

JAHAZI

Culture

Arts

Performance

Vol 8 Issue 1 2019



Intergenerational
Dialogues

The Forum

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The Journal is the result of an initiative by Twaweza Communications - Nairobi, and founding Editor Bantu Mwaura, to encourage dialogue between academicians and arts practitioners. The space is used to capture issues on culture, especially cultural expressions related to the arts in Kenya and the East African region and suggest theoretical and policy directions.

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From the Editor

G Olunya & Mueni Lundi

Conversations across generations have always been difficult. And for a country like Kenya, where cultural systems that ensured the continuities and relevancies of these dialogues were disrupted, and where the very things that define the tradition, or culture – the way we do – have changed significantly, these fractures are even more pronounced. Technologies have skewed matters further, with social media providing alternative worlds, and enabling the existence of alternative lives, where the virtual is increasingly perceived as the real. So how do we continue to speak, to fight, and to engage with each other across age, across ideology, across practice? How do the younger generation rebel and grow, as they must, and the older provide the much-needed bulwark of a steady resistance? In this Issue of *Jahazi*, we share some of the conversations from a series of Intergenerational Dialogues fora held in Nairobi as well as related and topical articles.

In the first conversation on 'The History and Evolution of Kenya's Music,' at the Kenya National Theatre, Tabu Osusa, Director of Ketebul Music pointed out the young peoples desire to identify with Western, rather than the different traditional types of musics from our own communities. In *Shades of Benga: the Story of Popular Music in Kenya: 1946-2016* by Ketebul Music, he calls for a national repository, and decries the lack of 'systematic and reliable archives [that] has made it virtually impossible for emerging artists to retrace and reconnect to the rhythmic path and be creatively innovative with the rich sounds inherent in our cultures.' Steenie Njoroge samples a chronology of some of these archives. Kimani wa Wanjiru is concerned with identity formation around a national sound – a long drawn out and contested space – while Gazemba reflects on Peter Akwabi, Omutibo artist, who nurtured the next generation of music producers –his own children– at home.

Out of the second forum held at the Mnet Studios, focusing on 'The History and Evolution of Kenya's Film', Edwin Nyutho looks at the growth of film from its beginnings as a colonial propaganda tool, while Peter Mudamba, in a spirited discussion, remembers some of the challenges of growing a local theatre. He straddles theatre and film, and is critical of the continued absence of a facilitative legal environment as well as the perennial lack of resource allocation. John Ruganda is the subject of Oluoch Obura's homage, which gives a front row seat on the local establishment of the Free Travelling Theatre, and its impact on the growth of the genre. (It helps to contextualize the emergence of Ngũgĩ's well-known work with theatre at Kamiirithu, for instance.) Providing a backdrop to these developments is a piece from Gichora Mwangi's doctoral work on Colonial Theatre in Kenya [in Memoriam].

Dance and Conceptual Arts were the focal point of the third forum held at the Godown Arts Centre. Opiyo Okach, internationally renown dancer and choreographer takes a different and exciting turn on his journey with contemporary dance, from his base



in the diaspora. From her location at the Bomas of Kenya in Nairobi, Kahithe Kiiru, head choreographer of the national dance company looks at the idea of 'authenticity', and the challenge of reconciling innovation with tradition. Wambui Kamiru Collymore reflected on her Installation works centred on colonialism and freedom. Her Art Installation, *Wakariru*, ran from March/April 2019 at the Rosslyn Riviera, hosted by the One-Off Gallery, and is reviewed here.

According to Tabitha wa Thuku, the Visual Arts were once considered as 'something funny.' At the 4th forum at held at the Godown Arts Centre, it was evident that it has come of age. Initially driven from Kampala through the Margaret Trowell School of Art at Makerere, the genre has grown, with Paa ya Paa, the oldest art gallery in Nairobi, standing as testament to its diversity and versatility. The proprietors, Elimo and Phillda have, however, struggled to keep it alive and spoke to the polarization and challenges that have dogged this creative sub-sector. Elimo, who famously did the murals in the Muranga Cathedral (then Fort Hall) in 1959, spoke of the racism that held the colonialist back from believing that an African artist was capable of such work. We visited Paa ya Paa, and share a sense of the vitality of the Njaus' commitment, and their legacy to the visual arts.

Colonialist legacy is seen from an interesting perspective in words and pictures by Chao Tayiana, who looks through the so-called lunacy of the Kenya-Uganda railway, which mainly revolved around how much it cost the British taxpayer, to looking at the untold stories of ways it impacted indigenous and other lives lived alongside it. [This, for instance, is the subject of Peter Kimani's *Dance of the Jakaranda* (2017)]. If cost is the criteria for judging lunacy, then its replacement, the Standard Gauge Railway (est. US\$3.6 billion and counting) takes us clear off the grid.

The literary world has suffered two major losses. Locally, we salute Binyavanga Wainaina, founding editor of *Kwani?*, who passed on in May 2019. His critique, and embrace of the ironies and contradictions of our everyday lives was the stuff of legend. In fine critical form, Rasna Warah helps us to mark the passing of a true iconoclast. With Tom Odhiambo, we salute Pulitzer Prize winning and Nobel laureate Toni Morrison, a spectacularly phenomenal woman. Barack Obama called her a 'national treasure' and said this in tribute: "Her writing was a beautiful, meaningful challenge to our conscience and our moral imagination. What a gift to breathe the same air as her, if only for a while." She has not only left us a rich body of work; as an editor, teacher, and mentor, her influence on such incisive younger writers as Taiye Selasie of *Ghana Must Go* (2013) reassures us that she will live on.

The front cover photo is by Thandiwe Muriu, whose bold signature in textile and texture continues through the Issue. We carry photographs by Chao Taiyana, Emmanuel Jambo, Ketebul and Steenie Njoroge. Our back cover is a rendering of the upcoming GoDown space that looks to impact on the cultural and creative landscape of the capital city.

Karibu!

From the Publisher

Kimani Njogu

This issue of *Jahazi* has been developed alongside intergenerational dialogue fora on the creative sector organized by the Creative Economy Working Group (CEWG), with the support of the Lambent Foundation, over the last one year. The overall goal of the fora was to discuss the arts and cultures of Kenya historically and seek to situate current trends. Intergenerational dialogues are vital social vehicles which facilitate purposeful, contextualized and ongoing interactions, learning and sharing of resources among younger and older generations. Programmatically, the dialogues can occur in community settings, educational institutions, entertainment areas and spiritual spaces, among others. They are important for building trust, establishing connections and crafting humanizing philosophies about life.

CEWG believes that intergenerational learning exchanges enhance our understanding of how cultures and their artistic expressions contribute to the transformation of communities. Therefore, the fora created a space for exploration of the discontinuities and continuities in the creative sector during the pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods. At the core of the intergenerational dialogues was a conceptual understanding that social change is a consequence of deliberate reflection and sharing about societal events among different age groups. Despite this recognition, there are few programs that encourage intergenerational perspectives in development and quite often talents, skills, energies and resources of older people are not harnessed to serve younger people. Because many artists today are self-taught, they do not benefit from learning about the history of art as it is taught in educational institutions. But even within these learning institutions, the evolution of cultural and creative industries is taught thinly due to a paucity of documentation. Moreover, the structure of our educational institutions alienates and excludes older artists from sharing their experiences. The education system is far too examination oriented and removed from actual practice of the arts in real life. Intergenerational segregation, negative stereotyping based on age, and poor quality of social networks between youth and older people undermines transfer of knowledge. Given the role of culture and the arts thereof, in identity formation, community development, building social cohesion, increasing feelings of well-being and happiness, debunking myths about communities, and advancing inclusion, regular dialogues, knowledge sharing and skills transfer are imperative.

During the CEWG Intergenerational Dialogues, participants took an active role in determining the form and content of the exchanges. There was sharing of key issues in culture and cultural expression, and an underlining of how the cultural and creative industries can become drivers of political and socio-economic transformation. They ignited a curiosity about how repressive political regimes stifle the arts through censorship and the need to protect artistic freedom, freedom of expression and freedom of the media at all times.

Some of the questions discussed revolved around how artists have contested power relations over time; how they have reclaimed artistic spaces, captured shifts in





political, economic and social formations; asserted their legitimacy and articulated the enjoyment of arts and cultures as a human right in the face of repression by the state and its agents; the shifts in the assemblage and consumption of artistic products in the context of advances in information technology; and how identities and appearances are captured by artists to show their malleability and impermanence. The dialogues which were held in spaces associated with the culture, specifically the arts in Nairobi, were animated and candid. It was evident that learning was happening across generations.

There were discussions about how artists have fought for social justice and interrogated socio-cultural divides and philosophies entrenched under colonialism and in the pursuit of power in the post-colonial era. Generations of visual and conceptual artists, film-makers, animators, musicians, theatre practitioners, and dancers shared their knowledge and experiences. Occasionally, there would emerge a sense of impatience with the uncritical acceptance of influences from the West. While there was recognition that the language of the creative sector in Kenya will invariably change with time, its inner core ought to be rooted in the communities who inspire and consume the creative output. Artists shared thoughts about the value of continued learning, especially around available technologies which can facilitate production and distribution of artistic products.

The decision to hold the fora in spaces associated with the arts and cultures of Kenya was deliberate. It is an attempt to reclaim space for the sector. From the 1930s to the 1960s most housing estates built for African residence in Nairobi had social halls. Pumwani was built as a response to the 1921-1922 urban protests movement led by Harry Thuku after Kenya became a British colony. Later, with the growth of the civil service, other social halls such as Landhies, Ziwani, Kaloleni and Makongeni were built as art spaces and for other social activities. Indeed, in the early 50s, the Queen of England was a distinguished guest for the National Schools Drama Festival held at the Kaloleni Social Hall. But these halls have been neglected and have, over time, ceased to be centres of artistic expression. On the other hand, The Kenya National Theatre, initially built to cater for colonial audiences, has been a site of struggle for the freedom of artistic expression. In order to grow the creative sector, we must continue to support newer spaces such as MNet Studios, and older ones like the GoDown Arts Centre, which is rebuilding.

After the series of these Intergenerational Dialogues, one was left with a strong feeling that the creative sector ought to purposefully organize intergenerational programming and community development. This would enhance understanding of societal opportunities and challenges, create a greater sense of belonging to community, embrace the role of history in comprehending contemporary events and imagine a future for the arts in our evolving culture.

From Omutibo to Mandugu Digital:

Akwabi's Legacy

Stanley Gazemba



As a youngster, Peter Akwabi says he first heard music from his mother, who claimed the songs she was singing around the homestead as she worked had come from elephants passing through her maternal uncle's farm on their way to a watering hole at the edge of the farm. Of course the young Akwabi did not believe her, arguing that elephants could not sing. But his mother was adamant, insisting that there were melodies and rhythms, indeed music, that she could discern in the trumpeting of the beasts!

Later, as his interest in music grew he became friends with George Mukabi, who often visited his relations living in Akwabi's village. Mukabi would later introduce Akwabi to 'real' music. Mukabi, who had already mastered playing the acoustic guitar, was much older than Akwabi, and so, to convince Mukabi to tutor him, Akwabi offered to become his porter, carrying the older musician's instrument to gigs in the neighbourhood during school holidays. In December, especially, there were lots of dances in the village.

As Akwabi lugged the guitar on his shoulder Mukabi would follow close behind on his bicycle, cycling leisurely as he kept an eye out on the boy, lest he drop his prized instrument. With them was another musician from the area, Jackton Malenya, who accompanied Mukabi on the vocals, striking out a rhythm on a Fanta bottle using a six-inch nail. To complete the line-up was Philip Ochieng, whose specialty was tapping out a beat on a Tusker bottle. Save for Mukabi's much-prized acoustic guitar, these improvised instruments completed their set.

According to Akwabi, "During the dance Mukabi would spot a lady he liked and pause playing, handing the guitar to me... He would then playfully encourage me to play a few notes on the instrument, which I did because I had been observing what he was doing. To my surprise, Mukabi would applaud and encourage me to keep playing on. Of course what I did not know even as I entertained the patrons, was that he (Mukabi) had long slipped off with the lady and left me to entertain the party!"

It was in this way that the young Akwabi slowly started gaining stage confidence, making full use of these opportunities as understudy. He was always careful not to damage the prized guitar even as he belted out Mukabi's favourites like '*Fanyeni Mchango Tununue Ndege*', '*Ndoto za Kanga*', '*Vipusa Shuleni*', '*Bibi Mzuri Nyumbani*', and more.

But shortly after, Mukabi and Malenya migrated to Nairobi after they got jobs with the Kenya Railways, leaving Akwabi behind. It was while he was in Class 7 in 1963 that Akwabi got news that his mentor, Mukabi, had died during an altercation at his in-laws home, where he had gone to ask after his wife following a domestic dispute. This news saddened the young Akwabi, who had already started getting his first lessons on the

Omutibo master's guitar. He subsequently composed his first song, '*Kifo cha Mukabi*', a tribute to the *Omutibo* legend, and traveled to Nairobi determined to record it. With the assistance of Malenya, he made his first recording at AGS (African Gramophone Studios).

It is this tribute song that would trigger the composing bug in the young Akwabi, seeing him back in the studio in Nairobi during subsequent school holidays to cut records for the studios. They in turn paid him money that he saved up to pay his school fees, something he is extremely proud of to date. In those days it was rare to find a musician who would juggle school and music; one often had to give way to the other. Little wonder that the parents were always up in arms against their children taking up music. A good case in point is that of his mentor, Mukabi. His parents and the local administrators could not stand his guitar playing as they felt he should be focusing on school. This attitude is what gave the genre its name, *Omutibo* ('waywardness' in the Luhya language), because that is what they perceived it to be!

Akwabi was born to peasant parents, Onesmus Okutoyi and Leonora Ambiyo in Ebwongo village in Kwisero, Western Kenya in 1946. He joined Ebwongo Primary School in 1953 but left for Tanzania the following year to live with his elder sister, who was working for the East African Railways and Harbours.

In Tanzania he enrolled at Turngold Mine Kiabagare Primary School in Musoma. But he was hardly there for two years before his father transferred him back to a school in Kenya. At the time, the Tanzanian education system favoured Kiswahili, while the Kenyan system favoured English, which the old man considered more prestigious.

It was when he joined Butere Secondary School that Akwabi completed compositions for his first album, which he recorded at AGS. After completing secondary school in 1969 he was admitted to the Railway Training Institute for a Ticket Examiner's course with a monthly allowance of Ksh680. At the same time he received an offer from the Kenya Chamber of Commerce and Industry for a clerical job that paid a Ksh820 salary. Despite the lucrative offers, his father felt that he should concentrate on his education first, and urged him to proceed to Kenyatta College, where he studied Music, Kiswahili, History and Physical Education. He graduated with an SI certificate in 1971 and was posted to Alliance High School.

He was later transferred to State House Girls High School and in 1977 was promoted to Lecturer I and posted to Mosoriot Teachers' College. This posting changed his life somewhat because, unknown to him, it brought him closer to the powers of the land. It was in 1979 while at the college that he charmed his way into the heart of former president Daniel arap Moi with his compositions, which were presented by the college choir. The President enjoyed these so immensely that he ordered Akwabi's transfer to Kabarak High School, then in its formative years. It was while at Kabarak that Akwabi composed the patriotic song '*Fimbo ya Nyayo*' which ruled the airwaves throughout the 1980s.

Despite what his father had tried to do earlier with his own schooling, it would seem like Tanzania has a special pull for the Akwabis. Of Akwabi's four children, two boys and two girls, the sons would later opt to migrate to Dar es Salaam in pursuit of their musical career when they came of age. The eldest, Ambrose Akula would go on to become a much-sought-after music producer, as would his younger brother Shaky.

The two run the Mandugu Digital studio based in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. It all started in 1984 when Ambrose accompanied his dad to a music lecture, where his fascination with music took root. Before then, he was taking informal lessons on the guitar from his dad. "I used to have students coming over to my house for private music lessons,



Akwabi got news that his mentor, Mukabi, had died during an altercation at his in-laws home, where he had gone to ask after his wife following a domestic dispute. This news saddened the young Akwabi, who had already started getting his first lessons on the *omutibo* master's guitar. As a consequence, he composed his first song, '*Kifo cha Mukabi*', a tribute to the *omutibo* legend, and traveled to Nairobi determined to record it. With the assistance of Malenya, he made his first recording at AGS (African Gramophone Studios) studios.



and I noticed that every time we were playing the guitar one of the boys would be hiding under the table,” said the senior Akwabi. “One day I called one of them (Ambi) out and gave him the guitar and asked him to play. I was surprised to see him playing exactly like I was teaching my student. When I asked him where he had learnt to play, he said he had been observing me for a long time noting what I was doing. I think it just came naturally to them.”

According to their father, Ambi became so good at classical music he would teach some of the older students who came for private tuition. He also mastered the history of classical music, including knowing about the respected composers in that genre.

By then, Ambrose’s elder sister, Lola, was already a refined pianist, and Ambrose was drawn to the sound of the instrument, persuading her to show him the ropes. Lola, who is currently a music teacher in Dubai, agreed and gave Ambrose his first lesson on the keyboard, specifically in the classical music slant.

Under his elder sister’s tutelage Ambrose soon became confident enough at the piano and felt he was ready to showcase his skills. Like most Kenyan student musicians, his debut was at the annual Kenya Music Festival. Between 1991 and 1996 he featured at the festivals as a student pianist, with his group winning some of the contests and losing some. It has remained a memorable time for him because it is this festival that allowed him to develop his self-confidence as a musician.

As they found their musical feet, Ambrose and his brother Shaky were also curious about the forces behind the popular music that they were listening to; they were keen to know how the music-making process came about. It is this that drove them towards music production.

In 1996, they entered the Star Search competition at the Carnivore, going by the name JINKS. They were competing against Abbas (Jerry Manzekele), and Shadz of Black, which was managed by the then ace-producer Tedd Josiah.

“At this time the boys were artists and not really producers,” said their father. “I was naturally curious about the music they were playing and I asked them to play it for me. It sounded a little strange from what we were doing, and I remember asking them why they couldn’t play it the way we were doing. The boys told me that there was no way they could play the kind of music we, their fathers, were playing at a place like The Carnivore. It simply wouldn’t work.”

During the Star Search the Akwabi brothers were so impressed by Tedd Josiah’s work ethic they pursued him to Sync Studios, determined to learn the finer aspects of music production. It is at Sync that they made the decision to focus on creating music from behind the scenes and leave others to front their efforts.

When Tedd left Sync sounds to start his new label, Blue Zebra, he took young Ambrose along, obviously impressed with the progress he had made at Sync. Shaky had other plans, opting to hook up with Joseph Kallaway to start the group Jawabu. It is at Blue Zebra that Ambrose got to work with the top artists in Nairobi at the time, among them Kawesa, Kalamashaka, Hardstone, Intu and Gidi Gidi Maji Maji. He featured as associate producer on Tedd’s definitive compilation album, *Kenyan the 2nd Chapter*, which featured Nameless’s ‘*Megarider*’, Intu’s ‘*Tamani*’, Nazizi’s ‘*Nataka Kuwa Rapper*’, among other hits.

Having honed their skills this far, the Akwabi brothers came back together again and decided to branch off on their own. In 2000, Ambrose left Blue Zebra and together they approached Suzanne Kibukosya and her husband Giddo at Samawati Studios. Earlier that year Shaky’s group Jawabu had won the Star Search competition, and they



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were under pressure to record an album. The brothers were given a chance to work on the album at Samawati's Studio B.

It is at Samawati's Studio B that Ambrose finally found his solo touch, working on Jawabu's debut album, K-South's *'Nairobi'*, Ukoo Flani's *'Tuko Fresh'*, Suzzanne Kibukosya's *'Sitaki'* among a slew of other hits.

The Akwabi brothers stayed at Samawati for a year and a half before the wandering bug bit Ambrose again, and he decided to move to Tanzania to work on Kalamashaka's album, *'Ni Wakati'* at PFunk Majani's studio, Bongo Records, in Dar es Salaam.

He would briefly return home in 2003 to take up a post as producer with Homeboyz Studio, working on smash hits like Bamboo's *'Compe'* and Kantai's *'Kantadda'*. He brought over some artists from Dar, among them Juma Nature and TMK Wanaume, who recorded their hit *'Chai'* at Homeboyz. At the time 'the bounce' beat was the rage in town, and Ambrose was right at the centre of it.

But it would appear like Dar, where he had already set root, was calling, and Ambrose soon after crossed back to take care of waiting business there, where he has remained since.

"One other reason that made him leave Nairobi was the work ethic of the Kenyan musicians," said their father. "Ambi is a very rigid person who likes to do things exactly the way he wants them to be done. This can be a problem when dealing with musicians. It was a very big problem with Nairobi musicians, who would turn up for sessions whenever they felt like, and sometimes even drunk. This really annoyed Ambi and he decided to quit for Dar es Salaam, where the musicians were generally more disciplined."

And it would seem like these discipline issues would plague the brothers even in Dar. Differences soon started to emerge between the Akwabi brothers at their new studio in Dar, mostly brought about by the people they hang out with outside the studio. When not in studio Shaky liked to hang out with the top cream of the Dar social scene, among them a son of the then President, Kikwete. He was more likely to be found in places like Mikocheni, where all the action was. This was in direct conflict with the older Ambi, who preferred to hang out in the *vibandas* of Dar's Uswahilini where ordinary folk were. This soon became a huge issue between the brothers since it started to affect their work at the studio. At some point matters came to a head and Ambi was forced to send his younger brother back home.

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“He told me to stay with Shaky for a while here in Nairobi and try and see if I could make him change his approach to work,” said their father. “If he agreed to change then he would be welcome back in Dar, otherwise if he continued the way he was going then it was going to be very difficult to work with him in Dar.”

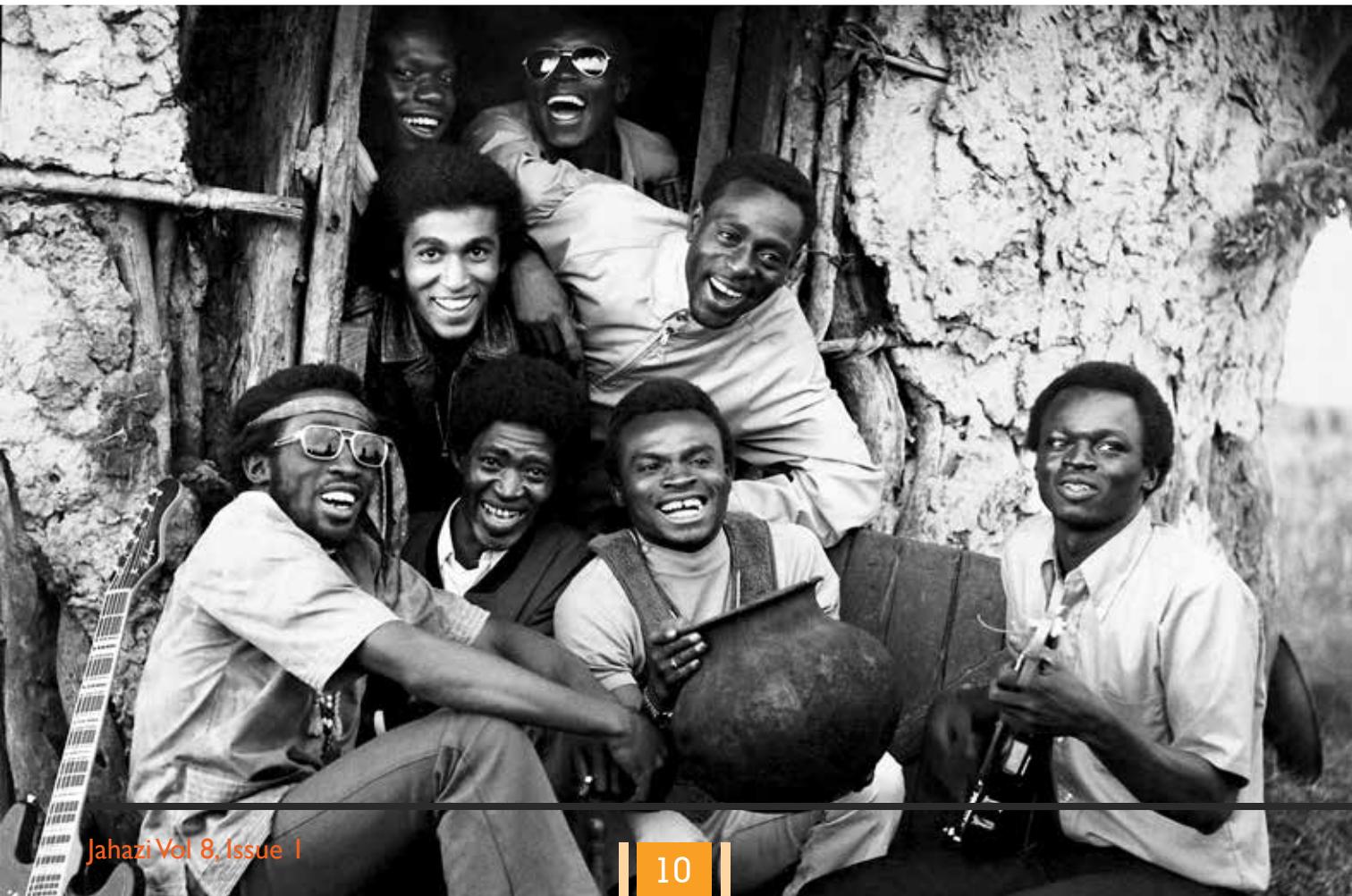
It would seem like these sibling misunderstandings would keep dogging their careers because in later years, they finally decided that Ambi should run the Mandugu Digital Dar studio while Shaky focused on Mandugu Digital, Nairobi. Other than the music of his father and the musicians he grew up listening to, Ambrose says he also draws a lot of influence from J. Dilla and Eric Sermon as he continues to experiment with finding a contemporary and yet uniquely East African sound.

Aside from producing leading artists in East Africa, Ambrose has also taken time to mentor other artists and producers. In 2005, when Producer Provoke [Kevin Provoke] – then a rap artist – was struggling to find artistic direction with his fellow rappers in the group Vaksin, he opted to turn to music production in order to discover the sound he was looking for. Ambrose took him under his wing at Mandugu Digital and refined him to the extent that he was able to work on Coke Studio Africa Season 2 without disappointing.

And as the Akwabi siblings continue experimenting on their musical sojourn, their father is yet to hang up his musical gloves. At 72, he is still energetic enough to go on tour, his latest having seen him traverse Europe with the Boda Boda Band for 16 days, performing in Dusseldorf, Wuppertal, Gelsenkirchen, Remscheid, among other venues. So far, the senior Akwabi has composed over 250 songs in a career spanning over four decades. He has also taught and mentored many musicians.

Stanley Gazemba is a creative writer, journalist and editor based in Nairobi.

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Finding the Beat:

National Identity through Music

Kimani wa Wanjiru

Introduction

Sometime back, Kenya was gifted with several designs of what was envisaged would be the national dress. A team of eminent persons in culture and the arts had been tasked by the Ministry of Culture to search, identify and come up with designs that would help to finally resolve the longstanding issue of “*what is a Kenyan national dress?*” This debate was not happening in isolation as it was replicated in many other arts genres in Kenya such as the culinary arts—what is the national dish? It was particularly persistent in the music scene. Artists and diverse experts continue to dialogue on whether we have what can be described as a truly Kenyan beat. Is it *benga*? Is it *Kapuka*? Or do we stick with the beats that have come to be identified with our communities such as *Omutibo* in Western Kenya, *Mwomboko* amongst the Gikuyu, *Sengenya*, *Bango* and *Chakacha* at the Coast?

Do we have a definitive sound like *Mbalax* from Senegal, *Kwaito* or *Kwela* from South Africa, *Juju* music from several countries in West Africa, or *Rhumba* from the Democratic Republic of Congo that if heard out there, can distinctly be identified as from Kenya? Does the country need to have a clear, overarching musical identity? Can other countries be identified through a dominant musical sound that defines them for the world?

In Senegal, *Mbalax* is identified with Wolof, in the same way that Lingala the music, and the language share an identity. But in the DR Congo, its widespread use as the language of music also gives it the broader appeal that makes it carry the sense of a national identity. Kiswahili functions in the same way in Tanzania, where its use in song sits easily with its use as the national language. However, would singing in Kiswahili or any other local languages, alone, give Kenya *that* distinct beat? Most experts agree that it takes more than language alone, more than just singing in Kiswahili, Dholuo, Gikuyu or sheng.

In Kenya, *Benga* seems to fulfill that role. In *Shades of Benga*, a book detailing the origins and growth of this genre the case is made for this beat as the definitive Kenyan music sound, with impact beyond national boundaries, most notably in Zambia and Zimbabwe. *Benga* aficionados argue that this is the most distinctive sound to have come out of Kenya’s 70 years of creating urban guitar music.

“It may still not be considered an upmarket genre, but it has managed to establish its hold as a definite Kenyan style and beat,” the experts at Ketebul Studios, who put together a booklet, an audio CD and documentary DVD dubbed *Retracing the Benga Rhythm* note. “Sprinklings of it are to be found as far south as Zimbabwe and it has been borrowed, repackaged and offered in big-name music countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo and Cameroon. From its humble rural beginnings, this music has been nurtured into a club circuit affair in numerous urban areas in East, Central and Southern Africa.”

Identity Struggles Beyond Arts

The discussions on music are not about to wane, and neither are those concerning the need, or not, of a national dress. However, this search whether in the music scene, fashion, film or even the culinary arts, is without doubt one of the clearest illustrations of our collective struggle with the complex issue of identity. It also manifests itself in every other aspect of our national psyche –in the political, economic, social and cultural spheres.

At independence, the Constitution prescribed a Westminster-style model that was adopted at Madaraka, which spelt out the roles of Governor and Prime Minister. However, immediately after independence, the KANU political elite sought to dismantle the independence Constitution in order to establish a singular executive authority vested in the Presidency. The elite wanted something akin to the American system but they fell short of putting in place other strong institutions that would provide the necessary checks and balances. This resulted in a political struggle that culminated in a new constitution that is now faced with reverberations from this past era.

Eighteen months after Kenya attained independence, the government of Mzee Jomo Kenyatta published Sessional Paper No 10, *African Socialism*. It suggested a philosophy of democratic African Socialism that would guide future planning. “We rejected both Western Capitalism and Eastern Communism and chose for ourselves a policy of positive non-alignment,¹” Mzee Jomo Kenyatta wrote in his opening remarks. However, as in politics, the economic blueprint was strong in intention but failed miserably in implementation. The country gravitated towards Western Capitalism, becoming hostile to countries and neighbors like Tanzania that adopted socialism through Ujamaa. Indeed, Kenya is regarded as “the epitome of the capitalist system of governance.”² Much has been written about this tension between Socialism and Capitalism, demonstrating the struggle with economic identity.³

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¹<https://www.knls.ac.ke/images/AFRICAN-SOCIALISM-AND-ITS-APPLICATION-TO-PLANNING-IN-KENYA.pdf>

²<https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2000218578/kenya-the-epitome-of-the-capitalist-state>

³David Himbara; Myths and Realities of Kenyan Capitalism; <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X00011824>; Published online: 11 November 2008



The political and economic identity-struggles and the resultant machinations are reflected in our social definition often epitomized by the tussle on whether to support the nation or “my community”. This struggle is often exhibited during elections when the political elite whip up ethnic emotions over national issues as they seek political office, also linked with economic reward. As Professor Kimani Njogu notes,

The marriage of ethnicities in Kenya was arranged by the colonialists. During the struggle for independence, a spirit of nationalism was ignited, but this vision was not pursued by the new leadership. Instead, ethnic affiliations have been stimulated and perpetuated by the political elite to acquire or maintain power. Ethnic cleavages continue to undermine national consciousness, often over competition for resources and access to political power. They undermine Kenyan nationhood.⁴

The first cultural policy for Kenya was launched in 2009, 46 years after the country attained her independence. Before it could even be implemented, the country gave itself a new Constitution a year later. This necessitated a further review of the cultural policy to align it to the new Constitution. An intensive process was undertaken to this end, but the subsequent document has never seen the light of day.

Ethnic affiliations have not only played out during elections and campaigns, the linguistic connections and differences are also a great indicator of the identity struggles that we experience. Broadly, there are three language groups in Kenya, namely *Bantu* which includes Kiswahili, Gikuyu, EkeGusii, Luhya and Kamba; examples of *Nilotic* languages are Kalenjin, Luo, Turkana and Maasai, and the *Cushitic* includes Rendile, Somali Borana and Gabra. Each group includes more than five dialects, which makes Kenya a multilingual country with over forty-two languages. The Constitution of Kenya, 2010, recognises these languages.

Besides these languages, the Constitution also made Kiswahili the national and official language of Kenya. English, a legacy of colonialism has been recognized as an official language. However, this has not helped to stop the wrangles around identity and recognition that have persisted between Kiswahili and English given the historical contexts from which they stem.

The colonial language policy in Kenya is important putting into consideration that it impacted greatly on post-colonial language policy. Contrary to the long-held postulation that it was the objective of the colonial government to promote English language in the colony, the colonial language policy was always inchoate and vacillating such that there were occasions that measures were put in place to promote or deter its learning. However, such denial inadvertently provided a stimulus for Kenyans to learn English considering that they had already taken cognizant [sic] of the fact that it was the launching pad for white collar jobs. This can be said to have been the genesis of English's hegemonic and divisionary tendencies, between the elite (those who could use it) and the masses (those who could not use it).⁵

The Identity Struggle in the Arts

The political and socio-economic identity struggles are taking place with such intensity because our cultural identity has not been addressed. Observers note that we fought for political and economic emancipation and while we might have scored some victory on these fronts, we did not sufficiently consolidate it through a well thought out cultural policy. We instead took note of our diversity and grounded our aspirations on the strengths that these diversities presented. We defined ourselves clearly as Africans when we waged the political war through fronts such as the Mau Mau, but failed to develop similar clear lines of identity when it came to a culture that would be explicitly defined through our artistic impressions and expressions. In the Preface to *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o notes that

for a full comprehension of the dynamics, dimensions and workings of a society, any society, the cultural aspects cannot be seen in total isolation from the economic and political ones. The quantity and

⁴<https://www.nation.co.ke/oped/opinion/There-is-hope-for-Kenya-nationhood/440808-3187976-vobpue/index.html>

⁵ibid

quality of wealth in a community, the manner of its organisation from production to the sharing out affect, and are affected by the way in which power is organized and distributed. These in turn affect and are affected by the values of that society as embodied and expressed in the culture of that society. The wealth and power and self-image of a community are inseparable. ...Culture gives that society its self-image as it sorts itself out in the economic and political fields.(p. xv)

The first cultural policy for Kenya was launched in 2009, 46 years after the country attained her independence. Before it could even be implemented, the country gave itself a new Constitution a year later. This necessitated a further review of the cultural policy to align it to the new Constitution. An intensive process was undertaken to this end, but the subsequent document has never seen the light of day. The country went back to its default mode of trying to define itself and addressing matters culture, producing artistic expression and impressions without grounding these in an official policy.

There is no doubt that culture and cultural identity are at the center of any quest to resolve issues of identity not only in the arts, but also more broadly. The continuing search for a national dress as a recognizable badge of belonging, in step to a Kenyan beat, is evidence of this disquiet.

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Recording Popular Music in Kenya:

Roots, Genres and Pioneers

Steenie Njoroge

Commercial recordings of East African music can be traced as far back as 1928 with the recording sessions of Siti Binti Saad, Maalim Shaaban and others in Mombasa that saw a total of 56 shellac records being released under His Masters Voice (HMV) label. The success led to a second and third session that generated a total of 71,518 shellac records sold up to June 1931.

The commercial potential of the East African market attracted other European players as well. The British Columbia Label, German Odeon and French Pathé all started recording in the 1930s. They later merged into one company, EMI.

Jambo Records was the first independent company to challenge the monopoly held by EMI after World War II. They set up a pressing plant in Nairobi called East African Records, and by 1957 some 48 small record labels were available in the East African market.

Major independent labels of the time include Mzuri Records owned by Assanands and Sons Ltd. Mombasa had Capital Music Stores on the CMS label, African Gramophone Stores on the AGS label and Associated Sound Ltd on the ASL label.

Shellac discs were to be phased out in 1961 when East African Records pressing plant was sold to Charles Worrod, an Englishman who worked for Gallo Records in South Africa before relocating to Kenya. Here, he bought Jambo Records and converted the label to Equator Sounds Studios Ltd. The Record Pressing plant was in turn taken over by Philips and became the main factory of vinyl over the next two decades.

The labels house band, known as Equator Sound Band, was composed of Kenyan musicians Fadhili William and Daudi Kabaka, Ugandan musician Charles Sonko, and two Zambian musicians, Nashil Pichen and Peter Tsotsi. Together they ushered in the era of the African "Twist", a musical and dance style inspired by the *Kwela* rhythm from South Africa that became the new sound of newly independent Kenya.

Kenya had by now established itself as the regional hub for music and was home to the first renowned Congolese musicians, Jean Bosco Mwenda and Edouard Masengo, who came to record and perform in Nairobi. This Congo connection turned out to be very influential in shaping the style of music played by many Kenyan musicians in the years following independence in 1963.

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¹See the authoritative *Shades of Benga: The Story of Popular Music in Kenya: 1946-2016* by Ketebul Music for a very detailed analysis. The book covers the pioneers of Kenya's popular music, Benga, Rumba, Ohangia, Mwomboko, Akorino, Taarab, Funk, Gospel, Urban Expressions, Hip-Hop, Live Gigs, and the Smithsonian Folklife Festival

Evolution of Kenyan Recorded Music¹

Taarab

Taarab, which has been recording commercially for over a century, has its origins in the Indian Ocean cultures. It carries the Arab court music traditions, and poetic forms of the *shairi*. This genre was popularized by musicians such as Siti Binti Saad and Maalim

Shaaban. The former is credited with bringing the Swahili influence into the genre and for removing Taarab from the palace to the populace.

Born in 1880 in Fumba Village in Zanzibar, Siti Bin Saad was active as both a performer and recording artiste from the 1920s until her demise in 1950.

By the 1940s Mombasa, Kenya's Coastal town had become known across the Swahili speaking world as a centre of Taarab innovation. Professional Orchestras like Lulu, Jauhara and Morning Star offered poetry that drew from the rich literary tradition.

Other Kenya pioneers of the genre are Matano Juma, Maulidi Juma, Juma Bhalo, Zuhura Swaleh, Zein L' Abadin and Asha Abdo Suleiman with her popular song, Vidonge. Mombasa is also known for the Mwanzele beat and Chakacha – a hip gyrating dance style mostly performed at wedding ceremonies.

Influence of World War II

African soldiers returned home with new musical instruments such as the Spanish guitar and the accordion, along with musical styles that they had sampled abroad, which included Afro Cuban Rumba. The influence of the Afro Cuban style of music, such as bolero, rumba, and the cha-cha-cha contributed to the emergence of the popular genres of African music we have today such as Congolese Rumba and Highlife music from West Africa.

Some of the Rumba pioneers included Wendo Kolosoy and later, Joseph Kabassele and African Jazz. In Kenya meanwhile, it was Fundi Konde who introduced the Cuban influence.

Mwomboko

The early 1930s saw the development of a local sound known as Mwomboko, which originated from the Kikuyu community and was influenced by the English Waltz, Scottish Dance coupled with traditional rhythmic movements to the sound of the accordion. Among the most popular musicians of this genre are Gacungi wa Kamau, John Arthur, Cinda Gikombe, Meja wa Wanjiru, Maranga Gatonye and HM Kariuki.

The American cowboy yodeling style of Jimmy Rodgers heavily influenced notable musicians such as Sammy Ngaku, although the genre failed to take root in Central Kenya.

The Congo Connection

The arrival of Congolese musicians Mwenda Jean Bosco and Masengo Edouard in the late 1950s had a profound effect on the musical trends in Kenya. Both plucked their guitars with the thumb and forefinger, using an intricate finger picking technique. This technique greatly influenced other genres such as Omutibo and Benga.

The African Twist

Charles Worrod produced most of the first twist artistes through his Equator Sound Studio and Label.

This style of music was influenced by Chubby Checker, who popularized the dance style in the 1960s, with the *Kwela* influences from Southern Africa (as played by Nashil Pichen and Peter Tsotsi) adding the penny whistle sound that was popular in the townships of South Africa.

Locally, Daudi Kabaka, who was part of the Equator Sounds Band, later came to be known as King of African twist.

Omutibo

Omutibo developed in Kenya in the early 1950s. As earlier stated, it is another

African soldiers returned home with new musical instruments such as the Spanish guitar and the accordion along with musical styles that they had sampled abroad including Afro Cuban Rumba.

Omutibo developed in Kenya in the early 1950s. It is another example of the African finger picking guitar style that was introduced to Kenya by Bosco and Masengo.



In the 1970s a musical revolution was sweeping across the African continent from the West to the East Coast. The name was Funk. The one man who defined the movement was the American Godfather of Soul, James Brown. The potency of his music spread rapidly across Africa

example of the African finger picking guitar style that was introduced to Kenya by Bosco and Masengo. The bouncy up-tempo style played with an acoustic guitar and a Fanta bottle (which had grooves) originated from Western Kenya, with George Mukabi acknowledged as the pioneer of this genre.

Benga

The Ogara Boys Band from the shores of Lake Victoria pioneered this style in the 1960s before its dispersion to the Western, Rift Valley, Central and Eastern parts of Kenya. This spread is mainly attributed to the session musicians from Western Kenya based in Nairobi. With time, DO Misiani became the most popular artiste in this genre.

The style quickly spread to other parts of Africa e.g. Zimbabwe where it is known as Kanindo or Sungura and is played by artists such as Moses Rwizi and Alick Macheso. An offshoot of Benga is the current Ohangla music, which is quite popular among the youthful musicians from Western Kenya.

Rumba

Along with Benga, Rumba is one of the most popular genres of dance music in Kenya. Rumba as a music genre traces its origins to Cuba, as indicated above. This type of music was imported to the Democratic Republic of Congo in the 1940s where it was merged with Congolese traditional beats, played on European instruments, and recorded in the European studios in Kinshasa. This became what is known as Congolese Rumba.

The style gained popularity in East Africa during the migration of musicians out of Kinshasa due to the raging civil strife in the 1960s and 1970s. Congolese bands such as Maquis and Makassy settled in Tanzania and introduced songs with lyrics in Kiswahili forging the common currency of an East Africa musical culture.

Their success led to the influx of other big bands in Kenya starting with Baba Gaston, Boma Liwanza, Bana Genge, Mangelepa, Samba Mapangala and Les Kinois, who were common features in the live band circuit in Nairobi at the time.

Kenyan bands soon picked up the style with the most successful being Maroon Commandos, Ochieng' Kabaselle and Simba wa Nyika— an off shoot of Arusha Jazz.

Funk

In the 1970s a musical revolution was sweeping across the African continent from the West to the East Coast. The name was Funk. The one man who defined the movement was the American Godfather of Soul, James Brown. The potency of his music spread rapidly across Africa. In 1974 James Brown visited Zaire along with BB King and a cast of American Soul Legends.

The performance made a lasting impression on musicians such as Tabu Ley, who quickly added a set of Western drums so as to introduce elements of funk into Congolese Rumba. In Kenya artistes such as The Ashantis, Slim Ali and Ismael Jingo, and Steele Beauttah took up the new genre with gusto.

Hip Hop

In 1990, the very earliest rappers made their first appearance at clubs in Mombasa, Kenya's second largest city and main coastal port. They were dropping their rhymes over hip hop instrumentals and dancehall ragga riddims. Andrew Burchell, arrived in Mombasa from England and set up a small recording studio in an area known as VOK in Kisauni. He was to become a notable music producer, and is credited with encouraging hip hop artistes to either rap in Swahili or their native language. Some of the artistes he recorded include Fundi Frank and Poxi Presha



Gospel

Alongside the secular music in the various genres, gospel music found its place. Nyairo (2015: 176) has indicated that the “earliest recorded Christian song rising to popular acclaim is probably Kenneth Owuor’s 1968 hit, Ring No.9,” in which the guitar was used to sing about salvation. Later, many gospel musicians borrowed from South African Kwela music and other styles. This was the case with the gospel musician Mary Atieno. Her intonation and music arrangements are quite similar to the Southern Africa Kwela Beat popularized by the likes of Miriam Makeba and Dorothy Masuka in the early 1960s. Since then, Western rhythms, Kwaito, Hip Hop, Genge and traditional genres have influenced recorded gospel music. In reaching the soul of the people, gospel musicians have adapted popular music in its various forms.

Kenyan music has contributed to the growth of a vibrant popular culture in urban and rural areas. It has been propelled by local, regional and global events in form and content. It has made commentary on political, economic, social and cultural events even as it has entertained its audiences.

Steenie Njoroge, thespian, art critic, photojournalist, but also music researcher takes us back in time, giving a brief overview of a music world that continues to grow in depth and breadth.

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Towards a National Film Industry in the New Millennium

Edwin Nyutho

The Kenyan fight for political independence was fierce, brutal and bloody. The 'Mau Mau' rebellion is recognized as one of the bloodiest and most protracted wars of decolonisation fought in Britain's twentieth century empire.¹ The liberation war was waged by a ragtag group of poorly armed freedom fighters that fought gallantly to get back their lands and liberty. Britain was determined to keep Kenya colony by hook or crook even as freedom from colonial governance was being celebrated all around the world. The overwhelming and embarrassing evidence of British brutality against the Kenyan freedom fighters in detention camps forced the colonial government to begrudgingly hand over their prized jewel to a consortium of local leaders they had once said would lead the country unto darkness and death.

During the entire colonial period, the colonial government had used film as a tool of subterfuge and propaganda so as to manipulate, dominate and rule the Kenyan communities. According to James Genova (2017),² from the "Scramble for Africa" in the 1880s to the era of decolonisation that began in the 1950s, culture and media played essential roles in constructing images of the colonised subject as well as governing newly conquered empires. The colonisers had come to believe that Kenya colony was their land in perpetuity. Kenya not being a British colony was incomprehensible to a colonial government that was at wits end when its human rights abuses, under the guise of civilising unwieldy natives, were exposed. The colonial government was ordered from London to coordinate a power hand-over. Britain risked being taken to the International court of justice to face genocide and human rights abuse charges especially as she was at the forefront of the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights, which followed the end of the Second World War.

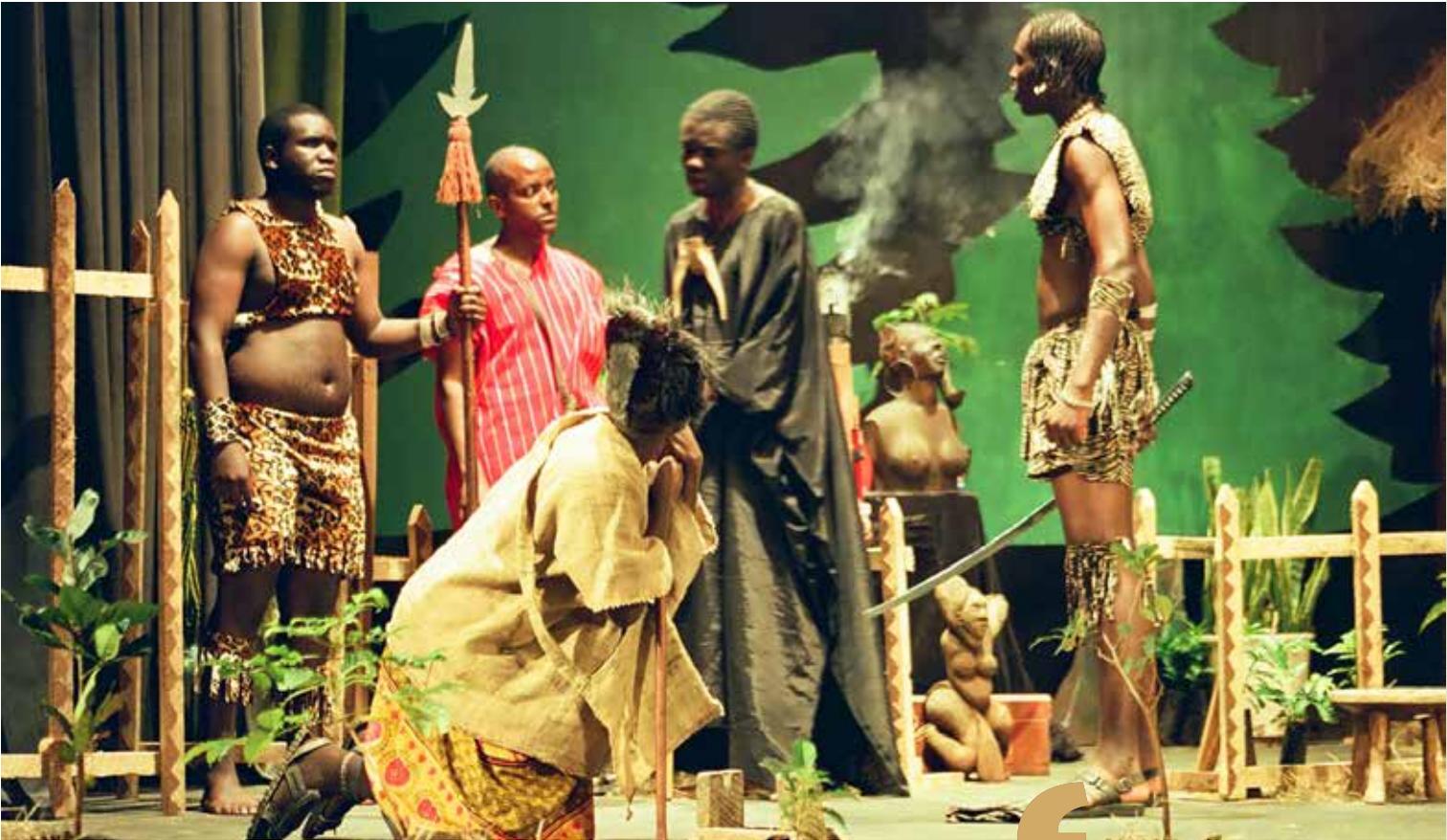
When independence was granted in 1963, revised governance systems should have been put in place to transition a people who had been ruled through oppressive force. This system of self-governance also needed what Ngugi wa Thiong'o has called a 'Decolonising [of] the Mind'. Saelo T. Kgatla³ defines this mind decolonisation process as 'an attempt to help black people reach self-empowerment and self-emancipation from external as well as from internal enslavement and the control of their colonisers.' Creating a new independent nation required a clearly thought out strategy that would stabilise the nation against the tide of imperialism and create an 'emancipated national consciousness'⁴ in the newly independent countries. I look at independent Kenya critically from a post-colonial discourse perspective, analysing the adoption of film as a tool towards building a culturally robust, independent, developing nation.

¹Caroline Elkins, 2014 *Britain's Gulag: The End of Empire in Kenya*. London: The Bodley Head.

²James Genova, *Subject: Cultural History, Image of Africa* Online Publication Date: Dec 2017 DOI 10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.1115

³The decolonisation of the mind Black consciousness community projects by the Limpopo council of churches <http://www.scielo.org.za/pdf/mission/v46n1/09.pdf>

⁴*Postcolonial Text*, Vol 6, No 4 (2011) Decolonizing National Consciousness Redux: Ousmane Sembène's *Xala* as Trans-historical Critique, Vartan Messier, City University of New York



Given the overwhelming evidence of the power of film in the subjugation and control of the African to make him amenable to colonisation and Christianisation, it is surprising that the post independence Kenya government did not learn from the experiences of the other African success stories and embrace film technology to right the wrongs of a cruel and debilitating colonisation period. This failure to embrace the available technological tools to address the neo-colonial challenges of the times indicates how effective colonialism had been in making the leaders blind to charting a future destiny of cultural robustness and self-determination.

Singapore, which also went through similar colonisation, did a thorough soul-searching in creating an independent nation because they wanted a foundation based on firm values upon which to build their future, different from the colonisers values. They saw the need to create:

- 1- Nation before community and society before self
- 2- Family as the basic unit of society
- 3- Community support and respect for the individual
- 4- Consensus not conflict
- 5- Racial and religious harmony⁵

Some of these values were meant to focus the people away from greed and individualism, the bulwarks of capitalism that characterised the years of colonial governance. The capitalist western values promote selfish behavior because each person then becomes preoccupied with seeking self-gratification at the expense of the community. This, to an extent, becomes the bedrock of corruption as individuals pursue their insatiable lust for wealth.

Kenyan Failure to Use Film as a Tool of Cultural Diplomacy

The Academy for Cultural Diplomacy observes in their website that 'throughout the twentieth century and beyond, Film has served as one of the most influential and an accessible medium of cultural diplomacy and it has had a unique ability to effect "the masses" all around the world. In particular, certain films have succeeded at not only

Given the overwhelming evidence of the power of film in the subjugation and control of the African to make him amenable for colonisation and Christianisation, it is surprising that the post independence Kenya government did not learn from the experiences of the other African success stories and embrace film technology to right the wrongs of a cruel and debilitating colonisation period.

entertaining audiences, but have served as examples of films that have truly helped to educate, enhance and sustain relationships, to break stereotypes and transcend borders at a number of levels.⁶

From documents sourced from the Kenya National Archives, which stores all national governance data, there's shocking and overwhelming evidence of how lacklustre the Jomo Kenyatta government was in use of film for national development. The 1963 government ignored the potential of film to foster national development and to address foreign policy. Filmic representation was needed to show the world how Kenya had risen from the colonial ashes and asserted herself in the world as a free nation. The government of the first Kenya republic was put through embarrassing experiences in diplomatic circles immediately after independence when ambassadors needed films to showcase Kenya at various diplomatic events. Films are often used in diplomatic circles such as trade fairs or exhibitions to provide visual evidence and promote Kenya as an investment or tourist destination. Unfortunately, the films available in the local archives at the turn of independence in the 1960s portrayed the locals in very embarrassing light. The Kenyan ambassadors abroad are the ones who faced the embarrassment whenever they were called upon to screen a film to showcase Kenya.

On scrutiny of Kenya government records, I found shocking revelations on government's failure to license private local and international movie companies who wanted to shoot stories in Kenya after independence.

In 1972, nine years after independence, the Kenyan High Commissioner to India, S.K. Kimalle wrote to the Permanent Secretary (PS) in the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting decrying the embarrassment he faced while trying to look for films that could show the achievements of black Africans and "depict the progress and development of our nation." He had recently received a film on fishing along the coast of East Africa "which was made before independence and naturally was dominated by Europeans and was therefore inappropriate for publicizing an independent nation." Around the same period, the Kenyan Ambassador to Washington, L.O. Kibinge, was facing similar embarrassments. In a letter to the PS for Information and Broadcasting, he stated that there was "a pressing need in the U.S.A. for documentary films on Kenya as it really is; her people, culture, history, modern and traditional activities, and aspects of achievement since the attainment of independence."

Ambassador Kibinge recommended that before a license to shoot a second movie in Kenya was issued, the crews would need to be evaluated on the previous film they had shot in Kenya to verify the extent to which they were promoting Kenya abroad positively. Unfortunately there's no evidence that this recommendation was implemented.

There was similar disappointment with Kenyan films by Kenyans who also needed to showcase their nation internationally but did not, yet the government didn't seem to recognize the potency of the image in marketing the newly independent nation. There was need to dismantle the negative stereotypes and make movies that reversed the propaganda that had been heaped on Kenya over the years, showing the ineptitude of the African as a person.

Kenya Government Apparent Sabotage Towards Starting a Local Film Industry

On scrutiny of Kenya government records, I found shocking revelations on government's failure to license private local and international movie companies who wanted to shoot stories in Kenya after independence. According to F.P. Stanic, soon after independence in 1964, a proposal for investing in film production was presented to the government by Stanic Film Productions of Chicago, Illinois, in the US. The proposal, addressed to the Ministry of Information, Broadcasting and Tourism suggested putting at the disposal of the Kenya government, film production experts who would produce documentary films "designed specifically to the needs of Kenya as prescribed by officials of government." They identified many developmental issues in

⁵Tan, D. G. (1993). Values, nation building and control: The Singapore mass media in the next lap. Retrieved from <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses/1156>

⁶http://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/academy/index.php/en_film-as-cultural-diplomacy

diverse areas such as health and agriculture where such films might be needed. These included making films on how “ ‘contour farming’ is done; how to drive a tractor; elementary hygiene; national objectives; why leaders must be followed and why there must be unity and so on.”

The proposal went on to suggest a distribution network using the mobile cinema vans so as to show the films to the masses of Kenyans who were cut off from the formal mass media such as radio, newspapers and TV, and who were the majority at this critical period of the nation’s history. According to the proposal, use of film would overcome a major development challenge, as film was a most cost effective medium with high impact compared to other media. Unfortunately, this proposal was never taken up notwithstanding the great need for production of films in diverse areas of development. If government had taken good advice, it might have spared its ambassadors and diplomats many embarrassing moments.

Government Refusal to License a Mau Mau Film

During the Mau Mau conflict which erupted in 1952 and dragged on for years, the British colonisers used cinema very effectively as a propaganda-for-entertainment tool and produced three movies, shot in Kenya, during the period. These were distributed mostly in Europe and America to entertain curious audiences who came to witness the fight between ‘primitive barbarian villains’ against ‘civilised white heroes’. Cinema’s formidable power as a means of propaganda and persuasion in this conflict pitting black versus white and good versus evil polarised the Mau Mau story with the white audiences, and made huge returns at the box office.

After independence, although several parties were interested in producing films on Mau Mau from a local perspective, the Kenya government blocked all such requests. One of the most shocking filming license refusals was to a locally created multi-racial group who had started a company for producing movies based on local stories and experiences beginning with the Mau Mau war of liberation. According a memo dated 14th February 1972 from Arthur Ruben,⁷ Senior Information Officer in the Ministry of Information and Tourism to the Permanent Secretary of same ministry, he advised against licensing a Mau Mau film, which had already taken three years of elaborate planning and costly expenditures. The film project was flushed down the drain with the stroke of bureaucratic pen. And yet this is the story the world was waiting to watch. The story has up to date not been conclusively told through cinema.

Deadlock between MPEAA and Kenya Government over Kenyanisation of Cinema Policy

According to Nyoike Njoroge (1967), once Kenya became independent, with a growing cinema-going middle class population, a policy was created to draw Kenyan Africans into the movie business, dominated by Indians and Europeans. The Kenyatta government had created a Kenyanisation policy that was meant to entrench Africans into all spheres of business. But the global film monopoly, the Motion Picture Exporting Association of America (MPEAA), which virtually controlled over 80% of the global cinema business, would hear none of it.

According to Manthia Diawara (1987, 61-65), these monopolistic tendencies have persisted elsewhere in Africa. He observes that “not only film production but also distribution in Africa has faced a ruthless and monopolistic exploitation by American, European, and the Indian distribution companies.” According to K.S.N. Matiba (1967), then a government Permanent Secretary (PS), a confidential letter from the PS in the Ministry of Commerce & Industry addressed to the Minister for Commerce & Industry and Minister for Information & Broadcasting showed a meeting had been held on 13/2/1968 with the Vice-president of MPEAA, Mr. Griffith Johnson, in Nairobi, to resolve the cinema closure crisis. Mr. Johnson stated openly that he “did not understand why

After independence, although several parties were interested in producing films on Mau Mau from a local perspective, the Kenya government blocked all such requests. One of the most shocking filming license refusals was to a locally created multi-racial group who had started a company for producing movies based on local stories and experiences beginning with the Mau Mau war of liberation.

⁷KNA/MIB/12/4/13/163



...in the early 1980s there was a raging debate on whether Kenya was ready to go into film production or not. The debate on the feasibility of a local film industry started during the third Kenya Film Exhibitors Conference in Nairobi in August 1985 which discussed, among other things, the challenges of local film production and the impact of importation of video film on Kenya's film industry. The film distributors estimated that there were over 20,000 illegal video tapes in the country which were helping to undermine cinema attendance.

⁸David Murphy (Dec., 2000), Reviewed work(s): Source: *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2 Africans Filming Africa: Questioning Theories of an Authentic African Cinema Author(s): pp. 239-249

the Kenya government chose distribution as the first point of attack in the movie industry." His contention was that film "distribution was a sensitive and not a lucrative business." He had the audacity to tell government that Kenya Film Corporation (KFC) was "not capable of handling film," and [yet] that the American film companies could not deal with "citizen only companies," only with KFC. According to David Murphy (Dec 2000),⁸ from the early 1970s, African filmmakers and other prominent cineastes sought to build a common approach to African filmmaking especially due to the negative representations that had been made of Africans during the colonial and the post-colonial eras. A number of meetings had been convened in various venues to discuss this, among other developmental issues.

One such meeting occurred in Algiers, Algeria between 11th and 13th December 1973. At the meeting, Third World filmmakers deliberated on the possible use of 'Third World cinema' as a popular tool of remaking history. Cinema was seen as a progressive means of seeking cultural liberation. Co-productions among the third world countries were also recommended as a means by which the countries could express "anti-imperialist solidarity."

The 1985 Nairobi Conference on Film Industry Creation

According to Wanjiru Ciira (1985:13), in the early 1980s there was a raging debate on whether Kenya was ready to go into film production or not. The debate on the feasibility of a local film industry started during the third Kenya Film Exhibitors Conference in Nairobi in August 1985 which discussed, among other things, the challenges of local film production and the impact of importation of video film on Kenya's film industry. The film distributors estimated that there were over 20,000 illegal videotapes in the country, undermining cinema attendance. The conference asked government to increase video library license fees fivefold from Ksh 20,000 to a punitive Ksh 100,000, in an effort to discourage opening up of more video outlets.

According to Njama's report, as above, figures presented at the August Distributors Conference by the General Manager of Kenya Film Corporation Mr. Simeon Macharia, attendance in English films climbed from 3,472,878 in 1972 to peak at 5,119,537 in 1980. With the advent of video, they declined to 3,527,231 in 1983 but there was a slight pick-up in 1984 to 3,536,556. Asian films performed even worse. From 1972 there was a huge decline in attendance, from 2,225,917 to 665,092 in 1984. In light of this decline in audiences, cinemas, especially the ones showing Indian movies, closed down.

In Nairobi, Globe Cinema was a casualty, while the Belle-View Drive-in started showing English-language movies except on Sundays, as did Embassy Cinema. In Mombasa, the Naaz and the only drive-in closed down. With their backs to the wall, film distributors came out fighting. Mr. Arthur Reuben, chairman of KFC led the onslaught against illegal videos flooding the market and customs officers started raiding video libraries. In one video library in the city center, customs officers nabbed tapes worth over Ksh 100,000 as owners couldn't provide importation documents on the spot. According to Kaleb Njama, nothing further was heard of this case but a customs official said such operations would continue if the goods were "prohibited, restricted or un-customed." This video tax didn't change the trend because the video libraries loaded the tax charge on to the video hire costs. According to the Kenya Gazette Supplement no. 58 (Act No. 7) of August 30, a person who contravenes the section on taxation will be guilty of an offence and will be liable to a fine not exceeding Ksh 20,000 or a year's jail sentence. The law continued to warn that no videotape could be hired without a ticket or receipt "stamped in such a manner as may be prescribed denoting that the video tax has been paid."

Ironically, while video technology was threatening to destabilize, if not destroy the film industry in Kenya, it had the very opposite effect in Nigeria, and Nollywood rode on the crest of the new technology to launch their now flourishing cinema industry. According to Gary Kafer (2012), Nollywood started out as a mistake. He claims that in 1992, an Igbo electronics dealer based in Lagos found himself with an overstock of blank cassettes imported from Taiwan which he decided to sell with a movie as an added bonus. With a shoestring budget and non-professional actors, he produced an Igbo-language and English subtitled film about a greedy man who kills his wife in a ritual sacrifice in order to earn great wealth, only to be haunted by her ghost. Distributed on VHS, the film was wildly successful, selling over 950,000 copies, and effectively announcing the emergence of Nollywood.⁹

Panic when Video Knocks on Film's Door

The entry of the videocassette recorder into the Kenyan market rattled the film industry. Both mechanical and digital video innovations have influenced everything from equipment to distribution, changing how films are made and the manner in which we consume them.¹⁰ The proliferation of the video home systems cassettes (VHS) in the 1980s shook the cinema industry to the roots. Cinema had been the global premier family entertainment for close to a century. The entry of video gave families a platform to consume films of their choice without going to the cinema house. Cinema attendances declined globally, followed by the closure of many cinema houses.

In the U.S. the situation wasn't any better than Kenya. According to Jake Rossen (2013), Jack Valenti, a former president of the Motion Picture Association of America had warned that the new video distribution might kill his industry. He feared that video would empty theatres and drain studio coffers. His argument was that no one would venture out to multiplexes when films could be disseminated virtually free and viewed in the convenience of one's own home. Valenti feared that the videocassette recorders rolling out of Japanese factories in the 1980s that could make or play copies of movies at minimal cost were going to overrun the movie industry.¹¹

But the fears proved unfounded in the long run. According to Rossen, despite Hollywood's nervousness, box office revenue rose in the decade of the VCR from \$2.7 billion in 1980 to over \$5 billion in 1990, an increase of over 16 percent. Years later, DVDs—the successors to videocassettes, would account for roughly 50 percent of studios' overall profits.

In Kenya, the scare of the videocassette was equally dramatic. Cinema owners launched a major advertising campaign to combat the video onslaught. According to Kaleb Njama (1985), cinema owners would buy a full page in the newspapers extolling the virtues of cinema, urging families to attend. They also invented gimmicks to launch and sell new movies. Before *Breakdance* premiered in Nairobi, a break dancing competition was staged outside Kenya cinema where the film would be shown. For the screening of *Woman in Red*, 20th Century Fox gave free tickets to all women attendees dressed in red. And for *A Passage to India*, a free ticket to Bombay was offered to a lucky viewer. The industry outdid itself in inventing gimmicks to focus attention on the cinemas so as to divert audiences from the convenience of the VHS, and home viewing.

Impact of Piracy on the Kenyan Movie Industry in the 1980s and 1990s

In the 1980s and 1990s, it is the proliferation of movie piracy on River Road, later known as Riverwood, which had the most adverse impact on the local movie industry. It discouraged local producers who would make films, but not reap the benefits.

According to Copyright News Magazine (2012),¹² piracy affects the author of the artistic item, the economy and the consumer. Filmmakers in the developed world often rely first on box office earnings, after which the movies are marketed through DVD and

⁹Gary Kafer, Introduction to Nollywood Cinema, <http://nollywood.arcadia.edu/introduction/>, accessed on 7/4/2014

¹⁰<http://memeburn.com/2013/02/9-tech-innovations-that-changed-the-film-industry-through-the-ages/>

¹¹He called them a "parasitical instrument" and told Congress in 1982: "The VCR is to the American film producer and the American public as the *Boston Strangler* (using an example of an epic movie of the period), is to the woman home alone." According to Rossen (ibid), the scare was exacerbated because the filmmakers heeded him. Steven Spielberg one of the most acclaimed Hollywood directors refused to release *E.T.* to the home video market for six years. The debate was so fierce that it took a Supreme Court ruling to guarantee a consumer's right to record someone else's intellectual property.

¹²Copyright awareness creation, <http://www.copyright.go.ke/awareness-creation.html>, accessed on 3/9/2015.

The board in this press release claims that the levels of piracy in the music and film industry “are estimated at over 98%.” If these figures are correct, it means that the creative industry proprietors gain only 2% to 5 % while the rest goes into the pockets of the criminals. This is nothing short of anarchical plunder which should not be tolerated in a country governed by the rule of law.

online distribution channels. Any sale made through piracy decreases the filmmaker’s revenue and reduces the amount of investment into the next film. But this mode of piracy is not as inimical to the investor as the one in which the investor expects to make direct returns from DVD sales without recouping costs from the box office.

In a press release dated 15 February 2012, the Kenya Copyright Board claims that “high levels of piracy in Kenya are an impediment to the growth and development of the creative industries in Kenya as the pirates live off other people’s intellectual property and curtail the development of the industry.” The board goes on to say that the levels of piracy in the music and film industry “are estimated at over 98%.” This is a highly alarming figure as it is almost double that of Nollywood whose piracy figures are stated at 50%. If these figures are correct, it means that the creative industry proprietors gain only 2 to 5 % while the rest goes into the pockets of the criminals. This is nothing short of anarchical plunder which should not be tolerated in a country governed by the rule of law.

According to Nyutho and John Karanja (2015), one of the best strategies is to incorporate the pirates into the production business. Karanja claims that the movie and music piracy industry is so entrenched in Kenya that it is like a dragon with a million heads. The small men on the streets hawking the DVDs are the small fish that are visible. The kingpins however are well endowed people who have created a mafia-type empire which is hard to deal with. Most of them are well known and are protected by the corruption in government bureaucracy.

The New Millenium ‘Nairobi Half Life’ Cinematic Fallacy

No Kenyan feature movie has made more impact locally and globally than *Nairobi Half Life*, which was released through a Kenya/Germany co-production in 2012. It is the first ‘local’ effort in recent times to become a box office success. During its premier weekend, it is said to have grossed over seven million Kenya shillings (US\$ 100,000), a significant amount in a culture where movie going is rare. The film is produced by One Fine Day Films, a German company that received funds from the German government to train Kenyans in movie making. The film director, Tosh Gitonga, was a trainee director under a German film director trainer, Tom Twyker, best known for his film *Run Lola Run*. When *Nairobi Half Life* premiered in Nairobi, over 20,000 viewers watched it, a huge audience by Nairobi’s standards.¹³

According to Jeremy J. Dicker,¹⁴ Nai-robbery, Kenya’s capital, uncoils to strike with all the injustice, indignity and indecency it can muster when a naïve boy, Mwas, comes to the city to pursue the dream of becoming a professional actor. This allusion to a scorpion or a serpent lying in wait for its prey is frightening. His mother had warned Mwas that this city is where the devil lives. Every aspect of Nairobi we are shown in the movie is decadent and abhorrent. The toilet in the police station where Mwas is detained after his arrest in the city is the filthiest toilet I have seen in cinema (except perhaps the one the main star fell into in *Slumdog Millionaire*). The toilet, which is shared by male and female inmates is spilling over with urine, vomit, and blobs of faeces everywhere and Mwas is forced to clean all this filth barefoot with his feet ankle deep in the sludge. The toilet is a symbol of Nairobi’s depravity. It summarises everything in the story—the corruption, the mismanagement, the drunkenness, the decadence, the criminality—all the mess is reflected symbolically in that toilet. Society cannot sink any lower.

The overarching motif in the film is a grey darkness that symbolizes a morbid lack of life and vivacity. If we are not in the dirty slums, we are in the dark alleys or in the police cells or with the prostitutes or with the carjackers or at the dark end, staring down the merciless muzzle of a police rifle as it spits death. Nai-robbery doesn’t appear to have one bright spot. This helps to drive home the message the producer is making, of a city full of despair, disaster and death.

¹³<http://www.kenyabuzz.com/lifestyle/nairobi-half-life-competition-reviews>

¹⁴<http://www.kenyabuzz.com/lifestyle/nairobi-half-life-competition-reviews>

The execution of the criminals by the police in the dingy, dimly lit dungeon towards the end of the story is a haunting allegory of a failed state, where the ruthlessness of the police machine gun is the order of the day. The massacre of criminals, when it starts, is cold blooded, calculating and frightening. This is overuse of gratuitous violence to horrify the audience and imbue them with fear for entertainments' sake. But it also paints policing in Kenya as wantonly brutish, undertaken by maniacal, trigger-happy dunderheads who are utterly merciless and senseless.

Nairobi Half Life Through a Postcolonial Lens

Nairobi Half Life is produced by two German-owned companies, 'One Fine Day Films,' and 'Ginger Ink.' The Kenyan cast and crew came in as trainees, and according to Jane Munene,¹⁵ the film should never have been nominated as a Kenyan film in any festival. Indeed, her attempt to block the nomination at the Kenya Film Commission was overruled. Wanjiru Kinyanjui, a German trained movie producer and the Chair of Film Production Training at Multimedia University concurs with Munene that *Nairobi Half Life* is a German, and not a Kenyan production. According to Kinyanjui, it could only have qualified if the director was a bona fide Kenyan. In this case, Tosh Gitonga was a trainee and therefore the German trainers are the ones who hold the certificate of origin of the film. To claim that the film is Kenyan is to perpetuate a falsehood.

Nairobi Half Life is highly seductive, yet disturbing, as it hammers home a story of chaotic failure, corruption and despondency. Its success rests on a Nairobi city 'where poverty, disease and the devil live.' The critics of *Nairobi Half Life* deride its unapologetic and unforgiving stance on the corruption, the insecurity and the widespread mismanagement of crucial social systems.

This film epitomizes Amy E. Harth's "hopelessness myth" which claims that in Africa, there is so much violence, instability, corruption, poverty, disease, and other problems that these issues can never be resolved.¹⁶ The myth suggests that it is not worth trying to help or concern oneself with the continent. According to a local critic, "There is a very hopeless voice that runs throughout the movie and unfortunately it does not change up to the end of the story."¹⁷ Except for Mwas' miraculous escape, the entire gang that he had joined for his own survival is exterminated by police machine-gun fire in a cold-blooded massacre to rival the best Hollywood gang extermination by police.

Conclusion

The post-colonial Kenyan film journey has not only failed to glorify the narratives and achievements of the indigenous Kenyan people, it has failed to celebrate Kenyan cultural and political liberty with the exuberance it deserves. The most successful 'Kenyan' film at the box office, *Nairobi Half Life*, seems to contradict the principles that were set in the Algiers 1969 film conference that tried to emphasize that there is no longer room in Africa for literature that is outside the revolutionary struggle. According to Hauza Hamouchene (2014),¹⁸ this gathering was a genuine meeting of African cultures united in their denunciations of colonialism and uniting Africans to adopt the film medium to assert their political and cultural freedom from being dominated again by imperialists. The Algiers meeting succeeded in conveying the idea that culture is a form of resistance to domination, a means for mobilization and consciousness-raising, and a medium for the political struggle against colonialism or any other form of oppression. The implementation of this call is yet to happen in Kenya 50 years later.

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¹⁶Amy E. Harth, *Representations of Africa in the Western News Media: Reinforcing Myths and Stereotypes*, MA Thesis, Tiffin, OH: Tiffin University, 2009.

¹⁷Karimi Nyaga, MA student in Film and Theatre Studies Dept of Literature, UON. Essay.

¹⁸Culture and Revolution: The Pan-African Festival of Algiers, 1969

<https://www.pambazuka.org/pan-africanism/culture-and-revolution-pan-african-festival-algiers-1969>

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From Stage to Reel:

A Retrospective on Theatre

and Film in Kenya

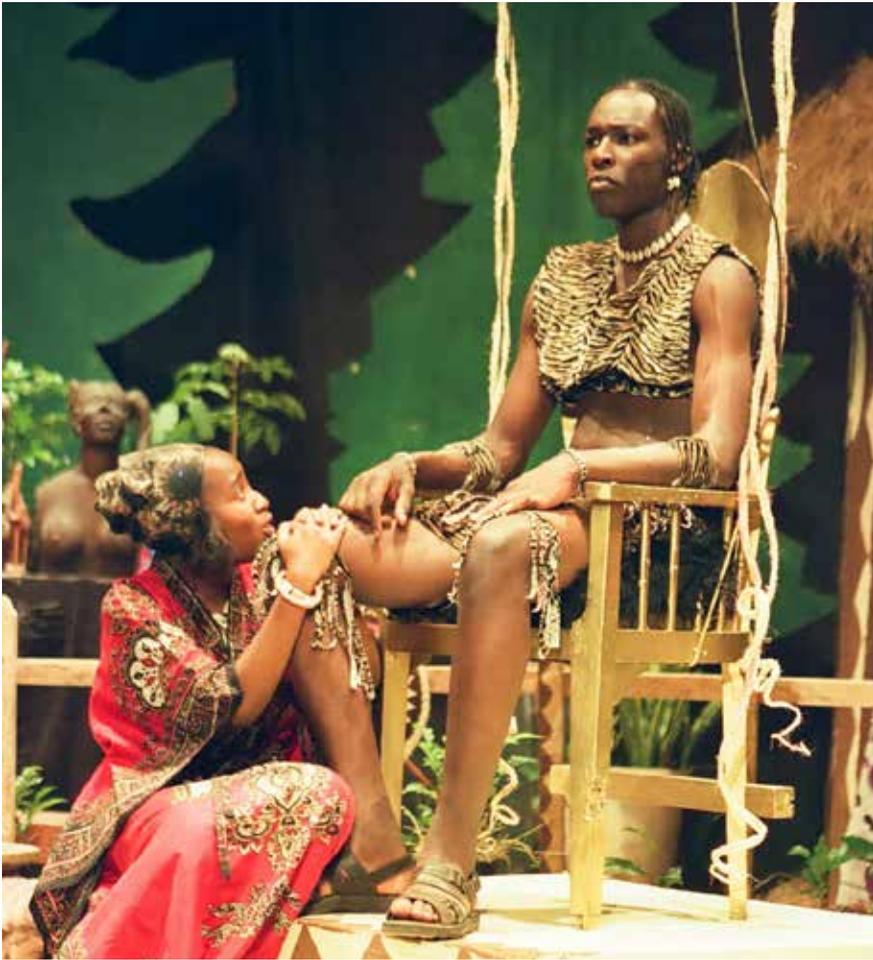
Peter Mudamba

The importance of these dialogues is that we – meaning artists, need to dialogue at several levels as we seek to redefine the central place of the creative or cultural sector in society. This can only happen if we get to the heart, the core of our very existence. As social beings, we cannot exist without speaking to each other and as players in the creative sector, we understand that speech is a central medium and tool of our art, especially for stage and film. Free expression provides an environment where artists create and thrive and it is with this understanding that Docubox supports independent filmmakers.

Allow me to divide and drive our dialogues into two larger generation demarcations for the sake of our theatre/film conversation here – from mid 1970s and into the 1980s, then from the 1990s into the 2000s, and so on, lightly touching on the present. In the 1970s period, I will rely on information shared or passed on to me by various theatre artists and film maestros who experienced these happenings first hand, and who narrated and relived these moments for us as budding artists at ‘the shrine’, as we fondly referred to The Kenya National Theatre. These include David Mulwa, Wasambo Were, Paul Onsongo, John Ruganda, Ka Vundla, Allan Konya, Francis Imbuga, Anne Wanjugu as well as Dr. Opiyo Mumma and Wajgwa Wachira, to name but a few.

As I do my walk-through, allow me to pick out some of the issues, raised in numerous personal conversations that have stood out through the decades. It is these conversations (and their attendant buzzwords) that gave direction and credence, anchoring and lending years of significance and artistic muscle, and weight, whether talking matters theatre or film. However, I'll be quick to warn you that these names may not necessarily be wholly representative of the landscape of the creative arts and that some will be of my contemporaries like Lenin Ogola, Joni Nderitu and Bantu Mwaura, all deceased, whose contributions to the theatre space remain central to its current shape and form. The same can be said of James Falkland, Annabel Maule, John Sibi Okumu, Stephen Mwenesi and a host of others to whom thanks are due for keeping the fire burning, who embraced and contributed immensely to the changing environment.

In the 1970s and 1980s the buzzwords were Funding of the Arts, The Act, and Censorship. On another level, scholars and artists dreaded the words ‘treason’, and ‘trumped-up charges’, which usually met any clamor for change. During these formative post-independence years, the ruling political elite was deeply wary of scholars and artists. These were, indeed, the years when Pan Africanism gained a lot of traction, with African names such as Jomo Kenyatta, Mobutu Seseseko, and Oginga Odinga becoming fashionable. Yet even as first “English” names were dropped, the conviction was not always there as the colonial hangover continued to haunt the leadership. These were also the years when festivals such as FESPACO in Burkina Faso were highly rated, and when *Betrayal in the City*, a play by theatre icon Francis Imbuga was selected to represent us there in 1977, and was well received.



Films from pre-independence days to the 1970s looked at Africans and their cultural practices as base, primitive and backward. Unfortunately that is the narrative that CAP 222 – Film and Stage Licenses Act has maintained to date, sustaining the narrative of the coloniser.

However, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii found the going really tough when they were arrested for staging *Ngaahika Ndeenda (I Will Marry When I Want)* at Kamirithu. Was this because the play was used to awaken the consciousness of poor peasant farmers in rural Limuru who recognised their rights, and the oppressor – and singled out the wealthy ruling elite turned neo-colonialist? Which then reawakened an unfair authoritarian government that was afraid of this call to revolution, and demand by the poor peasants of a free space for expression and restitution? This had come hot on the heels of the play *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* by Ngugi and Micere Mugo. The government must have imagined what these plays might do in the city and university where Ngugi and Mugo taught, and could not allow it. The government's reaction was therefore swift and ruthless, denying them any further performances and paying for the blood of the producers, who consequently went into exile. The recognition of the power of performance is worth underlining. The preferred charge against dissenters then, as stated above, was treason, with the harsh sentence of detention without trial as punishment.

The trend when it came to films was the glorification of whiteness and vilification of people of colour. Such films as *The Flame Trees of Thika* and *Kitchen Toto* basically elevated the white man, while the African role remained that of servant, almost slave, furthering the 'boy' culture. Films from pre-independence days to the 1970s looked at Africans and their cultural practices as base, primitive and backward. Unfortunately that is the narrative that CAP 222 – Film and Stage Licenses Act has maintained to date, sustaining the narrative of the coloniser.

During these years of struggle, with bad systems and perceptions, funding remained a major impediment for independent filmmakers in the country, a lack of support that has stuck through the years and subsequent governments. The other cruel thing that



Through hard work and persistence, Kenyan filmmakers have, through the years, learnt the art and craft of filmmaking. Beyond KIMC, such filmmaking schools as the Mo Amin Foundation came on the scene and took these skills to a higher level. A major stumbling block to our growth was the lack of a Culture Policy.



the governments of this era did well was to censor productions, from plays to films, confining artists within fences of control and suppression. This culture was perfected by the 2nd era where rule by instilling fear and curtailing free speech was the order of the day. These were the years when the University of Nairobi became the space where free thinkers converged to think of ways and means to sustain pressure against oppressive rule. The University lecture hall, Education Theatre II (ED II), became the space for creatives to converge, create and present their works. Thus artists, poets, thespians, activists including students and lecturers met and did their thing, before going on to socialize at 'the shrine'. These meetings fueled hope that free expression would one day be realised through sustained pressure by the power of the pen and performance.

In the 1980's there was significant growth in the film industry with the coming of age of documentary films commissioned by non-governmental organisations. Some docudramas and commissioned documentaries took center stage. Films such as *KolorMask* by Greg Adambo (directed by Sao Gamba) however, continued and heightened the narrative of 'white supremacy' and the 'primitive underdog African'. Remember it is during this period also that *White Mischief*, *White Maasai*, *Nowhere in Africa*, and other such films were made. The narrative of white supremacy was central in most of these films made by foreigners that shot films in Kenya with limited assistance of local production houses and fixers. No state institution involved in filmmaking saw the importance of countering this skewed and oppressive view. Independent filmmakers were still struggling then, as now, for funding. As a country, although 'independent and free' we remained colonized in the films shot in our spaces that carried the colonial supremacy narrative. However, a slight shift was taking place, as it is also during this period that a few local icons in filmmaking started emerging and showing their knack. Njeri Karago, Konga Mbandu and Lenny Juma started rising as they learnt and took up filming. They in turn were to train local filmmakers in various departments that had mostly been the preserve of whites, while "natives" worked mainly as set runners. Through hard work and persistence, Kenyan filmmakers have, through the years, learnt the art and craft of filmmaking. Beyond KIMC, such filmmaking schools as the Mo Amin Foundation came on the scene and took these skills to a higher level. A major stumbling block to our growth was the lack of a Culture Policy. This could have worked to streamline the sector, establish a proper leadership structure and craft a funding structure so as to determine decent budgets for steady growth of the sector.

The 1990s–2000s: The 1990's were years of positive change, great optimism and political reawakening, and the struggle for a 2nd liberation. The arts and artists played a significant role, with the song *Unbwogable* (meaning unbeatable or invincible) becoming a rallying call across the nation. During these years the one aspect that stood out and worked to help better creative inputs was the absence, or silence of the 'censor'. The censorship board soon changed its name to 'classification board'. The sector thrived in this relaxed and more accommodating period, with little intimidation. Although challenges of funding still remained, as is the norm, the general atmosphere was clearly more accommodating and conducive.

This then led to the comfortable growth of theatre and comedy in Kenya. Remember that in past years such TV programs as *Usiniharakishe* were summarily banned, and Joni Nderitu, after mimicking the president on stage, had to hide and be shielded by fellow actors, lest he be arrested and tortured at Nyayo House on false charges. But in later years Walter Mongare, John Kiarie aka KJ (now a Member of Parliament) and Tony Njuguna, all of Redykyulass fame, freely did their comedy thing on stage and on TV and inspired such growth as of *The Churchill Show*. Investigative series by journalists John Allan Namu and Mohammed Ali boldly helped unearth a lot of scams from the murky waters of politics. It became easier to write and speak about corruption even as the politician chose to take no action. It is during these years that scandals such as Anglo-Leasing and Goldenberg that lost Kenya billions came to the fore, as TV stations

joined the fight against corruption.

It is also during the 90s to 2000 and after that such interesting films as *Something Necessary* and *Nairobi Half Life* were produced, long after *Saikati* (1992). Huge TV series such as *Mali*, *Sugar* and *Siri* were also birthed during this period. Freedom to create enabled this to take place. The M-Net New Directions Series gave rise to new Directors (such as Ingolo wa Keya), as did Baraka Films. Mohammed Amin Foundation trained filmmakers were picked up by service companies such as Blue Sky Films, Pontact, Sound & Pictures and TV stations. New producers also emerged, such as Bob Nyanja, Anne Mungai and Jane Munene. But, really, hats off to Judy Kibinge and Njeri Karago and their ilk for standing up and putting up a good fight for the local film industry. Thank you, Daniel Ndambuki, for providing hope and an avenue for theatre artists and comedians to thrive through the Churchill Show.

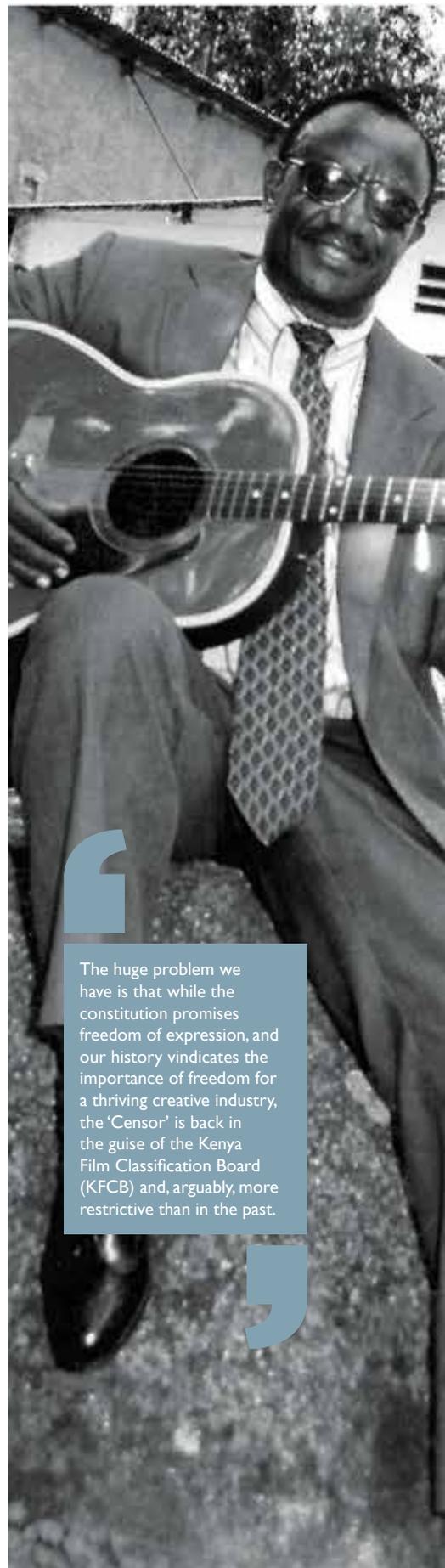
The huge problem we have is that while the constitution promises freedom of expression, and our history vindicates the importance of freedom for a thriving creative industry, the 'Censor' is back in the guise of the Kenya Film Classification Board (KFCB) and, arguably, more restrictive than in the past. It will not hesitate to ban a film even with the knowledge that its work and mandate essentially is to classify films. Kenya's self-declared moral policeman has no respect for key players in the industry and would go to any length to ridicule the sector and those engaged in it. The hurling of insults at filmmakers and artists has happened frequently in the last three years, and there is urgent need for some measure of etiquette.

Unless we decolonise the arts and creative industries from the shackles of Cap 222, and a certain colonial mindset, we will not see a thriving theatre or film industry. Allow artists to imagine new and different worlds, to produce and distribute creative works for local and broader consumption. Allow them the freedom to create and you will witness the greatest renaissance of the creative sector. I want us to imagine for one moment a weekend without creative input in our homes, social and workspaces: a world totally silent, with neither book, nor poem to read, no music or TV, no cinema halls. Tell me, which one can we most easily do without – the Creative, or the Censor? We must decolonize films/documentaries and the creative sector from the prevailing oppressive atmosphere. Our cultural gems cannot be viewed with high regard, for colonial laws look at our African culture and way of life as backward, primitive and wrong – same as the coloniser regarded our songs, dances and drum beats.

We cannot be silent when creative dreams are stilled; whilst institutions we formed to nurture and encourage creativity suppress artistic desires using archaic and unconstitutional laws. Freedom of expression is enshrined in the Kenya Constitution and should be the basis upon which we govern ourselves. Let us embrace our diversity in every area of our lives, and recognise the centrality of the creative sector in making us one society, proud of who we are.

Allow me to make a brief list that I shall call my roll of honor for theatre and film: These are the women and men who helped this sector rise like the legendary phoenix from the ashes. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Francis Imbuga, David Mulwa, Wasambo Were, Paul Onsongo, John Sibi-Okumu, Annabel Maule, Mumbi Kaigwa, Oby Obyerodhyambo, Daniel Ndambuki aka Churchill, Sammy Mwangi, the late Anne Wanjugu, Allan Konya, James Falkland, Joni Nderitu and Bantu Mwaura. The Free Travelling Theatre, Theatre Workshop Productions (TWP), Mbalamwezi Players, and Phoenix Players were the training grounds for many of these. On film, I have Anne Njeri Karago, Judy Kibinge, Lenny Juma, the late Charlie Simpson, Anne Wanjugu and Konga Mbandu, and the string of service companies that brought and continue to bring great films to our country. We celebrate you and those who worked with you to keep this industry on its feet. Keep dialoguing until you drop dead.

P. Mudamba Mudamba is Programs Director, Docubox-EADFF.



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Colonial European Theatre

Gichora Mwangi

As more and more Colonialists settled in Kenya, the need to reaffirm their own culture, or that of their motherland at least, led to the establishment of theatre that would remind them of life 'back home'. This section¹ will be a brief analysis of the early stages of the European theatre in Kenya. Its inclusion is justified by the effect and influence that this theatre had on the growth of literary theatre among indigenous Kenyans in Post-independent Kenya. Because of the dearth of well produced Kenyan theatre and as a consequence of their being educated to see European, and more specifically British, theatre as being the true representation of theatre, the Kenyan playwrights and actors saw these locally produced plays as being exemplary and aspired to their production values.

The development of European theatre can be traced back to the turn of the century: Yellowing pages of the 'Mombasa Times' of November 3 1917... are framed in the Little theatre Club to perpetuate the "Revue in Five Brain Waves" called "Pili Pili Hoho" in the Mombasa theatre owned by a Mr. Singh and which was probably a cinema. An unknown scribe has claimed this effort as the first theatrical production in Mombasa.²

The tradition of amateur theatre was brought to Kenya in the first wave of settlers, largely from middle class backgrounds. Later after the settling of the demobilised soldiers it was they who continued the tradition. After the First World War and the upheaval of the colonial conquest, the 1920s and early 1930s brought about a much more relaxed attitude that was favourable to the arts. There was also the element of reasserting their cultural links and this form of expression enabled them to do so. The first recorded purpose built theatres were the Regal and the Majestic theatres, built in 1931 and 1934 respectively. Both of these were in Mombasa and are described as being "Full scale theatres ... seating hundreds of people and equipped with facilities for twenty foot flats and orchestra pits, based upon the best London theatres of the early 1930s."³

Before the theatres were constructed, European theatre was active alongside the Asian theatre at the Goan Institute's 200 seat multi purpose hall. Also the Roxy cinema in Mombasa was a popular venue for amateur theatre productions. Mombasa was a natural place to start due to its cosmopolitan nature and the railway:

In the early parts of the century... it was the railway staff that started amateur theatricals in Nairobi and Mombasa. At the coast there was a railway club where the 'Harbour Lights', a concert party cum theatrical group, gave performances to large and enthusiastic audiences.⁴

¹This section is based on the scrapbooks of Dorothy and Dennis Patience, painstakingly kept over a period of over 40 years and kindly availed to me by Peter Doenhof of the Mombasa Little Theatre Club. I am also grateful to James Falkland and Kenneth Mason, both of Phoenix Players, for sharing with me an anecdotal history. Kenneth Mason came to Kenya as an actor in 1952 and is therefore well placed to comment on the development of this particular strand of theatre.

²From the commemorative programme of the 100th production at the Little Theatre Club, November 1971.

³Commemorative programme, Little Theatre Club, p5

⁴Programme to commemorate the 25th Anniversary of the Little Theatre Club, 1987, p. 12



There was growing demand for touring productions among the settler population upcountry and regional theatres were built to take these in the major settler towns of Nakuru, Eldoret, Kisumu and Kericho. The tradition of touring was however started before these were built and the performers used the social clubs of the settlers as venues for their performances.

The Second World War affected Mombasa directly and profoundly. As a naval base holding the British Eastern Fleet, the danger of attack was ever present. The armed forces' population was very high and it was they who formed the Inter Services Entertainment Society (ISES) in 1944, based at the aptly named Garrison theatre. ISES staged ten productions in the next three years before the demobilisation of the forces took its toll on the membership and the society was disbanded. One of its more active members, Dickie Moreton, then suggested the formation of the Little Theatre Club. Based at the Garrison initially and they put on a programme of standard British middle class theatre of the time, with a heavy leaning towards comedy. This group was to be the precursor of several active amateur groups, including the Nairobi City Players and the Nakuru Players. At the core of this group, a young couple, Dennis and Dorothy Patience worked to form companies wherever they transferred, and most successfully in Kisumu. By 1950 there was already in place then a network of purpose built theatres that had a full programme of touring shows from Nairobi and Mombasa.

When the Garrison theatre in Mombasa was abruptly demolished, the Little Theatre Club moved to purpose built premises, bought with the aid of a Belgian entrepreneur, Colinvaux. Seating 110 people, it opened in September 1952 with a production of Noel Langley's "Little Lambs Eat Ivy."

Meanwhile the National Theatre was opened in Nairobi in November 1952. In March 1946 a group of amateurs among the growing population of civil servants and wealthy

farmers living in Nairobi had proposed to construct a theatre in Nairobi and set about raising funds for it. In the official programme for the opening it is noted that this group then merged with another whose concern was “investigating the possibility of an inter-racial centre for the promotion of all the arts in the colony”⁵ In the end however there was no doubting where the allegiance of the joint committee lay:

Building started during August 1951 and in its early stages, in a short ceremony, water which had been brought from the River Avon at Stratford was sprinkled on the stage by Mr. James Master, a governor of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, as a token of our association with English theatre.⁶

The actual building had to accommodate the demands of very disparate groups and was built eventually as a multi-purpose hall where plays, concerts, pageants and films could all be staged. It was very ambitious in its realisation, with a capacity for 482 and a 32 foot wide proscenium arch stage. At this time there is no record of any African activity at this or any other of the European built theatres and one has to wait until after independence for any evidence of African involvement.

Another influential couple in the development of European theatre was Don and Mollie Maule. They arrived in Nairobi in 1948 and established an actors’ studio ‘in a large room above a grocery store’.⁷ In September they staged their first production at a cinema hall called the Theatre Royal and converted their studio into a theatre a year later, forming the Donovan Maule theatre Club. By 1951 the membership was 1400 and growing rapidly, reaching 2000 the following year. The programme was a clear attempt at keeping Nairobi audiences abreast with the latest theatrical trends in London and New York:

The Donovan Maule theatre had established such a reputation for itself that London and New York managements were prepared to release the rights of plays while they were still running in the west end or on Broadway. This enabled the Maules to keep Nairobi audiences up-to-date with what was happening in these two leading theatre capitals⁸

The company expanded rapidly, employing British professional actors and in 1953 they launched a tour that took them to all the major centres of settler population in East Africa, a trend that was becoming increasingly important. By 1956 the demand was so high that a larger theatre was necessary. A public flotation of the company was highly successful but delays meant the new theatre did not open until June 1958. The opening production ‘Separate Tables’ was the 89th production.

The theatre was heavily dependent on European membership and was badly affected by the exodus of whites from Kenya immediately after independence. At this time the African involvement in the formal theatre was still negligible and these companies resisted the Africanisation of the theatre as their purposes and those of their audiences were already being well served. However as the Africanisation drive intensified, it was only a matter of time before the young African playwrights who had begun to write at this time demanded a place on the scene. The performance of Ngugi’s *The Black Hermit* at the Uganda National Theatre quickly raised the question about the racial bias of the Kenya National Theatre. These issues are the subject of the examination of post-independent theatre in Kenya, in the next chapter.

⁵Official programme to mark the opening of the National Theatre p.1

⁶Opening programme for National Theatre, p.2

⁷Official programme to mark 25 years of the Donovan Maule Theatre, September 1973

⁸Programme for Donovan Maule Theatre; p.6

A Coda: In Conclusion

This thesis has examined the history of Kenyan theatre in the twentieth Century. The political events of the past 100 years have had significant impact on the modes of cultural expression employed by Kenyan people. Colonialism was perhaps the single most important one of these events. This is because at the beginning of the colonial era,

the country now known as Kenya simply did not exist. Once created, the country was settled by British imperialists accompanied by missionaries. The approaches of these two groups towards the land they had settled were very different but complementary. The missionary, who was obliged by Christian faith to bring "civilisation" to these "heathen" people was in the end beholden for protection and support to the settler who came to acquire land and live a life of excessive luxury. The laws that the latter passed were of benefit to both of these groups and ultimately of detriment to the indigenous people. The basis of colonial settlement of Kenya was undiluted racism, the assumption that the explorer had discovered this land completely overlooking the rights of those who lived there already.

This historical knowledge is important to enable an understanding of Kenyan theatre and the reasons why it has undergone the changes it has. There is no doubt that theatre existed among the Kenyan communities before independence. This has been variously described as Oral Performance, Oral Literature and more recently, Orature. The theatre that existed has much in common with other theatre traditions from all over the world. The commonalities are in the existence of a transaction between performer and audience and in a delineation of a performer and audience. While much is made of the active audience of Orature, it is still clearly defined as an audience, albeit one with a different role from the western conception of audience as passive bodies in the dark. The heightened awareness of space is another common element. While western theatre has been confined to specifically constructed buildings for a long time, Orature empowers and transforms space, creating a specific context for the performance. Orature exists best in what Brook called 'the empty space'. But colonial influence spearheaded by education and the creation of a class of indigenous Kenyans who were being equipped to become subservient to the needs of the colonial masters and not to their own, interfered with this concept of space and forced performance to rethink and reinvent itself.

The reaction of the local people, once they recovered from the obvious shock of the displacement, both physical and cultural, that colonialism had caused, was to resist this intrusion and try to reclaim their own culture and own forms of performance. The role of protest was not new to Oral Performance. One of the primary functions it served in traditional society was to criticize and set straight those who had gone wrong. The subtlety of this criticism, using the clever strategies of concealment that the various forms of masquerade afforded, meant that very critical messages could be put across without being offensive to those being criticised. Oral Performance in the struggle [for] independence acted as more than just a method of criticism. It was a focal rallying point, for a highly visible and open form that allowed people to reclaim their identity, gaining strength and pride in the process. Orature is a truly popular form.

... The form of Orature based theatre has a bright future. As more and more awareness grows and with the changing political fortunes, and with, perhaps, the relaxation of censorship, Orature based theatre will flourish. This is ironic in the sense that Orature based theatre has been encouraged by the censorship laws contained in the Film and Stage Plays Act. The flexible nature and the lack of script in this form has baffled the censor, who has had to wait until the performance in order to ban it, unlike other times when reading the script was all they needed to do. This has not stopped censorship... but as time goes on, and if need be, the theatre will adapt, change and conquer in order to survive.

Note: This excerpt is from Gichora's Doctoral Thesis, **Orature in Contemporary Theatre Practice in Kenya**. It was awarded by the School of English, University of Leeds in 1996. It has been minimally edited for *Jahazi*. We publish this posthumously.

Gichora Mwangi was a director, actor and founder of Karamu Trust, a theatre based foundation.



John Ruganda:

A Reflection

Oluoch Obura

In this piece, Obura pays what he considers as long overdue and crucial homage to John Ruganda who, in establishing the successful Free Travelling Theatre at the University of Nairobi, ignited the spark of such initiatives as Kamirithu, and much else besides. He hails the genius of this man whose contribution to theatre in Kenya is not yet fully acknowledged.

My first encounter with John Ruganda at a personal level was at the University of Nairobi in the 1970s. I vividly recall the day. It was a Wednesday night and we had gone for a session of the writers' forum that we used to have in the University. The writers' forum was a platform that brought together lecturers and students who sought to share ideas ranging from poetry, plays and literature in general. The forum's key goal was to transform and shape up ideas that saw works of art as tools of education and entertainment. It was an interesting writer's activity since students and lecturers had a chance to chat freely against the norm that was usual in the lecture hall. Most of the students came from the Educational Theatre group. Amongst the lecturers was John Ruganda, a rare breed of intellectual who mingled with the group freely, and with ease.

On this night it was decided that a reading of the play *The Island* by Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona, an African translation of the Greek play *Antigone* by Sophocles, would be done. Ruganda wanted to audition people for the cast of the play. It was my first time to be on stage at university level. The last time I was on stage was in high school. Since I was a first year student, I was too shy to offer myself up for audition. I decided to sit back and watch the auditioning process. As director of the play, Ruganda conducted the auditioning for all roles and at the end of the exercise announced that the rehearsals would commence immediately.

Having an immense interest in theatrical productions I attended the rehearsals of the play paying keen attention to how Ruganda and his actors did their thing. His unique approach towards directing plays was phenomenal. The pool of actors, particularly the main actors, were given a chance to showcase what they had. Ruganda did not block his plays in the usual way but rather gave his actors leeway to manifest themselves in a free spirit - they were allowed to improvise. This struck me and I realized that I could also have auditioned. I thought back to my high school days and my creative capabilities. I clearly had my own ideas on how to do the things I saw on stage. Meanwhile, rehearsals went on for several weeks, as the play took shape.

Ruganda and his actors had a special relationship since he had had previous encounters with them on stage. He wasn't starting with new actors like me and the more rehearsals I attended, the more I was convinced I could give it a shot. I offered myself up for a role among the backstage crew. My theatrical journey with Ruganda had begun. When we first staged the play it was to a full house. The audience response was electric. Indeed,



Ruganda had done a marvelous job. Following the huge success of this first production under his direction, I vowed to audition for a major role in his next play. There were other productions at the University of Nairobi but I was keen to work with Ruganda.

John Ruganda was a man of noble demeanor who had a personal relationship with his actors both on and off stage. Although a don and director, his relationship with students was respectful and consultative. It was democratic. This was a welcome sign for me and I felt privileged to be working under him. Not one to bully, he instead joked with the actors as he insisted on what he wanted done in a firm and friendly way. This rare gift made him attract good actors, both undergraduate and graduate students, from diverse disciplines, whom he nurtured, creating a pool of trained and competent actors. The audience was also mixed, with the majority drawn from disciplines like engineering. The atmosphere created by the theatrical productions was exciting and students were exposed to a vast repertoire of cultures. Ruganda revolutionized, and popularised theatre, creating an alternative for people who were not interested in movies.

His works, such as *Black Mamba* and *The Floods* were also popular. But it is the establishment of the Free Travelling Theatre at the Department of Literature that truly opened up opportunities in theatre. It was a great venture, and I dared to audition. Ruganda, who introduced the model from Makerere University spearheaded this initiative, which also included Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Mugo. He was also experienced in matters of theatre production, a skill he brought to Nairobi. The troupe would travel and perform all over the country. In 'The Makerere Travelling Theatre in East Africa', Lydia Kayanja speaks to Ruganda's potential at Makerere:

Most of our plays were written by university students, some of whom were travelling and performing with us—for example, John Ruganda, who had won first prize at Makerere drama festival with his 'Pyrrhic Victory', and Angellus Okello, our Luo dramatist. The plays were written in English, Luganda, Swahili, and Luo. (141)

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John Ruganda was a master of his own art, and took to center stage of theatre production in the Literature Department. There were other equally illustrious members at the time. David Rubadiri was the poet, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o the novelist. Like a gifted sculptor crafts a masterpiece, Ruganda created a theatrical group whose productions were way beyond their time. I had the golden opportunity to be selected for the Free Travelling Theatre, which became a trademark of the University. The University of Nairobi management offered monetary and other necessary support to the group, making our operations smooth. It was a unique venture that brought together a pool of gifted actors across all the university departments. The Travelling Theatre was composed of free thinkers who were diverse in talent and artistic interests.

It is thus Ruganda's vision, and initiative at Kamirithu that saw the realization of a new theatrical experience in Kenya. If theatre had been the preserve of a selected elite up to this point, Ruganda now used it in a way that sought to bring the ordinary people on board.

John Ruganda in his play productions diversified from all over the world incorporating all kinds of plays and cutting across all ideological debates in the 1970s. Ruganda did not engage in, nor bother with the ideological debates. His commitment to creating a theatrical production that used art as a tool for changing the society remained the primary goal. Ruganda's perception of art was that it should be used for education and enjoyment purposes. For him, it was for the audiences enjoyment. The actors were to be accessible to the people and mingle with them to see what was going on.

While scholars like Ngugi embraced the ideological debate that focused on using works of art as a way of fighting the political regime, Ruganda chose to focus on plays that didn't target or antagonise the political system. His interest was to get the audience to appreciate theatre. Through him educational theatre was revolutionised, and the greater public assured of quality entertainment. The University of Nairobi, specifically the literature department, became a force to reckon with, and Ruganda was at its epicenter.

If one was to draw a comparison, what Ruganda was to theatre, Ngugi was to the novel. During our country-wide tours we had the chance to visit Ngugi's home in Limuru, a truly memorable experience. The visit culminated in the performance of Ngugi's play *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, co-authored with Micere Mugo. We performed the play in the open-air theatre at Kamirithu, an emotional experience for the villagers, most of whom associated with the play as they were closely involved in the Mau Mau movement. The impact on Ngugi would be felt in the years to come. Following the success at Kamirithu, country wide tours were done popularizing the play. I want to argue that this experience taught Ngugi the power of theatre as a tool for changing the society. Following on its success and impact, Ngugi organized a team of villagers to audition and act in the same play. It is thus Ruganda's vision, and initiative at Kamirithu that saw the realization of a new theatrical experience in Kenya. If theatre had been the preserve of a selected elite up to this point, Ruganda now used it in a way that sought to bring the ordinary people on board.

It is around this Kamirithu experience that Ngugi now mobilized, bringing in key directors to work with the villagers, who became actors in their own drama, in their own language, Gikuyu. The shift was new, and extraordinary, the performances riveting. Watching our roles being re-enacted, and watching the villagers perform from their own firsthand experience of the Mau Mau war infused a clear urgency, lending depth, and bringing in a dimension previously missing. Ngugi was building upon what Ruganda had started, and it was powerful. It is not that the play's thematic concerns were anti-establishment. Kenya was a conservative state and any work that sought to question those in power was bound to land a playwright in deep trouble. The line between stage and life was fine, with Ruganda valiantly trying to stay non-controversial so as to avoid being drawn into fighting the political system. And he was a foreigner, albeit East African.

Ruganda was a magnet when it came to getting actors, with whom he cultivated close friendships and lasting relationships, establishing a mutually loyal bond. It is these

relationships that fed into his art, and into the characters he went on to create. They became powerful living beings with discernible traits, as seen in his work with Stella Muka and Wakanyote Njuguna in the 1970s and 80s. The play that came closest to being political was *The Floods*, an exploration of the changes brought about by the military regime of Idi Amin Dada in Uganda. It was a premonition of the violence that was to engulf Uganda. It was performed at the French Cultural Center and other places.

Ruganda remained faithful to theatre, and did not embrace the political platforms popular with his colleagues at the University of Nairobi at the time. He was a generous man who kept a cordial relationship with his fellow artists. His lifestyle was a sharp contrast to his fellow workmates since he preferred spending time with fellow artists at the University hall, Education Theatre II. Every day after we were done with our rehearsals he would invite us to the Kenya National Theatre where he liked to imbibe in his favorite Johnnie Walker whiskey that he fondly nicknamed “*Macho Mbili*”. Together with his students he would enjoy his drink in a very relaxed mood. During these moments we got to interact with him in a special way. It was time for banter, nothing serious, nothing academic, not even theatre matters. He didn’t throw his professional weight around. He made everyone comfortable and never used big names, preferring to use pseudonyms. He loved his bottle, but when it came to time for rehearsals he was always alert. It seems as if liquor unlocked his creativity—it encouraged him to be more versatile. His fellow lectures referred to him as “chief”, a moniker that was a carryover from Makerere University.

He liked to keep in touch with his actors outside of the theatre. He was always there for them and accorded them respect. He would visit our parents and we all enjoyed his company since his personal demeanor was an important factor to his actors specifically the older actors in the University of Nairobi and the National Theatre. Ruganda was a friend to other dramatists like Francis Imbuga, but kept his distance. He enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with Imbuga’s team, comprised of Kisa Amateshe, Waveney Olembo and David Mulwa from Kenyatta University. The two groups related well and respected Ruganda since he was the guru. While Imbuga dominated in Kenyatta University, Ruganda created a theatrical dynasty in the University of Nairobi Theatre group. Students would come back to work with him even after completing their studies at the University.

During his last days in the University of Nairobi, Ruganda’s relationship with some members of the Department of Literature turned frosty in response to *The Floods*. Members believed the character Nankya, whom Ruganda depicts as very ambitious, portrayed Micere Mugo, then a colleague at the Literature Department. Mugo had aspirations to become Dean, and some of the colleagues thought Ruganda was taking a dig at her through Nankya. I didn’t share this view since I knew Ruganda wouldn’t purposely throw such a jibe at a colleague. It was just an artistic creation, nothing more. In the play Ruganda crafts an upwardly mobile Nankya, who is selected winner of the J.F Kennedy literary prize and chairperson of Women’s Lib in her homeland within a short period. (p.21)

Even though fellow dons never raised the issue directly, many did not support the production. This brought an ideological division in the Department of Literature, and soured Ruganda’s relationship with colleagues, who did not trust his intentions. Despite these undercurrents, the play was a huge success. It subsequently toured four cities in [the former] Yugoslavia—Mostar, Zenica, Banjaluka and Sarajevo.

As he was leaving the University of Nairobi, a separate movement was gaining ground. The Literature Department supported Wajgwa Wachira, who had recently relocated from the UK, to form a theatrical production that went on to perform in Kamithiru. It

He did what he believed in. His production techniques were experimental, eschewing established methods in drama. He was also influenced to a large extent by the South African playwright Athol Fugard, who created plays with few characters. This dramatic technique helped his actors give their best on stage, while bringing out their full potential.



seemed as if Waigwa was being used to sideline Ruganda, and the tension between them was discernible. Indeed, attempts to create a new theatrical caucus continued till Ruganda left the University.

Reflecting on Ruganda's life at the University, I recall a man who stood his ground, becoming stubborn when anyone tried to bulldoze him. He did what he believed in. His production techniques were experimental, eschewing established methods in drama. He was also influenced to a large extent by the South African playwright Athol Fugard, who created plays with few characters. This dramatic technique helped his actors give their best on stage, while bringing out their full potential. It also provided an opportunity for actors to explore a wide repertoire of plays, giving them broader exposure. Ruganda always got the best out his actors, making for successful plays.

His most outstanding production was *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, in 1972. It was widely acclaimed as a marvelous production, and got the nod from such luminaries as David Rubadiri, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who were literally blown away by the performance. Ruganda had nailed it.

On watching the play, then Vice Chancellor of the University, Dr. Josephat Karanja, who had just come from London was so impressed, he resolved to support the Free Travelling Theatre. Having previously seen the play in London, he was amazed by Ruganda's production, which easily rivaled what he had watched. It is thus that the Traveling Theatre, already impactful, became a marketing tool for the university. The young actors were an immediate attraction, and resonated well with the public, who marveled at this new phenomenon. Here were rebels with a cause who sought to address key issues in society, under Ruganda. Its coverage around the country was reflected in the newspapers and television and it was a proud moment for the University of Nairobi.

Other theatre groups started emulating the University of Nairobi Travelling Theatre and a symbiotic relationship blossomed, further amplifying Ruganda's contribution to theatre. Groups from Uganda would visit the University of Nairobi to stage their performances. This diversified the theatrical experience and helped create an extraordinary spirit around theatre. African plays also played a key role in fostering an appreciation of African culture.

In conclusion, I pay homage to this great man whose achievements in theatre production in Kenya remain largely unacknowledged. I celebrate him for the great work that changed forever the theatrical landscape at a time when theatre was seen as a privilege for the few. His life was centered on theatre. He was knowledgeable and precise in his duties as a director. Through his travelling troupe of actors he brought theatre closer to the people. Through his magic touch ordinary actors were transformed into extraordinary actors on stage. Many owe their career advancement to him.

May your good soul continue resting in peace Guru!

Oluoch Obura is Professor of Literature and Theatre in the Department of Literature, Linguistics & Foreign Languages, Kenyatta University, Kenya.

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In Conversation with Opiyo Okach

– Dancer & Choreographer

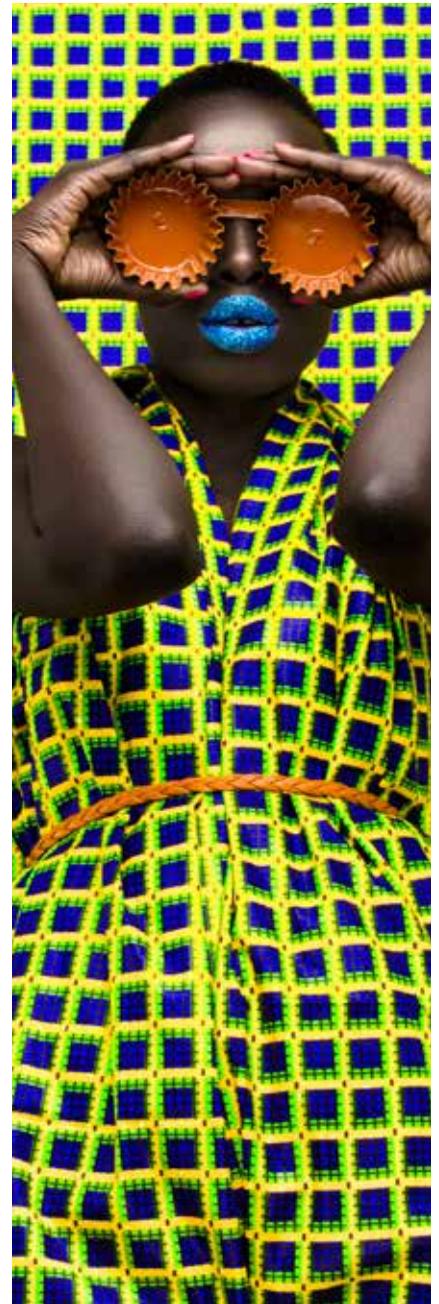


First of all, thanks a lot Joy [Mboya], for inviting me to this conversation with the rest of the community. To everybody in the room today are many greetings to all of you. It is my greatest honor to share my thoughts with you. At the moment I'm doing a little residency for choreographic research at a place called Labrecque, which is a center for choreographic development, on the outskirts of Paris. I have a little list of things to talk about. Joy gave me a little shopping list, so I will begin with that. Now, the first thing is my journey as an artist.

My journey as an artist is long and convoluted, but I guess that's the same for anybody who has been in this for the long haul, in Kenya. I started out in theatre in the mid-1980s, around 85/86. At the time, I was inspired by some of the icons of theater of the day, names like Odingo Hawi, Oluoch Obura, John Sibi Okumu... It's a long list. Like many aspiring artists, I hang out at the National Theater, at the French Cultural Center, participated in the projects of Gichugu Makini and Opiyo Mumma at the Literature Department [University of Nairobi]. I hang out with The Theatre Workshop fraternity, rubbed shoulders with Gichora Mwangi, Asiba Asiba and got awed by Suki Mwendwa and Afrija. My first experience on stage was Jacob Otieno's Friends Theatre, where I did a number of small roles for a time. Through a number of mime workshops at the French Cultural Center, I had discovered that I had a thing for movement and by the end of the 1980s was creating and presenting my own mime sketches on stage as a mime artist, for which I became quite reputed.

In 1990, I obtained a grant from the British Council to go to mime school in the UK. And so I went to the Desmond Jones School of Mime and Physical Theatre in London. The 90s in the UK was a time when interdisciplinary experimentation between dance, theatre, circus arts, film...was hip, with trail blazing companies like DV8 Physical Theatre [Dance Visual] or Theatre de Complicité pushing the boundaries between text and body based work. That's how I also came to have first hand experience of contemporary dance as well as other progressive forms – live art, experimental cinema.... Coming from Nairobi, this was an explosive experience for me. So I immersed myself in physical theater and the vibrant London arts scene for about five years.

So, [I was] back in Kenya in 1996, with a bit of formal training. But my experiences had largely been autodidactic. It had taken me 10 years to shape myself into some kind of artist. Around this time we hooked up with Faustin Linyekula – now reknown Congolese choreographer – who was living in Kenya temporarily; temporarily turned out to be not so temporary. But we found out that we shared artistic sensibility, dreams and vision. We creatively stimulated each other and worked together pretty well. At the Conservatoire of Music studio we gave movement classes for anybody who wanted to do something more creative than aerobics or yoga, and could pay.



That way we got to pay for subsidized space to develop our own work. Our vision of the work we were developing was a kind of physical visual theatre of the body. We didn't know what we were going to do with it, but being conscious that there was a global interest in arts from 'other' parts of the world, that is what we worked on anyway.

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Evident by the rising popularity of world music an interest in cultures from other parts of the world had grown in the 70s and 80s. There was now curiosity for the culture of a new Africa. For dance this translated into the quest for a contemporary African dance. Not the dance of post independence Africa that had produced national dance troupes – Les Ballets Africains of Guinea/Fodeba Keita, Adzido Pan African Dance Ensemble/Peter Badedjo, or Bomas of Kenya Dancers – but the modern Africa of 'cities and skyscrapers'. Around this period at the French Cultural Centre we saw work by dance and music groups from West Africa like Koteba from Côte d'Ivoire or Irene Tassemedo from Burkina Faso and eventually participated in workshops by Alphonse Tierou – dance writer and critic from Côte d'Ivoire. And we told ourselves that if what we were seeing was touring the whole world because it was the best Africa had to offer, then perhaps we had a few surprises up our sleeves. In 1998, there was a call for dance companies from Africa to submit contemporary dance work to the Second Edition of the African choreographic encounters. We figured this was the perfect opportunity to get our work seen.

By then we had been joined by Afrah Tenambergen and were working on a trio called 'Cleansing', which was a sort of minimalist, ritualistic, *Butoh* like performance [a form of Japanese dance theatre, of 'death and disease'] inspired by the events in Rwanda. So we figured that is what we had to propose for the festival. We were not dancers and never even considered our work to be dance. At the time there wasn't much dance video on the Internet for reference, but from the pictures we could see of the other companies, we could tell what kind of work to expect. Our work was conceptually and visually so different that we were convinced we would win. So we became La Compagnie Gàara (*gara* are the *nyatiti* bells) and with the help of the French Cultural Centre made and submitted a professional video of our work. Our submission to the competition was accepted, and so it is in 1998 we discovered contemporary African dance at Teatro Avenida in Luanda, Angola, where a bottle of coca cola cost 30 dollars! (The Teatro was demolished in 2009). And for sure, we won the third Prize. Winning the prize opened the doors to international touring, to festivals all over the world, as well as residences in France and elsewhere.

Back to Nairobi, 2001, I initiated a new longish term dance development program in three parts –training, creation of new work and touring of the new work. About 20 or so dancers went through the initial program between 2000 and 2003. A core group of dancers came out of the program, the seven musketeers of the apocalypse – 'Sir' James [Mweu], Laila [Masiga], Kebaya [Moturi], Juliet Amollo, Isaac [Karanja], "Gaddafi" [Maina Kariuki] & Mani [Mungai]. They have claimed many stages in the world with their feet and body. I am forever in their debt. From 2003 to 2010 different work was coming out of the program, including *Dilo*, *Abila*, *Shift-Center*, *No Man's Gone Now*, and *Border Border Express*. These toured all over the African continent, Europe, the US as well as South America. Besides the initial program in 2001 we have over the years organized different platforms that facilitate exchange between dancers here in Nairobi, the East African region, the rest of Africa and Europe and America as well.

Since 2011 I've been organizing a new program – Performance Lab Nairobi. The Performance Lab is a collaborative platform for creative process. It brings together artists and makers from different disciplines and origins to work together to exchange, experiment and hopefully to create new work. Thanks also to the work of the initial core group (James, Kebaya and co) as well as [Matthew] Ondiege, a new generation of dancers and tomorrow's choreographers is emerging today – Jack Brighton, Sarah

Kwala, Jared Onyango, Alacoque Ntome, to mention a few, are regular participants of the Performance Lab.

Since its inception in 2012 the GoDown Arts Centre has been a constant partner and home for these projects. From workshops to festival presentations to creative residencies, the architecture of the main space has significantly influenced my curating practice and work process and enabled me to play with space and performance configurations in ways not possible in conventional theatre space. Work with extended notions of audience/performer space like *Shift-Centre* and the ongoing performance and creative tech project – *Spaces of Critical Projection* – were inspired and conceived at this space. Over the years support for these projects has also come from various international partners and co-producers – Institut Français, Ford Foundation, Stitching Doen, the EU etc.

Insights on the Development of Kenyan Contemporary Dance

It is curious for me that we should say Kenyan contemporary dance as opposed to contemporary dance in Kenya. This suggests there may be a specific type of contemporary dance that one can identify as Kenyan and which would be distinct from Ugandan or Tanzanian contemporary dance in spite of the fact that the traditions of the region are spread across the national boundaries. Because it is young, still in development and I am looking/playing from the inside, I hesitate to talk about Kenyan contemporary dance. Yet if you think about it, there is indeed a Kenyan contemporary dance. The works of Suki Mwendwa, Ondiege Matthew, Fernando Anuanga or myself are very distinct from each other. They are evidence of the diversity of artistic and creative impulses that have shaped the evolution of contemporary Kenyan dance over the last 30 years. In their construction of contemporary identity they all have very different approaches to, and relationships with global connection and traditional heritage in ways that are uniquely Kenyan – aware of heritage in a broad sense but also conscious of historical context & contemporary influences. While inspired by traditional dance, Suki's work is conscious of black American jazz/modern dance but also classical Indian dance (Odissi). Anuanga's work is rooted in Maasai dance yet one can still discern the hip-hop/break-dance days in it. Ondiege's work navigates between traditional dance and social engagement theatre.

And Finally, the Future of Kenyan Contemporary Dance

I doubt public schools, roads and hospitals would exist if they were not subsidized by government. If it was left to the market place, I doubt that education, even high cost private [education] would exist. The principle of live performance, which is so intrinsic, which is the invariable must to an art form like dance, is so human resource intensive. It is simply not sustainable in the absence of public investment. There are no paintings or sculptures, no discs or books, no goodies for the public to buy. Just fleeting memories, ephemeral experience and intangible ideas to take away. Yet contemporary dance will survive somehow and continue to be the most open and more innovative of the artforms. There are always a few madmen out in the woods, but is it worth it just to survive? Is survival a worthwhile preoccupation? Without public investment we will never see its potential realized.

Opiyo Okach is a Dancer and Choreographer. He is artistic Director of the first Kenyan company for contemporary dance, 'Dance Gaara'. He did a special recording for the Intergenerational Dialogues. It can be found at Wabunifu.org

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Staging Authenticity:

The Limits of Creativity in a

National Dance Company

Kahithe Kiiru

Introduction

Authenticity has been a key concept in both the conceptualization and the critique of folk dance genre(s) across the world. However, its definition and interpretation varies greatly depending on the context of the produced discourse. While colloquial use of the term prevails, being deeply rooted in the belief that clearly demarcated, unique and somewhat immemorial indigenous cultures do exist, academia has moved away from the dichotomy between tradition and modernity. Oppositional constructs of *authentic* versus tourism-oriented adulterated performances have been the subject of deconstruction by a number of scholars since the early 1980s. The postmodern critique of *authenticity* rejects positivist essentialism in an intellectual battle against neo-colonial reductions of indigenous peoples to a rigid stereotypical idea of what it means to be 'African' or 'Other'. Thus, most recent works focus on the impact of politics, power relations and contested interpretations, while seeking to examine identity and "authentic tradition" as forms of symbolic capital in the 21st century globalised world.

Farnell (2008) uses etymology to reveal an interesting paradox illustrative of the major trouble with *authenticity*. "According to the Oxford English dictionary, the word 'authenticity' comes to us from the Greek *authentikos*, meaning 'principle' or 'genuine', and from *authentēs* – 'author'." (Farnell 2008:155) By expanding this analysis to other etymologically related concepts, it becomes even more evident that issues of originality, accuracy and validity are always closely related to those of authority, legitimacy and power on one side, and to the notion of authorship on the other. This realization is particularly useful in the analysis of folk dance products whose discourse continuously relies on the notion of *authenticity*. In the Kenyan context, we often refer to these commodified and appropriated stage products as *cultural dances of Kenya*, defined as "a set of traditional practices reinvented and re-contextualized for a stage experience and a contemporary social use." (Kiiru 2017: 2) The continuous (re)invention of these practices has been induced by political, social and economic developments and ongoing since the late colonial period (Kiiru 2018). Unlike folk dance in its first existence, which is mainly an integral part of a community's daily life, the second existence folk dance, such as the *cultural dances of Kenya*, is characterized by a conscious revival or cultivation. It therefore has a more fixed and structured form, relies on a smaller number of interested parties for survival, and is transmitted in an intentional, organized and structured way by professionals and/or semi-professionals (Hoerburger's 1968 concept revisited by Nahachewsky 2001).

On the African continent, the emergence of post-colonial nationalisms was accompanied by a fervent search for a national culture and with a number of more or less conscious identity-building projects in the domain of performing arts. Due to its amenable and permeable nature, as well as to its centrality in the social universe of numerous communities, dance has been the chosen media *par excellence* for such



projects in most African countries. The staging of folk dances and the progressive creation of a national dance repertoire thus became sites of power, negotiation and resistance; a unique platform for, on one hand, the reinvention of diverse cultural expressions, and, on the other, the ramification of music and dance forms and of existing ethnic stereotypes. It has also been indicative of our understanding of what Kenyan culture consists (or should consist) of and how it should be represented.

However, the role of authorship, whether assigned to individual creators (choreographers, artistic directors) or to groups, in this ongoing creative process is still rarely discussed. And so is the choreographic process itself. The following article examines the role of *Bomas Harambee Dancers*, Kenya's unrecognized national dance company, in the process of developing the set of practices dubbed *cultural dances of Kenya* and interrogates the place of authenticity in its choreographic processes.

The Mandate and its Implications

Regardless of its historical and political anchorage, the status and mandate of *Bomas Harambee Dancers* has always remained ambiguous, if not paradoxical. Established in 1971,¹ in the midst of national identity construction, the Bomas of Kenya (BoK) was designed as the premier institution for preservation and management of cultural knowledge with the aim of preserving Kenya's "authentic" cultural values. In 1973, the cultural centre was complemented with a resident troupe of musicians and dancers named *Bomas Harambee Dancers*, and with it came the mandate of preserving and promoting the diverse music and dance traditions of the country. Founded by the Government of Kenya, under Kenya Tourist Development Cooperation (today, Tourism Finance Corporation), the year of its official establishment qualifies BoK as a late nation building project, when compared to other African states.² However, archival research traces the seed of the idea of "formation of a national troupe" in documents dating as early as 1966,³ and even its rooted in pre-independence developments. Thus, in the late 1950s, British colonial government officials discussed the idea of bringing "tribal dance displays" closer to Nairobi and suggested that such shows should take place in Ngong area.⁴ In a way, BoK was an idea of the colonial government, subsequently reshaped to correspond to the national agenda with a characteristic use of music and dance as preferred media for identity construction.

However, the unofficial, unverified narrative of creation claims that the First President Jomo Kenyatta was the brainchild behind BoK – Kenyatta would have been convinced by military officers who, during a trip to Nigeria, had seen a national folk troupe there. So, if it was established in the same historical period, with the same mandate and the same form as other national dance companies on the continent, why has the status of *Bomas Harambee dance* troupe been repeatedly challenged? And what are the major critiques concerning its repertoire?

Arguably the most important reason as to why *Bomas Harambee Dancers* have never been officially recognized lies in the fact that its attachment to the Ministry of Tourism in terms of budgets, internal policies and development strategies seemingly collides with some of the central elements of its mandate, which are ordinarily identified with cultural institutions, such as the Department of Culture (nowadays under the Ministry of Sports and Heritage). The official mandate "...to preserve, maintain, educate and promote the rich and diverse cultural values of all of Kenya's ethnic groups"⁵ and the imperative to "portray them in a most pure form"⁶ reveals two characteristic elements of all folk dance projects – the orchestration of cultural diversity and the quest for *authenticity*.

The first of these elements translates into *ethnic essentialization* – the need to distinguish sets of homogeneous populations that are characterized by a specific type of musical and choreographic culture (Djebbari 2011), as well as into unintentional reinforcement

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¹Under the Companies Act (CAP 486), Laws of Kenya.

²For example, the popular West African national dance companies were founded and recognized in the late 1950s, early 1960s: Les Ballets Africains de Guinée were founded in 1952 and became the national company in 1958; Mali founded Troupe folklorique nationale du Mali in 1961; Senegal's National Ballet of Senegal in 1961; whereas Tanzania established a National Dance Troupe in 1964.

³Source: Martin, 1966, District Commissioner Nairobi Area, Formation of National Troupe, a letter to the Permanent Secretary, Kenya National Archives and Documentation Service (KNADS), Nairobi (PC/EST/2/21/2)

⁴For more on pre-Independence folklorization processes see Kiiru, 2018.

⁵As per BoK's Strategic Plan 2013-2017.

⁶Ibid.

of certain ethnic stereotypes. This rigid demarcation is in conflict with the dynamic nature of culture and with the porosity of cultural traits and practices, especially in this day and time, whereby communities have co-habited, mixed and exchanged knowledge for centuries. However, it is common in all national folk initiatives, which rely on *particularization* to emphasize how distinct and singular the various regions, or in the Kenyan case tribes, the nation is composed of are (Shay 2002).

Thus, the mandate of BoK in the domain of cultural tourism exists on the border between preservation and development. In this, two desires, which could be interpreted as conflictual, are both evident and explicitly conveyed: the desire to remain as faithful as possible to 'the original' and the desire to take into account audience expectations, to entertain and please the spectators. Thus, any BoK stage product must strive to achieve *authenticity*, while remaining entertaining, one could even say spectacular. Nevertheless, most critics aim at the place of proclaimed *authenticity* and argue that BoK's dances are not real or accurate enough. Some see BoK dances as simplified staged products which reflect commercial or political choices and even claim that BoK is a failed project. An inquiry into the choreographic processes used to progressively build the BoK repertoire unveils an alternative story.

The Choreographic Process

Folk dance, across space, time and geo-cultural contexts, is essentially a stage product, a performance. In that sense, the presence of an audience compels authors of any Kenyan *cultural dance* to make several changes to the initial dance materials (movements and songs). Most of these changes are in the area of space and time configuration, implemented in order to sustain the spectator's attention: i.e. a spatial separation between active performers and 'passive' audience; dance space is reduced and a 'stage front' is established; the number of dancers is reduced; the duration of the performance is shortened; musicians and dancers are dissociated; variations in terms of dancers' configurations and stage trajectories are introduced; etc. This however is the final stage in a long process of introducing a new dance to the national repertoire at BoK.

The process in fact begins with identification of a 'new' dance. This selection is guided once again by principles of national diversity and equal representation of all of Kenya's communities and minorities. The most recently introduced *Sindimba* dance of the Makonde community is a perfect example. While the Makonde community received their national identity cards and were finally recognized as constituent members of the nation in 2017, the following year the BoK singled out the community's music and dance for inclusion in its repertoire. In other cases, dances are identified because of the threat of their disappearance. Small size communities that have been or are in danger of being assimilated by larger neighbouring communities are often the first candidates for inclusion in the repertoire. Other criteria include radical change in a community's social environment and practices (applies particularly to dramatized dances portraying dance in a ritual context that may have been lost); linguistic extinction or danger of the same; etc. The representation of all the constituent elements of the Kenyan *rainbow nation* (Shay 2002) is accompanied by a genuine concern for equity. Aside from the inclusion of all of Kenya's communities, the emphasis is equally placed on equitable representation. Hence, it may not be enough to stage a single dance of a particular ethnic group. BoK continues to enrich the repertoire by returning to the same community for a second, a third dance. In other words, it is not a question of a community existing in the repertoire list, but of being represented appropriately, sufficiently in relation to other communities. And as the repertoire, currently consisting of approximately 50 dances continues to expand, balance in ethnic and regional representation remain a primary concern.

Once a dance or a community, depending on the reasons for selection, have been identified, the choreographic process begins from field research. Indeed, before any

material reaches Nairobi, a team of experts comprised of the Choreographer and/or the Artistic director, research officers, costume designers and a technical team (for camera and sound recording) will conduct research in the concerned region. Through interviews, filming and participant observation they will collect as much data as possible on not only music and dances, but equally on history and culture of the community (livelihood; social organization; ritual practices; etc). The gathered information will be used as a basis for the identification of a specific dance belonging to the community in question. Under the guidance of the Choreographer, research in the field also involves identification of facilitators – practitioners from local communities considered experts in music and/or dance and capable of transmitting their knowledge and skill to others. The identified facilitators are at the centre of the second phase of the BoK choreographic process. This group of musicians and dancers will come to BoK centre and spend several weeks teaching the dance. The Choreographer and selected BoK instructors will work with the facilitators on identifying songs and dance movements. It is thereafter the job of the Choreographer to arrange them, to compose a dance piece by joining steps and movements into phrases, arranging the songs sequencing, and, last but not least, introducing stage patterns, formations and trajectories. Once the dance piece is complete, the team of facilitators and instructors takes it to the larger dance troupe. Training continues for another few weeks, depending on the complexity of movements, linguistic idiom, songs and rhythmical patterns.

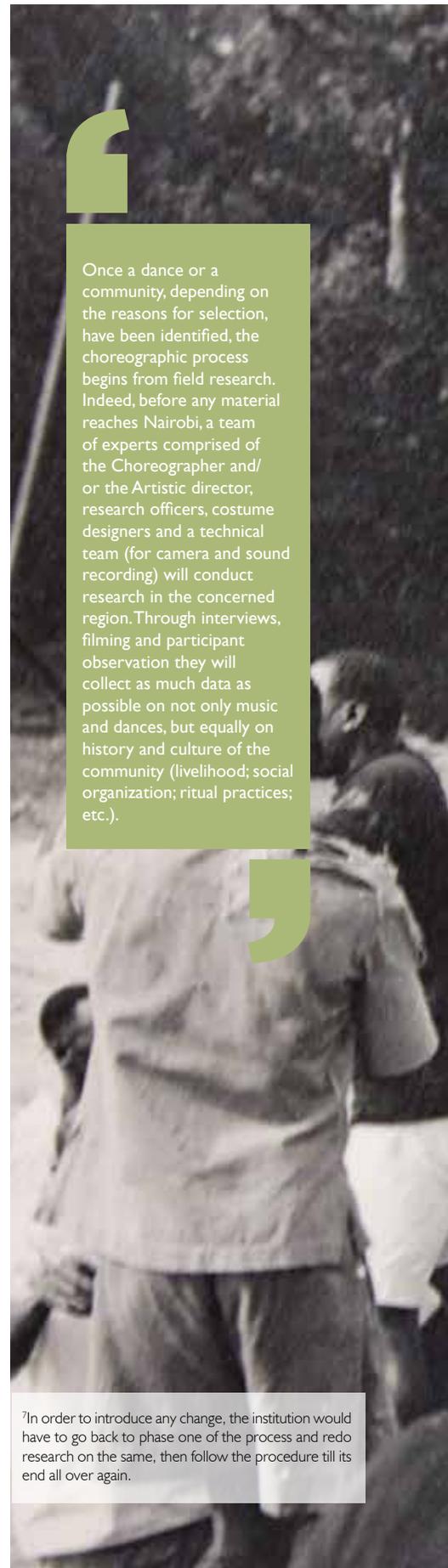
In the meantime, the Costumes section will start developing, based on notes and documents collected in the field, an appropriate costume respective of the community's colours and patterns, together with accompanying accessories and props (if any). A script of the dance – a brief narration explaining the context of its original execution, the instrumentation involved, and any other cultural meanings, is equally developed with the help of facilitators. Different phases of the training process are filmed for preservation purposes.

Once the dance training is completed, the BoK will invite in community representatives, from outside of the training process, for purposes of 'validation'. A group of community Elders is selected to come verify the accuracy, that is the *authenticity*, of the final product. If any concern is raised, whether in relation to dance vocabulary or songs or costumes or script, the errors must be corrected until the Elders agree with the same and everything is to their satisfaction. After final approval is given, a validation document is signed and preserved in order to serve as a point of reference for the future and the BoK repertoire becomes richer by one item.

Conclusion: Who's Authenticity?

The choreographic process at BoK is an excellent illustration of the characteristic tension between conservation and creation, intrinsic to any heritage venture. Although, for the Choreographer, the validation by community representatives translates into the inability to introduce any change to the dance materials,⁷ he/she still maintains a certain level of artistic freedom in the way in which the materials are composed on stage. Thus, rehearsal, which is in the context of BoK referred to as 're-choreography', consists of smaller corrections aimed at putting things back in line, bringing them closer to 'the original', assuring that performers everyday creativity does not interfere with *authenticity* of the dance in question. This is a task difficult to achieve, as experiential authenticity (Daniel 1996) is difficult to sustain over time. The structure of tourist time and of administrative programing can easily give rise to conventional or formulaic choreography, which can lead to "performance death" (Daniel 1996: 790). It remains the responsibility of the Choreographer/Artistic Director to find creative ways of composing and maintaining dance products as attractive as they are *authentic*.

The challenge in the creative process becomes the striking of a balance between, on one side, the specific musical heritage with its expressive requirements and its historicity, and on the other, the individual and singular creativity of the Choreographer. At the



Once a dance or a community, depending on the reasons for selection, have been identified, the choreographic process begins from field research. Indeed, before any material reaches Nairobi, a team of experts comprised of the Choreographer and/or the Artistic director, research officers, costume designers and a technical team (for camera and sound recording) will conduct research in the concerned region. Through interviews, filming and participant observation they will collect as much data as possible on not only music and dances, but equally on history and culture of the community (livelihood; social organization; ritual practices; etc.).

⁷In order to introduce any change, the institution would have to go back to phase one of the process and redo research on the same, then follow the procedure till its end all over again.



As an essentially nationalistic project, the BoK approaches performance from the perspective of establishing and emphasizing national ownership. In its own way, it addressed the issue of how to express ethnicity and simultaneously contain it, a problem not yet resolved in many African states.



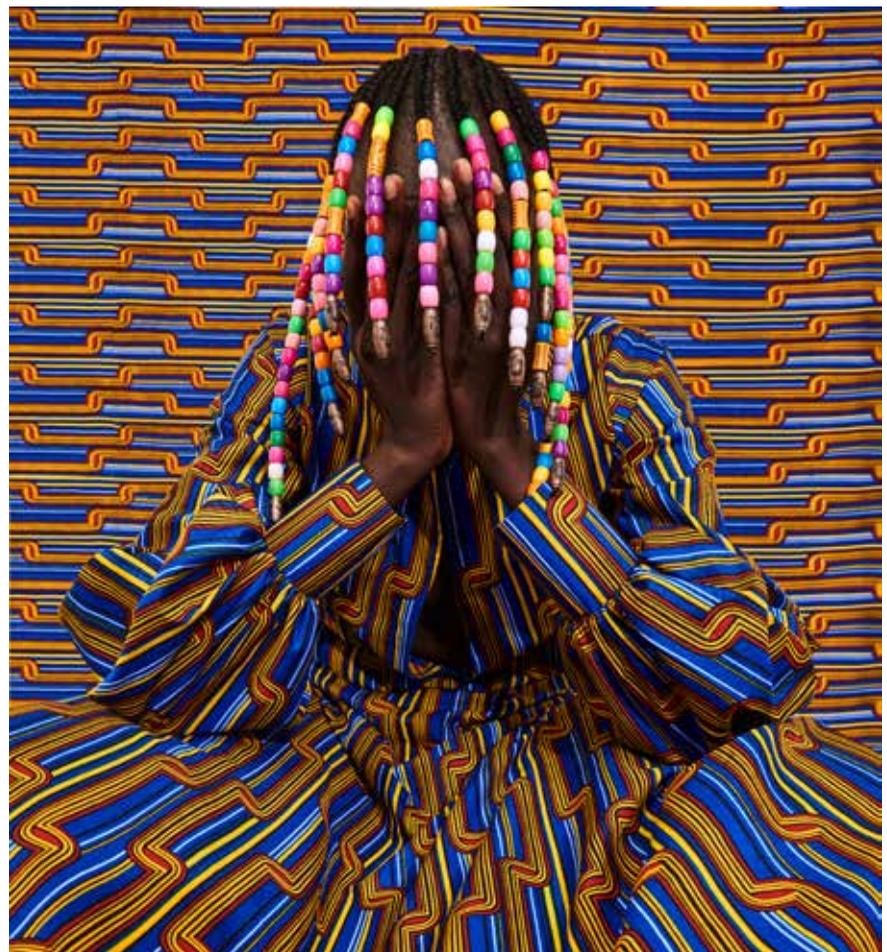
same time, the nature of BoK's mandate with an emphasis on preservation assumes the place of *authenticity* to be in the (more or less distant) past. Stage products should thus be read as attempts to recreate "magic moments" from a forgotten time and/or space in which specific ethnic communities expressed themselves in a specific manner during specific occasions. They are overproduced in order to highlight change and discontinuity between what is now and what used to be. And this discontinuity is intentional for more than one reason.

As an essentially nationalistic project, the BoK approaches performance from the perspective of establishing and emphasizing national ownership. In its own way, it addressed the issue of how to express ethnicity and simultaneously contain it, a problem not yet resolved in many African states. And it does so by separating cultural forms from tribal ownership in order to assert "that the multi-ethnic heritage of Kenya is now the property of all Kenyans." (Bruner 2001: 888) This translates into ethnic essentialization as much as it does into spectacularization.

When we readjust our perception of Kenya's dance heritage and understand it as a continuously ongoing, historical and politically charged process rather than a finished product, several facts become salient. Indeed, BoK has participated both directly (by recruiting and training several generations of folk artists) and indirectly (by influencing and propagating Kenya-specific stage dance formats and portraying images of national dance) in the progressive creation of *cultural dances of Kenya*. However, it has not been a solitary actor in the complex web of dance heritage creation. Several institutions dating from different historical periods⁸ have impacted the form and the content of contemporary dance heritage in this country. Interestingly, the circulation of human resource creates a tangible connection between these institutions and once again brings out the importance of individual authorship in the domain.



Finally, can we truly speak of authenticity when describing or appraising cultural dances of Kenya? And if yes, what is the root of it? Is it in the community? Or in the hands of experts? Can we date the reference point of the glorious past in which these practises might have occurred in an 'unadulterated' form? Who has the power to legitimize one dance as more authentic than another? Or, should we rather ask ourselves the question - whose authenticity is it we keep referring to?



⁸These include the Kenya Music Festival and subsequent national competitive festivals; educational institutions that teach traditional dance such as Kenyatta University; as well as a large number of smaller folk dance troupes that have directly or indirectly sprung from BoK.

At the same time, the comparative analysis of the national folk dance repertoire of BoK and local folk dance repertoires of different communities across the country reveal intriguing ways in which they mutually influence each other. Thus, it is not just the 'dances in the field' that directly influence the repertoire of folk troupes through collection of materials. In the context of politicization of folk dances, the dancers in local communities more or less consciously appropriate images and staging techniques characteristic of recognized folk dance repertoires in order to make their presentations 'more attractive' and to meet the taste of their audiences. Consequently, we should speak of "parallel traditions (that) maintain obvious ties to one another" (Shay 1999: 31).

Finally, can we truly speak of *authenticity* when describing or appraising *cultural dances of Kenya*? And if yes, what is the root of it? Is it in the community? Or in the hands of experts? Can we date the reference point of the glorious past in which these practises might have occurred in an 'unadulterated' form? Who has the power to legitimize one dance as more authentic than another? Or, should we rather ask ourselves the question – whose *authenticity* is it we keep referring to?

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Since 2017, she has been the Head Choreographer at Bomas of Kenya, a national dance troupe tasked with the mission to preserve, promote and showcase Kenyan traditional music and dance worldwide.

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G Olunya



'If we can forget the names for everyday things, we can forget the history of a people' W. K. Collymore

In the projected write up of the exhibition, *Wakariru*, it is described as an installation about 'the destruction of language for everyday things, and the accompanying loss of orally documented knowledge.' In South African artist William Kentridge's installation/performance piece, *The Head and the Load*, at the Tate in London 2018/2019, and slated to travel to Nairobi in 2020,¹ he goes even further and speaks 'Of language reaching a dead end.' But what do they mean by this? Wambui Kamiru Collymore questions the use of the language for the quotidian, zooming in on beans in a conversation with her grandmother and her daughter. What varieties are there, and what indigenous names do we have for them? She argues that if you can name a bean, if you can understand and name its purpose, if you have the language for this, then you can own your history. In the conversation in the Installation, there is loss, of the Gikuyu language. This is underscored by the need for translation in order to have this conversation between three generations of Gikuyu women. There is one generation that is unrepresented here, and can be read as a silence - that of Wambui's mother. She still finds it impossible to revisit this period of her life.

This particular conversation happens in the context of her grandmother's kitchen – *kariiko*. Wambui describes this as a female only space, that is here reconstructed with particular detail to an authenticity - it is an exact replica of her grandmothers hut, a place that is familiar to her. It includes a hearth with three stones and live chicken that are fed and tended in a corner. There is a pestle and mortar, for pounding the maize, which hangs from the rafters. This maize is also seed for the next season, at once reminding one of the sabotaging of some of these processes by agrochemical companies that will not allow for this natural, indeed commonsense regeneration. They have introduced single-season seed that must be bought from them each time, which for me signals the death, alas not just of language, but also of life itself.

Describing the performance of the colonial process in *The Head and the Load*, one reviewer notes the ways in which the constant

swirl of languages — eight of them African, English, French, morse code in Hungarian and "fragments of bad German" - add to the enveloping haze, a kaleidoscopic swirl of action and sound that pushes back against the idea of history as a tidy, linear thing.²

This is the very sense I got, going into the exhibition. The sense was drawn from the song *Wakariru* that plays incessantly, seemingly out of broken tin telephones from

¹The GoDown Arts Centre has made a bid to host this exhibition in 2020.

²See <https://www.voice-online.co.uk/article/review-william-kentridge-head-load>



As Wambui reaches into her past, therefore, she is able to both appreciate, and appropriate this song as an entry point into the very troubled Mau Mau past. She is then able to turn our focus on to the tense trope of 'the nation' through its interaction with its past.

which emanate a high-pitched, sometimes-muffled soundtrack to the exhibition. I recognized the song from childhood in Kabete, memories of primary school flooding back in remarkable detail, including the words of the song, which had woven itself into the fabric of popular culture at the time.³ It just so happened that Joy Mboya of the GoDown Arts Centre, and a former member of the girl band Musikly Speaking (1985-1993), also present, owned to having recorded the song as part of an earlier effort to document and contemporanise such traditional songs. (They named it 'Markis' song, for one of their members, Suzanne Kibukosya's young son, Marcus). Almost two decades later, Kayamba Afrika, a group that contemporanises traditional songs, and is popular for weddings and other social celebrations has popularized it. Joy shared the bands concern with the musicality of the piece, and how they paid close attention to diction – 'tu tu tu tu!' She remembers the words of this song, also well liked by the first president of Kenya, whose Nyakinyua dancers made a recording, albeit grainy, available on YouTube.

But my fascination was held by a brief chat had with the artist herself at the Exhibition opening, where I asked her about her choice and use of this particular song. I was also curious as to its links with the idea of a language for everyday things. When she was 5 or 6, Wambui's grandfather taught and sang her this song. She can remember the tune, even though as she put it, 'the words are gone'. And so she sets out to recreate the culture that gives meaning to the past, so as to make sense of the future. The cultural scholar and critic, Joyce Nyairo, has looked at the ways in which *Wakariru* 'demonstrates traditional Gikuyu equation of woman's beauty to her capacity for hard work. Thus the girl, *Wakariru* is urged to wake up quickly and start her work early for the rain is fast approaching and its bounty can only be guaranteed by the work of *Wakariru's* hands.' Indeed, 'The song's onomatopoeic rendering of the sound of the rain adds to its general homiletic air urging all to take refuge at the welcoming pillars of the homestead.' In the version that Wambui records especially for this installation, only the verses appear, and the rain action referred to by Nyairo, which comes as a sort of refrain – '*ni tu tu geithie tu tu tu tu*' – is edited out in this recording. The invitation is not only into the homestead,⁴ but also more intimately into the *Kariiko*, into the hearth, the

³Emily Akuno has recorded it in *Indigenous Kenyan Children's Songs: An Anthology*. Nairobi: Emakmusic Music Services, 2009, 100.

heartbeat of home. Indeed, Nyairo intuitively reads the excitement that accompanies the rediscovery of these traditional songs in contemporary contexts. As she points out,

[t]he rendition of folksongs in the contemporary moment is normally met with the more romantic side of nostalgia – excited recognition and ethnic pride – but the fact remains that it is still possible to reconstruct the tensions and concerns of traditional existence from a reading of these folksongs.⁵

As Wambui reaches into her past, therefore, she is able to both appreciate, and appropriate this song as an entry point into the very troubled Mau Mau past. She is then able to turn our focus on to the tense trope of 'the nation' through its interaction with its past. The silent handing over of letters of demand for information on an unsettled atrocity takes on an urgent, and powerful symbolism that speaks to the unfinished business that is the colonial project.

Nyairo elaborates on the role, and function of such songs:

It is possible to glean from the folksongs the values and aesthetics of traditional communities, many of which may still be tenable in the present age given the various tensions within the national moral economy. There is a sense in which the song appears allegorical, speaking of some interference with the community that comes from afar. Like the rain, this impending disruption to communal order is very often insidious; initially posing as beneficial only to later on unleash the full weight of its malevolence. In the circumstances '*itugi cia nyumba*' (the pillars of the homestead), refers to the imperative of the tribe/group closing ranks, standing firmly together against invasion.⁶

This song would be sang by children as a sign of impending rain, urging people to hurry, to '*cua cua narua*', and it is to the *double entendre* implied by this line that Nyairo refers. The song can additionally be seen, therefore, as drawing us into the cauldron of tensions that beset the very idea of Nation, even as answers are sought for unresolved issues of the war of liberation by the Land and Freedom Army, such as the burial place of the leader, Dedan Kimathi. It is in this way that Nyairo's analysis mirrors the concerns of the installation.

In the conversation between grandmother, granddaughter and great granddaughter, the different types of beans are discussed as they sort them together—*Gikara, Gakara, Njahi, Wairimu, Mwitemania* - and from what markets (e.g. Nyamakima) they are sourced. The artist recalls, explains and reconnects with her childhood, when she would visit with, and prepare a meal –be it the staple of maize and beans, or freshly harvested beans added to other foods, which we hear from the discussion are delicious—with her grandmother. The idea that in the emergency it was only possible to prepare '*mashakura*,' a mash-up of whatever food was available also came up in discussions with fellow attendees. According to writer and activist Muthoni Likimani, beans were a common staple, and also used to conceal bullets in food baskets during the emergency, as were maize (*mbembe*), carried in women's baskets under the foodstuff.⁷ These monitored, or concentration villages could be moved with no notice, and *shambas* destroyed. In *Detained*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o describes coming back home from school to just such a spectacle:

...home was now only a pile of dry mud-stones, bits of grass, charcoal and ashes. Nothing remained, not even crops, except for a lone pear tree that slightly swayed in sun and wind. I stood there bewildered. Not only my home, but the old village with its culture, its memories, and its warmth had been razed to the ground.⁸

The women are represented as they appear today. Of a certain age, the patina of domestic respectability is accentuated by dress – a neat headscarf and comfortable sweater or jacket typically worn by women especially in the colder parts of central region that belies their troubled histories. They represent a rootedness and stability, and are the pillars of a society that has not dealt fully with the memory of a violent past.

⁴Nyairo, Joyce, *Reading the Referents: (Inter)textuality in Contemporary Kenya Popular Music*. PhD, U of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 2004, 93.

⁵Nyairo, 93.

⁶Nyairo, 94.

⁷In Faith Wambura Ngunjiri, *Women's Spiritual Leadership in Africa: Tempered Radicals and Critical Servant Leaders*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2010, 155.

⁸Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Detained: A Prison Writer's Diary*. London: Heinemann, 1981, 73-74.

Mud huts were soon replaced by the kind of *mabati* (galvanized iron sheets) that Wambui builds in this installation. Quick. Alien. Impermanent. Modern? 'Home'.

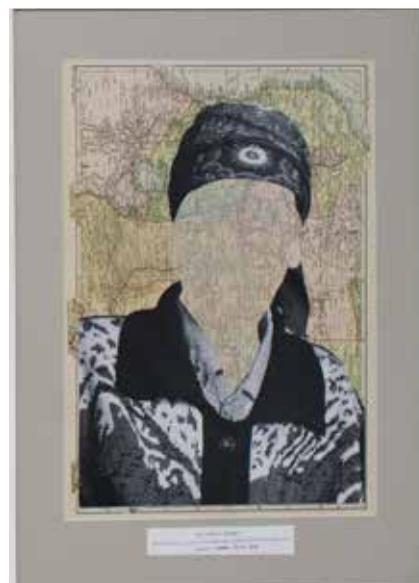
What is said is not always legible, and the muffled sounds, especially when heard from outside of the intimacy of the hut, of the designated women's spaces may suggest women as having no voice in the more public arena. But this would be to misread the subversive potential of these vital vents in spaces that were otherwise tightly policed, as well as the sly civility needed to negotiate traditional patriarchy, alongside colonial oppression. It is notable, however, that patriarchy is not presented as a cultural anxiety here. A picture of Wambui's grandfather frames the exhibition, just as her son is part of the discussion in the *kariiko*.

According to Kentridge, '[a]mong the many paradoxes of colonialism is this feeling of incomprehension,' a feeling that Wambui struggles to both convey, and overcome. Her exhibition is about the recognition of the women who took part in Mau Mau, and acknowledgement of their struggle. And yet even for her they remain 'faceless', with distinguishing identifying features left out of a seemingly blank space, although they are named and their function described. The women are represented as they appear today. Of a certain age, the patina of domestic respectability is accentuated by dress — a neat headscarf and comfortable sweater or jacket typically worn by women especially in the colder parts of central region that belies their troubled histories. They represent a rootedness and stability, and are the pillars of a society that has not yet dealt fully with the memory of a violent past. Their faces are symbolically cut out, perhaps shrouding, and hence deepening the mystery surrounding an unspeakable time.

What can be read as a powerful artistic statement can, conversely, signal a continuing erasure of the female subject for whom significance and recognition are afforded by this detail. For Wambui, the absence of facial features serves as an artistic strategy through which one may project the particular detail of any of the women who participated in the struggle, and thus helps her carry them all. The collapsing or consolidation may however generalise at the level of representation, and reduce the potential of what might have constituted a powerful and symbolic roll call of actors.

The cut-out spaces speak to many things, as do the parts that are shown. Firstly, the images challenge at a visual level the very idea of what a freedom fighter looks like! The association of Mau Mau with dreadlocked men (reinforced by the iconic image of Dedan Kimathi himself) is countermanded by this installation, which forces a different kind of reckoning. It brings the struggle against colonialism to the heart of community. All the portraits are indeed of *atumia*, of solid motherly types who have given their youth to the struggle for this place they now occupy on the map. Their avatars are mounted on a backdrop that is the first post-partition map after the 1886 Berlin Conference that carved Africa up, dated 1893. This placement is, of course, problematic. Atieno and Lonsdale have argued that '[n]ew states are often declared in the name of peoples not yet aware of their own collective existence.'⁹ It is in this sense that these women sit squarely in the arena of colonial conquest, and of an imaginary drawn up elsewhere that has for us become Kenya. And yet even as they do so their roles in the anti-colonial struggle bear the macula of some of its deepest contradictions. In a discussion with an exhibition attendee, Mary, I expressed curiosity that one of the women, Alice Mukami, even as she was a food carrier, was also labeled an 'Informant'. This term suggests that she might have betrayed those in the forest to the colonial government. According to Mary, women were forced into multiple, often contradictory roles depending on their circumstance, and what was at stake. This might be the life of a husband or son. In *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), Ngugi speaks of the betrayals that caused such rifts amongst the Gikuyu, and that persist to the present.

Another aspect of the exhibition that highlights a living narrative is carried in the complementary video recordings screened on the walls of the hut. When Wambui



⁹In *Mau Mau and Nationhood*. Oxford: James Currey, 1.

¹⁰Muthoni Likimani, *Passbook Number F.47927: Women and Mau Mau in Kenya*. Nairobi: Noni's Publicity, 1998, 2004.

¹¹Kwani?, 2013, 175-181.

¹²In *Beyond Violence: A True Story of Hate, Hurt and Hope*. Nairobi: Jomo Kenyatta Foundation, 1990.



Kenyatta, whose difficult job it was to bring together a diverse people, fully appreciated the difficulty of building a nation and tried to align all to a common agenda for a shared future, but built on ambivalence to Mau Mau in national discourse that continues to date.



Wambui sees herself as a product of his, and her grandmother's pain and courage. It is their resilience that compels her mounting of this exhibition that draws ultimately on a living history.



met Mukami in the course of her research, Mukami, herself a war veteran, requested of her that she carry a letter to the British Queen, requesting to know Kimathi's burial place. The colonial government was determined not to create a shrine for Kimathi. But so also were their adversaries determined to match this erasure. Likimani captures a statement of this intent:

Our biggest aim is to see that head of the homeguard, that former Mau Mau oath operator, now the biggest traitor, eliminated. *Eliminated without a trace. Not even his descendants will ever see his grave. Let his sons never have the honour of carrying his body to be buried. His bones should be destroyed...*(my emphasis).¹⁰

In Yvonne Owuor's *Dust*, she describes the gory detail of these colonial and local murders, and late night burials.¹¹ Agnes Leakey, in turn, wrote about the terrible violence in which her father, Gray Leakey, who lived in Nyeri, was buried alive on the side of Mt Kenya as part of a sacrifice that would lead to Mau Mau victory in this bitter and closely fought war.¹²

Wambui's enactment is a fascinating reminder that almost 67 years on it is the same Queen, Elizabeth Regina II, whose own links to Kenya make a compelling story, that still sits on the British throne. When her father, King George, died at Sandringham House in Norfolk in 1952, she was on a tour of the Commonwealth and in Kenya as heir apparent. She flew back home as Queen. In a curious twist, it is Jomo Kenyatta's son, Uhuru, then not yet born, who is now president of Kenya. Kenyatta was himself never comfortable with Mau Mau, referring to it in 1962 as 'a disease which had been eradicated, and must never be remembered again.'¹³ In rallying the nation in a Kenyatta Day speech in 1964, he exhorted them to

Let this be the day on which all of us commit ourselves to erase from our minds all the hatreds and difficulties of those years which now belong to history. Let us agree that we shall never refer to the past.¹⁴

Kenyatta, whose difficult job it was to bring together a diverse people, fully appreciated the difficulty of building a nation and tried to align all to a common agenda for a shared future, but built on ambivalence to Mau Mau in national discourse that continues to date. In "The Nation and Narration: 'The Truths of the Nation' & the Changing Image of Mau Mau in Kenyan Literature", James Ogude effectively analyses the paradoxes of a foundation that must repress memory, that must hide behind what postcolonial critic Edward Said has called 'the pastness of the past'. And yet nation formation is a 'daily referendum' in which both forgetting, and remembering are crucial factors.¹⁵ As Said elaborates, the past cannot be 'quarantined from the present. Past and present inform each other, each implies the other; neither past or present has a meaning alone.'¹⁶

The hut itself is made of a corrugated *mabati* and seems to undulate, conveying a sense of motion, an apparent instability. The images are also somewhat grainy in appearance, a technique that manages to lend a haziness and distance, maybe to remind us that in all of the 55 years Kenya has been independent, this is a question that should long have been settled. That it hasn't demonstrates just how fraught and unsettled certain issues remain regarding our path to independence, and consequently, the state of the nation. It is a shameful history for the British. Nevertheless, it should now be an issue for the sitting Government, the 4th since independence. Not the colonial one. The back and forth that has characterized the conversation for Mukami is that neither colonial nor independent government will take full responsibility for dealing with her demand to know where her husband was buried.

There have been false leads. In a 2014 interview in the *Daily Nation*, October 20, a Mr. Toroitich, who worked for the colonial Government confessed to having been

¹³Jomo Kenyatta, *Suffering Without Bitterness: The Founding of the Kenya Nation*. Nairobi: 1968, 189.

¹⁴Kenyatta, 1968, 241.

¹⁵Ernest Renan, 'What is a Nation', in Homi Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*. London: 1990, 8-22, cited in Ogude, 273.

¹⁶Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*. 1984, 4.

present on the night that Kimathi was killed, and buried in Kamiti prison. In his testimony he says the colonialists couldn't believe Kimathi was really dead, and he had to guard the grave for 3 months lest Kimathi escape. Toroitich claims to be able to pinpoint the spot, if only the buildings that have come up could be brought down. The claim may be false, but it fuels the legend.

Wambui's exploration revolves around a warning from a Lieutenant H. E. Crocker, on the dangers of their oppressive ways. It is projected on the kitchen wall and reads:

The problem of the Kikuyu children would require a solution in the near future for it is only to be expected they will imbibe Mau Mau teaching with their mother's milk.

Her grandfather's is a very painful history. He was arrested and detained at Manyani, a prison notorious for the harshness of its conditions. He also fought for the British in World War 2. Wambui sees herself as a product of his, and her grandmother's pain and courage. It is their resilience that compels her mounting of this exhibition that draws ultimately on a living history.

To fulfill her mission, Wambui visited certain monuments in London in a symbolic presentation of Mukami's petition – Winston Churchill's statue outside the houses of Parliament. She chose him because according to her, he thumbed his nose at history, famously saying it would be kind to him as he intended to write it; that history is written by the victors.¹⁷ Despite the bluster, he is himself a formidable historical character, who delivered victory for Britain in World War 2, curtailing the spread of Hitler's fascism. Then there is the liberal Fenner Brockway, whose statue is shrouded in leafy obscurity, arguably for his life of protest that included objection to violent repression of Mau Mau by the British government, as part of the larger Movement for Colonial Freedom. The petition was finally presented at Buckingham palace, home to the Queen of England. In this manner Wambui came full circle, querying the history and teasing out the nuances of this period that has held her grandparents hostage and threatens to do the same to subsequent generations. This is clearly seen in *Who I Am Who We Were, An Art Project on Kenyan Identity*, carried out by Wambui and Xavier Verhoest, which bears out concerns that have variously been explored by Mahmood Mamdani, for instance, on the responsibilities of citizenship, and of the question of belonging.¹⁸ Mamdani explores the upheavals that characterize the difficult transition from being a subject, to becoming a citizen in a self-governing African State. But how do we do this without a usable past?

The exhibition raises many complex questions, for which there are no simple answers. The difficulty of the problem that Wambui presents is reflected in the silencing of this

¹⁷Churchill had been a war correspondent, starting with the South African (Anglo-Boer) war. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, "for his mastery of historical and biographical description as well as for brilliant oratory in defending exalted human values." He would much have preferred the Peace Prize, for which he was nominated in 1950, but which went to Ralph Bunche, the African American UN Diplomat, for brokering Israel/Arab peace in 1948.

¹⁸Wambui Wamae Kamiru & Xavier Verhoest, *Who I Am, Who We Are: An Art Project on Kenyan Identity*. Nairobi: Kuona Trust, 2016. Mamdani explores these issues in *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*. Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2004. (Princeton: PUP, 1996).



particular story [recalling Chimamanda Adichie's warning on the dangers of assuming a single story], and not just in the past. This history she revisits is one that is personal to her grandparents, and a part of their everyday angst. Its seepage is heard in the silences of her mother and her generation, and in the reopening of an old wound through Wambui and her children. And beyond that, to the stories we have chosen to tell ourselves about who we are as a nation, including the story of Mau Mau, which has previously been so politicized, some may read it as a narrowly circumscribed allegory.¹⁹ The exhibition itself makes a valiant stab at this many-layered and complex history that clearly exists for those that were part of it then, and those that have been drawn into it now, in ways that perhaps stultify or even edify, but that determinedly leak into futures, staking their claim.

Wakariru was hosted by One Off Contemporary Gallery at the Rosslyn Riviera Mall from 24th March -30th April, 2019. It was realized through partnership with the Mukami Kimathi Foundation.

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¹⁹See Marshall S Clough, 'Mau Mau & the Contest for Memory,' 262-264. In ES Atieno Odhiambo & J Lonsdale, Eds. *Mau Mau & Nationhood*, Oxford: James Currey, 2003. See also J Ogude, *ibid*, 283.

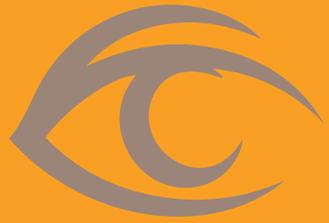
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Of Colonial Legacies:

“The Lunatic Line”

Chao Taiyana



As we replace this railway that so many died building, and from which so many people earned their living; this same railway that moved us across the country and built cities in its wake, we need to ask ourselves: what stories do these stations and these rails hold for Kenya about Kenyans?

It is often said that the story of Kenya as we know it today begins with the railway. Indeed, a quick look at the map of the Kenya-Uganda railway, constructed between 1896 -1901, reveals that majority of the urban centres we have in the country today grew around railway stations or railway stop-overs. This 100-mile-long work of steel and concrete that snaked its way across the region, that surmounted steep hills and descended daunting valleys, that crossed through scorching deserts and treacherous swamps, that served Kenya for more than 100 years, still stands to this day. Albeit dilapidated in some parts and abandoned in others, evidence of this colossal structure remains deeply embedded in the landscape of this country, like a scar across the cheek.

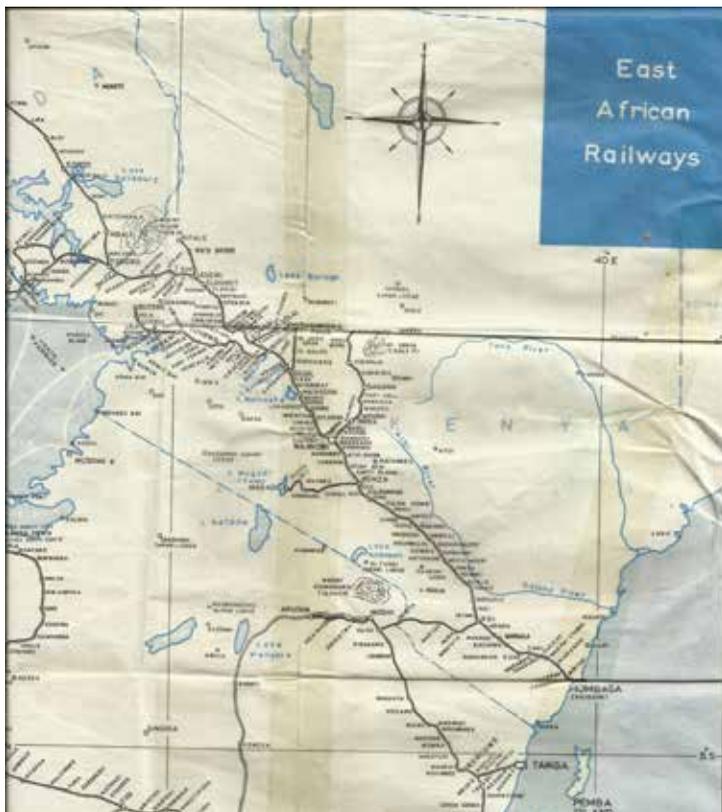


Figure 1
Map showing all Railway Stations in Kenya

As a Kenyan, I am deeply intrigued by the story of this scar, the memories it holds, the pain it conjures and the healing it represents. When you look at the physical infrastructure of the 'old' railway today, you see significant gaps. In some parts, large portions of the track have been removed and sold for scrap metal while some of the stations have been demolished. But perhaps what is more striking than the gaps we can see are those that we cannot, and these are significant gaps in the narrative.

In trying to trace the story of this railway, we start with what we know, the official history, the facts and the figures.

Built as a strategic endeavour by the British to keep the Germans from reaching the coveted source of the Nile in Uganda, the total cost of the railway was immense. 32,000 labourers imported from India, 2,500 lives lost, and 5 million pounds spent. Commenced in 1896, the journey from the Ocean (Mombasa) to the Lake (Kisumu) was fraught with natural disasters, unimaginable obstacles and innumerable challenges, famously earning it the name 'The Lunatic Line'. By the time of its completion the Uganda Railway, as it was first known, was one of the greatest structural feats undertaken in East Africa.

What stands out today about the narrative of the railway is the romanticised but equally horrific stories of man-eating lions (1898), Roosevelt's infamous safari (1909) and the ways in which it represented the opening up of 'uninhabited', 'exotic' lands. Which is strange, because in the 100 years of its existence these narratives account for less than 10% of its entire history. So where is the rest?

One sunny afternoon in August 2013, I visited the old Voi railway station which is located a couple of hundred metres from the current Voi town centre. I remember being instantly struck by its beauty and timelessness while being equally haunted by its emptiness and degradation. I soon realised that most railway stations around the country were in a similar state of dilapidation and disuse, compounded by the inception of the new Standard Gauge Railway (SGR), which meant that some of the old stations would need to be demolished to pave way for the new guard. As a result, I began a passion-project dubbed 'Save The Railway' in 2013 to document and campaign for the preservation of old railway stations around Kenya.

'Save The Railway' started as a project to document buildings but a couple of months in, I realised that this story was much more than that. The missing narratives weren't about the structures - they were about the people. In both pre- and post-independence Kenya, the railway was used by millions of Kenyans to transport children to schools, produce to farms, loved ones on their honeymoon, family members up-country,



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Figure 2
Voi Railway Station, August 2013

agricultural produce to markets, you name it. Whether old or young, urban or rural, rich or poor, the railway was a central part of so many lives.

But where were these stories of life, joy, aspiration, love and pain, 100 years after the man-eating lions? Where were the stories of the men and women in post-independence Kenya who built this country; of the thousands of Mau Mau detainees who were transported to different detention camps around the country in a special train called 'gari ya waya'? So named, because the windows were lined with grills and barbed wire to prevent detainees from escaping during transit. Were these stories not part of the railway, and do they not deserve to be heard?

In every station I visited I made an attempt to talk to the people working there or living around it. No single story was the same. At Taita Taveta station a passerby told me: *'Kwa nini unapiga picha hizi vitu nzee, si unipige mimi'*. To him those buildings were completely useless. At Miwani station in Western Kenya a sugar cane farmer said, *'Tafadhali waambie warudishe hii reli, tangu isimamishwe, maisha yetu imebadilika tunateseka sana'*. For him, the railway station and railway itself were not some kind of historical structures but present-day infrastructure waiting to be reopened and revived. And with each comment, each question, or each discussion, these abandoned stations begun to come alive. This spectrum of memories and perspectives was representative of what Kenyans felt and what they remembered.

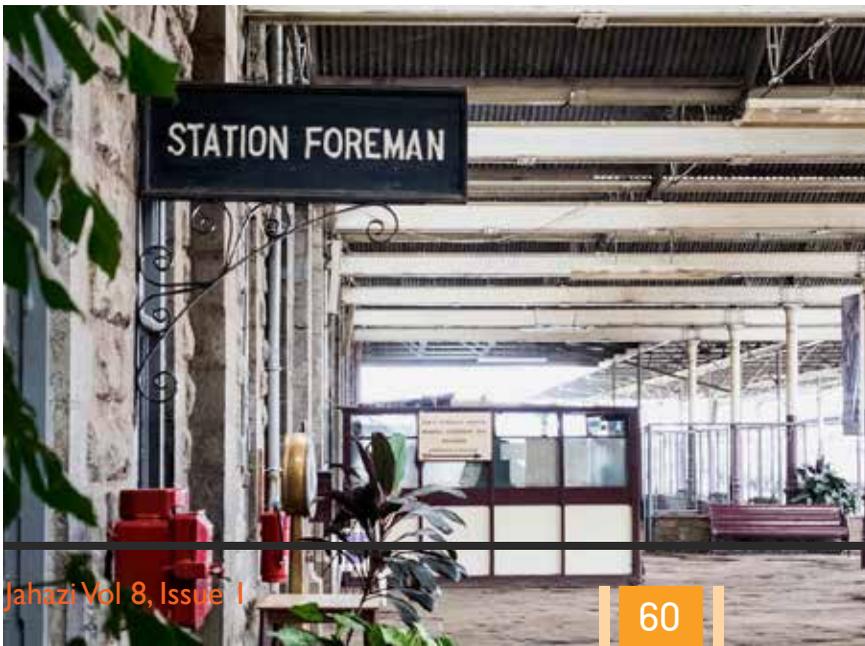
The Kenya-Uganda railway is perhaps one of the most tangible representations of colonial legacy in Kenya today. In spite of this, its history, its representation, whether in film or literature, has seldom been seen from the perspective of the ordinary Kenyan whose life was in one way or another shaped by it. In many ways its original intentions were surpassed and overshadowed by the lives it went on to affect and change. So, when we speak about its history and its place in our country, do we see ourselves in it? Do we separate what it was from who we are? Or do we silently watch it disappear, unaware that our narratives might disappear with it too?

The question on engaging with legacies of colonialism is largely about meanings and multiplicities. As we make sense of the effects and impacts of colonialism in our lives, we should also recognise that these meanings are neither singular, nor are they static.

In the 1890's, Nandi chief Koitalel Arap Samoei and Kamba prophetess Syokimau predicted the coming of the Uganda railway, as did many leaders from different communities around Kenya. Their predictions served to warn their people that a foreign object, a fire spitting iron snake would slither through their lands and completely disrupt life, as they had known it. And they were right.

But where were these stories of life, joy, aspiration, love and pain, 100 years after the man-eating lions? Where were the stories of the men and women in post-independence Kenya who built this country; of the thousands of Mau Mau detainees who were transported to different detention camps around the country in a special train called 'gari ya waya'?

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At the height of the railway, stations like Eldoret were a major transit point for many, many passengers and cargo by the tonne being transported to Uganda and the rest of Central Africa. Today, a much-diminished Eldoret is the fifth largest town in the country. Syokimau, meanwhile, has an ultra-modern railway station on the outskirts of Nairobi named in her honour. Would she be surprised? Happy? Sad? We will never know, but what's important is that we appreciate that as we change, so will our narratives.

We return to the analogy of the scar – a scar with a story: a beginning and an end. As it cuts through, fresh and raw, it embodies our pain. When it has healed, it reminds us of our resilience and our triumph.

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Paa ya Paa?:

A Testament of Resilience

G Olunya

‘The intention of love is the biggest intention of all’– Elimo Njau

‘And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.’ Romans 8:28.

The gates had been left partly open when I got to Paa ya Paa, a cultural and arts space that has stood the test of time and outlasted many others. It hadn't rained for a while, and the savannah-dry grass crunched underfoot, releasing soft puffs of red dust as I made my way straight into a sculpture garden—the Love Garden. I meandered gently through, and past the arena flanked by huge bamboo, stopping to look at artworks, and murals by Samuel Wanjau, and on to find Philda. I was struck by a sense of acute sadness and desolation, and an odd nostalgia for what this place had been, once. More powerful still was the feeling that it could have, should have been, so much more. Austin Bukonya, as if reading my mind, has written that 'It was, and still is, much more than just a few structures on a piece of land.'¹ This is true.

The welcome I received was warm, and the tour confirmed a once vibrant and rich territory. After, I found Elimo has designated various seating areas, and I was asked to choose where we should sit, based on degree of 'luxury'. I chose the broadest shade, the Norfolk, where we held our discussions over a cup of tea. This was a follow up on of the conversation that had started at the GoDown as part of the intergenerational dialogues.

In the Visual Arts Dialogues, Elimo and Philda Ragland-Njau represented the 1960's and 70's. It was a rare privilege, as they are the custodians of a space that is both historic and iconic, having nurtured generations of artists. It was started in 1965 as a cultural arts centre, preceding spaces such as Gallery Watatu (1969-2013), or Alan Donovan's African Heritage (circa 1970). According to Austin Bukonya, who was present, the anchoring role that this gallery has played can only be compared to that of a national flag, or indeed anthem. It is 'an inspiring and challenging symbol of our daring, aspiring spirit to uplift ourselves to the pinnacles of imaginative achievement and success.'² Paa ya Paa is the Institution to which the artistic energies in East Africa shifted when Uganda fell apart because of politics. Indeed, if it wasn't for Idi Amin, Elimo said he wouldn't be in Kenya. Bukonya describes it as a shrine, a 'major home of refuge for the scores of creative minds looking for a shelter for their visions...a spiritual home, a priceless embodiment of the regenerative power and energy of peace and positive creativity.'³

It was evident on welcoming Elimo, and Philda, that they were excited to be at the GoDown, and to participate in the conversations with younger people a series of

the anchoring role that this gallery has played can only be compared to that of a national flag, or indeed anthem. It is 'an inspiring and challenging symbol of our daring, aspiring spirit to uplift ourselves to the pinnacles of imaginative achievement and success.'²

¹Austin Bukonya, 'Paa ya Paa Gallery: A Plea for Saving the Flying Antelope. *Daily Nation*, Weekend, Saturday Dec 15, 2018.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

generations apart! Elimo, who grew up in Nairobi, said he never thought he'd see such a day, so honored was he to be called on as a member of the older generation. He is 88. He was so elated, he darted to the stage in a mock run, and confessed that his thoughts were 'floating like the dollar'. The mood was electric!

The invitation was an acknowledgement by the organisers – the Creative Economy Working Group (CEWG) – of the pioneering role Elimo played in the establishment of the arts in Kenya. Phillda, his wife, is an African American who initially came to Kenya for a year (1969) as a photographer for the United Presbyterian Church, at the Reverend John Gat'u's instigation. She returned to Tanzania (Kibo Art Gallery), and Kenya in 1970 as Coordinator of the International Arts Programs & Creative Manager, and shared a Calendar that shows the type of activities that they have engaged in over the years, as well as people who have visited Paa ya Paa. According to Phillda, the sixties were a vibrant period globally, with nationalism sweeping across much of Africa, and the Civil Rights movement pulsating in America. East Africa was real as an entity, and sharing a currency. The Gallery did not have to do any marketing— 'people would just show up'.

And the list of people who showed up is impressive, as is that of activities, which we can only sample here. Phillda insists she wasn't the draw that saw Sidney Poitier look in (1970), Vincent Smith (1972), Dick Gregory and Lauryn Hill in the 80's, Langston Hughes (1996), and Jimmy Carter (1998). The United States International University (USIU) had a robust joint program, including celebrating Black History month, and Internships. Links with Kenyatta University (KU) were also strong. Guests have included Wole Soyinka in 1966, 2 decades before he won the Nobel Prize for Literature. A reading room was launched by the Malawian poet, David Rubadiri in the context of a six day workshop, '*Tradition & Progress: A Reflection of 20 years of Cultural Development*' (1984). Then there were the writers Ama Ata Aidoo (Ghana) and Rebeka Njau (Kenya) a co-founder of the space; Nana Tagoe of KU, who later went on to SOAS, the cartoonist Terry Hirst, and Dr Mohamed Hyder gave a talk on 'The Role of Swahili in the Cultural Integration of Kenya'. Creativity, which many see as new and innovative today, was discussed back then. In a one-day workshop in 1985, for instance, Charity James gave a lecture on 'The Source of Creativity'.

Artists including Ugandan Jak Katarikawe, Ubhi Mohan from India, Finnish Eeva Liisa, Joseph Kyaruzi from Tanzania, the sculptor Elizabeth Dean, Anne Mwitii from Kenya, and many more mounted exhibitions. Samuel Wanjau, and Kiasi Nikwitikie from Mozambique were based at Paa ya Paa, where Wanjau's work can still be found. One of the artists in attendance, Evanson Kangethe, recalled that his first joint exhibition, themed on 'The Child in Contemporary Art' was organized by Paa ya Paa and Dr Johanna Agthe (1986), a curator for the Museum of Frankfurt, and champion of East African art.

There was an Artists in Residence program, but most times artists would just show up and stay, even for six months. And they might leave as abruptly as they came. This meant that the Gallery had a lot of work in storage, forcing them to issue a notice for artists to collect their work. Only two did, so the rest, 50 pieces, were put up for silent auction. 50% of sale proceeds would go to the artists.

Elimo also shared his journey, mostly delivered in homiletic style, punctuated with such quotes as 'An artist without faith is like a hoe without a handle'. He started his career as an artist by drawing a portrait of his father, for which he won a box of paints. This early focus helped him really see people. He argued that the anti-humanism of the West stems from this inability to look at ourselves, leading us to focus our art on inconsequential things, like zebras and elephants (tourist art). He expressed great concern that we are turned Afro-Saxon, as evident in our use of 'vernacular peppered with English'.

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Phyllida had shared the challenges of maintaining an art space, the fundraising, and lack of money that seems to characterize the arts. She has worked alongside as a piano teacher at home, and for ten years at the Maxwell Academy in Ongata Rongai. Her original piano was also destroyed in the fire, but kindly replaced by the German Embassy. She was expecting a student as we spoke, and says that for them retirement is not an option, as they have no benefits. The last 'real' job she held was in 1974.



He is originally from Tanzania, from a time when Julius Nyerere revived and energized Kiswahili as the ultimate form of expression. It is a language Phyllida also knows well, having been taught by Elimo's father over an eight-year period spent in the village. Elimo's elaboration on mother-tongue as the language of conscience was timely, given that I was seated next to a young artist on whose bag was emblazoned an 'untranslatable' quote, complete with two 'F' words. This was her brand, gleaned from the revolutionary, Ché Guevara, but which may not always travel well through time and culture. She was on the panel 'Millennial Onwards'. I found myself thinking how critical it is that we begin to understand each other's worldview.

In a curious twist, Joy Mboya, moderating the session, noted that in the 80's and earlier, most artists were formally taught, but coming into the 90's, many were self-taught. The establishment of a Fine Arts Department at Makerere (later the Margaret Trowell School of Fine Art) provided the foundation for a robust flowering. We were fortunate to have Elimo revisit that period with us, as well as have Austin Bukunya, then his student, remind him that the journey that they had started was truly East African. A brief stint at the University of Dar es Salaam to set up the Department of Theatre Arts preceded his coming to Nairobi. Joy further noted with concern that we have been slow to create an art buying public, probably because of the lack of a clear distinction between what we see as material culture, as part of the everyday, and what we see as 'art'. To settle this question, Bukunya urged the artists to be open and to engage in

*"John Koigi, 'Mau Mau sculpture the State wouldn't accept.'
Daily Nation, Saturday Feb 24, 2007.*

all types of work that requires creative input. Meanwhile, Government is willfully non-committal to a sector that by its very definition must be fluid, reading this nature as lack of clear purpose. This develops into a justification to not support the arts.

*

There are layers of memory in this place. One is linked with the statue of Dedan Kimathi, commissioned by Government and sculpted by Elimo, and Samuel Wanjau. Charles Njonjo, then Attorney General, rejected it for public display in 1973. Interestingly, the office of the Government Architect, at the time Mr. George Mund, paid for it. Elimo, who saw no discernible reason for this rejection has speculated that it probably looked too much like a forest fighter, which it was, of course, meant to depict! As he told Koigi, 'It looks crude, like a rural person, but portrays the guts of those who fought for our independence. This is not the polished freedom fighter who can hold a press conference at Norfolk or Hilton Hotel. No wonder, he is still in the forest'.⁴ In Elimo's forest, in sardonic humor, the designated seating areas are named for these very hotels (as above)!

In a recent family dispute over land, the statue got caught in the crossfire and was damaged. It lies next to the firing oven, a gift from artists, also destroyed. This incident evokes probably the lowest moment for the couple when in 1997, a fire gutted the gallery, destroying most of the artworks. They were not insured, and have never really recovered.

Philda had shared the challenges of maintaining an arts space, the fundraising, and lack of money that seems to characterize the arts. She has worked alongside as a piano teacher at home, and for ten years at the Maxwell Academy in Ongata Rongai. Her original piano, also destroyed in the fire, was kindly replaced by the German Embassy. She was expecting a student as we spoke, and says that for them retirement is not an option, as they have no benefits. The last 'real' job she held was in 1974.

But how *did* the Centre run? Mostly on an ad hoc basis over the years, with sponsorship sometimes coming in from Institutions like the Goethe Institute, for specific programs or events. When Alliance Française (AF) set up in Kenya they occasionally sought advice from Elimo, who also worked with the Universities. Elimo spoke of robust church support over the years, particularly from the World Council of Churches, and the All Africa Conference of Churches. These organisations did programs through art, and sponsored exhibitions and events. USIU, through Vice Chancellor Frieda Brown, had been a steadfast supporter.

That sustainability is a real challenge is borne out time and again. And yet in Paa ya Paa we have a cultural and arts space that has weathered the times, and is still standing. For the creative economy to be viable and productive requires a change in government attitude, and fair allocation of resources to the sector. It is clear that a different model or approach must be found if the arts are to survive another 50 years.

Note: Elimo Njau and Philda Ragland-Njau run the Paa ya Paa Art Centre.

G Olunya is a Strategic Consultant at the GoDown Arts Centre. She is an Ubuntu Fellow, Centre for Advanced Learning, University of Pretoria.

Binyavanga Wainaina:

The Writer Who Democratised Kenya's Literary Space

Rasna Warah

“Some birds should never be caged, their feathers are too bright. But when one such is finally set free, something inside of you sings that knows it was wrong to cage it in the first place.” – *Red in Shawshank Redemption*

I first met Binyavanga Wainaina in 2002 - an election year in Kenya when a hopeful country was looking forward to removing an authoritarian regime and ushering in a brave new world. He had just returned from South Africa and was scouting around for ideas for a literary journal that he hoped to establish to revive the dying (if not dead) literary scene in Kenya.

It was during these heady days—when it seemed that anything was possible – that Binya, as he was fondly called, came back home like a gust of fresh air that sweeps through a damp, mouldy room and changes the atmosphere. His enthusiasm was infectious. He could mesmerise an audience so much so that many aspiring writers, including myself, who never imagined having a literary career, began writing their own stories, in their own voices, with no apologies.

With the launch of his brainchild, the literary journal *Kwani?*, in 2003, he unveiled talented and previously closeted writers who had been silenced not just by a government afraid of creatives, but by a stodgy old school literary fraternity that saw no value or merit in the writings of those they deemed to be too unschooled or undisciplined. As the blogger and academic Wandia Njoya stated in a tweet shortly after his death, Binyavanga “liberated our art from the literature police in Kenyan universities”.

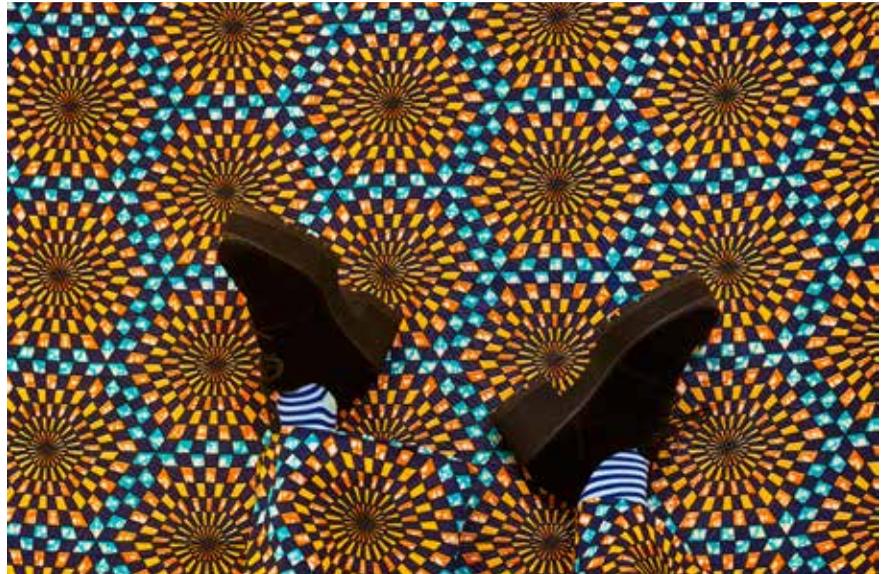
Indeed, Binyavanga democratised the literary space in Kenya, especially for young writers. He entered the Kenyan literary scene at precisely the time when the country was undergoing a major transition – a “second liberation” brought about by a group of anti-establishment politicians and activists and a population hungry for change, which led to the election of Mwai Kibaki and an end to Daniel arap Moi's 24-year reign.

It is difficult to write about someone you have known, especially someone who was as charismatic and controversial as Binya, whose short life as a literary icon generated as much admiration as it did indignation. He was not without flaws. Loud, sharp, witty, and even rude at times, he dared to question the status quo that reduced Kenyans, and Africans in general, to mere spectators in their own lives – people who saw themselves through other (mainly white) people's eyes. Binya opened up literary spaces that had remained closed for many Kenyan writers. He gave us permission to write. This, I believe, was his greatest gift to young Kenyan writers, many of whom ventured out on their own and became literary warriors in their own right.



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the very Westerners that Binya criticised in his writings were quick to adopt him and give him a platform where he could thrive. In a sense, they co-opted him, made him one of their own, thereby taking some of the sting out of his critique. Although often vilified – or perhaps misunderstood – at home, Binya was lauded abroad for his genius and writing acumen



A Polarising Influence

Binyavanga will be remembered for many things, among them his seminal satirical essay, “How to Write about Africa”, in which he lampooned Western journalists and so-called Africa experts for their negative, stereotypical and ignorant depictions of the continent (starving Africans, naked dead bodies, celebrity activists and aid workers trying to save the continent etc.). This essay not only made many Western journalists cringe, but was also a call to African writers to write about their lives and their continent in an authentic voice without worrying too much about how they would be perceived by non-African readers. In his essays, writings and speeches, he represented a new generation of Kenyan writers who, as Nigerian novelist Helon Habila commented, attempt to explain Kenya and Africa but do so “without a knee-jerk resort to colonial woes”.

But the very Westerners that Binya criticised in his writings were quick to adopt him and give him a platform where he could thrive. In a sense, they co-opted him, made him one of their own, thereby taking some of the sting out of his critique. Although often vilified – or perhaps misunderstood – at home, Binya was lauded abroad for his genius and writing acumen. He won the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2002, which catapulted his career as a writer and earned him a directorship at the Chinua Achebe Centre at Bard College in the United States. Thereafter, he was wined and dined by publishers, agents and philanthropists eager for a fresh new African voice.

The Nigerian blogger and columnist Ikhido R. Ikheloa, in an essay titled “Our World According to Binyavanga Wainaina”, called Binya “a brilliant lunatic” who writes about darkness with “startling clarity and casualness”. However, Ikheloa also censured the Kenyan writer for being one among many African writers who are rescued by the West “like abused puppies”. He was particularly harsh when commenting on the author’s memoir, *One Day I Will Write about This Place*:

Wainaina’s book brings to full convergence the anxieties and tensions around the tortured relationship between the West and African writers. On the one hand, Wainaina acknowledges openly and graciously in that book that it was published thanks to generous funding from a long list of Western donors and corporations. . . On the other hand, Wainaina is almost contemptuous of the interventions of the West in his fortunes; sometimes he gives the impression that he suffers from a culture of entitlement. Indeed if I was to offer any criticism of this lush narrative it is that Wainaina’s analysis conveniently excluded the role of the African writer in fomenting (for profit) the stereotyping of Africa in the enthusiastic hawking of the single story.

The *Economist*, in a review of the book, was equally scathing: “Too many African writers are co-opted by the American creative-writing scene only to be reduced by prevailing navel-gazing. Separately, much of the African writing culture that remains on the continent, including *Kwani?*, is propped up with cash from the Western donors that African writers purport to excoriate.”

However, both Ikheloa and the *Economist* failed to acknowledge that for any African writer to be taken seriously, he has to first go through an assembly line of agents, editors, publishers and distributors based in Europe or North America. African governments rarely support the arts, writers in particular, and the publishers on the continent are more interested in publishing textbooks (that bring in more profits) than publishing an author who is little known outside his country.

In 2007, perhaps in reaction to these criticisms, Binyavanga rejected an invitation by the World Economic Forum (WEF)’s nominating committee to be named as one among 250 Young Global Leaders. In an email to the chair of the committee, Queen Rania of Jordan, he wrote:

I assume that most, like me, are tempted to go [to China where the WEF was being held] anyway because we will get to be ‘validated’ and glow with the kind of self-congratulation that can only be bestowed by very globally visible and significant people... The problem here is that I am a writer. And although, like many, I go to sleep at night fantasizing about fame, fortune and credibility, the thing that is most valuable in my trade is to try, all the time, to keep myself loose, independent and creative. It would be an act of great fraudulence for me to accept the trite idea that I am ‘going to significantly impact world affairs’.

Coming Out

However, Binyavanga would go on have a significant impact on the LGBTQ community in the last few years of his life when he stoked (some might even say welcomed) controversy, particularly after he came out as a gay man in 2014 and published what he called his book’s “lost chapter”. The coming-out essay, “**I am a Homosexual, Mum**”, enraged the conservative evangelical Christian moral police (whom he loathed and whom he blamed for turning many Kenyans into zombie religious fanatics), who dismissed the author as the devil’s work. But the gay community both at home and abroad congratulated him for coming out, especially at a time when many African countries were targeting and criminalising homosexuals.

But not everyone was convinced that this Kenyan writer had the intellectual mettle to liberate Kenyan minds. In a critique in the *Saturday Nation* of his six-part self-made video, “We Must Free Our Imaginations” (or what Binya referred to as “What I Have to Say About Being Gay”) the Kenyan social scientist and academic Joyce Nyairo described his arguments as “scattered, off-hand generalities” and accused him of having a limited understanding of Kenya’s history. “His knowledge of homosexuality in colonial and post-colonial Kenya is either non-existent or it has been unwisely excluded,” she wrote.

Many also accused him of being deliberately apolitical or politically naïve. His quest to show Kenyan urban middle class lives (like his own family’s in Nakuru) as normal – without sufficiently explaining the abnormality that produced this class – earned him a few barbs. However, when the circumstances demanded, Binya could take on the role of political activist. In January 2008, for instance, at the height of the post-election violence in Kenya, when churches were being torched and women were being gang-raped for being “the wrong tribe”, he mobilised a group of writers to explain to the world what was going on in the country. He believed then that through the power of the pen Kenya could be prevented from descending into a Rwanda-like genocide.

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Like many others who view Kenya's democracy purely through the lens of free and fair elections, he failed to see that the main problem in Kenya is not that we consistently have rigged elections; the problem is more systemic

"I want to live a life of free imagination," Binya stated. "I want to see this continent change." Sadly, the change that he envisioned in Kenya did not come during his lifetime. By the time he died at the age of 48, the same reactionary, anti-change forces were back in power

But while campaigning for a peaceful Kenya, he aligned himself with the very forces that had catapulted the country to the brink of a dangerous precipice. In 2013, when Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto were declared the winners of the presidential election, Binyavanga viewed their victory as a victory against the imperialist West and its so-called lackey, the International Criminal Court, which had indicted the duo for crimes against humanity committed after the 2007 election. "Gone are the days when a bunch of European ambassadors speak in confident voices to the Kenyan public about what we should do, why we should do it," he wrote in the *Guardian* newspaper. "The west should expect more defiance from an Uhuru government – and more muscular engagement."

Though he admitted later that he had perhaps declared victory too soon, he failed to understand that the problem afflicting Kenya was not that Western governments were imposing their will on the Kenyan people, but that Kenya was sliding back to the bad old days of the Moi era, when dissent was not tolerated and when a culture of mediocrity and corruption pervaded all arms of government.

In a letter published in *Brittle Paper* in October 2017, when Kenya was about to go through another election, he stated: "I would like to apologise to all the people of Kenya for not seeing through the attempts to rig the election in 2013. I believe that going to the polls on 26 October with the same IEBC [Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission] is a mistake." Like many others who view Kenya's democracy purely through the lens of free and fair elections, he failed to see that the main problem in Kenya is not that we consistently have rigged elections; the problem is more systemic – we refuse to acknowledge that the rain started beating us at independence, when the first wave of leaders decided that the spoils of a post-colonial state should be distributed among a tiny elite and that ethnic identity should determine the nature and scale of that distribution.

The Change that Never Came

"I want to live a life of free imagination," Binya stated. "I want to see this continent change."

Sadly, the change that he envisioned in Kenya did not come during his lifetime. By the time he died at the age of 48, the same reactionary, anti-change forces were back in power – forces that are taking Kenya back to those dark days when creative minds and imaginations were considered a threat to national security (or rather, to the security of the president) and when artistic spirits were crushed. We no longer have the torture chambers that sent writers like Ngugi wa Thiong'o into exile four decades ago, but Binya's untimely death has reminded us that the struggle for a new way of thinking and bold ideas is still not over; on the contrary, the old guard is firmly back in the saddle.

However, there is no doubt that Binyavanga Wainaina forever changed the literary landscape in Kenya, opening it up to a new generation of Kenyans who are no longer afraid to experiment or innovate. He never managed to finish the novel he said he was writing when he fell ill a few years ago, but he did leave behind an indelible body of work that challenged his generation to take charge of their own narratives.

I think Binya would have agreed with the Italian writer, Oriana Fallaci, who said, "To write is to die a little less when I die, to leave the children I did not have, to make people think a little more."

Note: This article was first published on *The Elephant*, May 31, 2019.

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‘...and on and on, for all time’:

Regarding Toni Morrison

Tom Odhiambo

The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations.
Alfred A. Knopf, 2019. All page references are to this text.

Toni Morrison is taught in departments of English and Literature all over the world largely as an African-American author, a woman writer and often as a feminist, because her fiction pays special attention to the experiences of African-Americans and women – she recalls being told at what she calls a ‘very, very large state university’ that her books were taught in “twenty-three separate classes on this campus” (p.304) – meaning in twenty-three different courses. Her Nobel Prize in Literature made her a global figure, as it has done for many other winners, expanding her reach into many parts of the world. With her death in August, reviewers have reminded readers of her keen sense of history and human experience, which her fiction largely explores. To read the fiction is the real introduction to her life, politics, culture and literary person.

Yet, Toni Morrison was also a very perceptive critic of global historical, economic, social and cultural realities, and their consequences for millions of people all over the world. Like so many writers of her generation, she didn’t just write fiction, she also wrote prose essays reflecting her thoughts on issues ranging from literature, the arts, politics, economics, globalization, violence, race and racism etc. Indeed, her final bequest to the world is a collection of essays, *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2019). For she is reported to have declined to write an autobiography, arguing that she didn’t think that her life was worth writing about. What a sense of self-effacement!

In *The Source of Self-Regard*, Toni Morrison begins her conversations by reminding us of the power of art, especially literature. She argues that a world without its artists/writers is a society deprived of a sense of meaning of life. She suggests that the writer is so crucial to understanding the world, especially one in which violence has become so commonplace and so destructive, that she or he must be celebrated and protected. She writes, “Certain kinds of trauma visited on people are so deep, so cruel, that unlike money, unlike vengeance, even unlike justice, or rights, or the goodwill of others, only writers can translate such trauma and turn sorrow into meaning, sharpening the moral obligation.” (p.IX) It is worth remembering that in today’s world, it is the victor’s story that dominates news, public conversations and everyday life. Whether the victor is the marauding politician, sweeping his opponents into exile or jail and impoverishing his citizens; or the exploitative businessman; or criminals; or warlords, official history seems to celebrate the oppressor. In many places in the world, only the writer can confront such perverted history.

Thus, Toni Morrison is suggesting that literature/art could be the bulwark against the rampaging violators and violence. The story has the ability to contest the manipulation of history. Indeed, today it is storytellers who are recording the tragedy of migrants; of the



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At the root of racism is the struggle for and over resources. No African-American writer can avoid speaking about these realities that have shadowed the descendants of slaves and migrants of colour to America. Indeed, all of Toni Morrison's fiction revisits these issues, seeking to raise old and new questions on how to deal with them

This dilemma of countering racism without reproducing racism is the near-insurmountable challenge facing any other writer contesting the many dehumanizing conditions in today's world.



oppressed in much of the world; of war; even of globalization and its destabilizations. Globalization, previously celebrated as bringer of the village to the world, is no longer seen as the progressive force that it was supposed to be. It is the carrier of hope for some but of pain for many. This is how Toni Morrison characterizes it in the essay, *The Foreigner's Home*: "Yet, as much as globalism is adored as near messianic, it is also reviled as an evil courting a dangerous dystopia. Its disregard of borders, national infrastructures, local bureaucracies, internet censors, tariffs, laws, and languages; its disregard of the margins and the marginal people who live there; its formidable, engulfing properties accelerate erasure, a flattening out of difference, of specificity for marketing purposes. An abhorrence of diversity." (p.7) For Toni Morrison, what was once a benevolent spirit to humanity has turned out to be a violent force, working mostly for the market and money; wrecking lives and leaving the world worse off.

According to Morrison, where the market is concerned, the public gives way to the private. In such a world, the individual is at the mercy of demand and supply –gender inequality rises up, race and racism rear their heads. One is a marker of being, the other a monster that denigrates those seen to be racially inferior. At the root of racism is the struggle for and over resources. No African-American writer can avoid speaking about these realities that have shadowed the descendants of slaves and migrants of colour to America. Indeed, all of Toni Morrison's fiction revisits these issues, seeking to raise old and new questions on how to deal with them.

This is why in the essay *Black Matter(s)* she reflects on what she calls the 'racial house', the house that people of color are fated to occupy. She wonders what she has to do to make the house hospitable, or hers –

If I have to live in a racial house, it was important at the least to rebuild it so that it was not a windowless prison into which I was forced, a thick-walled, impenetrable container from which no sound could be heard, but rather an open house, grounded, yet generous in its supply of windows and doors. Or at the most, it became imperative for me to transform this house completely. (p. 132)

The skills, knowledge and energy to rebuild the 'racial house' or any other house of oppression, depends on the ability of the subjugated to reinvent the language of

domination and violence; to create new vistas and visions of the world. Literature, by offering imagination, enables the (re)telling of stories of loss, suffering, death etc anew. But Toni Morrison is keenly aware of the difficulties of reinvention, of the risks of reclaiming one's identity, of the limits of artistic/literary revolution. Let's quote her at length –

These questions, which have engaged so many, have troubled all of my work. How to be free and situated; how to convert a racist house into a race-specific yet nonracist home? How to enunciate race while depriving it of its lethal cling? They are questions of concept, of language, of trajectory, of habitation, of occupation, and, although my engagement with them has been fierce, fitful, and constantly (I think), evolving, they remain in my thoughts as aesthetically and politically unresolved. Frankly, I look to readers for literary and extraliterary analyses for much of what can be better understood. (p.133)

This dilemma of countering racism without reproducing racism is the near-insurmountable challenge facing any other writer contesting the many dehumanizing conditions in today's world.

The Source of Self-Regard is a book that celebrates many subjects – persons, places, forms of knowledge, writing, etc. Yet, at the heart of the book is the question of the worth of writing and reading literature. Toni Morrison highlights this question in the chapter, “The Source of Self-Regard”, where she discusses what she calls ‘progression’ in her work. She refers to *Beloved* and *Jazz*. She tells an anecdote about addressing an audience where a high school teacher asks her (Toni Morrison) for advice on how to teach *Beloved*. She has no answer apart from telling the teacher to task her students to write notes on the novel. (p.305) After some time Toni Morrison receives a package containing notes that the students had made. And some of the essays make her realize how difficult it is for an author who writes ‘novels that have a historical basis.’ She concludes that generally authors may be inclined not to ...“question the history. Or really analyze it or confront it in some manner that is at odds with the historian or even the novelist’s version of it. One sort of takes it, swallows it, agrees with it. Nothing is aslant.” (p.306)

Yet, for Toni Morrison, *Beloved* was intentionally skewed. It sought to disturb official history, in the hope that eventually the story would “... elicit critical thinking and draw out some honest art from the silences and distortions and the evasions that are in the history as received, as well as the articulation and engagement of a history that is so fraught with emotion and so fraught and covered with a profound distaste and repugnance.” (p.307) In order to provoke such an understanding of a text, Morrison argues that the writer has to invite the reader to be proactive and a procreator, in a process she calls ‘writing the reading’, which she says “... involves seduction – luring the reader into environments outside the pages. Disqualifying the notion of a stable text for one that is dependent on an active and activated reader who is writing the reading...” (p.350)

In many senses it is sad that as we mourn, and read Toni Morrison, elements that seek to deny humanity to millions of people worldwide stalk many nations—violence, war, death, racism, xenophobia, and more. The senseless violence against non-South African blacks should provoke serious discussions on how to maintain eternal vigilance against the urges to make others less human. The message Toni Morrison seems to have left us is that humanity needs to rediscover and relearn how to bestow dignity on the *other* instead of *othering* her or him.

The writer teaches literature at the University of Nairobi.

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INTERGENERATIONAL DIALOGUES ON THE CULTURE SECTOR IN KENYA

History and Evolution of the Sub-Sectors

Date & Venue: Tuesday 30th October, 2018 Kenya Cultural Center

Intergenerational Dialogue on Music

Moderators
Kimani Njogu – CEO, Twaweza Communications
Bill Odidi – Journalist (Music)
Joy Mboya – Director, The GoDown Arts Centre

Panelists
Tabu Osusa – Director, Ketebul Music
Peter Akwabi – Veteran Artist
Osumba Rateng’ – Veteran Benga Artist
Gregg Tendwa – Bengatronics/ Co-Founder, Santuri East Africa
Phy Ngetich – Musician
Dan Chizi Aceda – Musician/Actor
Barbara Guantai – Musician
Topi Lyambila – Seasoned Media Personality
Fundi Frank – Mseto EA Journalist & Music Events Promoter
Rashid Jibril – Music Promoter
Michael Waithaka – Organizer, Koroga Festival | Programs Controller – Capital FM
Boniface Nyaga – Entertainment Journalist & Publicist

Showcased Musicians
Johnstone Mukabi & Omutibo Stars
Fadhilee Itulya

Date & Venue: Friday 30th November, 2018 Mnet Studios, Jamhuri Park

Intergenerational Dialogues on Film & Theatre

Moderators
Kimani Njogu – Twaweza
Kingwa Kamencu – Writer
Mueni Lundi – The Orature Collective
Joy Mboya – The GoDown

Panelists
Dr. Edwin Nyutho – University of Nairobi
Wanuri Kahiu – Afrobubblegum (Film-maker)
Brian Gitahi – Kibanda Pictures
Cajetan Boy – Scriptwriters Guild
Peter Mudamba – Programs, Docubox
Nyambura Waruingi – Design Studio 5
Rachael Wainaina – Talanta Film School
Dr. Mshai Mwangola – Performance Scholar

Date & Venue: Friday 1st February 2019, The GoDown Arts Centre

Intergenerational Dialogues on Dance & Conceptual Arts

Moderators
Kimani Njogu – Twaweza
Joy Mboya – The GoDown
Fernando Anuang'a – Dancer/Choreographer
James Muriuki – Photographer/ Curator

Panelists
James Mweu – Contemporary Dancer & Choreographer/Yoga Practitioner
Opiyo Okatch – Contemporary Dancer, Choreographer
Kanda Kid – Dancer
Dina Abok – Assnt Chair, National Folk Artists/Folklore artist
Matthew Ondiege – Dance Into Space Foundation
Grace Mwangi – Dancer
Kepha Oiro – Dancer/Choreographer
Kahithe Kiiru – Choreographer, Bomas of Kenya
Wambui Collymore – Installation artist/The Art Space
Thandiwe Muriu – Photographer
Jared Onyango – Dancer/Choreographer
Mumbi Kaigwa – The Arts Canvas

Showcased Dance Pieces by
Artzone
Sarah Kwala
Jack Bryton

Date & Venue: Friday 1st March 2019, The GoDown Arts Centre

Intergenerational Dialogues on Visual Arts

Moderators
Kimani Njogu – Twaweza
Joy Mboya – The GoDown

Panelists
Elimu and Philda Njau – Paa ya Paa Art Gallery
Kangara wa Njambi – Visual Artist/Arts in the 80's
Austin Bukenya – Professor of Literature, Makerere University (previously Kenyatta University)
Thom Ogonga – Visual Artist/ Nairobi Contemporary (Journal)
Ngecha Art Centre & Banana Art Gallery – Peri-urban Artist Collectives
Janice Iche – Independent Artist
Joan Atieno – Waremba Wasanii
Michael Musyoka aka Brush Tu – Visual artist
Onyis Martin – Independent artist, based at Kobo
Salim Busuru – Avandu Collective
Joseph Bertiers – Independent Artist
Flora Okuku – Design, Technical University of Kenya
James Muriuki – Curator and Photographer
Chao Taiyana – African Digital Heritage

The Secretariat:
The GoDown Arts Centre:
Twaweza Communications:

Mutheu Mbondo, Catherine Mjomba, Henry Omondi, Salome Ndung'u.
Catherine Bosire, Irene Cege

NOTES

IN 1952, THE KENYA CULTURAL CENTRE AND NATIONAL THEATRE WERE BUILT BY THE COLONIAL GOVERNMENT.

SINCE THEN, NO MAJOR INVESTMENTS IN ARTS & CULTURE INSTITUTIONS HAVE BEEN MADE FOR THE PEOPLE OF KENYA.



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