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# THE RIVER AND THE SOURCE

By Margaret A. Ogola

## Summary Notes

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## An Overview

The River and the Source is an epic tale of three generations of Kenyan women and their progeny, spanning over 100 years, takes the reader from a nineteenth century rural village in Western Kenya to the end of the twentieth century in modern-day Nairobi. Join the descendants of Akoko as they confront cultural upheavals, from the coming of Catholicism to AIDS, with the courage and reserve that they derive from the blood of their matriarch. The River and the Source is a capacious novel that will take you beyond the intimate life of a single family; it will take you into the heart of Kenyan women everywhere. The River and the Source has been on the KCSE syllabus as a set book for many years, and it won the 1995 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for best first book, Africa Region.

Margaret Atieno Ogola (12 June 1958 – 21 September 2011) was the Kenyan author of the book. Dr. Ogola, a paediatrician by profession was also the recipient of the Familias Award for Humanitarian Service of the World Congress of Families. She wrote 3 novels, a biography and a handbook for parents: These include: The River and the Source, I Swear by Apollo, A Biography: A Gift of Grace, Educating in Human Love, Place of Destiny. She worked on her final book titled "Mandate of the people" a book she completed before her death.

The River and the Source is divided into the following chapters:

1. Chapter One: It's a baby girl!!
2. Chapter Two: The young chief owuor kembo- a man of nyadhi
3. Chapter Three : the bride price and marriage ceremony
4. Chapter Four : a Juok!
5. Chapter Five: The cold reception

## Discussion Questions

For the purpose of learning the following are discussion questions about The River and The Source:

1. The progeny of Akoko are many, but Ogola chooses to focus almost entirely on the long line of daughters. How does this compare to other classic genealogical epics, like Marquez's 100 Years of Solitude?
2. Each generation of women embark on a path that is in marked contrast with the generation before her. How does this manifest itself in Akoko? Maria? Elizabeth? Vera and Becky?
3. How does Ogola's minimal reference to the passing of time (e.g., world events) impact your reading of the story?
4. "The leaving and cleaving was always more difficult for a woman who has to tear herself from so much, and give so much - which almost always went unnoticed." How does Wandia's reflection permeate throughout the generations?

## **CHAPTER ONE:**

### **IT'S A BABY GIRL!!**

Aketch, the second wife of Chief Odero Gogni delivers a baby girl to the surprise of the chief who expected a baby boy. The chief appreciates the light of the girl by wisely saying, 'A home without a girl is like a spring without a source' pg1

The girl is named Adoyo since she was born during the season when farmers were busy weeding. The second name, Obanda, is given to the child after the father and grandmother have a dream about the recently dead medicine man. The child would again be called Akello after her step grandmother who died childless. Now adoyo was very noisy and she got the name Akoko.

The above outlines how naming took place among the Luo. Naming was a sacred way and it had to be respected. Most often, the child would receive the name of a season it was born as the parents waited to see which ancestor would send a dream. Thereafter, if the child developed some kind of complication, for example

a bout of colic and screaming, an elder had to be summoned for spiritual incantation. Nyar-Alego, the grandmother of the child was summoned when the child developed such symptoms. She broke into enchantment marching up and down beseeching the ancestors. She mentioned her immediate dead relatives and that is how Akoko got the name Akelo. Akelo was the sister of Nyar-Alego who had been brought by to serve as a co-wife as per the customs. (pg3) Lastly, the child would be named according to its character and behaviour.

Being the only girl, Akoko had to learn how to survive in a homestead full of boys. She was vigilant. She not only earned love from her brothers but also from her father. She grew rapidly into a beautiful woman and soon young men were flocking into chief Odero's homestead.

#### **SIGNIFICANT EVENTS IN CHAPTER ONE**

1. The birth of Akoko.
2. The naming ceremony.
3. Position of a girl child in the community.
4. Luo customs and beliefs

#### **QUESTIONS FROM CHAPTER ONE**

1. What is your experience about the naming of a child? Is it in any way related to what occurs in chapter one of The River and the Source?
2. What is the position of a girl child in The River and the Source?
3. What do you think Chief Owuor Kembo meant by the uttering, A home without girls is like a spring without a source?

#### **OBSERVATIONS MADE FROM CHAPTER ONE**

- a) The second wife of chief Odero Gogni is called Aketch. The name Aketch, according to the Luo is given to a girl child who was born during the season of

famine. When we come across the household of Odero Gogni, one significant feature is, there are no girls, could Aketch be symbolic of the fact that the homestead 'lacked' girls?

b) Adoyo Obanda is also called Akelo. Akelo among the Luo means she was brought. From what Nyar-Alego mentions in her enchantment/monologue, she brought her sister from Alego to be her co-wife. What is the significance of marriage in this community?

c) The first words uttered by Akoko were, *dwaro mara-want mine*. Do you think this has anything to do with her destiny in life? Would she as a woman have a right to own anything.

d) Most often, barren women or impotent men are not named after. In this context, Akoko is named Akelo-who was barren. Would this name affect Akoko's life in a way?

## **CHAPTER TWO:**

### **THE YOUNG CHIEF OWUOR KEMBO- A MAN OF NYADHI**

Chief Odero Gogni turns down twelve suitors. Akoko is beside herself with fear that, if this goes on, she might lose a potential husband and remain in her father's homestead. The thirteenth suitor, however, is a man of Nyadhi. The entourage came from Sakwa.

Chief Odero is pleased with them. The young man-chief Owuor Kembo, urgently needs a wife. According to tradition, one cannot be chief until he is married. The qualifications of this young man are startling. It was rumoured that, Chief Odero wanted the potential suitor to be chief and preferably his daughter to be the first wife-mikayi.

As a proud father of beautiful daughter, the chief sets the bride price relatively high. To his surprise, the potential in-laws accept the challenge without question. The celebrations went on after the people had inspected the 'Jewel' from yimbo.

### **SIGNIFICANT EVENTS IN CHAPTER TWO**

1. The arrival of young chief Owuor Kembo at Chief Odero Gogni's home. His coming was full of Nyadhi (great style). It is important for one to represent himself with great style to appeal to potential in laws.
2. The role of the jawang'yo and how effective they were. It is said that even as far as Sakwa. Akoko's spirit and beauty had been heard.(Pg18)
3. The role of spokesmen and how they knew how to negotiate coining words and daring their opponents with admiration and expectations.
4. Marriage negotiations and their value, essence, flexibility and test of wealth.

### **QUESTIONS FROM CHAPTER TWO**

1. Explain the importance of bride wealth in African communities in relation to The River and the Source.
2. Was Chief Odero Gogni fair in raising bride price to such a high level? Explain

### **OBSERVATIONS MADE FROM CHAPTER TWO**

1. Aspect of marriage gives so much liberty to the father of the girl who has a choice of manipulating it the best way he wants. It is evident that Chief Odero Gogni uses his privileges but he is caught in his own game.
2. Akoko is a girl of new mettle. She confidently walks into the room and surveys her guest unflinchingly.

3. There was some kind of thorough research before one decided to marry from a certain community. This diminished chances of relatives marrying.

### **CHAPTER THREE :**

#### **THE BRIDE PRICE AND MARRIAGE CEREMONY**

The thirty head of cattle are brought to Yimbo. Dashing young men perform stunts, singing and shouting their brevity. They were welcomed to the homestead of Chief Odero Gogni where they dined and drunk kong'o until the dead of the night.

Early the following morning, the young men, stole Akoko. They ran as Akoko wailed for help from her people. The rest of the Sakwa men engaged in a mock fight with the young men of Yimbo. They broke free and were on the way with their bride.

Arrival in Sakwa was greeted with great anticipation. Everyone wanted to see the beauty that had attracted such a huge bride price. Everyone consented to the beauty and Akoko was installed as Chief Owuor Kembo's mikai.

Counting began and nine months after her arrival, she gave birth to a bouncing baby boy. The child was named Obura. She would later get another child, a girl and they named her Nyabera.

#### **SIGNIFICANT EVENTS IN CHAPTER THREE**

1. Bringing of bride price.
2. Young men eloping with Akoko very early in the morning. (Taking of the bride price)
3. Installation of Adoyo Obanda as the Mikai of Chief Owuor Kembo.
4. The birth of the first and second child i.e Obura and Nyabera.

### **OBSERVATIONS MADE FROM CHAPTER THREE**

1. The chapter voices the role of the Luo woman. It points to the direction of continuity of the generation and that is why, being a chief's wife, people were relieved to learn that, the chiefdom would continue in the hands of Obura Kembo.

### **CHAPTER FOUR :**

#### **A JUOK!**

Akoko was not giving birth as was expected of her. Her mother-in-law, maro, was so agitated. The chief too had remained with one wife, a thing unheard of. Whispers flew in the air. Several pleas had gone unheard as the council of jodongo appealed to the chief to have another wife.

The chief's young brother had now two wives and children were now increasing in numbers. This worried the maro who even accused Akoko for having cast a spell on her son. She claimed that her son was not marrying maybe due to the spell.

Akoko was not pleased with accusations leveled against her by her maro. She kept silent and gathered her courage. The following morning she wailed attracting the attention of several people who came rushing. She gave a passionate speech and thereafter left back to her paternal home.

### **SIGNIFICANT EVENTS IN CHAPTER FOUR**

1. The pressure on Chief Owuor Kembo to marry another wife.
2. The accusation that maybe Akoko had bewitched him into monogamy



3. Akoko leaves her two children (matrimonial home) and heads back to yimbo (paternal home).
4. The people of Sakwa are received coldly when they went to yimbo to claim their wife Akoko.

#### **QUESTIONS FROM CHAPTER FOUR**

1. Discuss the advantages of polygamy basing your illustration on the book *The River and the source*
2. Do you think Akoko was right to confront her mother in law in public as she did? Explain?
3. What would be your reaction if your child was accused of Witchcraft? Explain?

#### **OBSERVATIONS MADE FROM CHAPTER FOUR**

1. Akoko is a different woman, in her own words when she was young, *dwaro mara*, she earnestly demands for her own right to be respected. She stands out as a woman who would do anything to fight for her own rights.
2. There was some kind of conflict resolution that bonds this community. The society has maturity in solving its conflicts without resorting into violence. They display a maturity which needs to be embraced even in modern times.

#### **CHAPTER FIVE:**

##### **THE COLD RECEPTION**

Being accused of witchcraft (*juok*) was grave and no community among this people took it lightly. The people of Yimbo were not pleased with it. When the

people of Sakwa came calling, they were received coldly. Kong'o was not served and the case went on.

Akoko was called and she repeated her version of the story. Owuor was also summoned and he told his own story. The elders advised them both and cautioned Akoko about her quick anger. There was appeasement where a goat was to be given by the people of Sakwa to the Maro. Later Kong'o was served and friendship returned to normal.

### **SIGNIFICANT EVENTS IN CHAPTER FIVE**

1. The Arrival of people of Sakwa and the cold reception.
2. Akoko is called to repeat the account on why she left her matrimonial home.
3. Owuor Kembo explains the circumstances surrounding his wife leaving without issue.
4. The council of Jodongo deliberates on the matter, cautioning Akoko about her quick anger.
5. Feasting and drinking as friendship forged in marriage is reignited.

### **QUESTIONS FROM CHAPTER FIVE**

1. Do you think the Luo way of solving conflict is good? Explain.
2. Were the elders wise in agreeing to let Akoko go back to her matrimonial home after such grave accusations?
3. What is your own opinion about witchcraft? Do you believe in it? How has it affected your society?

### **OBSERVATIONS MADE FROM CHAPTER FIVE**

1. Reasonable resolution of conflicts heals the wounded heart and everyone leaves happy and contented. This is observed in the way the two

communities share a meal despite what had transpired between them. It is essential to listen to a case rationally so as to make sound decisions/ deliberations.

2. Anger can motivate one to make irrational decisions without forethought. Akoko leaves her children behind as she goes back to her people. Her rush decision makes her even forget to consult her husband. It is important for individuals to learn on how to control her anger.

The headwaters of a river or stream is the farthest place in that river or stream from its estuary or downstream confluence with another river, as measured along the course of the river. It is also known as a river's source. The United States Geological Survey (USGS) states that a river's "length may be considered to be the distance from the mouth to the most distant headwater source (irrespective of stream name), or from the mouth to the headwaters of the stream commonly known as the source stream

Join the descendants of Akoko as they confront cultural upheavals, from the coming of Catholicism to AIDS, with the courage and reserve that they derive from the blood of their matriarch. *The River and the Source* is a capacious novel that will take you beyond the intimate life of a single family; it will take you into the heart of Kenyan women everywhere. *The River and the Source* has been on the KCSE syllabus as a set book for many years, and it won the 1995 Commonwealth Writers'™ Prize for best first book, Africa Region. Margaret Atieno Ogola (12 June 1958 – 21 September 2011) was the Kenyan a

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