Abstract

The urge to write *Rozaria’s memories* surfaced with much urgency that I set about the story, seeking to demystify tradition, to claim it before it could further diminish. The writing was brave, fraught with panic. I questioned over and over how my family would receive it, in particular some naked truths. What structure or direction might the narrative take? Scattered stories; whose story? In snipping it to personal history from the eyes of my maternal grandmother on her deathbed, I was able to uncoat Rozaria’s story. I mended it, fabricated it, created my own pattern, decorated it with detail and wore it as mine. Her story became my story. I had created a brand new design from the original. According to Donna Lee Brien, biographers recognise that they collect data to yarn stories removed from the disorder and complexity of real life, now neatly packaged in literary form (2014: §2). A good biographer is like a seamstress, an artisan who creates. Recollection is patched, darned, colour-matched. *Rozaria’s memories* remains a cathartic story whose significance grew manifold after the writing with the deaths of key players. Like any biography, there is still room to expand, to develop. But in its simplicity, this written artefact is my metaphor for life.

**Key words:** Culture—diversity—real life writing—family history—biography

**Rozaria’s memories:**

THE LAKE STIRS AT THE LIP OF MWANZA, Tanzania’s second largest town in population, beaten only by the capital city, Dar-es-Salaam. Mwanza is the economic heart of the lake region. But
the once animated Lake Victoria is now tame, green with pollution. She no longer boasts vast
diversity of fish, not since the water hyacinth invasion in the 1980s and early 2000s.

The free-floating menace brought with it devastation on trade by blocking ports. It also harboured
crocodiles, snakes, mosquitoes and bilharzia-carrying snails. Still, locals found use for the weed and
harvested it for paper, rope, baskets, biogas, fodder and mulch. Finally, the weed partially died or was
incompletely eradicated to something sustainable; but Lake Victoria never recovered her grace.

Older folk like Rozaria Nabigambo still remember the days of the water’s beauty, centuries of history,
as the lake wove her magic through many lands. She charted her course across colonies of disparate
people, wooing the Bantu whose men (and sometimes women) were circumcised; the Nilotes whose
traditionally gracile bodies carried tribal scarring; the itinerant Cushites, few in number, whose fairer
skin and longer, nylon hair set them apart from the Bantu and the Nilotes.

But people forgot their disparity to share in the offerings of the freshwater lake: her Nile perch,
tilapia, pied kingfisher and silver cyprinid that Kenyans came to fondly know and eat as *omena*;
Ugandans as *mukene*; and Tanzanians as *daggaa*.

The lake batted her lashes, and ran her feet across settlements of Bukoba, Mwanza, Ukerewe Island
and Musoma in Tanzania; of Kisumu, Kendu Bay and Homa Bay in Kenya; of Kampala, Entebbe,
Jinja and Ssese Islands in Uganda. There, she enamoured local communities and heartened trade.

But now, the lake is unwell and business languishes. Mwanza’s seasons follow the water’s
temperament, her castings of periodic humidity and ominous thunderheads to signal change.

Rozaria remembers those days, the olden days of prosperity when the once invincible African beauty
was not the sick giant she now is.

* * *

The bed squeals. Rozaria feels sicker than the lake today. She is an invalid, needing aided feeding and
nonstop nursing. In solidarity with her blind eyes, her feet have lost muscle and her toes have curled.
She is grateful her memory did not vanish with her sight. She succumbs often to malaria and is
constantly on the medicine drip. Her granddaughter, Flora Matoyo, Bibi’s child, talked to the doctor at the clinic down the road. Now a nurse visits.

It is close to a century since Rozaria was born. She remembers exactly things that took place years, months ago. Rozaria is helpless to see. She is unable to look into people’s eyes, or at their hands, to find their true intentions. She understands a person from their voice and the inflection it carries. She listens to the music of words, more than their meaning, and the harmony of sound, more than its source.

The years have not been giving. Age and disease have taken their toll. As does the lake, she feels tired all the time. Her life is ebbing, disintegrating. But she has seen much. Rozaria smiles wryly. The world is not as she knew it growing up. It has gone reverse. Children should not pass before their parents. As her son Melkiadi did. Yet it was Bibi’s passing that hurt the most.

‘Great Nana.’ Little Tony’s voice contains seven years of youth and triple the curiosity. He is standing by the doorway. She can tell by the proximity of his sound, and his breathing.

Her face turns toward him, peering into darkness. ‘Child?’

‘Great Grandpa is here. Shall I let him in, Great Nana?’

‘Don’t leave my husband in the courtyard with the chickens. Ukerewe is a long way to come visit.’

‘I am not in the courtyard, Rozaria.’

‘Lazaro?’ she says.

Above: A photo of Rozaria and Lazaro Nabigambo taken in 2009.
Rozaria listens to his ancient feet and the tap, tap of his walking stick, as he enters her room. Time chips much away. She remembers how he once moved without sound, no rustle of grass at his gentle tread. Her big fisherman: whatever he fished for, he found it.

He sits by the edge of the bed.

‘Are they feeding you well, Rozaria?’

‘Yes. Flora. Bless her.’ Silence. ‘Tell me about the cows, are they well?’

‘The manure is growing the maize.’

‘Then the cows must be well.’ Silence. ‘The rains fell. Have you planted in the patch near Petro’s house?’

‘Five new rows of sweet potatoes.’

Silence. ‘And how is the neighbour’s wife?’

‘Both Petro and Yohana have a wife each; which wife do you want to hear about?’

‘How about both.’

‘Yohana’s wife has travelled to Musoma to visit her daughter. Momo, Yohana’s son – his new bride will cook cassava, sorghum, tilapia and dagga for Yohana until the wife comes back.’

‘How long is the wife staying in Musoma with the daughter?’

‘Who knows? Yohana will be fine. Momo’s woman is clever with her hands and she knows her duty. She never grumbles.’

‘And Petro’s wife?’

‘She never grumbles either. She is pregnant again.’

‘At her age?’

‘There is nothing wrong with children.’

‘Already she has twenty-two.’
Silence. Their conversation, sparring and brief, holds much affection. Rozaria and Lazaro have lived enough years together to understand each other’s silences.

She wonders if his face is wearing a strong smile or one as limp as his tread, and just as lost. She knows he needs her and worries how he would be if, if... She cannot bring herself to think it. She wonders if there is still strength in his eyes. Same honey eyes that melted her the first time she met him. On her wedding day.

Everything had been put together—from the payment of a dowry of two bulls, three cows, one heifer and five roosters to the day, time and locale of her marriage—way before she saw the man to whom she was betrothed.

No wedding invitations were sent nor did they need sending. Sending invitations was stupid and a waste of time. Word of mouth carried faster and steadier than today’s pieces of paper slipped in envelopes and containing a person’s name. In the village, you would have to write everybody’s name. Anybody not lifeless or unwell like Rozaria came to a wedding. Or a funeral. You sizzled enough chicken, crisped enough pigs, tenderised enough cows, and trussed up enough spiced pilau rice, mumi fish, Nile perch and tilapia to carry a feast. People came and ate and borrowed pots to carry leftovers home.

That day of her wedding, Lazaro stood tall and fine-looking, his smiling lips the colour of rich berry fruit. A streak of something thrilling cloaked him, even as he drank togo, pure banana beer, with the rest of the men. They sat with stretched out legs on hyacinth mats under a mango tree. A calabash of brew travelled from one man to another.

Something about the sweep of Lazaro’s eyes, each time they took the direction of the stringy bark tree under which Rozaria sat with the rest of the young women, all virgins gleaming with animal fat rubbed on their skins, stirred her interest. She tried to keep her head lowered but felt inclined every now and then to lift it and wonder about her new husband.
She never felt that finger of doubt or that claw in the gut that gripped most fresh brides. Even when Lazaro took her fist, a fist because Rozaria was impatient but unprepared for his reach, finding no time to unfold her fingers into something yielding and clasping his, she never felt trapped.

She remembers the old women’s laughter, sharp as whistles, and her own mother’s closed face. She remembers the stray dog scrounging for scraps in the courtyard, his tail wag, wagging, wagging as Lazaro led Rozaria into a newly built hut.

She quivered at his approach, fearful of how he might initiate her into the real world of marriage. He took her masterfully, firmly. He was skilled and clinical like the fisherman he was. She submitted, because that was how she was raised: to submit. But he was also kind and affectionate in the way he brought down her shield of innocence. His touch dismissed everything she had heard or witnessed about the formidability of men, males like her father whose approach struck only fear in her. What Lazaro made her feel... was not fear.

Afterwards, in soft, smoky silence that left no words behind, soft because the moon’s shine was wan and smoky because her husband had rolled up a tobacco stick and was drawing on it, Lazaro continued to caress her with his eyes. She felt fragile and whole, and just then, only then – not sooner – did she dare touch him. She reached and lightly touched that strong jaw and those smiling lips the colour of rich berries.

Outside, the women’s laughter was no longer sharp or panicked. The mirth was this time belly-deep and wholesome until the sound of village drums drowned it. *Pom! Pom! Pom pi pom pi!*

*Our son has found a maiden!* began a chorus.

*A nymphette from the lake.*

*The begetter of our offspring!*

Snug in her husband’s arms, Rozaria didn’t mind the mosquitoes biting the inside of her leg. She wondered if her curiosity about Lazaro would ever end. She was still wondering when he left her just before dawn to cast his fishing net into the mist of the lake.
Dusk falls. Lazaro has not returned. He didn’t stay long with Rozaria. Said he was going to greet the others, and she knew what that meant. He was going to the local club where they brewed toggo two houses away from Flora’s house.

Rozaria knows how to make toggo. Just now she can’t. Not without feet to mash ripened bananas inside a large barrel until pulp slips like porridge through her toes. Not without hands to keep turning the barrel as the porridge ferments and its surface bubbles with foam. Not without eyes to see that the brew has reached the right colour, clear gold like ripe wheat, and the right consistency, not too thick or too liquid but just good for the calabash. Now all she can do is smell its hazy sweetness and savour its lingering tang.

She aches from too much sleeping. Lazy hands make one ill. Her bed in Mwanza is narrow and uncomfortable, more for its softness compared with the straw mattress in Ukerewe, the one she sporadically shares with Lazaro.

She misses Lazaro’s visits to her bed – it’s been a while now. He stopped coming after the medicine man’s herbs refused to work and Rozaria had to leave Ukerewe for Mwanza, to be close to the clinic. Lazaro understands her pain, the failings of her body. Before the oldness, before her body became this frail, as dusk fell and a shy moon cast, Rozaria always bathed and waited for Lazaro. Her submission was no longer a simple, unquestionable duty. After that first night, her submission turned into a gesture of willingness. It was a gesture that passed on a message. She wanted Lazaro to know, to understand, that she was more than an offering or a gift. A chicken or a goat was an offering or a gift. Rozaria was Lazaro’s wife.

Over the years, Lazaro turned their round mud hut with straw roofing to a square burnt-brick house and then a cement bungalow with corrugated roofing. Rozaria wonders if he can make logic of her living conditions now. She gets a sense of a tiny, windowless room housing her, at the back of the main house. The paraffin stench irritated her nostrils at first but now she doesn’t notice it as much.
Now and again light from the lamp filters through her closed eyes and she can see white, dancing silhouettes.

Lazaro’s return to Ukerewe is unavoidable. He feels lost in Mwanza, Rozaria knows. His fear of staying out of the village surpasses his affection for her. Despite his twice a month visits, she does not doubt his fondness. He is a different kind of man because he lets her see that he needs her.

* * *

‘David!’ yells Flora from the doorway, as she enters Rozaria’s room. ‘Tony! Bring the bowl of warm water for your Great Nana.’

Tony, who Flora sometimes calls David after she joined the other Christians, not the Catholics, and they baptised him David, still forgets his new name because he received it five years after Flora took him off her breast. He delivers the bowl his mother commanded.

Flora places it by the bedside and dips a towel into it. She squeezes excess water back into the bowl and wipes Rozaria’s brow. Her rub is gentle, kind, as loving as it must have been when she washed her mother, Bibi, in the mortuary.

Like the tradition of women in her family, women like Rozaria and Bibi, Flora has seen the death of her children. She lost two infants, Celina and Steve, and a teenage son, Michael; the first two from pneumonia, the last from idiocy – a moment of foolhardiness when the boy loaded himself with tobacco and toggo, and leaped into his mother’s car to drive it madly.

That last death, tragic and wasteful, was as sudden as Bibi’s death. She ate dinner one night, took to bed and didn’t wake up. How does a woman, strong and healthy as a cow with milk, close her eyes and die? Before it happened, there was no terrible blackness in Rozaria’s heart. Nothing like the one she felt the night thunder roared like lions and Melkiadi died.

A messenger from the boat brought news at dawn from Mwanza. News travelled by boat because Ukerewe had no power or telephone lines, and telegrams took longer to travel than word of mouth. The only post office in the island, built because missionaries raised money for it, now stood quiet and derelict near the shipyard at the port.
When Rozaria heard that Bibi had passed, coldness ran through her. She fell to her knees and howled, one single howl that lasted a small time. She took the next boat from Ukerewe to Mwanza. There, she sat on the ground, her face covered in ash, mourners surrounding her. Their wails carried for miles and miles, and people kept coming. The sun rose high and heat jumped. Oblivious to it, women and children tore their clothes, pulled their hair, and collapsed to the ground shuddering and rolling in dirt. The men sat silent.

Grave like the men, Rozaria did not cry. She felt ...drained. Bibi was gone. Loss pain is meant to be a short, stabbing thing in the chest that brings out a wail. But this pain was too big for crying. A parent shouldn’t have to bury a child. Rozaria’s mourning did not finish; it keeps coming back, like a memory. A bottomless knowing, long and winded, telling her that something is missing.

After they buried Bibi, not in the mission cemetery like the Sisters wanted, next to Melkiadi in the farm, there was feasting and dancing like that of a wedding. Everyone danced, every movement symbolic. Men turned as one to face the setting sun. Powerful feet descended on the ground, again and again. Women did half a turn, rolling their shoulders to a drumbeat gone wild. Together, they celebrated death as they would life.

‘David!’ Flora again. ‘That boy vanishes like a spirit. Tony! Take the bowl away and bring your Great Nana’s mash. Quick!’

Rozaria smiles. Flora’s protectiveness of the children she has left, like the youngest one Tony (now David), or the older one Wendo, is not clear to the outside eye. Soon as Wendo grew big enough to stay the hand his mother used to slap manners into him, he took the first train to Dar-es-Salaam. There, he first stayed with his auntie Alde, then with uncle Arnold. When uncle became too strict, the boy considered auntie Imma but she was having trouble with her husband of twelve years, who was thinking of taking a new woman because his family said so. Imma didn’t want to give the man reason to take them seriously so back again to Alde went Wendo. As for Tony, when he is not in school, Flora makes him work like a girl. Household chores.
She is different, that Flora. A bit like Lazaro. Or perhaps Bibi. Only Rozaria’s trained ear can hear tenderness snuggled inside Flora’s growl.

Rozaria smells the aroma of sorghum meal, pounded with baby spinach and fish, poured into the cup that Tony brings. Plastic gives the food a bland taste far different from the malty finish you get from a calabash.

‘Is there milk in Great Nana’s food?’ Tony asks Flora.

‘You already know the answer.’

‘Why doesn’t Great Nana drink milk?’

‘So you knew the answer.’

‘Girls were not allowed to drink cow or goat milk,’ explains Rozaria. ‘They didn’t eat eggs or meat from goats or chicken. My mother said men needed to have strength.’
‘But my mother drinks milk,’ says Tony. ‘And eats eggs and goat and chicken. Don’t you, Mamma?’

‘Times have changed,’ says Flora.

‘Why didn’t times change for Great Nana?’

‘She didn’t want hers to change. Now shoo.’

Flora’s face does not change as she replaces Rozaria’s nappy.

Rozaria knows that Flora understands bloodline. Kinship is first, always first. Despite her bark, Flora’s heart is munificent. In return, her finger with money is blessed. Her house is a place easy for the begging of hospitality, rich pickings for the opportunist. But Flora is as shrewd as she is religious.

Now she kneels by the bedside and together they pray, bead after bead of the Holy Rosary. Despite the other Christians who rebaptised Tony and named him David, Flora still prays the Stations of the Cross. Tonight, it is the mysteries of light.

‘The baptism of our Lord,’ prays Flora.

‘Be grateful for the gift of faith,’ prays Rozaria.

‘Hail Mary full of grace...’ Jointly, ten decades.

‘The wedding of Cana,’ prays Flora.

‘Give us the fruit of fidelity,’ prays Rozaria.

‘Hail Mary full of grace...’ Jointly, ten decades.

Long after Flora has gone, Rozaria is still praying. She pauses, rosary beads trembling. Inside, she experiences quiet composure.

‘What is it, my child?’ Tony hovers by her doorway. She adores this boy. He breaks her rigid world of routine: nursing, feeding, nappies and godliness.

He steps in and climbs her bed. ‘Great Nana, tell me a story.’

Rozaria sighs but lowers the beads. Tony is thirsty. His want to know is urgent. She also knows about the urgency of telling. It comes with age.
She clears her throat. Today, Tony will not go thirsty.

‘As you know, after Lazaro married me, I bore him three children: the eldest, your grandmother Bibiana; the second, your great uncle Alexi; and the third, your great uncle late Melkiadi, who the robbers killed when they came to steal Lazaro’s cows. Bibi was already married and living in Nairobi with Aloyse and the children but she came home to bury Melkiadi. My Bibi...She was a different kind of girl.’

‘The fastest in the village,’ says Tony.

‘And the prettiest.’ Rozaria smiles. ‘Did I tell you she had the neck of an ostrich and the lashes of a leopard?’

Bibi could run miles, balancing a pot full of water from the lake without holding it. Not only was she the prettiest girl in the village but the brightest. Brighter than her brothers. By the time she could walk, she could charm the meat of a chicken or a goat, even tongues or gizzards, from her brothers’ mouths. Her brothers Alexi and the late Melkiadi never caught up with Bibi. Even Lazaro ate from her hands.

Bibi was a pioneer. Unable to stay indifferent, she contradicted the world of riddles and the mastery of men.

‘She was the first woman in our family to see education,’ whispers Rozaria, almost to herself. Rozaria was brought up to respect everything tradition and girls didn’t go to school those days. Nowadays it was different. Then, girls learnt how to make good wives.

But, like the foreignness that came to the lake, suffocating the Nile perch, tilapia, kingfisher and daggaa, Christianity came to native lands. It suffocated the gods of the thorn tree and the Kilimanjaro. Catholics at the mission house baptised Rozaria’s mother and the other children’s mothers, before turning to the children and their would-be spouses because, like the water weed, missionaries travelled. They reached Musoma where the boy Aloyse, who would grow up and one day marry Bibi, was first named Matthew, like the name in the bible. But nobody in his village could say it right and the name became Matthayo, then Mateo and finally Matoyo, which stuck.
From when she was little, Rozaria watched the German Sister from a distance, as she taught village boys to read and write under the big mango tree. But little Bibi didn’t just watch. She sat at Sister’s feet. No beating could take her away from Sister’s feet, or the learning. Finally, Sister saw and understood the stars trapped inside Bibi and talked Lazaro into sending the child to a real school in Murutunguru.

Bibi ran miles barefoot to and from primary school daily and later became the first woman from the village to become a teacher. But despite being a *msomi*, educated, Bibi stayed close to culture and men fell over themselves for her hand in marriage.

But she had her eye on Aloyse, the late Atanasi Musiba’s son.

Atanasi Musiba, a friend of Lazaro’s, came all the way from Musoma to Ukerewe to beg Bibi’s hand for one of his six sons: Ludovick, Tarasizi, Aloyse, Christopher, Fortunatus or Francis. To everyone’s surprise, and Rozaria’s disapproval, because it was flouting tradition, Lazaro let Bibi choose. Nobody let Rozaria choose; a wedding was arranged, a man was brought and she married him. But Bibi got to see her groom. She put a finger on his face in the picture Atanasi brought along and picked him, way before her wedding day.

But Rozaria relented. Aloyse had an honest face and eyes that looked at you direct. A thing about him encouraged you to trust him. He was also a *msomi*, educated like Bibi. He would take her to see many
places, lands bigger than Ukerewe, Mwanza, Musoma or Dar-es-Salaam. Rozaria understood that the school in Murutunguru had done its work. Bibi wanted to see the world.

As does Tony now. He goes to an ‘English Medium’ school, they also call it International School. Tony is a new breed. His hunger for history is insatiable. Tonight, his quest is almost apostolic, like that of the Brothers and Sisters at the mission house. She learns from his hunger, as she did from Bibi’s. Tony is a bridge between times, the coming of two worlds. His eyes will look out for bigger, better. He will hunt new places, travel further than his world, explore. But his heart will always carry tradition. Just as Bibi’s heart did.

* * *

The wedding of Bibi and Aloyse was talk of the village for days and days, before and afterwards. As the ceremony drew closer, hour after hour, anticipation climbed. Suddenly, that dawn, song erupted. The moment everyone was waiting for had arrived.

Dancers swished sisal skirts here, beaded shoulders there. And the feet! Caked with red dust, their toes tapped on the earth in sync to the Ndobolo drum. The dancers’ heels made loops in the air, spraying soil each thump of the ground.

But although Bibi’s arms shone with copper and gold trinkets, she was not coated with animal fat, or wearing a sisal skirt, much to Rozaria’s displeasure. Bibi’s ivory gown was a gift from the mission. She looked stunning in it, Rozaria had to admit. Aloyse, he wore a black suit and a tie. No villager had ever seen anything more culturally distant than that.

Unsure how to navigate their feet inside floral dresses longer than the ‘Sunday bests’ they wore once a week to and from church, little girls tottered along with bracelets of purple and white Jacaranda blossoms.
Aloyse had shipped in crates and crates of white man’s beer called *Safari*. It came in brown bottles, not a calabash. That beer was not made for sharing: every person drank from their own bottle. People still drank it, even though it tasted like cow urine – given as medicine in finger-tip drops to babies who had the type of belly wind that pushed out bad stool and a squeal.

Villagers cheered when it was time to cut the big white cake decorated with flowers, a thing of awe that the Sisters from Murutunguru had baked. After the feasting and dancing, people watched in amusement as Aloyse carried Bibi over his shoulder. He put her in a car, his car. When he took Bibi away, amusement turned to fear for the children, as Aloyse’s blue car bellowed like the crocodile that nearly took a child but didn’t because villagers cornered it and beat it with sticks. The crocodile’s sound saved the child because the beast opened its mouth to bellow.

Despite education and tainting by the mission, Bibi made a good wife. She bore Aloyse a son and four daughters. But one thing she did wrong: she rejected that boy. Aloyse’s son.

Harry carried Aloyse’s blood, his face and dark gold eyes that look at you direct. He was born to his mother Christine Kilima, now Mrs Christine Ngamilo. Although carrying his son, Christine couldn’t marry Aloyse, who Bibi had already snatched. If Aloyse had known Christine was with child, Bibi might have wound up with Ludovick, Tarasizi, Christopher, Fortunatus or Francis.
But by the time Aloyse knew, Christine’s father, Jimmy Kilima, with support from her mother, Alatu Luwondo, had already wed the girl to Ngamilo. When Aloyse told Bibi he should bring Harry to grow up with his children, Bibi said, ‘Over my dead body.’ So Harry grew up with his grandmother Alatu, far away in Mbeya. Like Aloyse, Harry became a *msomi*, educated, and went to Russia to learn medicine. Now he cuts up people to take away their sickness.

Rozaria briefly wonders if she should ask Flora to send for Harry in Dar-es-Salaam, where he now runs a clinic, to come cure her. But what would he choose to cut? Her broken eyes, legs or toes? Is there a cure for old age?

Bibi was wrong, not letting Aloyse bring Harry home. No woman rejected a child, and Aloyse carried that pain with him to an early grave. He died in 1990 at the age of fifty-five. Bibi lost the stars inside her when Aloyse died. But she outlived him seventeen years.

Without trinkets but wearing the ivory dress of her wedding, Bibi looked as beautiful in death as she did when she said yes to Aloyse. Shocked them all, she did, going like that without sickness in her body or thunder from the lake.

The doctor said Bibi died of blood pressure. But Rozaria thinks Bibi was curious. She decided to go see the place her dear Aloyse had gone to find. The place that had taken his brothers Ludovic, Tarasizi, Francis; his sisters Corona and Teresa; his mother Martina Musiba; his father Athanasi Musiba; her brother Melkiadi; her baby Maria, and all the lost babies in the family history.

Rozaria’s eyes are burning, burning, burning. So badly, she wants to weep. For sorrow, for joy. She doesn’t need Harry’s curing. She has seen good times and now it is Tony’s turn.

She ponders the once animated lake whose then twinkling waters now spread a lick of green contamination by the waterfront. She wonders what memories the murky water carries and if, every so often, Lake Victoria, now tame, stirs and wants to weep. For sorrow, perhaps joy. Human cultures flourished and generations were born, as her fresh water meandered through many lands.

Like the lake, Rozaria has done her work.
Footnote

After a period of long illness, Rozaria Nabigambo slipped into a coma in Mwanza, Tanzania, and died on 10 September 2012. She was buried in Ukerewe Island the following day. Her husband, Lazaro, and son, Alexi, were present to witness her passing.

Little Tony (David) died suddenly on 17 October 2012 in Mwanza, Tanzania, following complications after a stomach operation.

Tony's mother Flora, Rozaria's grand-daughter, mourned these two significant loses, even as her health declined. She died on 3 March 2014 in hospital, Dar-es-salaam, Tanzania.

Lazaro, Rozaria's husband, died of old age in Ukerewe, Tanzania, on 30 May 2014.

RESEARCH STATEMENT

Research background: The word ‘culture’ is one of many meanings, hard to define, carelessly offered in allusion to ‘high culture, popular culture, mass culture, alternate culture, underground culture, drug culture, yob culture, the culture of violence, and the culture of nonpayment’ (Hughes, cited in Reeves-Ellington 2010: 16). In his ethnographic and anthropological studies, Richard Reeves-Ellington places his understandings on diverse constituents of culture. These include communities based on shared senses of identity, institutions intended to achieve instrumental goals and governed by expressed rules and regulations, and individuals within societal structures (2010: 3). His validity test for cultural data is when practitioners and members of a way of life accept the data as accurately reflecting contexts of their communities (2010:4). More than attitudes and behaviour of a given social group or entity (2010: 11), Reeves-Ellington defines culture as ‘a form of knowledge gained through engagement with people; it is characterized by openness and is ever-evolving’ (2010: 17–18).

Rozaria’s memories is a story of reminiscing, a burning story that brings alive to me, and perhaps others, a cultural past that influences now. In Reeve-Ellington-speak, the story looks at knowledge gained through engagement with family, nurtured with upbringing, characterised by openness. It is knowledge, ever evolving.
Research contribution:

If we wish to know about a man, we ask ‘what is his story—his real, inmost story?’—for each of us is a biography, a story. Each of us is a singular narrative, which is constructed, continually, unconsciously, by, through, and in us through our perceptions, our feelings, our thoughts, our actions; and, not least, our discourse, our spoken narrations. (Sacks, cited in Kleinknecht & Beike 2004: 745)

The past, like mine, can be another place, continuously another time. My history is as a child of diverse countries, one of which—the country of my birth—does not tolerate multi-citizenship. While my heart might hold tradition (diluted in remembrance and practice), and I might value heritage, I am adapted to new ways of thinking, of being. A new culture permeates the deep-rooted. What now exists is a hybrid culture. But what is culture? Whose culture? In his review of Richard Fox’s Lions of the Punjab: culture in the making (1985), Frank Perlin discusses the idea in social disciplines that cultures are each unique and resistant to comparison, forged from within, from without. The African ‘tribe’ or Indian ‘village’, for example, is no longer the survival of a distant, more ‘pure’ or coherent past; rather each is subject to the ‘dissolving acids of modernity’ (1990: 149–150). My family history spans many lands, traditions … and city upbringing has displaced from my tongue tribal language, has thinned custom.

While crafting Rozaria’s memories, a biographical piece that sought to clasp tradition at various points in time, I fabricated questions that influenced outcome. My bias as the biographer resurfaced ‘as a concept in relation to the types of questions posed to the respondents’ (Hammond & Wellington 2012: 14). My respondents—family members—in turn offered their own bias in the recollections they chose, and from which perspective they told them. While their memories contained facts, like names of places and people, there were multiple elements of point of view, of reminiscing that included personal feeling or thought. In determining how doing and knowing inform autobiography, Erica Kleinknecht and Denise Beike share their findings:

Research on the development of autobiographical memory in children has revealed the importance of two seemingly separate but related factors: theory of mind, or the ability to
know what another can and cannot know, and narrative skill, or the ability to tell a coherently structured story … Autobiographical memories often take the linguistic structure of narratives, or life-stories, that are shared with others through discourse. (2004: 745)

This means that, despite shared history, family member perceptions of Rozaria, and events surrounding her life, can never be an absolute match. Notwithstanding historical data, email or verbal affirmations, even photographic evidence, Rozaria’s memories is a statement of diversity. Her story is birthed from many stories, the narrations of other family members, and then positioning by the biographer. Original thought, already corrupted in recall and interpretation, mingles with secondary perception, truth as each narrator sees it. Each introspection is subjective, its truth not wholly reliant on the verbal, visual or written but rather on derived meaning. Rozaria’s memories illustrates biography as a re-creation, an ‘other’ perspective. As theorist Hesketh Pearson says, the finest biographer can only tell the truth as he sees it, with the probability that it will not be the truth as other people see it (cited in Lee Brien 2014: §2).

Research significance: Rozaria’s memories was published as creative non-fiction in Bukker Tillibul, a refereed journal with an international refereeing board. There is a difference between narrating a past event and remembering it that extends beyond early childhood:

Narratives are ‘cultural forms’ whereas event memories are ‘documentaries’ (Robinson & Taylor, 1998), and as a result those who tell the most engaging stories are not necessarily those who recall the facts most clearly. (Kleinknecht & Beike 2004: 761)

As a biographical piece, Rozaria’s memories reveals self and form through storytelling. It engages the reader, invites them to witness an act of recounting and reminiscing where subjectivity is not flawed. The storyteller applies selectively a structural approach as determined not by the subject but by the biographer. While the subject(s) of a biography can affirm or dismiss the story, its author plays the crucial role of crafting, where intention can sway readerly discernment.

Works cited


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