harm than good. For instance, when one of the men sent to accompany him from school to his father's home slips off a log he is walking on and falls into a river, Mujungu laughs instead of sympathizing with him. The man attributes this attitude to the education he is receiving at the Mission school for after asking him, 'Why do you laugh at me?' and he adds: 'You never did that before. You used to have pity for everyone who suffered misfortune. What kind of learning did you receive in school? I'm sure we never taught you that – to laugh at anybody who gets in trouble over an accident' (Nyabongo 1936: 145).

Another incident that shows the people's mistrust of Western education occurs later in the novel, when Mujungu insists on having sweet wine before a meal, and his mother rebukes him. 'I don't want you to talk back,' she tells him, 'I know what is best for you. You didn't go to school just to argue with your mother. You went to school to learn something, not just to argue' (1936: 147). In other words, to the mother, Mujungu's insistence has something to do with some habits he may have picked up from school, such as arguing with, and talking back to elders. When we remember that unquestioning obedience to elders was a pillar of indigenous education (Ocitti 1973: 90, Adeyemi & Adeyinka 2003: 434), we can surmise the gravity of the charge that Mujungu's mother is making against the Mission education's corrupting influence.

Indeed, the views expressed by Hubert on his purpose as a missionary give the reader cause to worry about the kind of person Mujungu will become

when he completes his Western education. For instance, when Mujungu hurts a playmate during a kicking game, Hubert bans African games on the pretext that they are dangerous. When a boy argues that European games are as dangerous, as his brother broke his arm while playing football, Hubert forecloses the debate in his characteristic way: 'I don't want to discuss the matter with you children,' he rules, 'I am giving my order and if you don't obey, you'll be put out of school' (Nyabongo 1936: 136). He then tells the children what his school is meant to do: 'You, all of you are being trained away from your African habits, and towards Western ideals' (1936: 136). This is an important statement in the novel, for it makes the mission of the school clear: training Africans to turn away from their 'habits', by which Hubert means their traditions and cultures, so that they may wholly embrace western values and lifestyles. It is a statement that shows the link between Western education and colonialism, for as Ado K. Tiberondwa (1998: vi) argues, 'the very act of providing Western education to the Africans and the replacement of certain African cultural institutions by foreign ones is, in itself, an act of cultural imperialism'.

Furthermore, Hubert's lessons on Christianity are tied to denigrating specific aspects of African culture, for instance he elaborates on the healing miracles in the New Testament to 'prove that Jesus was superior to the medicine-men' (Nyabongo 1936: 225). The idea is to discredit African medicine, so that the students and their relatives abandon it and replace it with western treatment. This educational aim brings to mind Thomas Babington Macaulay's infamous 'Minute on Indian Education', which colonial educators of Hubert's kind were most likely to have read, with India, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o observes, being 'the major English imperial centre from where many social experiments were exported to other British possessions' (2012: 37).[3] In this Minute, Macaulay, who was a member of the Supreme Court of India from 1834 to 1838, calls upon colonial educators to use the English language as the medium of instruction in Indian schools, as he contended that no Indian

[3]Thomas R. Metcalf elaborates this point thus: 'The practice of empire was, as well, shaped by structures of governance devised in British India. From Macaulay's law codes to the paired creation of the Collector in the district and the Resident at the princely court, from the classifying of ethnic groups to the working of 'divide and rule', the India of the Raj was the touchstone around which colonial administrative systems were put together' (2007: 2).

language is civilized enough to play this role. Macaulay's ethnocentrism prefigures Hubert's disdain for African games on the grounds that they are 'savage'. When the boys protest and try to teach him an African game to show him how good it is, he declares, 'I don't care if the game's as good as European games. You are not going to be permitted to play those savage games' (141). Hubert's unwillingness to learn an African game, and his confession that he does not care if it is as good as a European game, betrays what V. Y. Mudimbe (1988: 15) calls the West's 'epistemological ethnocentrism', 'the belief that scientifically there is nothing to be learned from 'them' unless it is already 'ours' or comes from 'us'.

By conceiving his role as being to train Africans away from their traditions and towards the western lifestyle, Hubert is following the pedagogy Macaulay championed, captured in the ominous words:

> We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population (2006: 375).

Mujungu resists Hubert's attempts at destroying African norms, customs and beliefs, and continues to challenge him, until he is expelled from the Mission school. I suggest that this challenging of Hubert's ethnocentrism at every opportunity points to the efficacy of African indigenous education as a force to reckon with, in the sense that its 'graduates' can see through the intentions of western education and work towards protecting their traditions and lifestyles against western onslaught. They are able to compare what they are taught by European teachers with what they have received from their parents and communities and to raise critical questions, as demonstrated above. This way, the novel portrays African indigenous education as serving as an antidote to Western/European education by producing 'graduates' who are able to appreciate the beauty of what they have received, and who are ready to defend this beauty against anybody who attempts to ridicule and supplant it.

It should be emphasized that what Mujungu is resisting is not western

education per se, but the Reverend Hubert's ethnocentrism and his 'hermeneutic monopoly', as Tobias Döring calls it (1996:145). By resisting indoctrination, the students are asking for a better pedagogy, one that respects their traditions and initiatives. Mujungu makes this clear later in the novel when he addresses Hubert thus:

> Sir, we appreciate what you have done for us. But your attitude has been fixed. If you will change your mind – not suddenly but gradually – with a view of soothing us ... then all of us will see that you are different from what we have thought. If you view us in this new light, surely you will change your notion of us and we will think of you in new light (Nyabongo 1936: 263).

The above quotation highlights Nyabongo's project in the novel, that of advocating dialogue between European and African worldviews, with the aim of getting the best from both. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o calls this 'building bridges' between cultures, so that each can 'illuminate the other' (2006: 389) for '[i]t is only when we see real connections that we can meaningfully talk about differences, similarities, and identities' (2006: 391). While Mujungu values European institutions, such as schools and hospitals, the missionary sees nothing worth valuing among the Africans.

There is another challenge to African indigenous education that Nyabongo alerts us too, a challenge related to the above, that of the conservatism of African people. The novel shows that Mujungu's going to a Mission school has some advantages, the most pronounced being his appreciation of Western medicine as being complimentary to African medicine. While African bone-setting offers better healing for fractures than Western medicine, Mujungu acknowledges that in the area of fighting smallpox, Western medicine is more effective. When a smallpox epidemic breaks out and kills many people, including his father, Mujungu therefore calls upon European doctors to come to his aid, which they do, and eradicate the disease. Rather than being thankful to Mujungu for enlisting the doctors' invaluable assistance, his people consider him to be a radical who does not deserve the Chieftaincy he inherited from his father. Predictably, the African doctor is not happy that his European counterparts are considered more effective than him, and claims that the 'new doctors are making all the people sick – and that their medicines are not as good as his' (Nyabongo 1936: 276-277).

That Mujungu's people refuse to recognise the positive aspects of Western medicine that helped to eradicate smallpox shows that they are not willing to accept the hybridity that Western education and medicine have occasioned. That is if we agree with Homi K. Bhabha's view that the notion of hybridity is 'about the fact that in any particular political struggle [or cultural struggle, in our case], new sites are always being opened up, and if you keep referring those new sites to old principles, then you are not actually able to participate in them fully and productively and creatively' (1990: 216). In other words, their conservatism robs Mujungu's people of the opportunity and possibility of enriching African medicine by learning from its Western counterpart. In the novel, Nyabongo suggests that while appropriate and relevant indigenous African practices need to be preserved, those from other traditions, such as Western medicine, need to be acknowledged. In other words, it can be beneficial to keep open the dialogue between cultures: in this instance, African indigenous and its Western counterpart.

Conclusion

While many scholars have studied the portrayal of Western education in African Literature, the emphasis has usually been on canonical writers, such as Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Woke Soyinka, and Mongo Beti, to mention a few (see, Mathuray 2003; George 2005; and Paustian 2014). These studies give the impression that African writers' engagement with Western education, particularly the Mission type, started with these canonical authors. Consequently, the contribution made by an earlier generation of writers, such as Akiki Nyabongo, is ignored, yet his novel, *Africa Answers Back*, preceded the canonical works by decades, being published in 1935, twenty three years before *Things Fall Apart* (1958), and thirty years before *The River Between* (1965). Not only is this unfair to Nyabongo, whose efforts have largely gone unrecognized, but it robs readers of the opportunity to know that other authors had preceded Achebe and other eminent African writers on the issue of Mission education, although not with the same insightfulness, depth of analysis and finesse of style that the later writers were to bring to their work. By examining how Nyabongo portrays African indigenous education, I have argued that while he sees Western education as a threat to its survival, as well as the norms, customs and beliefs that it passes from one generation to another, he also understands the need for

discernment when encountering other cultures, and engaging with those components that stand for the greater good, and possibly enable the survival of a people, albeit with change. Given the context within which it was written in 1936, with growing resentment to colonial authority in Africa and elsewhere, the author shows great courage and maturity in presenting a story about indigenous African culture, highlighting the points of conflict and opportunities for engagement without judgement.

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Danson Sylvester Kahyana
Makerere University & Stellenbosch University
dkdan76@yahoo.co.uk