



Film Synopsis

Queen of Katwe is based on the colorful, true story of a young girl selling corn on the streets of rural Uganda. Her world rapidly changes when she is introduced to the game of chess, and, as a result of the support she receives from her family and community, is instilled with the confidence and determination she needs to pursue her dream of becoming an international chess champion. Directed by Mira Nair (*Monsoon Wedding*) from a screenplay by William Wheeler (*The Hoax*) based on the *ESPN Magazine* article and book by Tim Crothers, *Queen of Katwe* is produced by Lydia Dean Pilcher (*The Darjeeling Limited*) and John Carls (*Where the Wild Things Are*), with Will Weiske and Troy Buder serving as executive producers. The film stars Golden Globe® nominee David Oyelowo (*Selma*), Oscar® winner and Tony Award® nominee Lupita Nyong'o (*12 Years a Slave*), and newcomer Madina Nalwanga.

For Phiona Mutesi (Nalwanga) and her family, life in the impoverished slum of Katwe in Kampala, Uganda, is a constant struggle. Her mother, Harriet (Nyong'o), is fiercely determined to take care of her family and works tirelessly

selling vegetables in the market to make sure her children are fed and have a roof over their heads. When Phiona meets Robert Katende (Oyelowo), a soccer player turned missionary who teaches local children chess, she is captivated. Chess requires a good deal of concentration, strategic thinking, and risk taking, all skills that are applicable in everyday life, and Katende hopes to empower youth with the game. Phiona is impressed by the intelligence and wit the game requires and immediately shows potential. Recognizing Phiona's natural aptitude for chess and the fighting spirit she's inherited from her mother, Katende begins to mentor her, but Harriet is reluctant to provide any encouragement, not wanting to see her daughter disappointed. As Phiona begins to succeed in local chess competitions, Katende teaches her to read and write in order to pursue schooling. She quickly advances through the ranks in tournaments, but breaks away from her family to focus on her own life. Her mother eventually realizes that Phiona has a chance to excel and teams up with Katende to help her fulfill her extraordinary potential, escape a life of poverty, and save her family.



Learning About the Setting



Phiona Mutesi is a nine-year-old girl when the film opens. She lives with her family—her mother; her older sister, Night; and two brothers—in Katwe, the largest of eight slums in Kampala, the capital of Uganda. Uganda is the ninth largest country in Africa by population.¹ Children age 14 or younger make up 48.2 percent of the population.² Most of the population depends on agriculture for a living, but many country people have moved into the city of Kampala in recent years, finding food and shelter where they can.

1. What did you learn from the film about life in Katwe?
2. How do the people of Katwe respond to the hardships they face in their daily lives?

3. Use the search term “Kampala” to find photos on the Internet of downtown Kampala. Compare these pictures with the photo of Phiona’s family in front of their home in Katwe, which is also part of Kampala. Why do you suppose there is such a difference between downtown Kampala and the area where Phiona lives?
4. How does the economic inequality affect the Pioneers, Phiona’s chess team, and their opponents when Phiona and her teammates compete in chess tournaments?

¹ <http://www.statisticstimes.com/population/african-countries-by-population.php>

² <http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?crName=Uganda>

Phiona's Family



Even before the first scene of the film, Phiona's family had known great hardship. Harriet Nakku gave birth to her daughter Night when she was only 16; Night was followed by four more children: Juliet, Brian, Phiona, and Richard. Left destitute when Phiona's father died, and heartbroken over the death of her daughter Juliet, Harriet moved the rest of her family to Katwe, where she worked very hard to give them food and shelter.

1. What responsibilities do Brian and Phiona assume every day? How do their lives compare with those of a boy or girl their age in your country?
2. What risks do Brian and Phiona face in their daily lives? How do they handle those risks?
3. When Brian is injured, Harriet takes him to a hospital that she knows she cannot afford. Do you think she did the right thing? Can you think of a time when you or someone you know had to make a hard decision that others might have disagreed with?
4. What do Harriet Nakku and Night argue about? Why do they argue? How does Night show that she really cares about her family?
5. What is Phiona's dream for her family? What is your dream for your family? How are your dreams similar to Phiona's?

For further reading about health and medical care in Uganda, see <http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/country-region/uganda>.

Robert Katende, Mentor

After giving birth at 15, Robert Katende's teenage mother left him with his grandmother in an isolated village in Uganda; he never really knew his father. In the 1980s, while Robert was still very young, the guerrilla warfare known as the Ugandan Bush War was fought, and Robert, his grandmother, and another toddler she cared for were forced to evacuate from the shack that was their home. For two years, they lived in the open, foraging for food and moving constantly.

Eventually, Robert's mother came back and took him to live with her in Kampala so that he could attend school, and the two formed a close bond. But his mother's early death left him a virtual orphan again, living with relatives. His high marks and his soccer skills earned him scholarships, first to a private boarding school and then to a university, where he earned a degree in civil engineering. Given a chance to pursue an engineering job, Robert decided instead to devote his life to helping the children of Katwe.

1. In what ways does Robert's early life prepare him to be a mentor to Phiona?
2. Why does Robert end up working for the Sport Outreach Ministry? What makes him decide to teach chess there?
3. What challenges did he face in arranging for the Pioneers to participate in chess competitions? How did he resolve these problems?
4. How does he use storytelling to teach the Pioneers? Has anyone ever told you a story that made a profound impression on you and perhaps even changed your outlook?
5. Why does Robert choose to stay with the Sports Outreach Ministry even when he is offered a better-paying job? Do you agree with his decision? Why, or why not?



6. How and why does Sarah, Robert's wife, support him in his efforts?
7. How has Robert changed the Pioneers' lives? How have the Pioneers changed his life?
8. Have you had a mentor in your life who has helped you at a critical time? If so, what did you and your mentor learn from each other? Do you think your mentor might inspire you to eventually be a mentor to someone else?

To learn more about the real Robert Katende, watch the 13-minute documentary "A Fork, a Spoon, and a Knight" at <http://www.queenofkatwe.com/robert-katende/>.

Learning the ‘Game of Kings’

The game of chess originated in India in the 6th century; it was there that the earliest forms of pawn, knight, bishop, and rook were found. From India, it spread to Persia, where the cry of “*Shah mat!*” (“The king is helpless”) probably gave rise eventually to the term “checkmate.” The playing of the game expanded throughout the Muslim Empire and by 1000 A.D., chess had arrived in Europe. Today, chess is played all over the world, and international competitions under the supervision of the *Fédération Internationale des Échecs (FIDE)* occur regularly. The Uganda Chess Federation was formed in 1972. The film *Queen of Katwe* has spurred a boom in interest in chess in Uganda and around the world.

1. Why does the game of chess appeal to Phiona? How does chess open up other opportunities for Phiona?
2. How do the other children treat Phiona when she first starts coming to play chess? How does Phiona overcome their antipathy? Have you ever felt like an outsider when you joined a class or group? How did you learn to fit in?
3. What does Robert mean when he tells the children, “Use your minds. Follow your plans. You all will find safe squares”? How do the lessons learned by playing chess help the children in their daily lives?
4. Robert and Phiona’s mother strongly disagree several times, even though they both care deeply about the children. Why do they have different visions for Phiona? How do they resolve their different visions? Describe a time when you compromised to achieve a goal; how successful was the compromise?

5. Phiona was at a disadvantage in her efforts to learn more sophisticated chess moves because she could not read chess books. How did she overcome this difficulty? Why is it important to be able to read? What should be done in countries such as Uganda to improve education for all children?
6. In your opinion, should chess be taught in school, as Robert Katende has urged? If you think it should be taught, how might you implement chess in your school? Does your school have a chess team?



Want to learn how to play chess?

<http://www.thechesswebsite.com/>

<http://www.chesscorner.com/tutorial/learn.htm>

To learn more about the Sports Outreach Ministry that employs Robert Katende and sponsors the chess club, see their website at <http://www.sportsoutreach.net/>.

Becoming the Queen of Katwe

1. Why is the president of the Chess Federation reluctant to support the Pioneers and let them enter competitions? How does Robert persuade him?
2. What particular challenges do the children face when they travel to chess tournaments? How does Robert encourage them?
3. Why is the *gomesi*, the traditional Ugandan dress for women, so important to Phiona's mother? Why does she sell it? Have you ever given up something important to you? What was it, and why did you give it up? How did you feel?
4. Why is Phiona so focused on winning tournaments and becoming a master?
5. The queen is the most powerful piece on the chessboard. When a pawn, a small piece, crosses to the far side of the board, it can become a queen. "In chess, the small one can become the big one." How does this idea inspire Phiona to succeed? Can this idea be applied to other aspects of her life? How might you apply that phrase to your own life?
6. Why are Phiona's victories so exciting to the people of Katwe? What are other instances in which a sports championship or other victory has effects far beyond the success for the individual?
7. Do you think Phiona changes as a result of her participation in the tournaments? If so, how? How does life change for her family as a result of her successes?



To learn more about international chess tournaments, see <http://www.fide.com/>.

To learn more about chess in Uganda today, see <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/07/disney-movie-sparks-chess-boom-uganda-160717075324646.html>.

Phiona Mutesi and Robert Katende: Where Are They Now?

*“I was only thinking how can I manage to get something to eat.
But now I’ve got hope of becoming a grandmaster, a doctor,
even building an orphanage for slum kids.”³*

— Phiona Mutesi

Although the plot of *Queen of Katwe* reads like a Cinderella story, the people it portrays are real, and the circumstances of their lives are accurately portrayed in the film. At age nine, Phiona became fascinated by the game of chess, which she had never seen before; it was popular among the children of wealthier Ugandans but unknown in the area where Phiona lived. Her rise to become the National Women’s Junior Champion of Uganda and then her victory in the International Children’s Chess Tournament in Sudan stunned the chess world.

Today Phiona attends a boarding school in Kampala, where she is in the equivalent of 12th grade in the United States; her brothers and several of her friends attend with her. She enjoys science and hopes to become a doctor. She is currently applying to colleges, some of which are in the United States. In 2013, she was invited to a Women of the World summit in New York City, where she won a grant of \$25,000 to spread the teaching of chess in her country. She has run a highly successful chess clinic for Ugandan girls, not only teaching the game, but also encouraging them to continue their education.



Like Phiona, Robert Katende continues to use chess to effect change among the children of Kampala in his role as the Uganda Ministry Director of the Sport Outreach Ministry. He has also extended his outreach to Gulu, a war-torn part of northern Uganda. He, his wife, Sarah, and their three daughters live in Kampala.

To read an interview with Phiona and Robert from May 2016, see <http://www.impactmania.com/article/phiona-mutesi-commenting-espn-disney-film-based-life/>.

³ Am Fallon, “Uganda: From Slum Girl to World Chess Prodigy,” Inter Press Service News Agency, (May 28, 2013) at <http://www.ipsnews.net/2013/05/from-slum-girl-to-world-chess-prodigy/>.

The Children of Uganda

As you look at the picture on this page, you see a striking illustration not only of the literal burdens carried by many of the girls of Uganda, but also of their remarkable resilience.

As Robert Katende and Phiona both found out, having an education can make all the difference in one's life. Uganda has made great strides in increasing literacy and encouraging primary school enrollment. Many organizations are working to improve the status of girls' education in Uganda. You can investigate the work of some of these agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the resources listed in the box below.

Research Questions:

1. In spite of high primary school enrollment, few children (less than 20 percent of both boys and girls) continue to secondary school in Uganda.⁴ Why is education so important in improving health and economic opportunity? What could be done to increase secondary school attendance?



2. There are many countries in the world where girls do not have the same educational opportunities as boys, or where they are even forbidden to get an education. Malala Yousafzai, a young Pakistani girl, was even shot because she spoke out in favor of girls' education; fortunately she survived her injuries. While still a teenager, she has been a global leader in this area. Why is it important for us as a global community to improve educational opportunities for girls? How would you suggest addressing this challenge?
3. Are there any challenges girls face in your own country with respect to education? In your own school? If so, how can the situation be improved? What can you do?

Resources to learn more about education in Uganda:

- The Let Girls Learn initiative of the Peace Corps and the United States Agency for International Development at <https://letgirlslearn.peacecorps.gov/>
- The Girls' Education Movement at http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/uganda_53331.html
- The Kasiisi Project Girls Support Program at <https://www.globalgiving.org/projects/girl-support-project-in-uganda-africa/>
- Literacy and Adult Basic Education (LABE) at <http://labeuganda.org/web/>
- Church-based organizations such as the Sports Outreach Ministry

⁴ http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/uganda_statistics.html

Mentoring



The word “mentor” comes from the 3000-year-old Greek epic *The Odyssey*, by Homer. In this story, Odysseus is away from home for 20 years, leaving his young son under the guidance of a wise man named Mentor. When his son, Telemachus, sets out to find his father, the goddess Athena assumes the appearance of Mentor to guide him on his quest. To “mentor” someone today means to provide advice and help, usually to a younger person, and to be a trustworthy guide and counselor.

Here are some questions to help you think about mentoring:

1. What qualities should someone have in order to be a successful mentor?
2. Why might someone choose to become a mentor? What might be the personal benefits of being a mentor?
3. Can you give an example of someone who has mentored you at some stage of your life? How did that person help you?
4. What advice would you give to someone who is volunteering to be a mentor of an adolescent? Are there any rules he or she should follow?

To learn more about being a good mentor, see these websites:

- The short version at <http://polaris.gseis.ucla.edu/jrichardson/documents/mentor.htm>
- The in-depth version at <http://www.mentoring.org/program-resources/mentor-resources-and-publications/>
- A database of mentoring opportunities at <http://www.mentoring.org/get-involved/become-a-mentor/#zipsearch>

Organizations that provide mentoring:

- Boys and Girls Clubs of America at <http://www.bgca.org/>
- Girl Scouts at <http://www.girlscouts.org/>
- Boy Scouts at <http://www.scouting.org/>
- My Brother’s Keeper at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/my-brothers-keeper>
- Bright Spots (recognized by White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics) at <http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/list/hispanic-initiative/bright-spots.html?queries%5Bsearch%5D=mentor>

A video from the White House about being a mentor:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Atm3P3XsAag>

Sign up to be a mentor:

- <http://www.serve.gov/mentor>

5. What organizations exist in your community or school to provide mentoring?
6. When have you been a mentor to someone? How successful was your experience? If it worked well, why do you think your mentorship was successful? What did you learn from it?



Film credits:

DIRECTOR: Mira Nair

Based on the book *The Queen of Katwe*, by Tim Crothers

SCREENPLAY: William Wheeler

PRODUCERS: John B. Carls, Lydia Dean Pilcher

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: Troy Buder, Will Weiske

MUSIC: Alex Heffes

Image credits

Photos courtesy of Walt Disney Pictures

This discussion guide for the film *Queen of Katwe* was written by Eileen Mattingly, Director of Education at Journeys in Film. For additional free materials to bring the world to your classroom, see <http://journeysinfilm.org>.

The Walt Disney Studios would like to thank the incredibly talented team of filmmakers for creating a beautiful and brilliant film: director Mira Nair, producer Lydia Pilcher, producer John Carls, writer Bill Wheeler, and actors Lupita Nyong'o and David Oyelowo. A special thank you for the studio leadership of Alan Horn, Alan Bergman, and Sean Bailey. Lastly, thank you to Tendo Nagenda, Theresa Cross, and Anastasia Ali-Noble for their support throughout the development of this discussion guide.

