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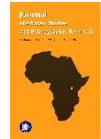
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# The human body as a weapon: A question of aesthetics, economics and military logistics



## Research Article



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### Abstract

Myths and legends have been extensively studied in orature even though they have been given a facile analysis. This qualitative desk top research presents an in-depth examination of Lwanda Magere folklore by bringing to perspective its images, signs and symbols and exposing their literary functions while theorizing the human body as a text. The study used the human body as text theory to analyse data. Berger (1987) notes that, 'Looking fixedly at certain phrases sitting on the page, they begin to move, change shape, dance, wriggle, turn inside out, sprout wings and fly about flapping from one speech or speaker to another until my wits begin to turn.' Berger's finding in literary words applies intrinsically to human bodies and objects as texts. The paper has examined human bodies in gender, military and economic senses and data from the Lwanda Magere narrative as well as narratives from foreign folklore have been subjected to textual analysis and their discussions extended to touch on human bodies as prostheses, cyborgs and weapons in futuristic science fiction. The study found out that life dramatically changes when we continue to integrate scientific and technological elements into the human body. The result will affect ethics, morality, justice, economics and to a large extent what it means to be human in the future.

**Keywords:** aesthetics, cyborgs, espionage, myth, prosthesis, thenatos



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## Public Interest Statement

This paper is an analysis of Luo folk literature and how it relates with common understanding of the human body.

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## Introduction

Myth has been defined in varied ways by different scholars. This study adopted the definition by Bascom (as cited in Bhanegaonkar & Alhaidari, 2012) who notes that ‘myths are prose narratives which, in the society in which they are told, are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past... They may recount the activities of deities, their love affairs, their family relationships, their friendships and enmities, their victories and defeats.’ Myths play several roles namely: they offer explanations for unknown phenomena; they serve a religious role in the sense that they help people understand the roles played by gods and goddesses thereby knowing which one to pray to in times of a specific need; they give justifications for the performance of different religious rituals and they give a good image of the natural and social order (Bhanegaonkar and Alhaidari, 2012). This study is a cultural analysis of the Lwanda Magere story which is used as a springboard to critique world developments, predicaments and adaptations in Kenya and the world. When mythical events are presented in a narrative form, they capture the imaginative perspectives and acquire credibility in society by crystallizing facts. This way, the mythical material becomes memorable and endures as folklore. In this position, myths represent patterns of the human world in order to show the symbiotic relationship between the credible and fictitious aspects of life. The spaces in our environments and the costumes we wear speak loudly in their silence (Blessner & Salter, 2007). People listen involuntarily and half-heartedly because it is an activity that is inevitable and for this matter, we do not maximize the comprehension of signs and symbols. Therefore, this paper has endeavoured to awaken people about the subject and make the human body visible and significant in the way we interact with one another in the contemporary and historical settings.

## Research objectives

This study was guided by the following specific objectives:

1. To identify aesthetic characteristics of the human body in fiction.
2. To demonstrate how the human body can be converted into a weapon.
3. To discuss how the nature of human body can boost economic wellbeing or otherwise.

## Literature review

The human body has been depicted in various ways in orature. In this study, we are interested in its depiction as a weapon since it has connections with weapons and tools. The various parts of the human body are used to advance violence of varied forms such as sexual violence. Shargi (2019) notes that the primary locus in which the effects of war and violence are evident in the

human body. The body is used as a tool to advance war in the sense that it targets and kills an adversary and it is also the entity that gets destroyed during war. He further observes that ‘in warfare, bodies are trained to be the mechanism of killing and they are employed on the battle fields according to the political objectives of their sovereign power. Thus, the soldier’s body becomes a weapon separated from the individual body by the political authority.’

The weapon talk has been used to propel various ideologies such as hegemonic masculinity. Messner (1992) argues that there are activities in which the human body is frequently turned into a weapon to be used against other bodies, resulting in pain, serious injury and even death. One such activity is football where different parts of the body are used as weapons against an opponent. Vaz (as cited in Messner, 1992) argues that the combination of violent adult athletic role models as well as rewards from coaches, peers and the community for the willingness to successfully utilize violence creates a context in which violence becomes normative behaviour. To corroborate the notion of the body as a weapon, Hague (as cited in Kirby, 2020) posits that ‘weapon talk encompasses two complementary rhetorical manoeuvres: the transformation of the body into an object (rape is like a gun, a tool, instrument) and the subordination of sexualised violence to a rational military purpose (rape is a tactic, strategy, policy).’

### **Theoretical framework**

The ‘Body as text’ theory has been employed in the analysis of the data in this study. While Lwanda Magere myth forms the backbone of the paper, several other bits of foreign folklore have been extracted and integrated in the study to complement what is evident in the main narrative. The Body has been theorized in multiple ways, often creating controversies and contradictions from time immemorial. Feminists, scientists and theologians have depicted the human body as an organism consisting of mind-body-dualistic-structure (Messner, 1992; Kirby, 2020; Shargi, 2019). For some brief moments, the body has been perceived as matter or as self-moving automation in which some scholars value mind over body and others believe the opposite. This debate justifies the need for investigating and illuminating the interaction between the body, actions, perceptions and meaning. In Freudian thoughts, what matters in the human body is nothing but id, ego and superego and these elements can determine how the body interacts with the environment. Without getting entangled in the divergent debates in the theory, it will suffice to say that the body as text theory in this context will simply mean a schemata of body images consisting of parts that are organized into wholes that can impart or receive meaning (Miall, 1997). Leaning towards literary aesthetics the body is theorized as the bearer of cultural information imprinted on it in terms of ornaments, costumes and incisions. These are reinforced by cosmetics, mannerisms, norms and symbolism that are coded to impart messages even if the body in question remains mute (Ogembo, 2004). Like it happens in other texts, the body lends itself to decoded interpretations that society has cultivated over a long time.

## Designs and Methods

This is qualitative research that was carried out through a survey of selected texts in oral and printed forms. Since abundant literature exists in this area, we did purposive sampling, then subjected the material to textual analysis and discussion. The images are interrogated to expose the potential multiple meanings and how these have been transformed in time and space.

## Discussion and analysis

The human body has been used as a weapon from time immemorial. Kelly (2020) states that apart from knives, guns and axes that are classified as weapons, the human body can constitute weapons too. Contrary to this standpoint, Mukwege (2019) argues that the body cannot become a weapon. These divergent perspectives are held by scholars from different parts of the world and cultures. To some extent, these contrary opinions also depend on time and place where the debate is taking place and the profession of the people consulted.

## Lwanda Magere myth

Lwanda Magere is a Luo folklore that has existed for about 500 years. This is a narrative in which the Luo hero called Lwanda Magere was considered invincible in war against the Nandi cattle rustlers because his body would turn into a stone when in battle. When he went to war, the Nandi weapons like spears, arrows and swords would not cut his body. Mayor (1938) observes that when the Nandi had lost very many battles because of Lwanda they went back to the drawing board and sent a very beautiful lady to Lwanda. He could not resist this kind of beauty so he married the girl. One day, Lwanda fell sick of malaria and needed treatment. This involved cutting his body and rubbing some herbal drug to the wound. But the body could not be cut! He revealed the secret of his body to the Nandi lady so she was asked to cut his shadow which bled then she applied the medicine to the wound in the shadow. He recovered only to discover that the woman had sneaked back to her home where she revealed the secret. Next time, the Nandi raided the Luo and killed Lwanda by shooting his shadow. It is mythically reported that Lwanda turned into a stone that still helps the Luo in ethnomedicine such as in faith healing, soothe-saying and prophecy (Ogembo, 2005).

According to this mythology, Lwanda's body turned into a rock that could not be destroyed. It became a militarised body, hardened brutally to withstand the enemy (Omtata, 2010). The main cause of war was cattle which constituted the livelihood and economic resource of the Nandi those days. The Luo kept cattle but also doubled up as fishermen and cultivators. This notwithstanding, cattle rustling became a perpetual problem between these communities. It is alleged that in those days for a young Nandi man to marry, he had to show that he was brave enough to go for cattle raids and come back home with cattle of his own to be used as dowry. Otherwise, it was hard to find a young Nandi girl who would be willing to be engaged to such a weakling who could not create wealth on his own. Therefore, the motive for cattle rustling was so

strong that it could not fade away and Lwanda Magere, being rock hard, was obstructing the Nandi ambitions, so this resulted in a kind of stalemate.

### **The war over cattle**

When the dispute between the two communities was assumed to have been sorted out by hard power method, it never ended and remained chronic, flaring up again and again. The Luo had an upper hand in hard military power tactics based on what their mysterious hero could achieve. In the face of this, the Nandi went back to the drawing board and reviewed their strategy so they launched soft power and the Luo did not know how to contain it. The lady spy or intelligent agent was so beautiful that Lwanda could not resist her. This aesthetics was used as a military weapon. It was a radical and revolutionary military technique. Soft power according to Wagner (2014) is the ability to get others to do what the person wants using persuasive influence such as attraction or intangible power, like culture, ideology and societal or indigenous institutions. Hard power is coercive and is enforced by threats, rewards, military intervention, intimidation and diplomacy based on fear. Though the Luo were tough on hardware tactics, they were weak and failed flat to contain software tactics from the Nandi.

Cattle rustling is a chronic problem in many parts of the world with adverse economic effects in the society. For a long time, this has been a culturally approved practice especially among the pastoralist communities. It is a cross border problem these days aggravated by the need of beef in large cities which provide lucrative markets for the stolen animals. In Lwanda Magere's time, cattle rustling was strengthening one community while weakening and subverting the economic base of the other. Military prowess became a vital survival tool without which a community could be wiped out. The need for inculcating aggressive tendencies in youths became desirable and so the Lwanda story became mythologized and by so doing, it gained immortality in traditional songs, folk tales and drama.

A physically dreadful looking body became glorified among men. Aesthetically speaking, militarised human bodies have populated literature for a long time and in many countries. Bousquet, Grove and Shah (2017) have examined how bodies become weaponised and they observe that no human artefact or part is intrinsically a weapon, whether it is a sword, an explosive or a chemical agent until the intention to deploy it for war is revealed. Therefore, it is the violent intentionality that weaponises bodies or things. This is achieved through relational changes of objects that generate lethality by making death events and dismemberment achieved. An object might be neutral but it can be transformed by mutating it to become lethal thereby aestheticizing its destructive capability. Lwanda Magere had attained this kind of aesthetics in war.

### **The human body as weapon**

Thompson (2003) theorizes that the female body can be topologically and spatially contested in a military sense. For instance, in the Lwanda Magere story, the beautiful lady from Nandi was given

to Lwanda Magere to subdue him. Here, the female body was employed as a weapon and indeed it succeeded where other military hardware failed. Though the Nandi beauty tricked Lwanda Magere, she remains anonymous and disappears from the scene. It is Lwanda who remains inscribed in the folk history and memory with indelible ink. Her body dissipates and melts away into nothing. She is a winner and a loser simultaneously in this war. Lwanda is given a cultural 'post-mortem' and his body is preserved in a stone, semiotically immortalizing the character unlike the woman who is short-changed. If a woman prevailed over a man, it would be subverting the 'natural' order of life, therefore, the people had to find a way of redeeming the lost glorified image of the man. It would appear that even the Nandi men would not have been happy to go down in history as weaklings who resorted to the power of a woman to secure their boundaries. Thus, even where women have contributed to save, shape or turn and twist human history, their roles are always down played at the expense of men's contributions that are always highlighted. This is concealment of historical episodes and distortion of facts because it is the lion rather than the antelope that writes history.

As for Lwanda Magere, he is a victim of complacency. He had a record of invincibility against the Nandi cattle raiders and so he did not need to worry about an attack. He therefore did not need to contain the law of duality that says that nature operates in 'yin yang' (positive-negative) pattern and the bodies oscillate in between. It is the continuous movement of energy in battery plates that kicks off an engine to start. If this movement is curtailed, the battery dies. So is man, if he ceases to have challenges to stimulate activism, he courts self-destruction. Life is sustained by the tension between the two forces such as love and hate, harmony and chaos, good and evil. Human life is a result of a continuous interplay between these negative and positive forces. Any time one ceases to be afflicted by the dual forces, he does not dread any challenges and naturally reverts to igniting forces of self-destruction (Ejupi, Silvanovska & Izeni 2014). Simply put, without challenges one dies. This phenomenon can be observed in the life of Lwanda Magere. Since he had conquered all his potential enemies, he thought that he only needed to indulge himself in pleasure (pleasure principle) and what an opportune moment when the Nandi beauty turned up!

Cherry (2020) explains that pleasure principle is the force of id that seeks immediate gratification of all needs like hunger, thirst, anger and sex. The balance between thanatos and eros was eliminated in favour of eros and he plunged into his death by a woman's snare. There was the voice of reason coming from his first wife, warning him to keep off the damsel but pleasure principle prevailed and that became his undoing. The universal law of nature entails duality as an indispensable attribute of life. That which is totally successful tends to destroy itself. This is subconsciously known and is instinctively enforced. History is replete with records of countries that had become so successful and vanquished all their enemies then destroying themselves from self inflicted implosion because of lack of serious threats or opposition. Like Lwanda, many successful people believe they should 'eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die.'

### The human body in advertisements

Presently in Kenya, there is an advertisement of *Tropikal* air freshener on TV in which a young lady comes home in the evening to meet her husband, who opens the door to receive her. Upon hugging him, she sniffs the air freshener he has just used and assumes that he has been entertaining a woman, who might have gone into hiding in the house. Her pleasant face changes and she becomes stern, then thrashes her hand bag into the hands of the husband and dashes upstairs to hunt for the lady who has encroached into her territory. The potential hideouts like the wardrobes and under-the-bed are found to empty. Without the catch, she returns to her husband who remained transfixed by the door. She removes one stiletto shoe and while threatening to hit the husband with it, demands to know where the intruder may have been hiding by shouting, 'Where is she? Where is she?' At this point, the husband smiles to disarm her, produces the *Tropikal* air freshener and sprays it then turns his back on the woman and runs upstairs. The woman realizes that she had misunderstood her husband so she follows him and catches up with him on the stairs. There, she embraces him, fondles and caresses him and this way, peace is restored to this family. While this is a marketing strategy to sell a product, it is exploiting the shoe which is an appendage of the woman's body as a weapon. The shoe symbolizes military hardware and the air freshener is represented as a software capable of neutralizing a belligerent atmosphere and reinstating desirable calm.

### Dressing the body and 'weaponizing' it

Johnson, Lennon & Rudd (2014) who have studied the psychology of dressing, argue that how a person dresses affects his or her behaviour in sexual terms. The woman in the tropical air freshener advert had a militant attitude probably because of her foot-wear outfit which gave her masculine traits. It is noted that this interpretation is culture bound. Whatever the case may be, the dressing fuses into the body and shapes the mind of the wearer and in turn the opinion of those external observers. In the advert in question, the high heel shoes emboldened the woman and to some extent subdued the man. It is debatable over who emerges victorious in this brief disputed episode. The woman had combined subtle gorgeousness with invisible lethality under her feet.

Hansen (2019) observes that there are multiple uses of shoes that people wear these days. There are shoes with phones built into them, others can be used as bottle openers, others have secret compartments for espionage agents while others are 'weaponized' shoes by which a professor was stabbed to death according to ABC news as reported by Hansen. The lady in question was wearing 'killer heels.' The dualistic image of the shoes makes aesthetic as well as legalistic sense. She had been a beauty queen beguiled as the toxic agent of death. Though the Kenyan advertisement mentioned above is supposed to be light-hearted and humorous, there is an underlying reality in the joke. This viewpoint is reinforced by Friday (as cited in Lombardi, 1997) who says: 'Believe me, beauty is a player, stalking the streets bare-breasted, stiletto heeled, fly unzipped. Its power is luminous and monumental.' This assertion highlights the fact that physical

beauty is a powerful phenomenon. This is why it is crucial to marketing different commodities like cosmetics and it promotes aesthetical surgeries entailing plastics. Though reconstructive surgeries often become necessary after accidents, so many patients seek liposuction, breast implants and hair substitution for no other reason except aesthetics. If this kind of medical intervention is therapeutic, then the disease it is combating must be self-denigration which is an enemy in mental or psychological terms.

### **High heels, fashion and war history**

The history of high heel shoes according to Jenner (2019) reveals that they were military footwear for the Persian horse riders in war. The shoes gave them the necessary stability by holding their feet in stirrups in order to make them shoot arrows accurately at their targets. Looking at the military advantage the Persian marksmen enjoyed over Europeans, the fighters from Europe adopted the dressing. First, Queen Elizabeth 1 started wearing them in order to look like a powerful man. Then King Luis the 14<sup>th</sup> of France started wearing them too and everybody in the Palace imitated him. The men later changed and wore rational shoes that were not high heeled. This left the stilettos to the women and the shoes began to be perceived to be erotic. One can see the contemporary impression about high heel shoes from this quote of Jenner:

‘Shoes are totems of disembodied lust. They are candy for the eyes, poetry for the feet, icing on your soul. They stand for everything you ever wanted: glamour, success, a rapier-like wit, a date with the sex God of your choice. . .’

For Loliyong (1973), the stilettos only fix up the Freudian penis envy for women and the debate goes on and on.

### **The body metaphor**

The body as a metaphor has evolved over the years reflecting an interplay between physiology, costume, cosmetics, dressing and psychology. Frith and Gleeson (2008) theorize that the body is a multidimensional construct. It is often dressed to reveal or hide some parts. This practice is known as revelation versus concealment syndrome. The boundary between the two has often been a debate from generations to generations. How much of the breast would one expose when and where, for example, would vary from one culture and time to another. Sometimes outfits are worn to conceal ugliness as a result of deformities and at other times, they are designed to enhance some attributes that are considered beautiful and can be used to attract friends and disarm enemies. The body as a construct is a fickle thing that undergoes transformation with time. Its ‘femininity’ or ‘masculinity’ and the boundary in between is unstable in terms of attributes. This is why what begins as military attire for men, gradually mutates into a feminine aesthetical outfit

that is marketed as such. It ‘metamorphosizes’ from the hard and aggressive military tool valued for its capacity to kill, into a new harmless product of aesthetics exhibiting sentimental glamour that attracts infatuation.

What has happened to the female body in terms of outfits, is reflected in men through body building. There is a symbiotic relationship between strength and beauty. Ogembo (2004) observes that Lwanda Magere was mythified in the Luo folklore and turned into a stone when he died. While he was alive, he had a rock stone body that could not be cut by any man-made weapon. A strong masculine body is aesthetically attractive and militarily invaluable and, in the contemporary, set up, people are generally going out of the way while trying to make men’s bodies appear strong. To some extent, this exercise is taken as a sport. Saltman (2003) notes that the male body is commonly fortified by drugs, exercise, nutrition and so on to make it ready for self-defence or defence of property in the capitalistic economy. He observes that this kind of weaponized body reflects the attitude that we live in a dangerous world where in order to survive, one must carry a dreadful image that is so intimidating that nobody can dare confront it. When you want peace, you must prepare for war and display your military capability. The body is engineered to exhibit belligerent readiness challenging any adversary to start a combative contest. At face value, the body is packaged as a muscle mass reflecting symmetry for aesthetic purposes but the core function is to be set for war.

### **Human body as a cyborg**

Sometimes, the human body is faced with medical challenges and it becomes necessary to give it a machine assistant. Such artificial organs are implanted after being engineered to be integrated into the body. It interfaces or fuses with the living tissue to substitute the natural organ. This kind of augmenting machine is known as prosthesis. From prosthesis, artists have gone a notch higher to create excess appendages or organs to give the body extra-ordinary capabilities. In futuristic literary theory, such organ transplants or artificial organs, have been fictionalized to give the body exaggerated combat capabilities in film wars. Meyer and Ashbrock (2018) give illustration in which super-villains using sporting bionic prosthesis in which a character can pull swords out of shoes. Stuart (2018) has published an article discussing how advanced prosthetics turned a man into an ‘emerging cyborg.’ The desire to make human body fit for war has moved artists to venture into the realm of cyborgs representation in science fiction. In such narratives, the characters are given malleable or versatile bodies that can manoeuvre through very difficult terrain at the battle front. They are given unique capability to handle multiple weapons and technological equipment that a normal human body cannot manage. The capacity to command movements in cyberspace is called cybermorphing. In the folklores, artists create such cybermorphing in a mythical style or legendary narration.

Kirby (2020) observes that the human body has been used as a regular weapon for a long time. His argument seems to classify the weaponised body only as male and does not consider the

female body as usable in this manner too. Kirby gives an example of the indoctrination of the American army in training to conceive their phallic organ as an instrument of conquering the enemy. He reports thus:

. . . the affinity between weaponry and male genitalia is encapsulated by the famous drill scene in Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), in which US Marine cadets declaim 'This is my rifle/This is my gun/ This is for fighting/ This is for fun', shouldering their carbines and tugging at their genitals in alternating rhythm (2020, p. 12)

He goes on to observe that the body here is psychologically identified as machine like and it is imbued with excessive destructive power. We know that the phallic organ is not meant to destroy but create, recreate and procreate. However, here, it is used as an ironical motif for humiliation, domination and destruction. The penis is represented as a gun used to impose misogyny. Many critics only consider the phallic organ as a weaponized tool for war. We agree, but go further to argue that even the female genitalia is a potential tool for war. In the case of Lwanda Magere, the anonymous Nandi girl employed her genitalia as a tool to subdue Lwanda. This 'Delilaism' is a soft power unlike the hard power where the male phallic organs are key. Both female and male organs are normally used to procreate, but where they are used belligerently, they can be considered as biological weapons. It is theorized here that in Lwanda Magere folklore the female and male bodies are fictionalized as weapons of aggression and defence.

### Conclusion

The paper finds that bodies, human and non-human, speak in spite of their silence. In their mute functions in narratives, they impart subtle meaning that readers or listeners stand to gain if they remain alert to them. These images and symbols are affected by time and space in history. To understand folklores, a reader or critic needs to pay attention to the silent spaces, objects and costumes and remain alive to their historical transitions, transformations, superimpositions and synthesis. The study of Lwanda Magere has been used here as a sample material to buttress the discussion. However, many other narratives can be subjected to similar rigorous examination. As the world is increasingly going digital and technology dominates our communication, heuristic capacity to decode literary texts becomes invaluable to navigate our way in academic discourses. It is evident that science fiction will demand this kind of skill thus, it is recommended that more narratives of that kind be investigated in a similar manner to figure out their aesthetics, economics and military implications.

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This is the original work of the authors and has not been submitted to any institution for examination or any other journal for publication.

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