

**A History of Kenyan Theatre: The Intersections between
Culture and Politics**

Rose Wangui Komu

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Abstract

The study is a piece of qualitative research that investigates both the history and historiography of Kenyan theatre. I have focused on showing how the performance traditions, thematic and theatrical concerns of theatre in Kenya have evolved from the colonial period to present time as well as the socio-political factors that gave birth to these changes. I also studied how other scholars have depicted Kenyan theatre with a view to identifying any confluence or contradictions with the historical data that was the basis of this study. The main question that the study investigated revolved around the major socio-political influences, internal and external, that have shaped Kenyan theatre since the colonial era. More specifically the study was interested in finding out the literary, intellectual and aesthetic considerations that have underpinned theatre practice in Kenya and the challenges the sector has been grappling with from the colonial to present period.

To acquire the necessary information, the study triangulated various methods of qualitative research. These included archival research at the Kenya National Archives and on the internet, interviews with theatre practitioners and experts, analysis of journalistic articles and observations of performances. These were accompanied by a robust library and internet research. An interpretive analysis of plays and material from fieldwork was undertaken to answer the research questions.

To argue out the various issues convincingly, theoretical frameworks from the fields of theatre historiography, post-colonialism and Theatre for Development were used. Among these were Frantz Fanon's ideas on colonialism and neo-colonialism, African socialism, Augusto Boal's ideas of Theatre for Development and Paulo Freire's views on education of the oppressed. The writings of renowned theatre scholars such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, David Kerr, Jane Plastow and Opiyo Mumma and historians such as Bethwell Ogot, Charles Hornsby and William Ochieng also shaped my work.

The major findings of the study were that political regimes of Kenya and ideology have been major influences in shaping the direction and aesthetics of Kenyan theatre. Lack of adequate training was found to be a

main challenge undermining the realisation of the full potential of Kenyan theatre. The study further revealed a lack of adequate research in the field of performance which has led to much misrepresentation of Kenya's theatre history. The study recommends more investment in terms of policy, infrastructure development and training to enable the Kenyan theatre sector realise its full potential.

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Background Information on Kenya

Kenya is located in East Africa. The major economic activities are agriculture and tourism. Its ethnic composition comprise of 42 native ethnic groups and significant populations of Europeans and Asians. Kenya's population, according to the 2014 census, was 43.0 million people. In 2010, the country promulgated a new constitution that among other things divided the country into 47 counties each with its own government. The elections for all political offices (President, Deputy President, County Governors, Members of Parliament, County Women Representatives and Members of County Assemblies) are held every five years.

Figure 1 : A Map of Kenya with the 47 administrative units.



Introduction

This study attempts a comprehensive investigation of how Kenyan performance culture has evolved from colonial days to the present and the social-political factors that have shaped this development. The study also interrogates the challenges that have hindered the realisation of the full potential of the Kenyan theatre industry as well as the factors that have furthered the interests of the various aspects of performance. I thought the most logical way to deal with these issues was to examine how each of the political phases of the country, from the colonial era to date, have contributed to the growth or disempowerment of theatre in Kenya.

As a Kenyan who has witnessed all the four post-colonial regimes, I noticed how the performance trends in schools, at the theatres and on television changed whenever a new government came to power. When I was growing up in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the dominant stories and experiences were about Kamiriithu theatre, university students acting plays at the local markets and schools and mobile film-vans showing the latest films in open spaces at night. These were complemented with songs and stories that were narrated, sung and dramatised by firesides, during school breaks, when tilling the land and harvesting and threshing millet. As I grew up and proceeded to high school and university and later, as a literature teacher at various levels, these memories were gradually replaced with those of the brutal coup in 1982, of plays being banned from the KSDF festivals and of teachers being arrested because of plays they wrote or staged.

After the political situation improved from 2002 and there was much more freedom and political tolerance, the question of what populated our television sets, school syllabus and theatres then began to arise. The evidence of what the many years of state repression had done to our theatre was before us as Western plays and Mexican and Nigerian films dominated our theatres and our television sets. Whatever little there was of local content was of poor quality compared to what I watched from elsewhere. These experiences informed my decision to investigate the extent to which

the current performance realities of Kenya have been shaped by her socio-political history.

Initially, I hoped to focus my study on the use of drama to communicate HIV/AIDS messages, having investigated the portrayal of HIV/AIDS in Kenyan fiction for my master's project at the University of Nairobi. My interest in theatre was out of the conviction that well-scripted and produced dramas could be an effective means of addressing the HIV/AIDS pandemic that Kenya declared a national disaster in the 1990s. In the process of preliminary research, I realised just how little has been written on Kenyan theatre. Most of what existed were fragmented studies, focusing on Theatre for Development (TfD), thematic analysis of plays, Kamirithu and oral literature. Ngugi wa Thiong'o has, for instance, written on language issues, Kamirithu and theatre censorship in works such as *Detained: A Writers Prison Diary* (1981), *Writers in Politics* (1981), *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) and *Moving the Centre* (1992). There have also been a number of relevant ethnographically focused studies by scholars such as Naomi Kipury (1983); Ciarunji Chesaina (1991, 1997); Okumba Miruka (2001) and Wanjiku Kabira (1988), in an attempt to 'preserve' oral forms before they become 'extinct'. From the 1990s, there have been several significant orature-based and TfD studies such as those by Opiyo Mumma (1994); Gichora Mwangi (1996); Ezekiel Alembi (2002); Egara Kabaji (2005); Christopher Odhiambo, (2006); Simon Otieno (2008) and Victor Ladan (2010).

These works, although contributing immensely to the field of performance study, fall short of providing a coherent account of the various developments and issues associated with Kenyan performance over the years. I therefore, decided to broaden my study to not only look at challenges and ways of improving TfD practices (the subject of Chapter Eight) in Kenya, but also to interrogate the broad spectrum of Kenyan theatre. The study is timely because, in the recent years, theatre and performance is increasingly becoming an important socio-cultural sector, a field of study and a means of addressing Kenyan problems following the institution of more democratic regimes from 2003. Thus, detailed research that provides an overview of important developments and challenges in the

sector may contribute in providing direction on future theatrical initiatives in the country.

Research Questions

The main question that this study attempted to address revolves around the major transformations that have occurred in Kenyan theatre since the colonial era and how these changes inter-connect with the major socio-political changes in the country. The specific questions I addressed were:

- What major influences, internal and external, have shaped the Kenyan theatre culture?
- How have the socio-political conditions of the country influenced Kenyan theatre?
- What literary, intellectual and aesthetic considerations have influenced the development of theatre in Kenya?
- What major challenges continue to face theatre in Kenya?

Collection, Analysis and Presentation of Data

The study is a piece of fieldwork-based, qualitative research. As a historically based study, my methods emphasised what R. W. Vince describes as the 'primacy of firsthand experience as a historiographical principle'¹ in an effort to get accurate data to 'reconstruct' Kenyan performance culture convincingly. As Thomas Postlewait advises, historical knowledge is often 'located in some kind of archive and [...] in people's memories, stories and cultural practices'.² Phillip Zarrilli and others elaborate such sources as including 'ruins of theatres, inscriptions that document a building's date or patron, original dramatic texts, visual records of performances, period costumes, financial records, and attendance figures, original playbills or programmes'.³ Although most of these sources were

¹ R.W. Vince, 'Theatre History as an Academic Discipline', in *Interpreting the Theatrical Past: Essays in the Historiography of Performance*, ed. Thomas Postlewait and Bruce A. McConachie, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), p.5.

² Thomas Postlewait, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.3.

³ Phillip Zarrilli and others, *Theatre Histories, an Introduction* (USA and Canada: Routledge, 2006), p. xxvi.

used in this study, the analysis is guided by the admonition against taking every historical record as a reflection of reality. Autobiographies were, for instance, treated with caution, as they may not always reflect unfavorable or negative views about the writer.⁴ The specific methods I relied on included the following:

Archival Resources, Internet and Library Sources

Archival material was most relevant for the first five chapters, but most significantly for chapters one to three. Official reports and correspondence, proceedings of meetings and journalistic articles were all important sources of data. As noted above, most of these were obtained from the Kenya National Archives and internet. The internet was particularly vital for retrieving 'cultural histories' in past journalistic publications. The two sources also provided a sizable amount of secondary data. The libraries of the University of Leeds and the University of Nairobi were, however, the most important sources of secondary data for this research.

Interviews

My study relied heavily on oral accounts that were acquired through unstructured open-ended interviews with some twenty-five Kenyan theatre practitioners for the post-colonial, contemporary and Theatre for Development (TfD) chapters. The participants included theatre teachers, policy-makers and theatre directors, producers, actors and actresses in diverse fields of theatre including TfD, university theatre, school theatre, professional and community theatre. The issues addressed in the interviews included political developments in the various eras, trends in Kenyan theatre across various political regimes, important influences on theatre over the years, plays that were performed at various times, the themes that have dominated Kenyan theatre and the contribution of the various artists to theatre.

Observations

I also observed theatre groups during training, rehearsal and performance sessions in the attempt to acquire first-hand information about performance trends in the contemporary period. Apart from scheduled observation

⁴ Ibid.

sessions with groups, I attended various cultural and theatre events such as the Kenya Cultural Festival at the KNT and the Lamu Cultural festival in 2013. I would also regularly go to theatres to watch performances to have a general overview of the industry. Observations would often be accompanied by discussions with all group members or their coordinators after the performance.

To capture the various aspects of data effectively, photography, audio and video recording were used. Handwritten notes were also taken particularly during observations and interviews. While library and internet research went on throughout the study period from (October 2012-October 2016), two fieldwork visits were undertaken to Kenya for the other aspects of data collection. The first was from 7 October 2013 to 15 February 2014. The first month of this visit was spent on establishing rapport with groups and participants that were observed or/and interviewed in the rest of the months. Archival and library research in Kenya went on throughout this fieldwork period. The second visit, from 15 April to 17 May 2014, was mainly for clarification of issues that arose during the data analysis. I also did more archival research within this phase.

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Analysis and Presentation

The material acquired from the archives was classified according to the recurring themes and according to dates to establish time lines. A similar

process was undertaken for the interviews after transcription and where necessary, translation. These themes were the focus of discussion in the study. Word for word translation and transcription was used for all the quotations in the work. It was only on occasions where the semantic meaning was completely unclear that the wording and structure of the sentences were slightly modified for clarity.

In the interpretation of the data, I endeavoured to give not just 'a detailed descriptive sequence' of events, but also an 'interpretive history'.⁵ The importance of this approach, as Postlewait explains, is that it enables the historian to show the significance of events. Therefore, notable productions, theatre initiatives, performance spaces, scenic designs, costumes and décor of the various periods were analysed for their thematic' stylistic, historical and socio-political importance. A similar process was undertaken for plays and playwrights, texts being perhaps the most enduring and tangible evidence of theatrical activity.

Theoretical Grounding

The broader study can be located within the area of theatre history and historiography. This is because, in the study, I was interested in analysing both what happened and is happening in Kenyan theatre, as well as what other historians and cultural commentators have written about theatre, culture and politics in Kenya. The study is also post-colonial in that it seeks to highlight how Kenyan theatre has evolved after independence and how these developments have been influenced by colonial and neo-colonial cultural hegemony and legacies. This explains the wide use of post-colonial terms such as 'subjugation' 'neo-colonialism' 'ambivalence' and 'hegemony'.

The ideas of Fanon on colonialism, decolonisation, neo-colonialism and the development of a national culture were particularly crucial in shaping the ideas in this study as discussed in detail in Chapter Five. The Marxist-oriented ideology of African socialism and its emphasis on the need to re-ignite the egalitarian principles of the African societies and cultures also provided an important ideological standpoint from which I interrogated some of the post-colonial issues in Kenyan productions and plays. The sections

⁵ Postlewait, p. 3.

dealing with Tfd were guided largely by Bertolt Brecht's ideas of epic theatre, Paulo Freire's ideas on education for the oppressed and Augusto Boal's ideas on theatre for the oppressed.

The study is also heavily influenced by Ngugi wa Thiong'o's writings on politics, culture, theatre and language in Kenya. Jane Plastow's pioneering work on African theatre history in her research on the evolution of theatre in Ethiopia, Tanzania and Zimbabwe also shaped my ideas profoundly. Other theatre historians whose ideas have shaped this work include Thomas Postlewait's and Bruce McConachie's publications on theatre history and historiography. The political history aspects benefitted greatly from the writings of William Ochieng, Bethwell Ogot and Charles Hornsby all of whom have written widely about Kenya's political history. These theoretical standpoints and the ideas of the various scholars are interrogated in detail in the relevant chapters.

The Periodisation and Structure of the Study

Perhaps the greatest challenge in any historical work is periodisation and it was no different for this project. The main challenge in this study was the fact that changes in politics did not always go hand in hand with changes in performance. Moreover, even within a particular historical phase, not all aspects of theatre changed at the same time and pace. For instance, social themes and Western traditions of play-writing continued to influence plays up to early 1970s even after most of the other sectors of theatre had acquired more radical approaches. Additionally, while some political phases impacted only modestly on theatre, others made far more significant contributions or are better evidenced in archives and other literature.

The colonial theatre period and the period after independence, for instance, witnessed greater theatrical changes than other periods. Some initiatives such as Kamiriithu also cut across two historical periods, the Kenyatta and Moi eras. I, therefore, took seriously the advice of Thomas Postlewait that historical writing must not always offer 'a self-contained and complete unity of beginning, middle and end'.⁶ However, it must 'provide a

⁶ Postlewait, p.194.

convincing explanation of the pieces' so that they add up to a 'coherent understanding [...] of significant changes'.⁷

Taking all these factors into consideration, the study was divided into eight main chapters in addition to an introduction and conclusion. Each chapter explores important aspects of performance in the various political phases. The introduction explains why and how the study was conducted. Chapter One focuses on the broad changes in performance in the colonial era. It begins by exploring the cultural influences of the Arab/Persians whose 'invasion' of the Kenyan coast has been dated to as early as 1st century and which continued up to the end of the 19th century when Britain colonised the whole of Kenya. It also covers the two centuries of brief interruption of Arab rule by the Portuguese from the late 15th to early 19th centuries. The chapter then focuses on developments in European, Asian and Kenyan people's theatre during British colonisation. Chapter Two discusses the influences of missionaries and colonial schools on performance. These two institutions were the main vehicles of colonial cultural hegemony. The focus of Chapter Three was on how Kenyans used indigenous performance to oppose colonialism with a view of demonstrating how popular forms can be harnessed to effect social change. Chapter Four covers the early years of Kenyatta's rule, a period often associated with little theatrical development among Kenyans even after independence. The chapter also explains how the capitalistic and neo-colonial nature of the first post-independence regime contributed to this state of affairs. Chapter Five focuses on the period from 1968 -1978, a period when great theatrical developments happened in Kenya. It discusses the major forces behind these changes. Chapter Six explores the situation of theatre during the Moi era, a period when most of the gains of the previous period were reversed by the regime's intolerance of radical views and its censorship of theatre. Chapter Seven discusses the impacts of the three contemporary political regimes that have ruled Kenya since 2003 on theatre and whose policies have been more democratic. These are the National Rainbow Coalition (2003-2007), the Grand Coalition (2008-2013) and the Jubilee Coalition (2013-date). Chapter Eight highlights some key issues in Theatre for Development practice in Kenya today. The

⁷ Ibid, p.195.

conclusion presents a summary of the key findings and concludes the study. It also gives suggestions for further research.

In this work, I have not offered a separate section for the discussion of pre-colonial performance forms. The reason for this is because it is one of the areas that has received significant amount research attention particularly from the 1980s when oral literature was made a subject in Kenyan schools. However, I have throughout the study, highlighted some important changes in the use and performance of Kenyan pre-colonial forms. The two gaps that need serious research attention in the scholarship of pre-colonial performances are too broad to be accommodated within the scope and space of this study. These are the study of the oral forms of the various minority ethnic groups and a comparative study to identify the dominant aspects in the oral forms of each community with a view of establishing if we can indeed talk of a pre-colonial Kenyan performance culture.

Challenges in Data Collection

Dealing with a national theatre history, even for a country like Kenya whose performance industry is only modest, is not easy. It calls for a prudent selection of participants and ideas to be discussed. In choosing the groups and people to be observed and interviewed respectively, priority was given to Kenyans who were recognised in various fields of theatre but whose accounts and contributions are not well-documented, a factor that can only be attributed to the low levels of research in the field of Kenyan theatre. I also attempted to find interviewees who by virtue of age could give information about the various eras to save time and in an attempt to secure reliable and quality data for the research. Priority attention was also given to outstanding theatre initiatives such as Kamiriithu, the Kenya Schools Drama Festivals and performance spaces such as the KNT as well as to political events that were most revealing on not only the development of Kenyan theatre, but also how these developments intersected with the social-political conditions in the country.

Accessing the sites and participants for this research was a daunting task mainly because most theatre practitioners in Kenya had no offices or permanent performance spaces. Most of the telephone numbers on the

websites of various theatre groups did not work and most of my e-mails to potential respondents were never answered. Thus, a lot of time was spent trying to locate participants. However, I was able to accomplish the research mainly because as a Kenyan and an educationist in the country, I could easily negotiate the geographical and social terrain to get people to connect me with potential participants either by directing me to the venues where they were staging performances or through their phones. The lack of permanent administrative and work centres for most practitioners also forced me to sometimes conduct interviews in public spaces which were, at times, prone to disruptions of noise, weather and intrusions of passersby.

With the library and archival research, there was a problem of poor cataloguing and storage and I had to rely on the goodwill and kindness of personnel to get the right material. While on one hand, this caused me some serious delays, on the other it made me to realise the importance of establishing good rapport in research because when the staff understood what I was doing they helped enormously in enabling me to achieve my goals.

Language was another challenge. Though I have lived in Kenya for my entire life and am well-schooled and fluent in both spoken and written English, Kiswahili and Kikuyu which greatly helped with transcription and translation, I cannot speak the rest of the forty languages in the country. This forced me to limit aspects that dealt with theatre in local languages to productions in Kikuyu and Kiswahili. The two languages dominate theatre in local languages. The vastness of the country meant that I could not visit all parts of Kenya within the budgetary and time constraints of this research.

Critical Terms in the Study

Four terms that are critical to this study are culture, drama, theatre and performance. In the definition of the word culture, my study borrows from Raymond Williams (1983) who in *Key Words* defines culture in three ways all of which adequately capture the various ways the term has been used in this study. The first definition is a general one where culture is seen as a 'process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development'. The second way he sees culture is as 'a particular way of life, whether of a people, a

period or group'. He also perceives culture as 'works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity'.⁸ Though the third definition is most representative of the way the term culture is conceived in this study, the other two definitions are also relevant as in the study, I was also interested in the theatrical trends since the colonial era and how Kenyans have related to them.

With regard to the term theatre, I found the definition of Thomas Postlewait who sees theatre as including a comprehensive field of performing arts such as 'dance, opera, folk theatre, puppetry, parades, processions, spectacles, festivals, circuses, public conventions and related performance events' most relevant. This is because the study is not limited to plays only.⁹ The study also adopts David Kerr's definition of theatre as involving 'many forms of ritual, dance and other performing arts such as acrobatics, mime and other semi dramatised narratives'.¹⁰ Kerr's definition is particularly crucial to this study because most pre-colonial forms that I have discussed in this study fall outside the scope of Western drama.

The term drama is mainly used to refer to Western forms of performance and as Kerr notes, it includes 'displays of action to an audience in which there is an imitation of events in the real or supernatural world and an element of story or suspense'.¹¹ Zarrilli and others add that drama can be read or performed.¹² This is unlike theatre which only comes to life through performance. Performance, as defined by Zarrilli and others, is also an inclusive term as it refers to 'religious rituals, state ceremonies, carnival festivals, political demonstrations, athletic contests or the recital of customs around a family dinner'.¹³ This means that performance is not limited to drama and theatre but includes 'all ways in which humans represent themselves in embodied ways'.¹⁴

8 Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (London: Fontana, 1983), 90.

9 Postlewait, p. 2.

10 David Kerr, *African Popular Theatre: Studies in African Literature* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1995), p.1.

11 Ibid, p.1.

12 Zarrilli and others, p. xxii.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

Zarrilli and others further trace the international bias of scholarship against non-Western forms of theatre to the 15th century when Europeans began to explore and colonise the Americas, Africa and Asia. This is because colonialism aimed at imposing Western civilisation, in addition to economic and political dominance.¹⁵ David Kerr, for instance, notes that in the colonial Africa, indigenous people were treated as a *'tabula rasa'*, as people without traditions and a source of primitive [...] obscene rituals which indicated [their] inferiority to the supposed rationalism of the European cultures'.¹⁶ This justified the colonisers' onslaught on their cultures.

Jane Plastow further notes that in theatre, the 19th-century European drama was used as the benchmark for 'ideal performance tradition' and African performances were judged on the basis of how they deviated from this 'ideal'.¹⁷ Since many pre-colonial performance forms lacked 'essential elements' such as a 'linear plot structure, specialised visual adornment, [...] impersonation of character and enactment of the story'¹⁸ as well as 'audience and performers clearly separated, a specific stage area and professional performers',¹⁹ they were seen as inferior to the European forms and classed as not constituting theatre. The fact that many African performances were connected to rituals did not help matters, as the European's idea of legitimate theatre was one that was secular and conceived primarily as a form of entertainment.²⁰ The onslaught on indigenous cultures and the imposition of Western forms on the indigenous people that was occasioned by these colonial ideologies are the subjects of my first chapter.

In this study, I have tended to use the term performance to refer to pre-colonial performance forms and drama in reference to Western theatre.

15 Zarrilli, p. xxiii.

16 Kerr, p.18.

17 Plastow, Jane, *African Theatre and Politics: Evolution of Theatre in Ethiopia, Tanzania and Zimbabwe* (London: Rodopi, 1996), p.12.

18 Kennedy Chinyowa, 'Context Performance and Meaning of Shona Ritual Drama', In *Pre-Colonial and Post-Colonial Drama and Theatre in Africa*, ed.by Lokangaka Losambe and Devi Sarinjeive (Claremont, South Africa: New Africa Education, 2001), pp. 3-13 (p. 4).

19 Plastow, *African Theatre and Politics*, p.12.

20 Ibid.

Theatre has on the other hand been used to refer to not only the play forms, but also other aspects of performance such as stand-up comedy and musicals. Another term that needs delineation in this work is the word 'Kenyan'. In the colonial and post-colonial chapters, I have mainly used the term to refer to indigenous African populations including the inhabitants of the coast region before British colonialism. In the contemporary theatre chapters, these demarcations are not very clear mainly because the racial divisions in theatre have faded greatly. Thus, the term is used in reference to all Kenyan citizens of all racial backgrounds. Worth noting is that Kenya still has significant populations of Europeans and Asians who are an important part of Kenyan's socio-cultural life.

Chapter 1

Colonialism and Theatre: Oriental, Portuguese and British Influences on Kenyan Performance

Introduction

Colonialism was a profound experience that left enduring marks on the political, economic and socio-cultural organisation of Kenyan communities. In Kenya, the term 'imperialism' has been widely used to refer to the seventy years of British rule from 1895-1963. However, it is important to emphasise here that before the British, there were three other 'invasions' by various foreign nationalities along the coast of Kenya that had equally far-reaching hegemonic consequences on the cultures and socio-political systems of that region as that of the British colonisation of the whole of the country in the 19th century. In this chapter, I will focus on how Arabs/Persians, Portuguese and British invasions influenced indigenous cultures in Kenya and the performances that emanated from these interactions. The main argument in this chapter is that foreign socio-political and cultural forces have been a major influence on Kenyan performance and theatre.

Arab and Portuguese Rule On the Kenyan Coast

The first non-African group that had significant impacts on the cultures of Kenya were people of Oriental background from predominantly Arabia and Persia. *The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, a marine guide composed as early as 60 A.D. mentions the flourishing trade along the East African coast that was controlled by Arabs. Other nationalities mentioned as participants in the early trans-Indian trade include Indians, Chinese, Greeks and Romans ²¹ all which, as various scholars have noted, influenced the cultures of the inhabitants of the coast of Kenya.²² Some of these traders settled along the East African coast and intermarried with the local Bantu tribes while at the same time exerting immense political, economic and cultural control over the

²¹ Aylward Shorter, *East African Societies* (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1974), p. 24.

²² See *Ibid*, among others.

region. One of the outcomes of the 'Oriental invasion' was the establishment of Swahili city-states on the islands along the coast of East Africa that were populated mainly by the Arabs and the Swahili people. By the 11th century, there were approximately thirty Arab/Persian colonies running from Mogadishu in present day Somalia to Sofala in Mozambique.²³ The culture that flourished in these cities was 'urbanite and cosmopolitan' from the mixed populations of Africans and foreigners and its major determinant was the Islamic religion that the invaders introduced in the area.²⁴ The peak of the Swahili civilisation was between the 10th and 15th centuries, a period often referred to as the *Shirazi* era just before the invasion of the Portuguese.

Swahili scholars are sharply divided as to whether it was from this interaction that the Swahili people and language that dominate the towns along the East Africa coast to this day came to being. Two schools of thought have emerged in the scholarship of the Swahili group. The first is what has been termed as Eurocentric ethnographers who emphasise and trace Swahili genealogies to Arab/ Persian roots.²⁵ Among the scholars associated with this view is the German scholar, Jan Knappert who has extensively collected and studied Swahili poems, myths and legends. In *Traditional Swahili Poetry*, for instance, Knappert alleges that the 'Swahili culture is essentially Oriental and not African in its material and non-material elements'.²⁶ Knappert has, however, been accused of selectively focusing on Islamic-Arabic themed material while ignoring forms such as initiation songs, lullabies and marriage songs which the Swahili share with other Bantu groups of Kenya and East Africa.²⁷

The second view is propagated by what has come to be known as Africanist Swahili scholars. They include among others, Thomas Spear,

23 Plastow, *African Theatre and Politics*, p. 60.

24 Pouwels Randall, 'A Historiography of the Shirazi of the East African Coast', *History of Africa*, 11 (1984), 237-267 (p. 238).

25 Mugyabuso Mulokozi, 'Revolution and Reaction in Swahili Poetry', *Kiswahili: Jarida la Chuo cha Uchunguzi wa Lugha ya Kiswahili*, 45.2 (1975), pp.46-65 (p. 47).

26 Jan Knappert, *Traditional Swahili Poetry: An Investigation into the Concepts of East African Islam as Reflected in the Utenzi Literature* (Leiden, The Netherlands: E.J Brill, 1976), p. 9.

27 Mulokozi, p. 47.

Randall Pouwels, Dereck Nurse, Justin Willis, Thomas Hinnebusch, Mark Horton, Neville Chittick, Lyadon Harris and Mugyabuso Mulokozi. Though the Africanists do not dispute the fact that the many years of Bantu and Oriental interaction had immense impacts on the demographic and cultural patterns of the Swahili people, they see the former's emphasis on Arab/Persian roots as over-rated and imperialistic. This group accuse their counterparts of deliberately ignoring the pre-Arab history in their endeavour to justify the Oriental parentage of the Swahili. They, therefore analyse oral and written accounts and archaeological excavations in an attempt to prove that Swahili people had existed long before the Arabs and Persians and that the interaction between the two groups was a 'reciprocal process of acculturation' and mutual adjustment rather than total assimilation.²⁸

Extensive interrogation of the views of the two schools of thought is beyond the scope of this study. However, if the Africanists view which seems to have gained quiet a significant following after independence is to be believed and looking at the Swahili culture today, the cultural influences of the Orientals on the Swahili people can be said to have been quite significant. The Africanists single out Islam as the main vehicle through which indigenous Swahili ways of life were eroded and the ideologies of the Arab ruling class implanted into the consciousness of the local people. Mulokozi, for instance, notes that the indigenous people were encouraged to convert to Islam so as to be regarded as *wangwana* (gentlemen) as opposed to *washenzi* (barbarians). As a result, 'many [converts] tried to imitate and ape Arab customs and manners, including language 'without questioning their relevance to their newly acquired religion.'²⁹ He adds that it was probably through this process that 'many Arabic and Persian words invaded the [Kiswahili] language, in some cases replacing the Bantu words'.³⁰

As during the British colonisation of the 20th century, the converts abandoned some of their traditional practices, ceremonies and rites in favour of those of their new way of life. Those that survived became more inclined to religion. Writing about Swahili epic poetry (known as *tenzi* or *utendi* in

28 E.M. Aseka, 'Urbanisation', in *Themes in Kenyan History*, ed. by William Ochieng (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1990), pp.44-67 (p. 50).

29 Mulokozi, p. 51.

30 Ibid.

some Swahili dialects), Ruth Finnegan, for instance, notes that the poems are usually 'long religious poems containing either homiletic material or a narrative treatment of the deeds of Muslim heroes, including their deeds of war'.³¹ Finnegan further states that the poems have 'deep religious inspiration' which is reflected in the conventional opening of the poems, which is normally the praise of God and his prophet Mohammed.³² The same is true about other Swahili performance forms such as *vave* (short recitals), *ngano* (tales), *wimbo* (songs), *methali* (proverbs) *gungu* (riddling conversational poems) and other modes of *mashairi* (poetry).³³

The second invasion of the coastal region was by the Portuguese who occupied the East African coast for 200 years, from 1499 to 1700 AD. Their aim was to control trade and spread Christianity. The Portuguese had a poor relationship with the coastal people because of their ruthless governance style. Some of their cultural habits such as drinking alcohol and rearing dogs as pets were also offensive to the Islamic populations. The Portuguese rule was punctuated with constant revolts as the inhabitants of the coastal towns strove to free themselves from Portuguese rule which eventually ruined the once thriving trans-Indian trade.³⁴

Their sojourn on the East African coast had also little cultural impact. For the two centuries they ruled the coastal city-states, the most visible marks of their presence is the Padro (also known as the Vasco da Gama pillar) that was erected by the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama at Malindi in 1498 as a navigation guide. They also built Fort Jesus in 1593 as a safe haven in times of danger.³⁵ Other imprints of the Portuguese include some churches in Mombasa such as the Augustinian cathedral, the Misericordia church, the Igreja Matriz (mother church) and a chapel inside

31 Ruth Finnegan, 'Oral Literature in Africa', *World Oral Literature Series*, 1 (2012), <http://www.openbookpublishers.com> > [accessed 20 April 2013], p.169.

32 Ibid.

33 See among others, Jan Knappert, 'Swahili Oral Traditions', pp.22-30 <https://www.isca.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/ISCA/JASO/Archive_1982/13_1_Knappert.pdf> and Jasmin Mahazi, 'Shela Koma Na Mizimu Mema - Remembering Our Ancestors', *Swahili Forum*, 17 (2010), 82-90.

34 *From Mission to Church*, ed. by Zablun Nthamburi (Nairobi: Uzima Press, 1991), p. 6.

35 Ibid.

the Fort Jesus.³⁶ There are also some Swahili words that have been credited to the influence of the Portuguese language. The word *pesa* (money), for instance, appears to have been derived from *pesos*, the Iberian currency. Other examples include *sapatu* (slippers), *shimizi* (female undergarment) and *kandirinya* (kettle).³⁷

The Portuguese control of the East African coast towns was gradually dislodged by Omani Arabs from the mid-18th century and who assumed absolute control of the region in the early 19th century. They also defeated the resistance of the Swahili and Arabs who lived in these towns and who, although tired of Portuguese rule were not willing to be ruled by another foreign power. The last port of resistance was Mombasa which they subdued in 1840. After the conquest, Sultan Seyyid Said of Omani who led the invasion relocated his throne to Zanzibar.³⁸

During this invasion, performance, particularly poetry was one of the means through which people voiced their displeasure with the new rulers. Among the poems of resistance was *Utenzi wa Al-Okida*, which is also one of the few surviving poems of the 19th century. It was composed by Muyaka bin Haji (1776-1884), a prominent poetic voice of the time and who is considered the father of modern Swahili poetry. According to Knappert, Muyaka was known for composing poems with 'hidden allusions in cryptic language' which 'only the initiated could understand'.³⁹

The Omani Arabs are credited with importing *taarab* music (love songs) to the coast of East Africa when Seyyid Barghash was the Sultan. Bargash is said to have invited some Egyptian musicians to perform in his court in 1870. He was so thrilled by their performance of the *taarab* that he decided to send a Zanzibari musician, Ibrahim Muhammed, to study it in Cairo. When Muhammed returned to Zanzibar, he formed a *taarab* orchestra. From here,

36 Ibid, p. 9.

37 Moses Wamanga, 'Portuguese Empire on the East African Coast (1498-1698)' <portugueseoneastafricancoast.htm> [accessed 25 February 2014], pp1-2, p.1.

38 Patricia W. Romero, 'Seyyid Said bin Sultan BuSaid of Oman and Zanzibar: Women in the Life of this Arab Patriarch', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 39.3 (2012), pp. 373–392 (p.381).

39 Jan Knappert, 'Swahili Traditions', in *Genres, Forms, Meanings: Essays in African Oral Literature*, ed. by Veronika Gorog-Karady (Oxford: Jaso, 1982), pp. 22-30 (pp. 22-26).

this genre of music spread to other parts of East Africa, including Kenya.⁴⁰ Until 1928, *taarab* bands sang in Arabic and were male-dominated. The dominance of men and Arabic began to be challenged in the 1950s when female artists and Swahili language began to feature in the *taarab* music. The most re-known female *taarab* singer of this period was Siti Binti Said from Tanzania. She sung in Kiswahili and is credited with popularising *taarab* in the whole of East Africa in the 1950s. Both *taarab* and *mashairi* survived British colonialism and to this day, they continue to be popular performance forms among East Africans.

During the Omani reign, Islam's hold on the coastal region was strengthened even further. The trans-Indian trade flourished once again which led to great prosperity for the coastal towns. By the end of the 19th century, long-distance trade caravans would penetrate to as far as Uganda in search of slaves, ivory and other trade goods. Through this, Kiswahili and Islam were spread more significantly into the interior of East Africa.⁴¹ It was the establishment of British colonialism that was oriented towards Christianity that curtailed the spread of Islam in East Africa. Kiswahili, however, thrived as a *lingua franca* in Kenya and East Africa even during British colonial rule and to this day.

British Colonialism in Kenya

The British, like other European powers, (Germany, the Netherlands and Italy) had a long history on the East African coast even before 1895, as they were participants in the flourishing trans-Indian trade in addition to strategic interests. However, it was not until the mid-19th century that Britain became more politically involved in the affairs of what is now East Africa. The ban of slavery in Britain in 1834 led to anti-slavery crusaders exerting pressure on the British government to be more proactive in curtailing the 'evil' trade from its very roots in places where the slaves were sourced. In 1873, and after intense pressure from the British Consul in Zanzibar Sir John Kirk, the

40 Mwenda Ntarangwi, 'A Socio-Historical and Contextual Analysis of Popular Musical Performance among the Swahili of Mombasa, Kenya', *Cultural Analysis*, 2 (2001), pp.1-37 (p.11).

41 Ali Mazrui and Alamin Mazrui, *Swahili State and Society. The Political Economy of an African Language* (Nairobi: East African Publishers, 1995), p. 36.

Zanzibar slave market, which was the largest in East Africa, was closed down when Sultan Bargash agreed to sign a treaty making the slave trade illegal in his jurisdiction.

Another factor that led to Britain's interest in East Africa was the reports of early European explorers and missionaries such as David Livingstone, Ludwig Krapf and Johan Rebman. Their narratives of not only the economic potential of the East African hinterland, but also the savagery of slave capturing expeditions and the 'backwardness' of the indigenous communities were used to justify political domination. Like in other parts of Africa, colonialism was explained as a civilising mission that would open up East Africa for evangelisation and spread of Western civilisation. The colony would also benefit Western economies by exploiting the resources therein and adding to the markets for European goods.⁴² It was, however, the Germany's annexation of Tanganyika (now mainland Tanzania) in 1883 that forced Britain to quickly take over the area that is now the present day Kenya and Uganda as her protectorate perhaps, before another party claimed it.⁴³

Following the Berlin conference of 1884 that was convened to map out the spheres of influence of the various European powers in Africa, Germany and Britain agreed to divide their interests in East Africa along the borders of present-day Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. A ten-mile stretch from the coastline to the hinterland along the coast and the coastal towns were bequeathed to the Sultanate of Zanzibar. By 1910, however, the Sultan had lost control over his territory gradually due to military incursions by Britain and Germany along the coast. Tanzania also came under Britain's control after World War One (hereafter WW1) when Germany was forced to surrender her colonies to other European powers as a punishment for her role in the War.

The British protectorate of Kenya was at its initial stages managed by the Imperial British East African Company (IBEAC). When it became bankrupt in 1895, the British government took over. The process of

⁴² Gichora Mwangi, 'Orature in Contemporary Theatre Practice'(unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leeds,1996), pp. 68-69.

⁴³ Ibid.

transforming the independent ethnic groups into a nation took place between 1895 and 1905. Force was used to subdue resistant communities and to establish the colonial political and economic authority.⁴⁴ To open up the East African protectorate, the construction of the 582-mile long Kenya-Uganda railway was initiated in 1895 and completed in 1901.⁴⁵

To make the colony profitable and to recover the costs of building the railway, a scheme was launched to recruit settlers to farm on what was noted as 'some of the richest agricultural soils in the world', located in 'districts where elevation and climate [made] it possible for Europeans to settle permanently'.⁴⁶ In 1902, the Crown Lands Ordinance that declared all 'empty land' public land that could be sold or leased off to Europeans was passed.⁴⁷ The idea of empty lands was an ironic one as it ignored the realities of the natives' patterns of life where people lived in villages and used shifting methods of cultivation to sustain land fertility. All in all the legislation provided the basis for the alienation of Kenyans from their lands for European settlement, essentially making some of them squatters on the lands they formerly depended on for sustenance.

By the end of 1903, the first wave of about 400 settlers mainly from Britain and South Africa had arrived in Kenya. Some 220,000 acres of land were annexed for their settlement in what came to be known as the white highlands, located mainly in Central Kenya and the Rift-Valley districts. Among the people in this first group was Lord Delamere who became the leader of the settlers in Kenya from 1907. The numbers of settlers grew steadily in the subsequent years particularly after the WW1 when the ex-soldiers settlement was established.⁴⁸

44 Bethwell Ogot, 'The Revolt of the Elders: An Anatomy of the Loyalist Crowd in the Mau Mau Uprising 1952-1956', in *Politics and Nationalism in Colonial Kenya*, ed. by Bethwell Ogot (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1972), pp.134-148 (p. 135).

45 Dorthe Mortensen, 'The White Man's Country', *News Partner*, 7.3 (2004)
<<http://www.actionaid.dk/sw7738.asp>> [accessed 8 April 2014]

46 East African Commission Report of 1924.

47 Robert Tignor, *Colonial Transformation of Kenya* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 30.

48 Frank Smitha, 'Kenya and the British', *Africa and Imperialism in the 1920s – Macrohistory* www.fsmitha.com/h2/ch14-africa.htm [accessed 10 April 2014] (p. 6).

Even though there were medium sized landowners who owned one thousand acres or less, most Kenyan settlers favoured large estates and ranches. Delamere's two ranches, Equator and Soysambo, in the Rift valley, for instance, accounted for some 150,000 acres of land. His family still owns and lives in some of these lands to this day. He was also the founder of Norfolk Hotel, opposite the Kenya National Theatre in Nairobi and a popular meeting place for the European community in colonial and post-colonial Kenya.

However, I should emphasise here that the number of settlers in Kenya was surprisingly small in comparison to the amount of economic and political power they wielded in the colony. By 1922, for instance, there were only 1,386 Europeans in agriculture out of the sum 9,650 whites in the colony. By 1931, the white farmers were 2,106 out of 16, 812 European population. The rest were in other businesses, administration, the army and other professions.⁴⁹ Their immense influence in the affairs of the colony can be explained by the fact that the Kenyan settlers were, as Bruce Berman notes, 'decidedly upper class' comprising mainly of a 'strong aristocratic clement'.⁵⁰ This implies they had strong economic and political connections even in Britain.

Many of the settlers and some colonial administrators wanted Kenya to follow the developmental patterns of South Africa, Canada, New Zealand and Australia where the settlers had greater political autonomy from Britain.⁵¹ The Colonial Office was not very keen on the idea and so it constantly repudiated 'numerous settler initiatives to gain overriding powers in the Legislative Council' that would have enabled them to enact laws that would have helped them achieve more political control of the colony.⁵² The colony itself, as Tignor further notes, was a site for 'intense conflicts' between different colonial agencies with each trying to 'exalt' its powers and interests sometimes at the expense of the other. However, their ideas found

49 Tignor, p. 25.

50 Bruce Berman, *Control & Crisis in Colonial Kenya: The Dialectic of Domination* (Oxford: James Curry, 1996), p.130.

51 Tignor, p. 355.

52 Ibid.

convergence in their shared belief in the 'benevolence of British imperialism' and the superiority of British culture.⁵³

To manage the colony, a hierarchical public administration system that started with the village headmen, chiefs, assistant district officers, district officers, district commissioners, provincial commissioners, all who reported to the governor was established. The chiefs were meant to be the main link between the people and the government. They mobilised labour, collected taxes and maintained public order. The institution of chiefs was new to many Kenyan communities just like the centralised government system as traditionally, most Kenyan communities were ruled by councils of elders. Moreover, their relationship with the ordinary people was generally poor particularly because most of the duties the chiefs were charged with were unpopular with Kenyans. In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngugi highlights their role in suppressing indigenous theatre by enforcing colonial bans on unlicensed communal gatherings particularly during the Mau Mau era when a meeting of over six people was banned.

They also surrounded themselves with *askaris* who often 'used a great deal of violence' in carrying out the wishes of the chiefs.⁵⁴ Thus, the institution only succeeded in some communities such as in Kikuyu land, possibly because the colonial government had to enforce the system as it was crucial to the supply of labour in settler farms. Several prominent chiefs emerged from among the Kikuyu in the colonial era. While most were loathed for their ruthlessness and loyalty to the colonialists, a few gained some amount of respect for leading their people along development paths in areas such as education.⁵⁵

Even though in most colonies access to socio-political opportunities, rights and privileges were largely determined by race and colour, the racial tensions in Kenya as in other settler economies, were more pronounced. The presence of large numbers of Europeans and Asians in the country and a production system that largely deprived the Kenyan people and kept them under the servitude to other races in the colony were some of the factors

53 Ibid.

54 Tignor, pp. 48-49.

55 Ibid.

that nurtured what came to be popularly known as a 'colour-bar' system. At the top of the hierarchy were Europeans, then Asians, Arabs and Africans at the bottom of the ladder. This explains the separate lines of development of sectors such as theatre and education with Kenyans being the most underprivileged.

The indigenous people never came to terms with the imposition of colonial authority on them and their lowly status in their own territory. Thus, for most of the colonial era, the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised was characterised by sporadic conflicts over control of socio-political and economic power. The culmination of the struggle was the *Mau Mau* uprising in the 1950s that precipitated independence in 1963. The rest of this chapter focuses on how the above-described socio-political context influenced theatre and culture in colonial era.

Theatre among Europeans in Colonial Kenya

As in other colonies, the Europeans in colonial Kenya strove to build enclaves that resembled their homes in Europe. In performance, proscenium theatres were built for the entertainment of settlers, administrators, soldiers and other European groups living in the colony. Theatre would also be staged in sports clubs that were found in all towns with significant populations of Europeans. These were the spaces where amateur theatre groups that were derived from settler communities and people working in colonial government offices mostly performed.⁵⁶

The earliest known performance space in Nairobi and possibly in Kenya was the Railway Club in Nairobi. It was started in a wood and iron building along the White House Road in 1901 as the Railway Institute. In 1912, it was renamed Nairobi Social Club and moved to its current location on Haile Selassie Avenue. According to the first rules of the club, only English subjects were eligible for membership.⁵⁷ This became the trend for all other theatre spaces that were established by Europeans in colonial Kenya as other races were not allowed to patronise them.

⁵⁶ The Theatre Company, 'A History of Kenyan Theatre', unpublished article, 2003.

⁵⁷ *Nairobi Club Newsletter*, 'History-The Beginning of Nairobi

Club' <http://compkenya.com/nairobiclub/page_id=89> [accessed 20 April 2014]

As early as 1912, even before the First World War, Nairobi had a fully equipped theatre. This was the Theatre Royal that was built by one Mr Medicks and which was situated on what was at the time known as Delamere Avenue (now Kenyatta Avenue). It had a seating capacity of about 350 people, though other sources, like Annabel Maule in *Theatre near the Equator* (2004) put it at 511.⁵⁸ During the World War Two (hereafter WW2) it was converted to a garrison theatre. The building still exists today as Cameo cinema on Kenyatta Avenue.⁵⁹ The other theatre spaces that were built in Nairobi in the 1920s and the 1930s were Capitol Theatre, The Empire and Princes' Theatre (later re-named The Playhouse).⁶⁰ These theatres were imposing buildings, constructed in the latest British architectural fashions as figures 2, 3 and 4 below indicate. All the pictures in this chapter except figure 8 which I photographed are sourced from 'Nostalgic East Africa', a photos and other materials collection by Harjidar Kanwal with his permission.⁶¹

Figure 2 : The Theatre Royal in 1912.



58 Annabel Maule, *Theatre near the Equator. The Donovan Maule Story* (Nairobi: Kenway Publishers, 2004), p.3.

59 Ibid.

60 The Theatre Company, p. 2.

61 Harjidar Kanwal, 'Nostalgic East Africa', < <http://www.sikh-heritage.co.uk/heritage/sikhhert%20EAfrica/nostalgic%20EAfrica%20nairobi.html>> [accessed 16 May 2014].

Figure 3 : Capital Theatre (Now Ambassador Hotel) in the 1950s.



Figure 4 : Empire Theatre in the 1940s.



Like many other theatres in British colonies, these theatres were converted into cinemas after the WW2 due to poor patronage after most soldiers returned to Europe. By 1946 and until 1949, it appears Nairobi had no theatre-house purposely built for live performance. Plays would be staged in cinema halls, sports clubs and school halls.⁶²

62 Maule, p. 3.

Donovan Maule Players (DM)

Theatre activities in Nairobi were rekindled in 1948 when Donovan Maule Players repertory theatre was established to entertain European populations in Nairobi. The company was founded by Donovan Maule and his wife Mollie who arrived in Kenya in 1947 after being demobilised from the army. By then, people had significantly recovered from the difficulties of the war and could dedicate more time and money to leisure activities.

DM and its activities offer a good illustration of the theatre situation in the late 1940s and 1950s. The group's initial performances were conducted at Theatre Royal and Capitol Theatre which as Maule notes, lacked the necessary facilities for live theatre after they were converted into cinema houses. These spaces were also unaffordable for a company that was starting from a scratch.⁶³ In 1949, the Maules got some reprieve when they acquired a 40 by 20 feet room above a grocery store along Government Road which they converted into a studio theatre. The space had previously been used as a dance studio. They also establishment the School of Dramatic Arts to train players for their company out of the need to cut down on the cost of hiring professional actors who were, in any case, few in the country and had to be sourced from Britain.⁶⁴

DM's first performance was *Dear Departed* (1908) by Stanley Houghton. It is a one-act social play that deals with the neglect of old people. The play was staged in The Theatre Royal in June 1948. It was broadcast by Cable and Wireless, the main broadcaster in colonial Kenya. From then on, DM's plays became a regular monthly feature for the broadcaster. This enabled people who could not attend the live performances to be acquainted with the plays through the radio.⁶⁵ DM first full-length play was *Guinea Pig* (1946) by Warren Chetham-Strode that deals with social divisions in the British education system. It was also staged at The Theatre Royal to enthusiastic patrons in September 1948.

By 1951, DM's fortunes had risen to the extent that, permanent membership had reached 1400. It grew to 2000 by the end of 1952. By

63 Ibid.

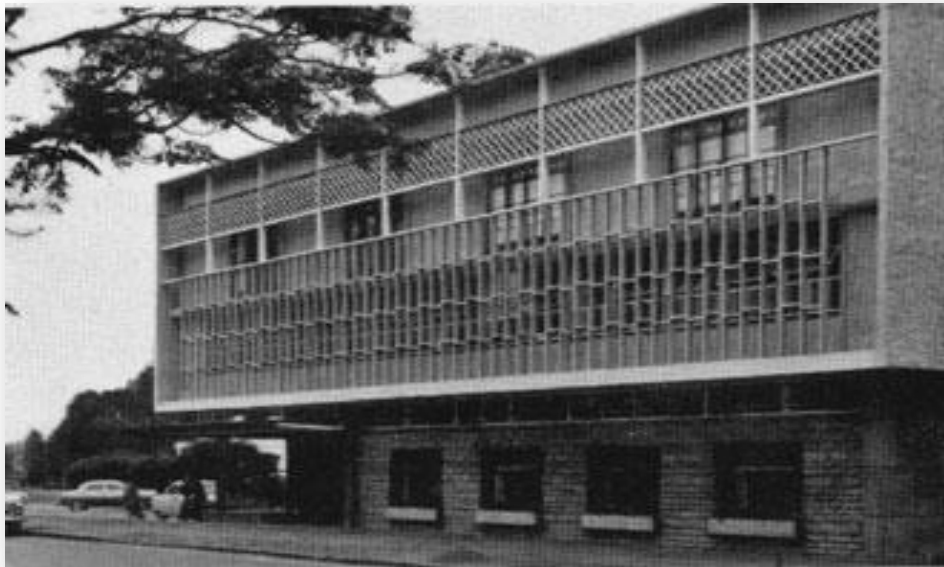
64 Maule, p. 7.

65 Maule, p. 6.

1953, the company could afford to employ professional actors from Britain, in addition to local ones that they continued to train in their School of Dramatic Arts.⁶⁶ By 1957, a larger and more prestigious theatre house was deemed necessary to cater for the ever-growing numbers of patrons. The result was the construction of the 220-seat Donovan Maule Theatre near Parliament buildings in Nairobi (see photo 4). The funds for the construction were raised mainly through the floating of public shares.

DM Players continued to entertain Nairobi theatregoers with the latest theatrical trends in London and New York up to the first two decades after independence until it closed down in 1982 due to dwindling profits.⁶⁷ The exodus of Europeans from Kenya after independence and the DM's failure to adjust to the realities of post-colonial Kenya to produce plays suited to the African populations were some of the factors that led to its closure.⁶⁸

Figure 5 : The Donovan Maule Theatre in 1959.



66 Mwangi, p. 80.

67 Gichingiri Ndigirigi, 'Theatre after Kamiriithu', *The MIT Press*, 40.2 (summer, 1999), pp. 72-93 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1146754>> [accessed 11 May 2013], (p. 74).

68 Ibid.

Figure 6 : An advert of a performance at the studio theatre in the 1950s.



Another notable European professional theatre group in colonial Kenya was Nairobi City Players. It was founded in 1958 by John Ebdon, Noreen Antrobus and Donald Whittle. According to Mumma, this group was committed to putting on quality plays of standards that had not been seen before on the Nairobi stage.⁶⁹ Like the Donovan Maule theatre, the group survived past independence and continued to entertain Kenyans up the 1980s.⁷⁰ It was one of the groups that dominated the KNT after independence.

European Theatre in Other Towns

European theatre also flourished in other Kenyan towns such Mombasa, Nakuru, Kisumu and Kitale that had large populations of Europeans. In the port town of Mombasa, the first purpose-built theatre was The Regal Theatre that was constructed in 1931. The Regal existed alongside another equally important theatre space, The Majestic built in 1934. The Majestic majored in films and plays of Indian origin in English and Indian languages.⁷¹ The two theatres have been described as 'full-scale theatres [...] seating hundreds of

69 Mumma, Opiyo, 'In Search of a Kenyan Theatre: The Theory and Practice of Educational Drama and Its Potential for Kenya' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Manchester University, 1994), p.134.

70 Ibid.

71 Cahil Murduff, 'Regal Cinema Was the Best Theatre in Mombasa in the 1950s', *Coast Week*, 3627. 5 (July 2013) (1) <<http://www.coastweek.com/362740.html>> [accessed 20 April 2014].

people and equipped with facilities for twenty-foot flats and orchestra pits, based upon the best London theatres' of the early 1930s.⁷²

Gichora Mwangi points out that before The Regal was constructed, European theatre was active alongside Asian theatre at places such as the Goan Institute (a 200 seat multi-purpose hall), Roxy Cinema and Mombasa Railway Club. The Railway Club was particularly famous for the performances of 'Harbour Lights', a kind of concert party-cum-theatrical group that often gave performances to large and enthusiastic audiences in the 1920s.⁷³ Mwangi notes further that the Second World War contributed immensely to the growth of theatre in Mombasa as the town was a naval base for the British Eastern Fleet hence hosted many European soldiers. In 1944, the Inter-Services Entertainment Unit (ISES) was formed to entertain the soldiers. By the time it was disbanded in 1947 due to demobilisation of most of them, ISES had staged about ten productions at the Garrison Theatre.

Thereafter, one of its most active members Dickie Moreton championed the founding of the Little Theatre Club to continue entertaining the European populations in Mombasa. Its activities were initially based at Garrison Theatre until it was demolished in 1952. This led to the construction of a 200-seat Theatre that they named after the group. The Little Theatre Club staged mainly British middle-class plays with heavy leanings towards comedy. Their first production was *The Little Lambs Eat Ivy* (1950) by Noel Langley in September 1952.

In Nakuru, the Nakuru Players Theatre Club (NPTC) located along Garland Avenue (now Kipchoge Avenue) was the first purpose-built theatre house in the town.⁷⁴ It was built in 1949 to 'fill prevailing gaps in entertainment and art in the region'.⁷⁵ The name Nakuru Players was adopted from a prominent European theatre group that operated in the town at the time. In Kisumu town in Western Kenya, the Nyanza Province Drama

⁷²'The Commemorative Programme of the 100th Years Production at The Little Theatre Club', November 1971, as cited in Mwangi, p.105.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Collins Odour, 'History of the Nakuru Players Theatre', in *Jicho Pili* <<http://oduorwordpress.com/2010/03/24/>> [accessed on 12 April 2014] (p.1).

⁷⁵ Ibid.

Society was formed in 1958 in an attempt to bring the various European theatre clubs under one umbrella body.⁷⁶ This shows there were several theatre groups in the town.

Most towns in colonial Kenya also boasted of one or more amateur or semi-professional theatre groups that entertained the European populations in their home towns and other parts of the country. Some of the notable amateur theatre groups in colonial Kenya included Molo-Turi players, the Nakuru Players, the Nyeri Players, Nairobi Amateur Dramatic Society, Mount Kenya Players, the Railway Players, the Kitale Theatre Club and the Kisii Theatre Club.⁷⁷ The names are indicative of the towns the groups were found groups. In addition, these groups competed actively with each other in major theatre festivals such as the Kenya Drama Festival (hereafter KDF), which was perhaps the most important national theatre festival in Kenya in the 1950s.

It was an annual festival that was started in 1953 by the East African Theatre Guild in conjunction with the British Council.⁷⁸ It mainly featured European and Asian amateur theatre groups. The only African group that staged performances at the KDF regularly was Jeanes School Drama Group. The group comprised of students of Jeanes School and African actors from other backgrounds. Jeanes School was a community teacher-training institution for black people that began participating in the festival from 1954 when KDF was in its second year. Their productions were original plays in Kiswahili language that were written by Graham Hyslop who was initially a teacher at Jeanes School before he was promoted to the position of the colony's music and drama officer. Jeanes School continued to participate in the KDF until 1960 when the school was converted into Kenya School of Administration. More about this institution and Hyslop's contribution to theatre in colonial Kenya is discussed shortly in this and next chapter.

The only other indigenous Kenyan theatre group that staged a play at the KDF was the Nairobi African Amateur Society (NAAS), a group formed in

76 KNA, Nyanza Province, Drama Society, Drama Festival Report, PC/M2A/3/6/15, 22 December 1959.

77 KNA, The East African Theatre Guild (Kenya) Report, KNA PC/M2A/3/6/15, 1955.

78 Mumma, p.126.

the 1940s to stage plays for Kenyans in places such as Machakos, Kiambu, Thika and Nakuru.⁷⁹ The play they performed at the KDF in 1955 was *Not Guilty* by J.A.C Bulmer. It was also directed by Graham Hyslop and was placed fourth out of the eighteen entries in the festival that year.⁸⁰

Another notable theatre festival in colonial Kenya was East African Shakespearean Festival (EASF). It was started by James Alfred Rudolf Masters in 1933 to stage Shakespearean plays. It featured amateur groups of European teachers and colonial settlers.⁸¹ Masters contribution to Kenyan theatre continued into the post-independence era as he was the Director of the Theatre at the Kenya Cultural Centre (KCC) up to the late 1960s.

Most of the theatre activities in East Africa were organised by the East African Theatre Guild (EATG). This was an umbrella body formed in the 1950s to coordinate dramatic activities such as training, funding and organising of national festivals in the wider East African region. The group worked closely with the British Council in all the East African countries in coordinating theatre activities in the region. Following the success of the KDF in Kenya, EATG initiated a similar festival in Uganda in 1955 that was known as the Uganda Drama Festival.

It is important to point out here that the culture of little theatres and amateur theatre groups was not unique to Kenya but was a tradition that cut across most British colonies. The earliest example is the African Theatre that was put up at Reinbeck Square in Cape Town, South Africa during Britain's first occupation of South Africa from 1795-1803. It served the entertainment needs of the European community, especially the garrison troops at a time when other forms of organised Western-oriented leisure activities were almost non-existent in the country.⁸² Seeff notes that, until it was sold in May

79 Kimani Gecau, and Ngugi wa Mirii, 'Kenya', in *Cambridge Guide to Theatre*, ed. by Martin Banham (London: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 597-599, (p. 597).

80 Kimani Gecau and Ngugi wa Mirii, a source often quoted in many works, note NAAS. was the first group Kenyan group to participate in the Kenya Drama Festivals. However, archival records appear to indicate the first African group in the Kenya Drama Festivals was Jeanes School with their play *Afadhali Mchawi* (A Wizard is better than Intrigue) performed in 1954. Even in the 1955 event, Jeanes School was also represented with the play *Mgeni Karibu* (Welcome Stranger).

81 Mumma, p. 26.

82 Adele, Seeff, 'Recovering the history of the African theatre', *Quarterly Bulletin of the National Library of South Africa*, 58.4 (2004), pp.159-167 (p.162).

1839, it offered a varied repertoire from Shakespearean plays to Victorian melodrama, comedy and farce in English, Dutch, German and French.⁸³ In Tanzania, there was The Little Theatre of Dar es Salaam and the Arusha Little Theatre. These clubs are still active to this day, hosting mainly the expatriate community and middle-class Tanzanians.

The Kenya Cultural Centre (KCC) and the Kenya National Theatre (KNT)

The KCC under which the KNT is managed was constructed in 1952. It was conceived to be an inter-racial cultural space that would cater 'for the enjoyment of citizens of the colony without distinction of race or creed.'⁸⁴ The aim was to provide Kenyans with a multipurpose space for the performance of music, drama and dance; exhibition of works of art and crafts and a place for discussions on matters of literary, historical, scientific, or educational importance.⁸⁵ However, as many studies have noted (among them Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1983; Ndirigi Gichangiri, 1991), KCC did not live up to its objective of being a multicultural space and this applied to the Theatre too.

Like other performance spaces at the KCC⁸⁶, throughout colonial era the KNT remained the preserve of European and Asian groups, a situation that did not change in the first two decades of independence. Critics attribute this dominance to the fact that the initial capital for construction and running of the KCC (and by extension the KNT) was mainly from European and Asian associations such as the European National Theatre Movement Trustees, the Nairobi City Council and the Agha Khan Foundation. The two races also dominated the KCC Governing Council.⁸⁷ The situation got further complicated when the Mau Mau war broke out soon after the theatre

83 Ibid.

84 Kenya Cultural Centre, Strategic Plan, July 2012 -June1015 (Nairobi: Government Printer, 2012), p. 5.

85 Ibid.

86 The buildings constructed during this first phase included administrative block that also hosts the Kenya Conservatoire of Music, a dance studio, a small concert hall for experimental music performances and the KNT. The 'bigger theatres, art galleries, studios, concert halls, and studios for music,' which according to Aghan Odero were to follow were not built after the Mau Mau war broke out. They have never been constructed to this day.

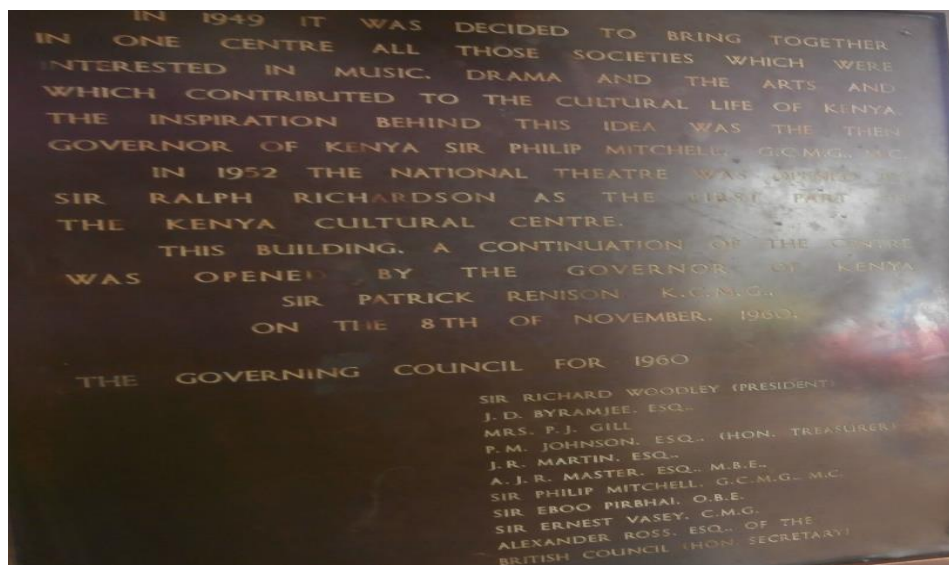
87 KCC, p.6.

was completed as this led to heightened racial tensions which dealt a blow to the whole idea of national integration that the KCC was meant to advance.⁸⁸ The location of the theatre in an area populated by the white community, away from where the majority of Kenyans lived was another factor that alienated the ordinary people from National Theatre.⁸⁹

Figure 7 : The Kenya National Theatre in the 1950s.



Figure 8: A logo at the KNT showing the reasons for establishing the KCC and members of the Governing Council.



⁸⁸ Mumma, p. 127.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

Asian Theatre during British Colonialism

The term Asian in this study is used in reference to South Asians who in Kenya are predominantly immigrants from India and Pakistan. The Indian people have a long history in Kenya as they were also participants in the trans-Indian trade which, as noted earlier, some sources put to as early as the 1st century. However, their presence during this period was overshadowed by that of the Arabs, Persians and later the Portuguese.

The influence of Asians in East Africa, and Kenya in particular, grew during British colonisation when some 32,000 Indian 'coolies' were transported from British India to help with the construction of the Kenya-Uganda Railway.⁹⁰ When the railway work ended in 1901, about 6,700 of the Indian workers decided to remain in Kenya either in the service of the railway or in other middle-level civil service jobs in the colonial administration. Others became traders, majoring in retail outlets which were popularly known as *dukas*.⁹¹ In subsequent years, Asians would play an important role in the socio-political and economic life of colonial and post-colonial Kenya.

Early Asian Theatre

In terms of performance, Asian cultures did not suffer the suppression that Kenyan indigenous cultures experienced under colonialism. However, the Asians did not also receive much official encouragement or recognition from the British in developing their cultures. For instance, there is no evidence that plays in Asian languages were featured in important national festivals such as Kenya Drama Festival even when plays in Kiswahili began to be staged from 1954.

Available sources, however, indicate Asian theatre flourished in Kenya from the early colonial period. In 'Asian-African Literatures: Geologies in the Making' (2002) Gaurav Desai, for instance, refers to a petition from a Goan named A.R Nazareth to the Nairobi Municipal Council, seeking authorisation to build an Indian Theatre in 1915. Although the municipal committee issued

⁹⁰ John Nyaga, 'Indian Labourers over Triumphed Worriers, Lions to Open up East Africa', *Daily Nation*, 13 June 2013, pp.1-2 (p. 2).

⁹¹ *Daily Nation*, p. 2.

him with the necessary building codes and permission, information on whether the theatre was built has not been found.⁹²

In the same article, Desai notes of multiple performances of the play *The Silver King* in Urdu at the Auctioneers Hall in Nairobi in December 1914. The play was meant to raise funds for the Indians engaged in WW1.⁹³ Desai also details the attendance of a European at a Hindustani play on 18 February 1918 that was staged at the Nairobi Indian theatre. The title of the play was *The Serpent* and its moral was 'no man should covet another man's wife. While one may be tempted to think this was the theatre Nazareth sought to build, details that would link the two initiatives were not found. The importance of the two examples is that they show Indian theatre was active from the early years of colonialism.

Asian theatre activities were not limited to Nairobi as Desai's research further reveals. He, for instance, writes of an incident that was reported in *The East African Standard* of 6 June 1914 about a European critic who had been invited to a play that was to be performed in Mombasa by a company known as the New Indian Opera and Theatricals. He could not read Gujarati, the language in which the ticket was printed, and so he ended up in a performance of a rival company, the New Raising Star. The play of the night was *The Binding Promise* whose message was 'the sacrifices that the king must make for his subjects'.⁹⁴ According to the unnamed European critic, 'to the European ear, [the] interminable Indian melodies became almost as monotonous as an African *ngoma*, though of course, it must be classed as music - music of an arrested development'.⁹⁵ Such a comments demonstrates the racial dichotomies that were characteristic of the time. The European critic also mentions having been invited to another play the following Saturday whose title was '*Khubsurat Bala*', written in the 1910s by

92 *Literary Organ*, quoted in Gaurav Desai, 'Asian-African Literatures: Geologies in the Making', *African Literatures*, 42.3 (Fall 2011), pp. i-xxx (p. ix- x).

93 'Indian Drama', *East in African Standard* (Nairobi: Kenya, 1911) as quoted in Desai, p. ix.

94 *Ibid.*

95 *Ibid.*

Agha Hashr Kashmiri. This writer had made his name through making adaptations of Sheridan and Shakespeare in Urdu.⁹⁶

From the above, it appears family and moralistic issues were the popular themes in Indian theatre of the colonial era. Desai further notes that young boys played women's roles and only men attended the performances. The plays were normally staged in the evenings, sometimes beginning at 9.00 pm and lasting up to 3.00 am Kenyan time. The audience for the plays in Nairobi and Mombasa included Arabs and Swahili people.⁹⁷

Asian Theatre after the World War Two: The Oriental Art Circle (OAC)

Asian theatre, as Robert Gregory in 'Literary Development in East Africa: The Asian Contribution 1955-1975' writes became more active and organised after the WW2. In 1948, the Oriental Art Circle (OAC) was founded to bring Asian performance under one umbrella for better coordination. The people associated with this initiative included Apa Pant, the then Indian High Commissioner to Kenya, and his wife, Nelinidevi, who also became the first patron of the group. Thereafter, the wives of successive Indian High Commissioners to Kenya became the automatic patrons. Initially, OAC consisted of a few active members such as M. M. Patel (a lawyer, actor and playwright), Shati Pundit (journalist/politician) and Abdul Samj (a dentist). By 1950, however, the OAC membership had grown to six hundred.⁹⁸

The headquarters of the OAC from the 1950s was at the Kenya Cultural Centre from where it organised its monthly presentations of Indian drama, poetry readings, dance and music.⁹⁹ The first play to be presented by the group was the Indian version of the social farce *Charley's Aunt* (1892) by Brandon Thomas. It was performed in honour of the Indian's Navy visit to Kenya in 1949. Many of the plays performed by OAC were borrowed from India, but others were locally written or Western plays. Though some of the

96 Ibid.

97 Desai, p. x.

98 Ibid.

99 Robert Gregory, 'Literary Development in East Africa: The Asian Contribution 1955-1975', *Research in African Literatures*, 12.4 (winter, 1981), 440-459
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3818924> [accessed 14 September 2013] (p. 442).

plays were in English, Indian languages such as Gujarati, Punjabi, and Hindi dominated the performances. The producers and directors could be locally sourced or people from India.¹⁰⁰ Similar efforts were duplicated in other towns like Mombasa, where the Mombasa Art Circle sponsored monthly activities that featured drama, poetry and music. As in Nairobi, many of the performances were in Indian languages and were on issues relating to Asian life in the colony and as a race.¹⁰¹ In addition to these exclusively Asian performances, Asians were also actively represented in the leading colonial festivals like the KDF and the Kenya Schools Drama Festivals (hereafter KSDF).

Indigenous Theatre during the Colonial Era

The discussion so far indicates that both the European and Asian theatres, although faced with challenges, were active and were encouraged to prosper right from the early years of colonial Kenya. The story appears to be quite different for indigenous theatre. In the colonial era, many of the indigenous forms were seen as either oppositional to the colonial authority or were perceived as 'pure sensualism' and a source of 'diabolic eroticism' and paganism. Thus, most of them were seriously censored by the colonial government.¹⁰²

Ironically, the colonialists were also not interested in encouraging Western theatre for the purposes of entertainment of ordinary Kenyan people. As Jane Plastow notes, 'beer halls and churches for bodily and spiritual oblivion and to keep the workers docile were the white man's idea of what was appropriate for the blacks'.¹⁰³ She further notes that 'a little musical and literary education' would also be offered to elite populations but of mainly 'non-political nature'.¹⁰⁴ This perhaps explains why the indigenous people rarely adopted Western-oriented theatrical modes to address their issues in the colonial era.

100 Ibid, p. 442.

101 Ibid.

102 Augustine Hatar, 'The State of Theatre Education in Tanzania', (unpublished manuscript, University of Dar es Salaam, 2000), pp. 1-30 (p. 7) and Kerr, p.19.

103 Plastow, *African Theatre and Politics*, p.109.

104 Ibid.

The systematic suppression of indigenous cultural modes by the colonisers led to the 'death' of some important indigenous performance forms. A widely quoted example was the *ituika* rite of passage among the Kikuyu people which was celebrated every twenty-five years to mark the change of leadership from one generation to the next. The rite involved feasting, singing and dancing over a period of six moons (months).¹⁰⁵ *Ituika* was banned in the 1920s because it was seen as challenging the authority of the colonial government. Performance among indigenous people was also hampered by public order acts that worked against their performance traditions. The out-lawing of communal meetings unless those licenced by colonial chiefs, for instance, worked against the indigenous performances as most of them were communal enactments that were staged in open spaces in villages, mostly at night after a long day's work.¹⁰⁶

This does not imply that colonialism was successful in eliminating Kenyan indigenous performance forms. On the contrary, new performances and spaces constantly emerged even in the colonial era to either address the gaps left by the banned performances or to respond to and challenge colonialism. Nevertheless, a good number of the emergent performances in the colonial phase were also an affirmation of the influence of Western performance cultures on those of the indigenous people. A good number of them adopted Western forms of instrumentation, movements costuming and sometimes, themes.

The earliest European's influences on local performance cultures were felt at the coast of Kenya where the first missions and freed slave settlements were established. Hymns and bible-based and moralistic plays that were meant for worship and to instil Christian values were obviously among the first performances that were introduced to the indigenous people as I discuss in detail in the next chapter. A more secular mode of performance was the brass bands that were introduced to ex-slaves by the British military in the 1880s. The bands borrowed heavily from the military

105 Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya: Tribal Ways of the Gikuyu* (London: Redwood Press, 1971), p.109.

106 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1986), p. 37.

bands in spectacle, costumes and instruments.¹⁰⁷ Brass bands did not spread significantly to other parts of Kenya, mainly because the instruments were expensive and had to be sourced from abroad.¹⁰⁸

Another performance that demonstrated the influence of colonialism on Kenyan performance was the *beni* dance. *Beni* emerged in the 1890s on the island of Lamu. Its roots have been traced to the *chama* dance societies of the Swahili people who dominated the town.¹⁰⁹ As Terrance Ranger notes, traditionally, the militaristic dance associations were a means of asserting pride and authority for the various streets in the Swahili towns. Thus, *beni* also involved the formation of hierarchical dance societies for similar purposes but imitating the military formalities of British and German colonisers. Kerr states that the dancers would dress in smart 'military uniforms and dance in regular columns with sticks imitating guns or batons'.¹¹⁰

The political and economic rivalry of the two European powers in East Africa (Germany and Britain) was also a source of inspiration for *beni* performers as rivalling dance societies would align themselves with either of the military powers. From Lamu, *beni* spread to Mombasa, other parts of the coast, Kenyan hinterland and to other countries in East and Central Africa through labour migrants, soldiers and travelling musicians. In those places, it was adapted to suit local cultures in terms of themes and language. *Beni* began to wane along the coast from the 1930s but continued to be performed in the hinterlands up to as late as the 1970s.¹¹¹

The decline of *beni* along the coast gave way to another European-oriented performance known as *dansi* in the 1930s. *Dansi* is associated with 'Bombay Africans'. These were mainly African ex-slaves who were rescued while being transported or soon after arriving in India during the trans-Indian

107 Terrance Ranger, *Dance and Society in Eastern Africa*, p.14.

108 Plastow, *African Theatre and Politics*, p. 68.

109 As I learnt during my fieldwork, Chama is still a popular dance in the Lamu and was one of the dances that thrilled audiences during the 2013 Lamu Cultural Festival. In the version that I watched during the festival, walking sticks (*bokora*) had replaced the swords.

110 Kerr, p. 60.

111 Plastow, *African Theatre and Politics*, p. 64.

slave trade and who settled and were educated by the missionaries in India. During the colonial era, some returned to East Africa where they got involved in evangelisation, education and exploration efforts having acquired formal education during their sojourn in India.¹¹² In Kenya, they teamed up with Goans living in Mombasa with whom the 'Bombay Africans' shared many cultural similarities to evolve a dance style that befitted their status as educated Christian men. Goans were a sub-section of Indian people who subscribed to the Christian faith. *Dansi* was modelled on the style of European ballroom dancing. Its instruments included the accordion, mouth organ and guitar.¹¹³

Similar developments occurred in the interior of Kenya. A good example was the emergence of *mwoboko* dance among the Kikuyu people of Central Kenya in the 1940s. It was 'a traditional-cum-modern dance' that merged Scottish and indigenous Kikuyu dance movements to create a new syncretic form. It was popularised by Kenyan soldiers who had participated in the WW2. The accordion and the clanging bell were its main instruments. The themes in *mwomboko* revolved mainly on love matters. However, its wording was allegorical so that even when the literal meaning was about love, other meanings could be inferred.¹¹⁴ This explains why the dance was easily appropriated for the anti-colonial struggle in the 1950s. According to Mwangi Muhoro, *mwomboko* performances would be staged to facilitate secret oath administration of Kikuyu youths which is why the colonialists banned the dance in the 1950s.¹¹⁵ However, as most other revolutionary dances the colonialists banned, it continued to be performed in secret. *Mwomboko* survived the colonial onslaught and has remained a popular dance among the Kikuyu people even today. Love matters remain the dominant theme in *mwomboko* though according to Muhoro, in the

112 Royal Geographical Society, 'Who were the Bombay Africans?'

<[https://www.rgs.org/NR/rdonlyres/E1A3CC2B-2772-4BE2-B239-](https://www.rgs.org/NR/rdonlyres/E1A3CC2B-2772-4BE2-B239-9A772B830FAF/0/F5Whowerethebombayafricans.pdf)

9A772B830FAF/0/F5Whowerethebombayafricans.pdf> [accessed 21 August 2015]

113 Gichora, p. 90.

114 Mwangi Muhoro, 'The Poetics of Gikuyu Mwomboko: Narrative as a Technique in HIV/AIDS Awareness Campaign in Rural Kenya', in *Songs and Politics in Eastern Africa*, ed. by Kimani Njogu and Herve' Maupeu (Dar-es-Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota Publishers, 2007), pp.73-92 (p.157).

115 Muhoro, p. 76.

contemporary era it is being adapted to address taboo topics such as sex and HIV/AIDS.¹¹⁶

Another important performance culture that was brought to Kenya by the British was the *kwaya* (choir) culture. *Kwayas* were conducted predominantly in churches and schools. They were popularised through the regional music festivals that were ran by various missions but whose culmination was the annual Kenya Music Festival that was initiated in 1924. According to Graham Hyslop, music festivals had a dual purpose of preserving the best in the indigenous traditional music while introducing good aspects from elsewhere. Thus, over the years they developed a tradition of insisting groups learn and perform an English song and one African song in the competition.¹¹⁷

Among the popular regional music festivals in colonial Kenya was the Nyanza Music Festival formed in 1941. It was an annual triangular contest that brought together three missions located around the Kima-Maseno area. These were Church of God (CoG), African Compound and Interior Mission (ACIM) and the Church Missionary Society (CMS). Over the years, the festival spread to schools and missions in the wider colonial Nyanza province.¹¹⁸ One of the highlights of the festival was the 'Obukhana (harp) festival'. In this category, groups and individuals competed in playing and dancing to indigenous musical instruments like the traditional lyre, *Oroto* and traditional guitars. Western instruments like the accordion were strictly barred from the competition.¹¹⁹

In Central Kenya, there was the Kiambu Music Society that was founded in 1957. This festival was particularly keen on preserving of what Henry Kuria, the Community Development Assistant in the area called 'worthwhile' indigenous songs, dances and instruments to prevent 'losing forever most of [our] African songs'. The 'deterioration and fading out of [our] traditional music' was blamed on the 'general acceptance that African

116 Ibid.

117 KNA, Community Development Department, PC/1955-1960, Graham Hyslop to District Community Officer Nyeri (Ref no Adm /51/1/1), 6 November 1957.

118 KNA, Nyanza Music Festival Handbook, Music PC/M2A/3/6/15, pp.1-8 (p. 2).

119 KNA, Nyanza Music Festival, Music, PC/m2A/3/6/15, K.J.A. Hunt to Provincial Commissioner, Nyanza, 5 April 1951.

dances as a whole are bad, if not immoral'.¹²⁰ There was therefore, the urgent need to collect and publish the songs 'before [we] forget that such [performances] ever existed. It also encouraged the practical use of music instruments that accompanied such songs and dances.¹²¹

These examples indicate that there was a selective attempt by the colonisers to preserve indigenous forms that they considered less controversial. The main limitation of such efforts was that forms that Kenyan communities may have regarded as crucial, but were considered backward, subversive or heathen by the colonisers could not be staged in such festivals. Moreover, music festivals divorced performances from their natural settings in the villages as well as the communal activities that informed them hence they contributed little to the traditional aims of such performances.

Indigenous Theatre from the 1950s

The 1950s marked a new phase for indigenous theatre as the decade was characterised by a gradual increase of the involvement of the indigenous people in mainstream theatre activities within the colony. This development has been attributed to the deliberations of the Cambridge Summer Conference of 1948 on ways of improving life for the colonised and which emphasised the importance of cultural activities in this endeavour.¹²²

In 1957, Graham Hyslop a trainer at Jeanes School since 1952 was elevated to the position of the colony's music and drama officer. Hyslop was a graduate in music from Oxford University who during the WW2 was in charge of Education Corps Unit of African that during the toured the Middle East for eighteen months 'devoting all its time to Music and Drama'.¹²³ This unit also produced the first sound film in Kiswahili.¹²⁴ As the colony's music and drama officer, he was expected 'to cater for the ever-increasing number of requests for help in organising music and drama', which according to the

120 KNA, PC/1955-1960, Kuria 1957, p. 2.

121 KNA, Henry Kuria's Appeal to form a Kiambu District Music Society, KNA, PC/1955-1960, 2nd January 1958, pp 1-2.

122 Plastow, *African Theatre and Politics*, p. 69.

123 KNA, Colony Music and Drama Office, PC/1955-1960, Circular Letter by from the Secretary for Community Development to the Treasurer, 29 March 1957.

124 Ibid.

colonial government, indicated 'there is enough work to keep an officer employed full time' in that post.¹²⁵ His specific duties included:

- Organising music courses at Jeanes school and in the district
- Choice of music festivals
- Adjudication at festivals
- Development and recording of African music
- Organising of drama courses for players and producers
- Adjudication of drama festivals
- Provision of suitable plays for African drama groups
- Encouraging the production of plays.¹²⁶

Though critics such as Ngugi have blamed him for setting indigenous theatre along the course of colonial interests, looking at his plays and his work as the colony's drama and music officer, he appears to have been a man who was rather liberal for the historical period he lived. Hyslop, for instance, believed in the need to root indigenous drama in the performance cultures and languages of the people as depicted in the following quotation:

It is unlikely, however, that a strong dramatic tradition will emerge in Africa until it has is built of the stuff of everyday life of the country. Thus, the technique of drama as it has been developed in the West will only be put to its best use in Africa when it is made to serve the purpose of representing and re-enacting the full-blooded life of the community. The more the drama in which an actor take part gives him the opportunity of expressing what he knows of real life, the more convincing will be his performance. As a rule, the African actor will be at his best in drama, which is rooted, in the very soil of Africa.¹²⁷

He, therefore, advocated the need to recognise local situations that could provide dramatic material that could be 'weav[ed] [...] into a thoroughly human and convincing story'.¹²⁸

Hyslop also wrote and published the first indigenous plays in Kenya and East Africa. His plays were in Kiswahili which as I noted earlier were performed by Jeanes School Drama group at the Kenya Drama Festival (KDF). Although his plays were non-political, moralistic and realist dramas that ignored the serious political and economic issues that the indigenous

125 Ibid.

126 Ibid.

127 Graham Hyslop, 'Drama in Africa', in *Heshima. The Home Magazine of the Shell Company of East Africa*, (April 1955) pp.1-2, p.1.

128 Ibid.

people were facing in the 1950s, their focus on local themes and use of Kiswahili was an important development in Kenyan theatre. Elena Bertonicina classifies Hyslop's dramas as proverb plays in that they illustrated and expanded on important African sayings and proverbs with a view of commenting on wider social issues.¹²⁹ His first play *Afadhali Mchawi* (A Wizard is Better than Intrigue) (1954) was, for instance, a moralistic play that commented on the theme of corruption. In the play, Issa a hospital attendant endangers the lives of his patients by stealing and selling drugs meant for public good.

Yet, it is the stereotypical way that Issa is depicted in the play that is the major weakness of this play. Issa is portrayed as so irredeemably corrupt and dishonest that when his colleague and neighbour Ali discover the theft he hatches a plot to kill him. When he fails, he tries to frame Ali up as the one who has been stealing the drugs. Issa remains unrepentant up to the end of the play as if to imply dishonesty is part of his nature that cannot be changed. Ali is on the other hand cast as a man of virtue and the ideal that Issa and his kind should aspire to emulate. It is therefore, not difficult for the reader to see the parallelism between the characterisation of Issa and some of the stereotypes that the colonialists ascribed to Africans such as dishonesty.

Jeanes School Drama Group performance of this play was ranked fourth out of the sixteen entries at the festival that year. The adjudicator's comments that 'the group was extremely well served by the play [...] which was at the same time within their grasp'¹³⁰ may have eliminated any doubts Hyslop harboured about the wisdom of championing locally written plays for African groups.

Hyslop's second play was *Karibu Mgeni*, (Welcome Stranger) published in 1957 but performed by the Jeanes School Drama group at the KDF of 1955 which was the group's second entry in the festival. Unlike the

¹²⁹ Elena Bertonicini, 'Palm Oil with Which the Swahili Words are Eaten: Use of proverbs in Modern Swahili Literature', in *The Growth of African Literature: Twenty-Five Years after Dakar and Fourah Bay* ed. by Edris Makward, Thelma Ravell - Pinto and Aliko Songolo (Trenton: African World Press, Inc., 1998), p.13.

¹³⁰ KNA, Colony Music and Drama Officer, PC/1955-1960, Circular letter from the Secretary for community development to the treasurer (ref no. ADM/51/1/1) 29 March 1957.

first play, the second had a historical theme as it dealt with the struggle for power during the era of the Sultans along the coast of Kenya. In the play, the autocratic regime of Ali is overthrown through people's power and replaced with the more democratic and popular one of Shaaban. Having been written at the height of the Mau Mau conflict, it may have been Hyslop's way of suggesting that regime change can be achieved without bloodshed.

The performance of this play at the KSDF in 1957 further reveals how realism literary tradition was a major influence in theatre activities of the period. A set of two walls of eleven feet high and a roof of eighteen feet wide was constructed to realistically depict Ali's veranda using material salvaged from Jeanes School. Though the production was disqualified from the trophy of the best original play for playing under twenty-five minutes, the set earned the group the trophy of best décor at the festival.¹³¹

Another play by Hyslop was *Uncertain Meeting*. It explored themes of love and clash of cultures. These themes came to dominate Kenyan drama in the rest of the 1950s and 1960s. The play dealt with the dilemma that confronts two African students (boy and girl) who meet and fall in love while studying in Oxford. They hope to marry but are afraid of not only distance between their countries, but also the cultural barriers that may lead to rejection of their union by their respective families.¹³² The adjudicator of the festival that year, Norman Marshall of London Commercial Television Networks Drama Department, noted that, though the play was insufficiently developed in terms of themes, it was a 'cleverly tailored piece that suited cast so that they were asked to do anything very difficult'.¹³³

Jeanes School Drama Group last play in the KDF was 'Fitina *Huuu*' (Intrigue Kills), 1960 also by Hyslop. It derived its title from a Swahili proverb that warned people against making trouble for others. The cast was derived from the current and former trainees of Jeanes School, with Morris Mwenda, an assistant education officer on the staff of Jeanes School being the lead actor. Others included Samwel Kigo, Samuel Kibuchi, Madson Madoka and

131 Ibid.

132 'No Easy Plays in the Drama Festival', *East African Standard*, March 1958.

133 KNA, PC/1955-1960, Adjudicators report on the performance of *Uncertain Meeting* on 24 March 1958.

Hezekiah Mwanje. Many of these actors came to dominate the Kenyan stage in the 1960s.¹³⁴

In addition to the performances by Jeanes School Drama Group at the KDF, Hyslop's plays were also used as reference materials during the drama courses that he, as the colony's music and drama officer, conducted for African groups throughout the colony. The plays were performed in regional African school's drama festivals that Hyslop initiated in various regions in the 1950s. However, there is no evidence of their performance by other races in the colony.

The 1950s also marked the emergence of first published plays by Kenyans. Like Hyslop's plays, these plays were written in a realist mode and Aristotelean dramatic structure.¹³⁵ They were also non-political, despite being published around the time of Mau Mau war when other forms of indigenous performance were concerned with anti-colonial protest. Most of them were written in heavy prose that betrayed the writers' rudimentary dramatic creativity skills. *Nakupenda Lakini (I Love You But)* 1955 but published in 1957 by Henry Kuria went down in history as the first play to be published by an indigenous Kenyan. In the play, Kangwana is forced into crime to become rich, in order to win the love of Rhoda. Rhoda, on the other hand, loves not Kangwana but his money. The play blames the complexities that characterise the lives of these characters to materialism and individualism of has come with colonialism and death of Kenyan communal cultures. Gerishon Ngugi's *Nimelogwa Nisiwe na Mpenzi (I Have Been Bewitched to Never Find a Lover)* (1958) has similar themes. Ben cannot win Beatrice's love because he is poor. He has to borrow Mathew's clothes in order to court her.

Despite the abysmal dramatic achievements of these plays, Ngugi notes that they essentially became 'community plays'¹³⁶ that were widely toured in the various parts of the country and performed in the villages and

134 KNA, PC/1955-1960, Graham Hyslop to Mrs PM Greenup, ref no MDK/D/ queens day 1960.

135 Gregory Barz and Judah M. Cohen, *The Culture of AIDS in Africa: Hope and Healing Through Music and the Arts* (New York : Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 258.

136 Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *In the House of and Interpreter* (London: Harvill Secker, 2012), p. 51.

community halls after their initial performance at Alliance High School where they mostly premiered. *Nimelogwa Nisiwe na Mpenzi* offers the best illustration of this situation. After its premier at Alliance High School on 15th June 1958, in the August of that year, it was performed at Wundunyi in Taita by of Alliance students from the region. It was also the first play that the Nakuru Dramatic and Cultural Society performed at Menengai Hall in Nakuru on 6 and 7 October 1958. A few weeks later, they toured the play at Elburgon near Nakuru.¹³⁷ The use of Kiswahili and themes that were relevant to Kenyans are some of the factors that contributed to the popularity of these plays.

Details of plays in other Kenyan languages are scanty. *Gichamu* theatre that was founded by Kimathi in Nyeri in the 1940s is the only worthy mention I came across of non-religious theatre in other Kenyan languages.¹³⁸ I did not find any written plays from this initiative. Details on local plays by playwrights of the European and Asian background are equally scarce. The *East African Standard* of Friday 14 October 1960 and *Daily Nation* of Thursday 20 October 1960 does mention two original entries in the Kenya Drama Festival of 1960 by Molo-Turi Arts Club and Kiambu players. These were *The Blizzard* by Anna Palmer and *A Man's Enemies* by Gillian Solly respectively. I could not find the written copies of the plays or other details on the plays.

Details of locally published plays by Asians in the colonial era are also scanty. Robert Gregory in *The Rise and Fall of Philanthropy in East Africa: The Asian Contribution*, however, mentions four plays by M. M. Patel that were written in the colonial period. These are *Na Aato Mari Chhe* (Oh No), a satire on himself as an advocate, *Mahila Downer* (Looking Down at Women) which was featured in the Nairobi Colonial times, *Krishna ni Sita* (Krishna's Sita) which was presented on Nairobi radio and *Rasik Gaya* (Rasik Passed Away).¹³⁹ All the plays were written in the Gujarati language.¹⁴⁰ Although I

137 Gerishon Ngugi, *Nimelogwa Nisiwe na Mpenzi* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1961), 'The Preface'.

138 Ross Kidd, 'Popular Theatre and Popular Struggle in Kenya: The Story of Kamiriithu', *Race and Class*, XXIV.3 (1983), pp. 288-304 (p. 289).

139 Robert Gregory, *The Rise and Fall of Philanthropy in East Africa: The Asian Contribution* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1992), p.165.

could not find more details on these plays, it is enough prove that Asians theatre was active in the colonial era and included originally scripted texts.

The 1950s also saw the emergence of slapstick drama. According to Kimani and Gecau, slapstick was an extension of the little theatre movement by British amateur theatre groups and the civilising mission of schools and churches.¹⁴¹ Its other influence was the colonial propagandist films that always emphasised the retrogressive nature of the African societies. The themes in the slapstick revolved around satirising Kenyans' craving for Western ideals and the life of the city. Slapstick was enacted in a concert form, a kind of a playlet, in social halls. In the 1950s, it was popularised by comedians like Athmani Suleiman (Mzee Tamaa) and Kipanga.¹⁴² This mode of drama continued even after independence through radio programmes like *Vitimbi* that is aired by the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation to this day.

Conclusion

The discussion in this chapter has portrayed the various socio-cultural and political influences that shaped performance in Kenya during the various phases of colonialism. The chapter has demonstrated that the effect of foreign invasions on Kenyan cultures whether Oriental or British was the erosion of indigenous modes and imposition of foreign performance cultures. The discussion also shows that of all the colonial influences, the British made the most significant theatrical impacts as all other invaders operated largely along the coastal regions. The chapter has clearly shown the origins of the dual theatre culture that characterises Kenya today. While the colonisers were successful in imposing their cultures on the Kenyan people, the indigenous cultures were resilient and could not be completely exterminated by colonialism. In subsequent chapters, I will discuss how Kenyans attempted to engage with this dual theatre heritage to institute a performance culture that could adequately respond to modern Kenyan society, while at the same time recognising their cultural heritages.

140 Ibid, p.167.

141 Kimani Gecau and Ngugi wa Mirii, p. 597.

142Ibid, p. 598.

Chapter 2

The Impact of Colonial Churches and Schools on Performance in Kenya

Introduction

Colonial churches and schools were the main avenues through which indigenous Kenyan cultures were consciously or unconsciously subjugated. They were also the main conduits through which Western modes of performance were imparted to the indigenous people. This chapter examines in detail how the two institutions and their ideologies affected Kenyan communities and their cultures. Of interest is the extent to which the two contributed to the alienation of converts and learners. The chapter also explores performances that emerged through the two institutions in the colonial era.

Missionaries and Theatre in Kenya

Missionary activities in Kenya, after the relatively unsuccessful efforts of the Portuguese in the 16th century, have been traced to evangelistic works of Ludwig Krapf and Johan Rebman. The two came to Kenya in 1844 as missionaries of the Church Missionary Society (CMS). Their activities were concentrated on the Kenyan coast where they established the first mission station at Rabai in the present-day Kwale District in 1846. Like the Portuguese missionaries before them, they achieved little success with the Islamic populations and their efforts were focused mostly on non-Islamic communities such as the Miji-Kenda and the Duruma. The abolition of slave trade in East Africa towards the end of 19th century was a major boost for missionary work in Kenya as some of the freed slaves were settled at the Rabai Mission. The missionaries were also put in charge of other settlements that were established for the freed slaves on the East African Coast such as the Freretown settlement in Mombasa. Since the freed slaves were detached from their communal and cultural roots, it was easier for them to absorb the gospel of the missionaries and a new way of life without undue

pressures from their larger communities. They thus formed the first homogenous group of converts in Kenya.

The 'alienating' aims of the missionary work were evident even at this early stage. An account of one ex-slave by the name Mbotela about his initial days at Freretown settlement as quoted by Terrance Ranger in *Dance and Society in Eastern Africa 1890-1970* adequately illustrates this cultural estrangement:

The first Christmas after their landing at Freretown the freed slaves performed their own 'different kinds of native dances'. But unfortunately, 'these dances excited the performers with memories of evil practices and beliefs. They decorated themselves [...] and some even cut themselves on their faces as they had done at home. And the sight was dreadful to behold'. So the missionaries [...] forbade the playing of the wicked drums.¹⁴³

From the above, we not only notice how the missionaries forbade the 'playing of wicked drums' but also, Mbotela's detachment from his culture as he now regards the adornments of the body by his people as sight 'dreadful to behold'. It was also in these settlements and early missions that some of the earliest pro-European performances such as Christian hymns, slave brass bands, and *dansi*, as I have discussed in Chapter One, emerged.

In the interior of Kenya, missionary activities intensified from 1900 when the Kenya-Uganda railway was completed in 1901 and colonial administration structures were established in many parts of the country. The period from 1900 to 1914 was a particularly intense one for missionary work in Kenya. It witnessed the arrival of various Christian groups - Protestants, Catholics and Seventh Day Adventists - in the country, who aggressively sought to not only to win converts, but also to establish their missions' 'spheres of influence' in a manner Ogutu humorously likens to a 'big race for Christ'.¹⁴⁴

Densely populated areas such as Kiambu, Nyeri, Meru, Maseno and Machakos attracted, disproportionately, more missionary activities as compared to low-density areas and were homes to some of the earliest

143 Ranger, p.11.

144 M. A. Ogutu, 'History of Religion', in *Themes in Kenyan History*, ed. by William Ochieng (Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1990), pp.83-87(p. 86).

churches and schools.¹⁴⁵ It was also in these places that most of the anti-colonial activities were witnessed as they were the centres of colonial settlement.

In the hinterland, evangelisation activities followed similar patterns to those at the coast earlier. The missionaries in their 'zealous' manner 'imposed their own idea of what should constitute African morality'.¹⁴⁶ They also opposed most of the traditional ways of life as David Reed in a briefing to Walter Roger of Institute of World Current Affairs, in New York noted:

What was banned varied from mission to mission, but there were certain targets of missionary zeal. Drinking native beer and smoking were disallowed. Native dances and songs which previously had played an important role in tribal life and which had provided an outlet to pent up emotions were banned as sinful [...] only hymns, drearily, except to the approving ear of the missionary, were permitted. Polygamy and female circumcision were banned [...] missionaries were opposed to all aspects of old religion.¹⁴⁷

The Consolata Fathers (CF) who first arrived in Kenya in 1905, for instance, believed that 'mission stations should be centres for radiating Christian and civilising influences into the heathen countryside'.¹⁴⁸ They, therefore, encouraged their converts to live within or around the mission stations to divorce them physically themselves from their communities and 'pagan' customs.¹⁴⁹ The Church Missionary Society (CMS) in 1928 went to an extent of publishing a detailed statute stipulating the heathen customs their converts were to abandon. These included 'all customs which were not agreeable to the word of God such as those pertaining to departed spirits, witchcraft, divination, sexual immorality, drunkenness, evil songs and female circumcision'.¹⁵⁰

Arguably, the best illustration of how culture was a politicised issue and a hotbed for conflict between Kenyans and colonisers is the widely

145 James Otiende, 'Education since the Early Times', in *Themes in Kenyan History*, ed. by William Ochieng, pp. 145-155 (p.147).

146 New York, Institute of World Current Affairs, 'Dini ya Msabwa', David Reed to Walter Roger <<http://www.icwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/DER-20.pdf>> pp. 1-18 (p. 6).

147 Ibid.

148 Tignor, p.123.

149 Ibid.

150 Tignor, p.123.

reported female circumcision controversy, pitting the Church of Scotland Mission (CSM) against the Kikuyu community. The controversy started in Murang'a District in the late 1920s when the CSM demanded that the converts abandon female circumcision and the festivities associated with the ceremony or risk being excommunicated and expelled from the churches and mission schools.¹⁵¹

The Kikuyu converts became adamant, preferring to leave the churches to forsaking the circumcision rite. As the conflict escalated, the missionaries introduced what was known as the *Kirore* (thumbprint) oath committing church members to publicly condemn and disown female circumcision. Those who supported the missionaries came to be known as the *Kirore* while those who refused to take the oath (the majority) were referred to as the *Karing'a* (truly traditional). After leaving the missionary churches, the *Karing'a* started their own churches and schools where they practised traditions that they considered culturally edifying and aspects of Christianity that they considered relevant.

Of significance to this study is the *muthirigu* protest dance that emerged at the height of this crisis in the 1930s. According to David Sandgren in *Christianity and the Kikuyu Religious Divisions and Social Conflict* (1989), *muthirigu* started at the Industrial Training Depot, an apprenticeship school that was located at Kiambu and was famous for its anti-colonial activities. From there, it spread to various parts of Kikuyu land in the 1930s.¹⁵² At the height of the female circumcision controversy, the *Karingas* would sing and dance to *muthirigu* songs outside the churches while worship was in progress to ridicule the missionaries and the *Kirore* and to express candidly their positions regarding the female circumcision rite.¹⁵³ *Muthirigu* was a flexible dance in which singers would coin new lines to explore the issues they felt were pertinent. However, the most common theme in *muthirigu* songs was the community's abhorrence of the *irigus* (uncircumcised girls). In the *muthirigu* songs, uncircumcised women were

151 Tignor, p.122.

152 David Sandgren, *Christianity and the Kikuyu Religious Divisions and Social Conflict* (Peter Lang publishing: New York, 1989), p. 88.

153 Ibid.

depicted as 'worthless, an unnatural social division', sterile, immature beings and bed-wetters,¹⁵⁴ as seen in the following song:

Girls of Kihumbu-ini¹⁵⁵

You're good looking in front of the eyes
But you are measured
in pounds like meat
Be beaten or even cut but *muthiirigu* will
Continue

And to know that it (*kiirigu*) is really bad,
it (*kiirigu*) will urinate in the bed and say
that the bed is cold

You will marry but your mother is circumcised,
therefore, where will you build for it
Irigu are not costly;
only seven dogs and you marry in church.

We want *githomo* (education)
but where can we be schooling because of
the bad smell of *irigu*.¹⁵⁶

The song clearly uses extremely derogatory language in reference to the uncircumcised girl. For instance, she remains immature as indicated by her bed-wetting. She is also untrustworthy because she denies her wrongdoing. Her bride price (if at all she could find a husband) would be settled using dogs, and not cows, goats and grain as the custom demanded, thereby emphasising her almost inhuman nature. She is also ostracised by her peers, who are willing to sacrifice the much-desired education to avoid coming into contact with her. The opposing ideology is obviously that, once circumcised, the girl automatically matures in all these aspects. Thus, as Wairimu Njambi (2007) observes, 'becoming a woman or a man in Kikuyu society was not determined by birth but by a series of initiation ritual markings that would continue to take place throughout one's lifetime

154 Ibid, p. 93.

155 Kihumbuini was a girls' school in Murang'a district under the Church Missionary Society. At the height of the female circumcision conflict, the Kikuyus broke into the school, kidnapped a girl and forcefully circumcised her. The incident heightened the cultural conflict between the Kikuyu and the missionaries even further.

156 Sandgren, *Christianity and the Kikuyu Religious Divisions and Social Conflict*, p. 91.

beginning with the *irua* (circumcision).¹⁵⁷ Failure to undergo the *irua* had serious consequences for the girl and her family. This explains the entrenched positions the Kikuyu adopted regarding the female circumcision issue.

The colonial government banned *muthiirigu* in the 1930s at the insistence of the missionaries who regarded the dance as obscene and one characterised by 'catch as catch can be between boys and girls as one missionary put it in his attempt to emphasise the immoral nature of the indigenous dances.¹⁵⁸ However, the dance continued to be performed secretly despite the heavy penalties imposed on the singers when found out. According to Ingrid Bjorkman (1989), it was one of the dances that the Mau Mau fighters appropriated in the 1950s to challenge colonialism.¹⁵⁹

The space and scope of this thesis will not allow for an extensive examination of all the conflicts that emanated from disagreements over entrenched customs between the missionaries and Kenyans. I should, however, emphasise that most of them played out in ways similar to the Kikuyu female circumcision controversy. The majority ended with the establishment of indigenous churches and schools which allowed the worshippers and learners to practise the traditions the missionaries opposed.

Among the notable movements that emerged as a result of conflict over important cultural practices was *Mumboism* (church of god *Mumbo*). The movement was founded in 1906 by Onyango Dunde at Alego. Its activities were concentrated in South Nyanza and Kisii districts. It emphasised a return to the Luo traditional ways of life and the worship of the Luo god *Mumbo*. The movement is reputed to have also started its own schools.¹⁶⁰ Another religious group that sprung up in Luo Nyanza was *Nomiya Luo* (the Luo mission that I attended). It was formed in 1910 by

157 Ngaruiya, Wairimu, 'Irua Ria Atumia and Anti-Colonial Struggle Among the Gikuyu of Kenya: A Counter-Narrative on 'Female Genital Mutilation'', *Critical Sociology*, 33 (2007), 698-708 <<http://crs.sage.pub.com/content/33/4/689>> [accessed 18 April 2013] (p. 659).

158 Reed, p. 6.

159 Bjorkman Ingrid, *Mother Sing for Me: People's Theatre in Kenya* (London: Zed Books, 1989), p. 29.

160 Otiende, p.188.

Yohana Owalo, a migrant worker at Kisumu but born in Siaya. In 1907, he claimed to have seen a vision in which Arabs, Jews and Luos were allowed into heaven but Europeans (the Pope inclusive), the Goans and the Indian Bunyans were denied entry.¹⁶¹ This imputes a political reason for the emergence of the church as the latter three symbolised cultural, economic and socio-political exploitation and oppression for Kenyans. This movement gained immense following in the 1910s due to its willingness to accommodate customs such as polygamy, ancestral worship and wife inheritance which were central to Luo culture but were condemned by the missions. There was also *Dini ya Msabwa* (the religion of ancestral spirits) that was founded by Elijah Maside in Western Kenya in 1918. It also opposed the missionaries' demand that the converts abandon customs such as polygamy, worship of ancestors and other Bukusu customs. Like the Kikuyu independent churches, *Dini ya Msabwa* was to some extent militant and was associated with the armed anti-colonial activities in the Western parts of Kenya in the 1940s and 1950s.¹⁶²

David Kerr in his attempt to understand the conflict between the missionaries and Africans has argued that the disagreements between the two were not merely religious/cultural conflicts, but were a reflection of two opposing worldviews and ideologies. To Kerr, while communal rites and performances were important in defining and affirming the cultural identity of the colonised people, the colonialists viewed them as a negation of the rational and puritanical standards of a 'civilised' society.¹⁶³ Opiyo Mumma in his PhD thesis in 1996 articulated similar views when he argues that the agenda of the missionaries was to inculcate in the converts a 'culture of silence'. Mumma notes that 'good Christians' were, for instance, encouraged to stay away from cultural and political activities that went against the workings of colonialism.¹⁶⁴ This may explain why the missionaries often depicted anti-colonial movements as evil and readily offered their services to

161 Ndeda Mildred, 'Nomiya Luo Church: a Gender Analysis of the Dynamics of an African Independent Church among the Luo of Siaya District in the Twentieth Century and Beyond', <www.codesria.org/IMG/pdf/NDEDA-1.pdf> [accessed on 5 April 2016], 1-17(p. 6).

162 Kerr, p. 20.

163 Reed, p. 7.

164 Mumma, p.100.

the colonial government to curtail Kenyan nationalism. During the Mau Mau struggle, the missionaries were actively involved in the so-called 'rehabilitation' of the detainees. The process involved making those who had joined the struggle repent their involvement with the 'evil' movement and oath-taking.¹⁶⁵

Christian-Oriented Performances

Among performances that the missionaries allowed the converts were Christian hymns. The trend in colonial Kenya was to translate the songs from Latin, Italian, English and other European languages into Kiswahili and other Kenyan languages. In 1957, an Italian reverend father in Meru translated 128 songs from Italian to *Kimeru* (one of the Kenyan languages). The songs were to be used for worship in schools and churches in the area.¹⁶⁶

Similar efforts were reported in the Kiambu District where in 1957, plans were made to 'expand the existing Kikuyu hymnbook' by translating more English songs into Kikuyu.¹⁶⁷ However, in the Catholic Church, for instance, it was not uncommon to find certain portions of the liturgy such as the requiem mass, the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer, being enacted in Latin even though few Kenyans in the congregations could understand the language. It is this indiscriminate borrowing of the 'good, the bad and the indifferent' from 'outside' and imposing it on the churches that a paper entitled 'The Use of Traditional Music in Christian Worship' in 1956 by the Jeanes School lamented. The paper also advocated the adoption of music that was based on African idioms and rhythms which African converts even from the rural areas could identify with.¹⁶⁸

The other mode of performance that flourished in missions was the orchestras and bands. A particularly successful band in the 1950s was the Drum and Fife band of the Catholic Mission, Machakos. It frequently

165 KNA, Mau Mau Detainees Cleansing Ceremony, MCD/ADM/ 61/33, Rehabilitation officer to the commissioner of community development and rehabilitation, 1961.

166 KNA, Colony and Music Officer Report on Tour of Central Province, CRD ADM/61/80, 1957.

167 An appeal to form a Kiambu District Music Society by Henry Kuria, CRD ADM/61/80, 1958.

168 Ibid.

performed in important ceremonies in Machakos and neighbouring districts.¹⁶⁹ Hyslop was, however, critical of the African bands and orchestras in the colonial era because of their tendency to ape European styles thus restricting their performances to complicated compositions by Western composers like Mozart and Handel. The bands, like the slave brass bands of the previous century, strived to ape English military band performance styles. There being few opportunities for training Kenyans in music (including in these genres) the performers tended to learn by listening to pre-recorded performances and picking up the tunes, sometimes with errors, or in what Hyslop called a 'hit or miss' fashion.¹⁷⁰

Drama was another important performance mode that the missionaries encouraged among converts. Missionary drama tended to be of two kinds: the bible-based plays that were meant to teach the scriptures and moralistic works to impart important Christian and by extension, Western/colonial values. A collection of ten plays by Hazel Philips entitled *Christian Plays for Christmas and Other Occasions*, published by the African Inland Mission Publishers in 1956 offers important insights into both types of drama. The *Prodigal Son*, the fourth play in the collection, dramatises a popular Christian theme and story. As in the biblical story, the younger son asks for his inheritance, goes away and squanders it, only to return home poor and begging for forgiveness. The father in his fullness of love and mercy readily forgives him to the chagrin of the elder son who has spent years toiling for the family. This parable was (is) central to the missionary and Christian gospel of conversion as it depicts both the unconverted and the backsliders as fallen and in need of redemption. The church, and by extension colonialism, is presented as a compassionate and benevolent institution that is ready to offer unconditional restitution to fallen/ backward people.

Another play, *Peter Leads his People* is about a boy who sacrifices his only calf to support the evangelisation efforts in Turkana, a remote outpost in Kenya. The moral of the play is that the converts should not spare

169 Colony and Music Officer Report on Tour of Central Province, CRD ADM/61/80, 1957.

170 Ibid.

any expense in the service of the church. *Beginning of the Church in Kemboni* focuses on Jando and his struggle to live a morally upright life in the midst of tribulations from his family, teachers and fellow students. The prototype of a good Christian, as painted through Jando, is one who does not react to any mistreatment but always resorts to prayer when confronted with difficulties. His uprightness is rewarded by more conversions. The play is a typical example of the virtues the missionaries sought to impart on Africans to prevent them from rising against colonial injustices and oppression. Christian virtues such as self-sacrifice, giving and forgiveness were integral in creating a subservient and docile population.¹⁷¹

Most of the plays in this collection made use of minimal dramatic effects and were written in heavy-handed prose. This was perhaps because of the audience and actors they targeted, that is, people with only basic education and few theatre skills. Thus, they had little to offer aesthetically. However, the style of the playwright was consistent with the didactic aims of the plays as all the plays were dramatised from the perspective of indigenous converts who were also the main characters of the plays. The settings were also localised. The three Christmas plays, *The Christian Soldier, I Want to be...* and *Christmas Day around the World* all of which highlight the importance of Christmas were slightly different. Their style could be classified as liturgical as they were derived from various sections of the bible dealing with the theme of Christmas and were meant to be sung, chanted or recited.

Colonial Education and Theatre.

Education in the colonial era was racially determined. As in many British colonies, separate schools were instituted for Europeans, Asians and Africans.¹⁷² While the colonial government's policy was to direct all available resources 'towards bringing every European child under education while he was still young',¹⁷³ the other races had to do with whatever the government and the missionaries made available. This partly, explains why both Indians

171 See Mumma, p.100.

172 See Kenya Education Reports of 1936 and 1924.

173 Kenya Education Report 1927, p.17.

and indigenous Kenyans tried to institute alternative ways of educating their children as the discussion on the Kikuyu Independent Schools later in this chapter illustrates.

The space and the scope of this study will not allow for a detailed examination of education among Europeans and Indians. However, a survey of the various education reports indicates that literary education was encouraged among these groups from the early years of colonialism. They also had access to better education facilities than the indigenous people. The colonial government's efforts in Asian education were complemented by Asian philanthropic bodies such as the Aga Khan foundation and other bodies that the Asians formed to further their people's interests in the colony.

The education of Kenyans in the initial years of the colonial era was in the hands of the missionaries and it was aimed at giving the early converts simple reading, writing and arithmetic skills to enable them read the bible and help with clerical works around the colony. The colonial government began to be more involved in policy direction and funding of Kenyan's education from 1911 when it established the Department of Education to help in the development of education provided by Christian missions.¹⁷⁴ From 1914, the government began to give missionaries grants in aid to educate the Africans.

In subsequent years, various commissions, educational ordinances and other structures of education management were put in place to improve the quality and quantity of education among Kenyans. In 1919, the East Africa Protectorate Education Commission was constituted to look into ways of improving Education for all races in East Africa. Its recommendations came to influence many of the decisions in the education sector in the early years of colonial rule. Among these was the need for provision of education of the indigenous people to remain 'a major responsibility of the missionaries'. The government was also asked to increase its role in the provision of education.¹⁷⁵

174 Peter C. Otiato Ojiambo, 'Quality of Education and its Role in National Development: A Case study of Kenya's Educational Reform', *Kenya Studies Review*, 1.1(December 2009), pp 133-149 (p.135).

175 Ibid.

The two commissions that greatly shaped Kenyan's education in colonial era were the Phelps-Stokes Commissions whose work ran from 1920 to 1924. The commissions were convened at the behest of the American Baptist Foreign Missionary Society to evaluate education systems in Black Africa. They were funded by the American Phelps-Stokes fund. The second Commission from January 1924 to June 1924 was particularly important to Kenya as it focused mostly on education challenges in East, Central and South Africa. Among the recommendations of these commissions was the need to offer the Africans a practical education that was adapted to the family and community life. The proposed education was to be informed by a scientific research on the needs of the various rural communities in Africa.¹⁷⁶ They also upheld the racial system of education that was prevalent in many British colonies and advocated for offering of secondary education to selected Africans.

Shortly after the two commissions made its recommendations, the Colonial Office constituted a committee that produced the first comprehensive policy document for Africans education in the colonies entitled 'Education Policy in British Tropical Africa' of 1925. It recommended the following re-organisation of education for the Africans:

- (a) Elementary education for both boys and girls, beginning with the education of young children.
- (b) Secondary or intermediate education, including more than one type of school and several types of curricula.
- (c) Technical and vocational schools.
- (d) Institutions, some of which may hereafter reach University rank and many of which might include in their curriculum some branches of professional or vocational training, such as training of teachers, training in medicine, training in agriculture.
- (e) Adult Education [...] vary[ing] according to local need.¹⁷⁷

These recommendations paved way for the establishment of various kinds of schools all of which had varied implications for theatre among other changes. Other important commissions that shaped education in colonial Kenya were the Beecher Commission of 1949 that reinforced the emphasis

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Colonial Office, 'Education Policy in British Tropical Africa' <

http://www.historicalpapers.wits.ac.za/inventories/inv_pdfo/AD1715/AD1715-19-27-001-jpeg.pdf > [accessed 27 October 2016].

on practical education and character formation in Africans education. It also recommended a 4: 4: 4 system of education (four years in elementary school, four years in primary and four years in secondary), expansion and a compulsory elementary education.¹⁷⁸ There was also the Binns Commission of 1951 that among things made far-reaching recommendations with regard to secondary and teacher training in Kenya.

These changes notwithstanding, Africans education remained underfunded, vocational, inferior, alienating and limited in comparison to that of other races. This explains why academic education, use of English as the medium of instruction and respect for indigenous cultures were some of the key aspects that were emphasised in the independent schools that were instituted in some Kenyan communities from the late 1920s. Colonial schools generally undermined these aspects at varied degrees.

Available literature on education in colonial Kenya indicates that five types of schools co-existed in the colonial period. These were mission schools, government schools, reserve schools, elite schools and independent schools.¹⁷⁹ Even though Christian/Western morality, discipline and performance forms were encouraged in all colonial schools, there were variations in the way each related with and affected indigenous performance.

Mission Schools

Missionary schools offered mainly elementary education after which those who did well proceeded to higher primary schools and later joined vocational courses in areas such as nursing, teaching and agriculture. Others joined technical schools such as Maseno, Tumutumu and Kikuyu to study subjects such as plumbing, welding, masonry, carpentry and brick making. By the late 1950s, some of these institutions were converted into secondary schools as the colonial government expanded academic education in preparation for independence.

The missionaries treated their schools as extensions of their churches, emphasising Christian morality and as the Kenya Education Report of 1927 noted, 'conversion and complete break from native customs and

¹⁷⁸ Ojiambo, p.136.

¹⁷⁹ Kenya Education Report 1927, p.14.

superstitions'.¹⁸⁰ The report goes on to say the following about missionary education and its relationship with the indigenous people and cultures:

When the Missions complain of the hostility of the elders to education, they should remember that they themselves are deliberately training their pupils to look on the older people savages or "*shenzis*," and the older generation, not unnaturally, resent this attitude in the rising generation. Hardly a mission can be named which collects preserves and makes an educational opportunity of the folklore of the African tribes. These appear to be ruled out as utterly bad, are replaced by Bible stories and hymn tunes foreign to African life.¹⁸¹

This underscores the extent to which the missionary schools were avenues of eroding indigenous cultures. The missionaries' fanatical attack on indigenous cultures that sometimes led to conflicts with Kenyan people did not sit well even with the colonial government as it threatened peace and stability of the colony. This notwithstanding, it's important to emphasise that mission schools formed the largest number of educational institutions for Kenyans and without them the education of the Kenyans would have been worse than it was in colonial era.

Government Schools

Government schools were schools established by the government from 1913 to offer technical and agricultural related education with a view of 'improving production in the reserves and at the same time release [skilled] labourers to work on European estates'.¹⁸² They included Government Schools of Machakos in Eastern Kenya, Waa School at the coast and Kagumo in Nyeri. They were managed by the Native Education Councils and Advisory Boards that were constituted from the 1920s.¹⁸³ Government schools also included tertiary institutions that offered courses in areas such as secretarial work and police work training. Even though 'Christian moral instruction' and discipline was emphasised in these schools, according to the Education Report of 1927, they were 'less doctrinal' than the mission schools and maintained

180 Ibid, p.13.

181 Ibid.

182 Tignor, p. 204.

183 Ibid.

'close touch with native elders and native councils'.¹⁸⁴ This perhaps explains why *muthiirigu* started at the Native Industrial Training Depot which was a government institution that offered courses in specialised and technical areas.

Elite Schools

This category of colonial schools was perhaps the most significant for performance. The first elite school in Kenya was the Alliance High School that was established in 1926 by the colonial Government in corroboration with an alliance of protestant missions led by the Church Mission Society and Church of Scotland Mission. Worthy of mention is the fact that the curriculum at Alliance School in its initial years was heavily tilted towards vocational courses as the following quotation illustrates:

Sixty-four pupils left the school in December. Eight had completed the year's course in clerical work. All immediately obtained employment in various parts of the country. Fifty-four boys completed the two years of Junior Secondary Course. Two-thirds of them proceeded to further train with a vocation: sixteen proceeded to Makerere College, eleven entered teacher-training centres in Kenya, eight proceeded to Railway School Nairobi, seven who had received teacher training before entering the school went directly to work as teachers and the remainder were accepted by the Medical Training Depot, the Post-office and the Police Training Depot for vocational Training.¹⁸⁵

It was only in 1938 that the school completely dropped the vocational courses paving way for more academic education in the school. The second secondary school for indigenous Kenyans was the Catholic High School, Kabaa in Meru established in 1936. It also offered a two-year Junior Secondary Education. In 1941, the school was relocated to Mang'u near Nairobi and renamed Holy Ghost College, Mang'u.¹⁸⁶

In addition to offering more-academically oriented education, both schools had a strong bias towards religion as the following quotation on Mang'u indicates:

184 Kenya Education Report 1927, p.14.

185 Kenya Education Report 1936, p.14.

186 The Mang'u Writers Forum, 'About Mang'u' 2014, pp1-15 (p. 3).

There was a great stress on religious observation at Mang'u. Retreats were frequent. All mass feasts were observed liturgically according to the church calendar, complete with hymns, church music and recitals sang by the boys.¹⁸⁷

The 'stress on religion resulted in some pupils deciding to join the seminary after sitting their Cambridge examinations'.¹⁸⁸

Scholars such as Ngugi and Bjorkman have widely argued that it was through elite schools that the role of education in the colonial 'civilising' mission was fully realised. Bjorkman, for instance, points out that the schools trained learners:

To admire and imitate things European and to regard all things African with contempt, thus alienating themselves from their origins. These Western-educated Africans came to question their own traditional norms, and the school system helped create indigenous elite loyal to the colonial power.¹⁸⁹

Marah notes further that the curriculum in elite schools was designed to alienate the Africans from their traditional cultures and to think and behave like the colonisers. If they failed to behave as such, they were construed as uncivilised.¹⁹⁰

In literary studies, for instance, Simon Otieno, states that, students were required to read at least twenty-five texts from a selected list of European writers in preparation for school certificate examinations.¹⁹¹ The works of Shakespeare, Shaw and other European writers were presented as the only valid dramatic and theatrical experience in the schools.¹⁹² While the emphasis on Western writers appears justifiable given that published Kenyan or African texts were rare at the time, the failure to include indigenous literature (orature) and performances in the school curriculum only illustrates the colonisers' disregard for local cultures.

187 Ibid, p. 4.

188 Ibid, p.14.

189 Bjorkman, p. 26.

190 Marah, p. 462.

191 Simon Otieno, 'Of Codes and Modes: A Critical Evaluation of Kenyan Performances by and for the Youth on HIV/AIDS', (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leeds, 2008), p. 40.

192 Mullet, Tololwa, 'African Theatre and The Colonial Legacy: Review of The East African Scene', *Utafiti*, 17.1 (1986) 20-29 (p. 23).

The school performances would also be conducted in halls with proscenium arches using expensively designed and imported costumes. The themes and subject matters in the plays were also of little relevance to the students' immediate circumstances as many plays were concerned with the lives of British middle-class families.¹⁹³ Mwangi Gichora notes that during occasions such as school concerts, speech-days and parents' days, the children would perform such plays before their parents, most of whom could not understand the English language but still 'felt this to be a real achievement and were proud' of their children.¹⁹⁴

Reserve Schools

These were schools located in the heart of Kenyan villages 'beyond the influence of the European settlement'.¹⁹⁵ They included such schools as the Maasai School in Narok, the Nandi School in Kapsabet and the Lumbwa School in Kericho.¹⁹⁶ In these schools, education was planned to 'begin with the very elements of native life'. The learners were expected to use the best elements of their own people's life, its stories and songs, its crafts' in the learning process.¹⁹⁷ Jeanes School, Kabete was the training arm for the supervisors of the reserve schools thus the rest of the discussion in this section will focus on this colonial institution because the teachers were implementing the skills that they were taught there.

Jeanes School Background

Jeanes School, Kenya was the first among comparable community-based training institutions like Jeanes Schools in Rhodesia, *Malingali* School in Tanzania, *Fort Hare* in South Africa, *Achimoto* in Ghana, *Bo* government schools in Sierra Leone. Most of these were founded from the late 1920s following the recommendations of the second Phelps-Stokes Education Commission which as I noted earlier was in 1924.¹⁹⁸ They were modelled along the lines of Jeanes and other community and agriculture focused

193 Tololwa, p. 23.

194 Mwangi, p. 89.

195 Ibid.

196 Kenya Education Report 1927, p.14.

197 Ibid.

198 John Marah, 'Educational Adaptation and Pan- Africanism: Development Trends in Africa', in *Journal of Black Studies*, 17.4(June1987) pp.460-481 (p. 460).

schools that were founded after the American civil war to offer skills-based education to former slaves under the funding of among others, the Anna Jeanes foundation and the Freedman's Bureau.¹⁹⁹

The recommendation for an adapted model of education in Africa was based on the assumption that the conditions of Africans in the colonies were similar to those of the ex-slaves in America in the 19th century. Hence, a practical, skill-based education was seen as the best way of improving whole communities, as opposed a 'bookish system' that encouraged 'selfish individual competitiveness' and which only served the interests of a few individuals.²⁰⁰ Jeanes School, Kenya, was the first to be established in Africa and according to Udo Bude (1983), the nearest example of the practical application of the recommendations of Phelps-Stokes Commission.²⁰¹ Indeed, Phelps-Stokes fund at one time described Jeanes School as the most important education institution in the whole of Kenya.²⁰²

The success of the school was attributed to the efforts of Mr J.W.C. Dougall, who was the secretary of the second Phelps-Stokes commission and the first supervisor of the Jeanes School Kenya from 1925-1931.²⁰³ According to the 1927 Education Report, Mr Dougall had to 'discover what ought to be taught as well as how to teach it to Africans'.²⁰⁴ At the beginning of his work, Dougall had planned to recruit graduates from Hampton and Tuskegee in America. The two were important institutions for training vocational, community and agricultural workers in America. He had to abandon the idea after a visit to America where he discovered that some of the renowned students from these schools had developed strong political and identity consciousness.²⁰⁵ For an education system that was geared towards producing 'good Africans', politically conscious black teachers were seen as potential troublemakers. Consequently, Dougall opted to build a

199 Ibid.

200 Ibid, p. 341.

201 Ibid, p. 346.

202 Udo Bude, 'The Adaptation Concept in British Colonial Education', *Comparative Education*, 19.3 (1983), pp. 341-355, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3098635>> [accessed 25 April 2016] (p. 341).

203 Kenya Education Report, 1931, p. 42.

204 Ibid.

205 Bude, p. 345.

staff of six Europeans to teach the various courses. Five of the first fifteen trainees were also retained to help teach the second group of twenty-seven students that was admitted in 1927.²⁰⁶

The Role of Theatre in the Curriculum at Jeanes School, Kenya

The overall aim of the training at Jeanes School was to produce 'better teachers for better schools' and therefore better villages. The schools were regarded as 'the levers for raising the people's consciousness and the teacher a propagandist for the social and development ideals of education'.²⁰⁷ Theatre fitted well in this endeavour as it was seen as an important means of imparting development messages, entertainment and a teaching method.

Throughout the year, students would make propaganda plays that were used to conscientise surrounding communities on various issues and as a way of practising how to make productions for the communities where they were going to work. Every week during the school year, the trainees worked in groups to put together short, rapidly rehearsed propaganda plays. During the first two terms, the plays were developed under the direction of the European staff. The ideas and the method of presentation were, however, left to the students to work out. In the third term, the students were left entirely on their own to work out the plays and methods of presenting them.²⁰⁸ The plays were staged for communities every Thursday during weekly meetings. The productions explored issues such as first aid, the danger of flies, rats, mosquitoes, best trading methods, best methods of planting seeds, the danger of locusts, well conducted and badly conducted schools.²⁰⁹

Most of the productions were normally two to four scenes burlesques that were based on folk stories. W.H. Taylor, as quoted in an article by Christopher Kamlongera, clearly explains how the stories were incorporated into the plays. According to him, in designing the plays, the moral points to

206 Davis, T.L, 'Digest of Reports on Jeanes Schools', pp1-26, (p. 2)

<http://www.historicalpapers.wits.ac.za/inventories/inv_pdf/AD1715/AD1715-11-9-11-001-jpeg.pdf > [accessed 25 April 2014]

207 Kenya Education Report 1931, p. 42.

208 Kenya Education Report 1931, p. 51.

209 Ibid.

be emphasised were often highlighted by the use of characters that were well known in the folklore of the indigenous communities. For example, if the intention was to teach the value of having improved grain stores, the clever hare was the one who profited from using the modern stores and the hyena who suffered for refusing to adopt the new technologies. If the lesson was on the value of good management of a village school, the poor teacher would be symbolised by the monkey or hyena and the better one by the hare. The hyena and monkey are the villains in most Kenyan narratives, while the hare is the witty trickster.²¹⁰ By utilising stock characters in Kenyan folklore, development messages were passed in ways relevant to Kenyan performance cultures. The plays used local languages and occasionally Kiswahili.

The students also ran the fortnightly recreational village meetings to instruct and entertain adults living around the school. They would work in pairs to produce at least one short play for these meetings. The rest of the performances came from the communities.²¹¹ The propaganda and recreational meetings plays formed the basis for the Speech Day play at the end of the year which basically comprised of a series of short episodes touching on diverse developmental issues.²¹²

A notable feature of Jeanes School productions was the emphasis on originality, resourcefulness, innovativeness and improvisation to make the productions as relevant as possible to Kenyans and to encourage the trainees to learn the art of putting on plays within their practical conditions.²¹³ This applied to even scripted plays. Too much rehearsing and formal dialogues were discouraged as they were perceived to undermine 'authentic' characterisation.²¹⁴ Improvised dialogues were also seen as a good way to maintain the actors' spontaneity and to maximise the dramatic effects of the

210 Tylor, 1933 as quoted in Kamlongera, Christopher, 'Theatre for development in Africa', in *Media and Glocal change: Rethinking Communication for Development*, ed. by Oscar Homer & Thomas Tufte (Buenos Aires: Clacso, 2005), pp.435-452, (p. 439).

211 Kenya Education Report 1936, p. 67.

212 Ibid.

213 Hyslop, 'Drama in Africa', p. 2.

214 Ibid, p. 63-64.

plays.²¹⁵ The stage, dialogue, décor and costume were also expected to resonate with the African performance contexts.

The performance of the *Pied Piper of Hameln* by Robert Browning in 1933 and *Chester Cycle* during the native show of 1936 are good illustrations of this fact. In the *Pied Piper*, the rehearsals were conducted as follows:

The story was explained thoroughly until the actors grasped it. They then rehearsed it on their own, and this was followed by a final rehearsal, with the member of staff responsible being present to suggest improvements where necessary'.²¹⁶

The play was performed in an open-air theatre in the school grounds, a kind of natural amphitheatre to give the feel of an 'open space'. The theme was also relevant to the indigenous people because it focused on the problem of eradicating rats, an issue that was a challenge to people in the rural areas of Kenya. In the performance of *Old Chester Cycle* in 1936,²¹⁷ carols were sung in Kiswahili and 'dyed American and Eastern garments' were used as costumes. The costumes were noted to have 'looked extraordinarily well against the unadorned background of the stage'. The event also doubled as the Parents' Day that was attended by over 1000 people which shows the performances may have been quite popular with the local communities.²¹⁸

Jeanes School also championed the documentation of indigenous folk songs by the use of phonographs and dances on 16m.m films. The project was perceived as a crucial step towards the preservation of the quickly fading indigenous forms under the influence of Westernisation. The fear was that with time, it would be 'extremely difficult to obtain a faithful record of native folk songs' hence, the need to record them when it was still possible.²¹⁹ The trainees were encouraged to bring with them notes on 'native customs' whenever they went to the field during teaching practice or when they returned to Jeanes School for refresher courses and to secure records of 'native life and customs' on their own for later use.²²⁰ They would

215 Ibid, p. 49.

216 Ibid.

217 Kenya Education Report 1936, p. 66.

218 Kenya Education Report 1931, p. 51.

219 Kenya Education Report 1932, p. 65.

220 Ibid, p. 75.

also annually compete in songs drawn from their communities.²²¹ The documentation efforts were, however, selectively conducted because topics dealing with initiation ceremonies, circumcision and black magic were deemed unsuitable and were prohibited in plays and in preservation efforts.²²² Such restriction indicates the paternalistic nature of the seemingly progressive Jeanes School initiative.

According to the 1933 Kenya Education Report, dramatics was cited as one of the programmes that had borne most fruit at Jeanes School and in the schools supervised by Jeanes teachers. The report noted further that plays for both propagandist and entertainment purposes had become a weekly, monthly or annual items in many of the schools supervised by Jeanes teachers. In addition, students were invited to take part in the Jeanes School play productions for the Kenya Drama Festivals in the 1950s even after they had completed their programmes.

Wanawake wa Jeanes (Jeanes School Women) and the Use of Theatre in Maendeleo ya Wanawake Clubs (Women's Development Clubs)

The Jeanes School trainees were encouraged to bring their wives along for the two-year course. In addition to jointly tending a plot of land with their husbands to practice improved methods of agriculture, the wives were taught home care and family hygiene-related courses and drama skills.²²³ On completion of the course, the wives were expected to supplement their husbands' efforts in the villages by teaching the women in their localities the skills they had gained as noted in the 1926 Education Report:

Yet there is a good chance of utilising a progressive native woman for teaching purposes if she were the wife of a Jeanes teacher. She might be able to do some visitation with her husband and in any case, her home would be an example of her neighbours and her help might be enlisted in the cause of better homes and better health nearby [...] their course of training should [...] treat home and the garden, the care clothing feeding of the children, the elements of cleanliness and hygiene (personal domestic social) and make these the focus and point of the teaching that is given, literacy or practical.²²⁴

221 Kenya Education Report 1933, p. 50.

222 Ibid, pp.63-64.

223 Kenya Education Report 1926, p. 29.

224 Kenya Education Report 1926, p. 29.

After graduation, these women worked mostly as heads of women's clubs in their respective villages. It was through these clubs that the *Wanawake wa Jeanes* disseminated the knowledge they had learnt to other women. Theatre was an important recreational activity and means of engaging each other on development issues and community tales were seen as a great store from which the learning process could be made more relevant to the women. Thus, the women were taught how to improvise plays based on narratives and use animations such as animal heads to make the learning process more entertaining and concrete.²²⁵ The following excerpt from a training session conducted for the clubs in the Kitui District provides an illustration of how folk stories were converted into plays:

Members were asked to tell a story. Some of these are suitable for dramatisation others are not. One was chosen and the process of thorough working it into the shape of a short play explained. The story was one of the many folk stories in which characters are portrayed as animals. Because of this help was given in the making of animal heads to suit the various parts.²²⁶

The culmination of the dramatic activity was the annual music and drama festival that usually featured a set play and set piece of music among other activities. Indigenous languages were used in most activities of the women's clubs to encourage participation, as most of the members had no formal training. Writing about the effectiveness of the use of drama in women clubs, Hyslop noted that 'musical and dramatic activity' had become an established part of the work of *Maendeleo ya Wanawake* clubs. He also expressed the need institute similar 'men's and youths' clubs in future.²²⁷

According to Bude, up to 1930s, Jeanes teachers and their wives were the only representatives of a community development concept in the villages.²²⁸ However, the focus on vocational and skills-based education at a time Kenyans had begun to clamour for more academic education made

225 KNA, Report on tour of South Province, Kitui, Maendeleo ya Wanawake Clubs, AB/1/119, 23 May 1957.

226 Ibid.

227 KNA, Community Development Officer, MSS 22/24/16, Graham Hyslop to Mr Greaves (ref.JS/2/52/2049), July 1957, pp.1-2, p.1.

228 Bude, p. 346.

Jeanes School programmes unpopular with most Kenyans.²²⁹ As in America where leading African-Americans such as W.E.B. DuBois criticised the practical education that was offered to Black people in the 19th century as second-class and an inferior mode of education, the Jeanes School programme was also seen as an attempt to keep the 'natives' in a 'state of unintelligent inferiority'.²³⁰ The emphasis on agriculture was regarded as a way of tying the African to the land to make him a permanent source of cheap labour for the settlers.²³¹

The demand for more specialised personnel in community work was another challenge that faced the Jeanes training programme. By the mid-1930s, the School had to re-evaluate its training. Following a Jeanes Teacher Conference in Salisbury in 1935, it began to focus more on preventive medicine and agriculture. Trainees began to be selected from already qualified and previously trained occupational groups in these fields.²³² As Kenya Institute of Administration today, it appears to have maintained this line of training even today offering in-service and refresher courses for the various government ministries in Kenya.

Kikuyu Independent Schools

Though independent schools existed in other parts of Kenya, it was arguably among the Kikuyu that the schools were most widespread and impactful. I have already discussed the female circumcision controversy in the late 1920s to oppose the missionaries' demand that Kikuyu converts abandon the rite in exchange for education and church membership and how this led to emergence of independent churches and schools earlier in this chapter. By 1935, five years into the female circumcision crisis, the Kikuyu Independent Schools Association (KISA) and Kikuyu Karing'a Schools and Churches Association (KKSA), a breakaway from the former in 1933, boasted of 6300 students.²³³ The number had increased ten-fold to 62,000 students by the time the government closed down the schools in 1952 for

229 Marah, p. 464.

230 Kenya Education Report 1926, p. 32.

231 Ibid.

232 Bude, p. 346.

233 Nthamburi, p. 5.

being mobilising platforms for the Mau Mau movement.²³⁴ KISA had also established a teacher training college at Githunguri in Kiambu in 1939 that was closed along with the schools.²³⁵ KKSA was the more radical of the two and its activities were concentrated around Kiambu. KISA operated mainly in Murang'a and Rift Valley districts.²³⁶

In the 1930s, the independent schools almost crippled education in the missions in Kikuyu-dominated districts.²³⁷ In Murang'a, for instance, the enrolment in CMS schools fell from 728 in December 1928 to only 87 a year later. Parents also refused to have teachers who were loyal to CSM teach their children. The CSM was the mission that had opposed female circumcision most vehemently. It was also where ninety percent of the converts rebelled against the missionaries. The African Inland Mission had twenty of their schools closed by 1930 in Fort Hall alone. Other missions reported similar losses. Many of the students who left the mission schools joined the independent schools.²³⁸

In addition to offering culturally relevant education, the independent schools emphasised academic education and English as the language of instruction at all levels of schooling.²³⁹ This was a sharp contrast to mission and government schools where indigenous languages were used for instruction with English being occasionally offered in the higher classes.²⁴⁰ The focus on English was because indigenous people regarded proficiency in English as a means of breaking the racial barrier in many sectors of the economy. Most of the curriculum choices of KISA and KKSA were regarded as detrimental to the pupil's education by the colonial government.²⁴¹ Thus, in August 1935 the government was forced to convene meeting that was attended by representatives from missions and KISA at Jeanes School to address the 'crises of the independent schools'. In the meeting, KISA agreed

234 Kidd, p. 288.

235 Ibid.

236 Kenya Education Report, 1936, p. 53.

237 Chloe Campbell, *Race and Empire: Eugenics in Colonial Kenya* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p.133.

238 Ibid.

239 Kenya Education Report 1936, p. 53.

240 Campbell, p.134.

241 Kenya Education Report, 1936, p. 54-55.

to make some adjustments in exchange for government grants.²⁴² Among these were to start instruction in English from class three and to send their teachers for training in either mission teacher training schools or Jeanes School rather than enticing teachers from mission schools.²⁴³ This may have informed KISA's decision to establish its own teacher training college.

The independent schools and churches were important sites for anti-colonial dissent and performance. In an interview with Gerald Murimi, a former member of the movement, he told me that, from the late 1940s to the time the independent churches and schools were banned, they were the only places where songs that resonated with the needs of indigenous Kenyans could be sung openly. He further told me that in the 1950s the independent schools were greatly patronised by people who wanted to listen to, participate and learn from the often highly politicised anti-colonial sermons and songs.²⁴⁴ In addition to formal education, the learners were also taught Kikuyu culture and *Nyimbo cia Aregi* (political songs of resistance).²⁴⁵ Some of these songs are discussed in the next chapter.

The Foundations of the Kenya Schools Drama Festivals and other School Festivals

An important development in school performance during the colonial era was the establishment of the Kenya Schools Drama Festival (KSDF) in 1958. The festival was instituted by the British Council and the East African Theatre Guild to enable 'the children of European settlers and expatriates to share in Britain's great theatrical tradition' and to promote English language in colonial schools.²⁴⁶ This explains the dominance of European plays in the festival. The festival ran parallel to the Kenya Drama Festival which, as noted in the previous chapter, was an amateur theatre groups and middle-level learning institutions affair.²⁴⁷

242 Ibid.

243 Kenya Education Report, 1936, p. 55.

244 Interview with Gerald Murimi held on 13 December 2013 at Kiandegwa Village.

245 Ngaruiya, p. 698.

246 East African Theatre Guild, 'Newsletter', 30 October 1958, pp 1-2, p.1.

247 Ibid.

The inaugural performance of KSDF was held in 1959 in the main hall of Duchess of Gloucester School (now Precious Blood), Nairobi. It featured twelve schools from European, Asian and African backgrounds. The African schools included Kikuyu Girls High School, Machakos Boys Secondary and Kangaru Boys. The Asian schools were Aga Khan and Menengai mixed High School, Nakuru. The European schools included Limuru Girls High School, Duke of the York, Duchess of Gloucester, Kenya Girls High School and Lorento Convent Limuru.²⁴⁸ The tradition of sourcing adjudicators from Europe that was the norm in the KSDF was carried over to the KSDF with Benn Levy, a playwright from England, adjudicating the first festival.²⁴⁹ This tradition was continued throughout the rest of colonial period and early independence period.²⁵⁰

In addition to the Kenya Schools Drama Festival, there were also regionally constituted schools' drama festivals. Many of them were racially exclusive. On the Kenyan coast, there was the Coast African Schools Drama Festival (CASDF). This festival was initiated in 1957 and was born out of a drama course that Hyslop facilitated at Shimo la Tewa Secondary School in Mombasa in the same year. After the course, the schools produced Hyslop's play, *Afadhali Mchawi* (A Witch is Better than Intrigue) with Hyslop adjudicating the plays. The winning schools in the districts competed against each other at provincial level, thus marking the birth of the Coast Provincial Drama Festivals.²⁵¹ The festival was sponsored by the East African Theatre Guild and the British council. Like the KSDF, its aims were to improve the learners' English and literary skills.²⁵² There was also the Arab Schools Drama Festival and Asian Schools Drama Festival in the same region that were started in 1960. These festivals also featured Arab and Asian plays respectively in addition to those in English language.

248 KNA, Graham Hyslop's Report on Coast African Schools Sports and Cultural Association, MSS22/23, 1958.

249 East African Theatre Guild, p. 2.

250 Interview with Joseph Murungu at Nandos Nairobi on 20 December 2013.

251 KNA, Taita District County Education Officer Report on Schools Drama Festivals in 1964 (ref. no Ins/M/D/2/2), ADM/51/1/1.1.16, July 1964.

252 KNA, Asian Primary Schools' Drama Festivals, F/6/7/1962.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the colonial churches and schools and how the two institutions influenced performance. It has shown the kind of performances the missionaries encouraged as well as the role of missionaries in alienating Kenyans from their cultures. The chapter has demonstrated that the missionaries, despite their seemingly benevolent disposition, were part of the wider colonial agenda. Through the Christian churches and mission schools, the moral basis of the Kenyan communities was gradually dismantled, thus paving way for cultural, as well as economic and political control of the Kenyan people.

The chapter has also explored the various schools that existed in the colonial era and how they affected Kenyan performance. The use of theatre at Jeanes School is particularly notable because even though the performances were conceived for paternalistic purposes of imparting colonial ideas of development, it offers one of the earliest models of how performance could be used to mobilise communities for development. Its focus on folklore and the emphasis on improvisation are particularly notable as they offer important lessons in the continued search for more grounded and dialogical methods of engaging oppressed communities in Africa. In addition, the school remains one of the earliest initiatives that challenged the colonial theatre tradition by encouraging plays in Kenyan languages and on Kenyan issues. The focus on the teacher was important because teachers were the elite in the villages, and therefore had great influence on both the children (in the schools) and adults (in the villages). The next chapter will focus on how the Kenyan people used performance to complement other forms of anti-colonial struggle and decolonisation efforts.

Chapter 3

The Role of Culture and Performance in Kenya's De-Colonisation Struggle

Introduction

Culture was a significant factor in Kenya's anti-colonial activities and decolonisation struggles. A conspicuous feature of the anti-colonial movements in Kenya is that many of them were preceded, accompanied or pervaded by a surge in cultural consciousness. The armed resistance of the early colonial period that sought to stop the establishment of a colonial authority and the political activism of trade unions and political parties whose peak was in the 1920s and 1930s were all marked by high levels of cultural consciousness. We notice even more conscious use of culture in mobilising support for anti-colonial efforts during the post- WW2 nationalism which culminated to Mau Mau uprising in the 1950s particularly through songs.

Three reasons can be advanced for the widespread appropriation of culture in anti-colonial activities. First, and as asserted by the Kenyan historian Bethwell Ogot, the Kenyan people resisted cultural domination with as much vigour as they resisted economic and political domination.²⁵³ Indeed, a sizable number of the conflicts between the coloniser and the colonised in Kenya were informed by the desire of indigenous people to assert and defend their cultures against the onslaught of colonialism. Secondly, indigenous cultures were a rich source of expressions that were effectively harnessed to speak out and mobilise people against colonialism. Thirdly, cultural expressions (performance in particular) were effective but less antagonistic methods of opposing colonialism by Kenyans who could not match the military might of the colonisers. Moreover, through indigenous performances, the anti-colonial messages would be communicated through modes and languages that the indigenous people could relate to and which were often less clear to the colonisers who were not versed with Kenyan cultures.

²⁵³ Bethwell Ogot, 'The Construction of a National Culture', in *Decolonisation & Independence in Kenya: 1940-1993*, ed. by Bethwell Ogot & William Ochieng, pp. 214-236, (p. 226).

This chapter is concerned with the cultural dimension of Kenya's decolonisation process, with an emphasis on artistic expressions. Although Kenya's de-colonisation process is an area that has attracted vast scholarship, both nationally and internationally, the cultural aspects of struggle have tended to be obscured by the political and the economic dimensions. The Mau Mau uprising, for instance, has been a focus of many studies. However, few of these have focused on the huge amount of orature that emanated from the conflict from a literary perspective.

When this part orature is studied, it is mostly for its political rather than its artistic contributions. Bethwell Ogot in 'Politics, Culture and Music in Central Kenya: A Study of Mau Mau Hymns 1951-1956' in 1977, for instance, analysed the Mau Mau songs for their political content. He concluded that 'the ritual songs of the revolt were ethnic, exclusivist and cannot be regarded as national songs which every Kenyan can sing with pride and conviction'.²⁵⁴

In *Thunder from the Mountains: Poems and Songs from the Mau Mau* (1989) Maina wa Kinyatti compiled and translated some of the Mau Mau songs into English.²⁵⁵ He, however, does not engage in any form of analysis of the songs. Hence, there is an attempt to analyse some of his texts in the current study in addition to song scripts that were generated from oral sources during my fieldwork in Kenya in 2013 and 2014. Kinyatti has also been accused by Cristiana Pugliese in 'Complementary or Contending Nationhoods? Kikuyu Pamphlets and Songs 1945-1952' (2003) of censoring the songs by 'replacing the word Kikuyu with Kenyan' and by transposing 'Kikuyu hymns into a clumsy Marxist idiom and in the process distorting the Mau Mau's complex ideology'.²⁵⁶ Pugliese's study relied on oral records from former Mau Mau figures to provide a persuasive account of how the Mau

254 Bethwell Ogot, 'Politics, Culture and Music in Central Kenya: A Study of Mau Mau Hymns 1951-1956', in *Kenya Historical Review*, 5. 2 (1977), pp.275-286.

255 Maina wa Kinyatti, *Thunder from the Mountains. Poems and Songs from the Mau Mau* (Trenton: African World Press, Inc., 1989).

256 Cristiana Pugliese 'Complementary or Contending Nationhoods', in *Mau Mau and Nationhood*, ed.by E. S. Atieno Odhiambo and John Lonsdale (James Currey: Oxford, 2003) pp.197-120, (p.114).

Mau songs were composed and transmitted.²⁵⁷ Mau Mau songs, their composition and transmission is discussed in detail in a subsection below.

Clearly, these works' orientation is tilted largely towards concerns other than the cultural and artistic contributions of Kenyan anti-colonial productions. For a movement whose memory has attracted so much controversy even after independence (as I discuss shortly), I argue that a more critical examination of the orature that emanated from the process can offer insights into some of these contentious issues. As I shall show below, the Mau Mau performances were anchored in the Kikuyu orature traditions whose main pre-occupation is to archive history.

Interrogating all anti-colonial activities that widely appropriated culture and performances in colonial Kenya is not possible within the scope and space of this study. Thus, I will provide a brief examination of the pre-Mau Mau anti-colonial struggles before focusing on the Mau Mau uprising in an attempt to emphasise the role culture played towards achieving the goals of the movement. The focus will be mainly on songs as they formed the bulk of Mau Mau performances. Other aspects of Mau Mau orature such as ritual oaths, narratives and proverbs are also highlighted.

The reason for focusing on the use of indigenous performances to oppose colonialism is because they offer important insights even for contemporary performance in Kenya, particularly the TfD sector. To borrow from cultural theorists such as John Storey, orature is the basis of popular culture in most communities:

The study of folklore produced not only the first concept of popular culture as folk culture, it also helped establish the tradition of seeing ordinary people as masses, consuming mass culture.²⁵⁸

In his analysis of the various ways in which popular culture has been conceptualised, Storey uses expressions such as the following: 'widely favoured or well-liked by the people,'²⁵⁹ 'produced for mass consumption,' 'authentic culture of 'the people,' originates from 'the people,' 'a culture of

257 Ibid.

258 John Storey, *Inventing Popular Culture: From Folklore to Globalisation* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006), p.15.

259 John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction* (Prentice hall: Pearson Educational Ltd., 2006), p. 4.

the people for the people',²⁶⁰ often has a 'theoretical and a political inflexion'.²⁶¹ The overall picture generated from these descriptions is that the people themselves construct popular forms to further popular causes. This is in contrast to 'high culture', which according to Storey, is a result of an individual creation and is mostly associated with privileged groups.²⁶² As Storey further argues, this 'culture of the majority' has always concerned the 'powerful minorities'. Thus, there is always an effort 'to police the culture of those without power, reading it for any signs of political unrest, reshaping it continually through patronage and direct intervention'.²⁶³

If we look at Mau Mau performances through the lenses of popular culture as perceived by Storey, it is easy to see how oral forms can function as tools for political action and why the colonisers were always wary of indigenous performances. We also understand the strategies that the indigenous people adopted in the composition, transmission and performance of these productions to evade the scrutiny of the colonisers. Thus, as theatre for development practitioners continue to search for more participatory and dialogical ways of communicating to the 'oppressed', this discussion highlights some of the ways in which oral forms could be used as a method of mobilising communities for popular initiatives.

The Role of Culture in Pre-Mau Mau Anti-Colonial Activities

It was arguably from a cultural perspective that Kenyans first experienced colonial hegemony. In the previous chapter, I have discussed in detail how missionaries, who in many communities were the first Europeans to interact with the indigenous people, stirred up the first controversies in their attempt to impose alienating versions of Christianity and education on the indigenous people.

The outcome of these conflicts was the institution of the first indigenous churches and schools from the 1910s. The colonial representatives (government officials, soldiers, settlers) who followed were no different as, in many cases, they also disregarded the cultural sensibilities

260 Ibid, p. 5.

261 Ibid, p.11.

262 Ibid, p. 5.

263 Storey, p.13.

of the colonised which led to conflicts. A good example was in 1891 when a row erupted at Matetani, Kasinga in Machakos District over the cutting down of the sacred *Ithembo* tree to erect a pole to hoist the British flag. A local prophetess by the name Syonguu is said to have rallied the *Iveti* warriors to attack a British camp in the area. The warriors were defeated and a punitive expedition sent to raze homes and administer other forms of punishment to avenge the attack.²⁶⁴ Such confrontations punctuated the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised in many regions of Kenya in the early colonial period.

Culture was not always the cause of conflicts between the coloniser and the colonised. Indeed, it was more useful to Kenyans as a tool for addressing the socio-political and economic grievances. This was particularly after the colonial authority had been fully established. The process of subduing the communities in many cases was a violent one, where colonial military expeditions left trails of death and destruction of property on those that met 'colonial forces with force'.²⁶⁵ This made many Kenyan communities rethink the use of force on a coloniser who was obviously better endowed militarily than they were. It was not until the 1950s during the Mau Mau war that we again see wide scale use of armed means against the coloniser.

The well-documented anti-colonial struggles of the Kamba and Giriama communities around the 1910s offer important insights on how performance was used to address imperialism in the early years of colonial rule. Around the 1910s, many Kenyan communities were adjusting themselves to the socio-political changes occasioned by colonialism such the introduction of the punitive labour, tax and property laws and culture was one of the means they employed to address these changes. Among the Kamba of Eastern Kenya, from 1910-1911, for instance, a movement that was known as *Kathambi-Ngai* emerged and became a forum for addressing the above-mentioned issues. Its promoters were a widow named Siotune wa

264 Myles Osborne, *Ethnicity, and Empire in Kenya. Loyalty and Martial Race Among the Kamba c.1800-Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p.125.

265 Peter O. Ndege, 'Colonialism and its Legacies in Kenya' <

<http://international.iupui.edu/Kenya/resources/Colonialism-and-Its-Legacies.pdf>
[accessed 20 August 2014].

Kathuke, who was supported by a traditional medicine man, Kiamba wa Muthavio. They were both from Maputi area in Machakos and claimed to have supernatural powers to communicate and rid bad 'spirits' from the people and land.²⁶⁶

The word 'spirits' as Forbes Munro (1975) suggests, had a wider connotation in the context of the Kamba cosmology. Its meaning could be extended to include the foreigners who had major influences on the Kamba particularly through trade. Similar spirit movements had emerged before colonialism to address issues relating to their interactions with the Arabs and other Kenyan communities.²⁶⁷ Thus, the 'spirits' in the context of *Kathambi Ngai* also meant the colonisers and their influences on the Kamba community.

At the height of the crisis, the leaders of the movement declared Sunday gatherings similar to those of missionaries, ordered their followers not to harvest their crops and to stay at home for a month.²⁶⁸ According to K.R Dundas, the Machakos District Commissioner at the time, the 'two neurotics' (as he labelled Siotune and Muthavio) had 'obtained the most extraordinary domination over people'.²⁶⁹ Their proclamations were 'so disruptive to the normal patterns of work that it had become impossible to obtain porters or collect hut tax'. Muthavio, as Dundas complained, was the more dangerous of the two as he also threatened to cause the villages to sink and to create a lake where the villages stood if the people did not do as he ordered.²⁷⁰

Apart from the openly anti-colonial pronouncements that accompanied the *Kathambi Ngai* activities, the rituals also included a drumming dance known as *Kilumi*. The dance was traditionally performed by women to exorcise possessed persons through 'heightened excitement and emotional tension'.²⁷¹ As Munro further notes, spirit possession rituals provided the women and other oppressed categories in the patriarchal

266 Munro, p.114.

267 Munro, p. 112.

268 Munro, p.115.

269 KNA, DC/MKS/10B/8/1, K. R. Dundas to Hopley, 24 Dec. 1911.

270 Ibid.

271J. Forbes Munroe, *Colonial Rule, and the Kamba. Social Change in the Highlands 1989-1939* (Oxford: Clarendon Press ,1975), p.112.

society with the opportunity to 'exert mystical pressures' upon their oppressors 'when few other sanctions are available'.²⁷² In the colonial period, however, men also danced the *Kilumi* which is indicative of the extent to which the colonial authority had subverted the traditional systems. The introduction of colonial law and justice systems, for instance, eroded the traditional authority of men and their participation in such rituals may have been a symbolic way of ventilating the frustration at their loss of power and status.

The crisis ebbed at the end of 1912 when the colonial government arrested Siotune, Muthavio and other prominent supporters of *Kathambi Ngai* and deported them to the coast.²⁷³ The movement resurfaced again in the 1920s under the leadership of Ndonye wa Kauti who among other things, prophesied the removal of Europeans from the land.

The Giriama revolt of 1913-1915 was also led by a charismatic woman by the name Mekatilili wa Menza. She was supported by a senior elder, Wanje wa Mwandorikola. The two wanted their people to stop paying colonial taxes and working for the British. They advocated for the return to the Giriama traditions and cutting of ties, including those of marriage, with their own people who had been 'contaminated' with foreign ways, especially by converting to Christianity.²⁷⁴ To rally and enforce obedience among the people, two traditional oaths were administered: *Muskushekushe* oath that was traditionally administered to women and the *fisi* oath for men.

According to Brantley, the Giriama people had used the two oaths for so long to regulate proper behaviour that a mere rumour that they would be administered was enough to make people change their ways.²⁷⁵ Thus, the people were more willing to attract the wrath of the British than to go against the dictates of the oaths. As with the Kamba revolts, the crisis was momentarily contained when the colonial government arrested and deported the two leaders to Kismayu in 1915. However, like many other Kenyan

272 I.M Lewis, 'Spirit Possession and the Deprivation Cult of Man' quoted by *ibid*, p.111.

273 Tignor, p. 344.

274 Cynthia Brantley, *The Giriama and Colonial Resistance in Kenya, 1800-1920* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981) pp. 86-88.

275 *Ibid*, p. 87.

communities, feelings of discontent with colonialism would periodically explode into serious cultural and social-political crisis for most of colonial period.

I have already demonstrated how culture continued to be a tool to fight colonialism through the 1920s and the 1930s using the discussion of female circumcision controversy among the Kikuyu in the 1930s. The next section provides more insights into the cultural angle of the Mau Mau armed struggle whose roots can be traced to cultural and political anti-colonial activities of the second half of the 1940s after WW2 and early 1950s.

The Mau Mau Movement: Background

Mau Mau is believed to have been the brainchild of some young and radical members of the Kenya African Union (KAU) who became disgruntled with the pace of constitutional reforms that the senior party leaders like Kenyatta championed in the fight for self-rule and better socio-political and economic opportunities for the indigenous people.²⁷⁶ Gitu wa Kihengeri, a former detainee, publisher, and the current secretary general of the Mau Mau War Veterans Association noted the following:

The men we found in KAU were always carrying briefcases that contained the dozens of memorandums they had over time written to the colonial office and on which no action had been taken. So we (the young men) decided the only language the white man could understand was that of violence.²⁷⁷

This radical group included the ex-servicemen who had served in the WW2 and who had become highly politicised in the battle frontlines in areas like Burma mainly by interacting with people from other parts of the colonised world and sharing their experiences under colonialism. The declaration of independence in India in 1947 was also a factor in the rise of political

276 KAU was formed in 1947 to champion the African's demand for self-rule and had countrywide support.

277 Njonjo Kihuria, 'The Untold Story of Kenya's freedom fighter Gitu wa Kahengeri', *The Star*, 10 July 2013 <<http://originalpeople.org/untold-story-kenyas-freedom-fighter-gitu-wa-kahengeri>> [accessed 16 July 2016].

consciousness in many colonies as it acted as a reference point that the colonial yoke could be broken.²⁷⁸

At the heart of the Mau Mau uprising was the issue of land. As Mia Green notes, the colonial land policies in colonial Kenya reduced the indigenous people to squatters or wage labourers on their former lands. Up to the 1930s, the squatter system had permitted Kenyans limited access to land to enable them to produce food for their sustenance. However, labour shortages on settler farms led to restrictions on the amount of land the squatters could own or animals they could keep, leading to high poverty levels and increased bitterness among the people.²⁷⁹ Other political and economic grievances included the 'colour bar' in accessing important services such as education, jobs and hospitals as well as forced labour and taxation.

The Mau Mau movement was also about the assertion of indigenous cultures. For instance, the controversial split of the Kikuyu community into colonial loyalists and supporters of Mau Mau was in largely culturally derived. This is because the majority of the so-called loyalists tended to be those who had converted to Christianity. Thus, the fight was not only about economic and political power; it was also about the assertion of indigenous traditions and performances. Culture was, however, more useful to the group as a means of rationalising and endorsing the group's activities as I shall demonstrate in the discussion of Mau Mau performances.

Mau Mau, Memory and Historiography in Post-colonial Kenya

Before looking at Mau Mau performances, it is important to discuss the varied ideological standpoints through which the Mau Mau uprising has been perceived in modern Kenya. The memory of Mau Mau in the Kenyan public space and scholarship has tended to be shaped by the way the colonial and post-colonial governments perceived the movement. In the colonial era, Europeans dismissed the uprising as a 'savage atavistic movement,' that

278 Mia Green, 'Mau Mau Oathing Rituals and Political Ideology in Kenya: A Re-Analysis', *Africa, Journal of the International African Institute*, 60.1(1990), 69-87 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1160427>> [accessed 13 May 2013].

279 Green, p. 71.

was out to revert people to the dark ages.²⁸⁰ After independence, Kenyatta added to the controversy when he advocated for a 'policy of amnesia' towards the movement, arguing that 'it's the future that is living and the past that is dead.'²⁸¹ Many of the writings and discussions on Mau Mau have tended to be a reaction to these two standpoints.

Three distinct schools of thought have emerged in the historiography of Mau Mau. Evan Mwangi in 'The Incomplete Rebellion. Mau Mau Movement in the Twenty-First Century Kenyan Popular Culture' (2010) identifies the first as comprising of scholars such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Maina wa Kinyatti and Mukaru Nganga. This group tends to interpret Mau Mau and its activities from a purely nationalistic standpoint.²⁸² To this group, the movement represents the highest point in Kenya's nationalism. They are also critical of the failure by the Kenyatta government to endorse the movement.²⁸³

Scholars such as William Ochieng and Bethwell Ogot champion the extreme opposing side. Though these scholars do not doubt the centrality of Mau Mau in Kenya's decolonisation narrative, they are critical of what they perceive as an attempt to hijack Mau Mau by the post-colonial Kikuyu elites to promote what they call 'Kikuyu ethnocentrism' and to exclude other Kenyans from the 'fruits of independence'.²⁸⁴ The third perspective comprises of writers such as Kenneth Watene and Rebecca Njau who seem to discredit the view that every Kikuyu who disliked colonialism automatically supported Mau Mau. This group tends to examine the movement from the perspective of the ordinary people, detailing their experiences and fate at the hands of both Mau Mau and the colonialists.

280 Shiraz Durrani, *Never Be Silent Publishing and Imperialism in Kenya 1884-1963* (London: Vita Books, 2006) p. 219.

281 Mashall S Clouth, 'Mau Mau and The Contest of Memory', in *Mau Mau and Nationhood*, ed. by E. S Atieno Odhiambo and John Lonsdale, pp 251-267, (p. 256).

282 Kinyatti, p. xii.

283 Mwangi, 'The Incomplete Rebellion. Mau Mau Movement in the Twenty-First Century Kenyan Popular Culture' (p. 93).

284 Elisha Atieno Odhiambo, 'The Production of History in Kenya: The Mau Mau Debate', <*Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 25. 2 (1991), 300-307 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/485221>> [accessed 25 August 2013], (p. 301).

The Mau Mau debate has also been gendered. Feminists are particularly critical of what they perceive as an attempt to exclude women from the anti-colonial struggle by ascribing them passive roles in comparison to men, particularly in leading literary works. For instance, in *A Grain of Wheat* by Ngugi, Mumbi is only a sister to Kihika and wife to the freedom fighter, Gikonyo. Her importance is judged by her morality and how well she looks after the home in the absence of her husband. She fails the test of 'good woman' when she allows herself to be impregnated by Karanja, Gikonyo's love rival and colonial loyalist. For this reason, Gikonyo rejects her without considering the factors that led to the pregnancy. Wambuku's involvement with the war in the bush is in the text stripped of any heroic qualities as the author reduces it to a pursuit of her love for Kihika that she is unable to win while they are in the village. Ngugi's and Mugo's attempt to give women stronger roles in the *Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1978) is also not very successful as the binaries of women as couriers and food providers and men as combatants in the front-line are still dominant in the play.

Perhaps the most visible contribution of Mau Mau to contemporary Kenya's politics and culture is the way it has become a symbol and metaphor for emancipatory trajectories in Kenya. The politically conscious novels and plays of Ngugi wa Thiong'o offer the best illustration of this. *Mungiki*, a controversial political and cultural organisation that the Kenyan government has branded a militia gang, offers another illustration. The group emerged in the 1990s at the height of the land-based ethnic clashes in the Rift valley. Over the years, it has mutated to a much-feared secretive group in many Kikuyu-dominated areas in the Rift valley, Central Kenya and Nairobi. The group claims to be a liberation force that is out to continue Mau Mau's emancipatory activities.²⁸⁵ Their invocation of Mau Mau has, however, been dismissed as an attempt to 'sanitise' their violent activities.²⁸⁶ As Mwangi further notes, popular culture groups like *Ukoo Flani* have also

285 Peter Kagwanja, 'Facing Mount Kenya or Facing Mecca? The Mungiki, Ethnic Violence and Politics of Moi Succession in Kenya, 1987-2002', *Royal African Society*, 102(2003), 25-49 < <http://afraf.oxfordjournals.org/content/102/406/25.full.pdf> > [accessed 17 September 2014] (p. 29).

286 Ibid.

borrowed not only the liberation themes in Mau Mau songs, but also the 'guerrilla-like tactics of Mau Mau in negotiating public and cultural spaces to avoid government's censorship when dealing with controversial political topics.²⁸⁷

Forms and Production of Mau Mau Protest Performances

One conspicuous feature of the Mau Mau movement was its wide-scale and conscious appropriation of Kikuyu orature to politicise and mobilise support for the group and its activities. Songs and ritual oaths formed the core artistic activities of the group. However, other forms of orature, particularly proverbs, myths and legends were also central to the group's activities.

Songs

According to Maina wa Kinyatti, Mau Mau songs can be classified into three categories. These were mobilisation, guerrilla and detention songs.²⁸⁸

Mobilisation songs comprised of songs composed and sung before the war to mobilise and educate ordinary Kenyans. Detention songs highlighted the sufferings in camps and prisons, while guerrilla songs told stories and experiences of the soldiers in the forests. Mobilisation songs are the best recorded because they happened in a more stable political context before the war broke out. Most of the songs were composed and performed orally from the late 1940s. However, a significant number were also recorded particularly in the early 1950s in sections of militant newspapers, songbooks, or on cyclostyled sheets. The composers were mainly talented and committed figures of KAU and later, Mau Mau.²⁸⁹

Popular songbooks included *Nyimbo cia Kwarahura Ruriri* (Songs of Awakening the Community). The collection was compiled and edited by Kinuthia wa Mugia and published by Mumenyere Press in 1951. Louis Leakey describes Mugia as 'the most popular singer and composer of Kikuyu political songs'.²⁹⁰ *Nyimbo cia Matuku Maya* (Songs of these Days) was edited by Muthee wa Cheche and published by Punjab publishers.

287 Mwangi, p. 97.

288 Kinyatti, p. x.

289 Durrani, p.175.

290 Louis Leakey, *Defeating Mau Mau* (London: Methuen and Company Ltd., 1954), p. 55.

Cheche was a trade unionist from Kiambu who in the 1950s led a choir of thirty people who often performed at political rallies.²⁹¹ *Gikuyu na Mumbi* (Songs of the Children of Gikuyu and Mumbi) was edited by Gakara wa Wanjau, another committed Mau Mau figure.

Gakara was also a publisher and historian who published political, historical and fictional material in Gikuyu and Kiswahili through his Gaakara book service that he founded in 1951. He was detained by the colonial government in 1953 for his anti-colonial activities. He continued to publish in the above-mentioned areas even post-independence until his death on 30 March 2001. Another songbook was *Nyimbo cia Ciana cia Gikuyu na Mumbi* (Songs of Children of Gikuyu and Mumbi). It was edited by Ndimbe Kingori, a teacher in an independent school in Nyeri. It contained forty-four songs and was published by ACME press.²⁹² In addition to the songs, there was a four-page 'Mau Mau Creed', entitled *Witikio wa Gikuyu na Mumbi* (The Creed of the House of Gikuyu and Mumbi), composed and published by Gakaara wa Wanjau. It emphasised the Kikuyu's 'inalienable land rights'.²⁹³ While the other collections targeted all Kikuyus, the Creed was aimed at the more politically conscientised persons such as the fighters in the bush.²⁹⁴

A complex distribution strategy was adopted to ensure the songs and other anti-colonial literature reached as many people as possible, even in the most improbable areas. Songbooks would be given for free or for a small fee at political rallies, oathing ceremonies and in the independent schools and churches. They would also be distributed by underground groups like the *Kenda Kenda* (Nine Nine) whose membership included 'taxi drivers, European house servants, men working in big government offices and even beggars who sat at street corners all day'.²⁹⁵ These members also served as intelligence gathering agents for the movement. Durrani notes that on the day the State of Emergency was declared in 1952, Kimathi was personally

291 Pugliese, p.115.

292 Ibid.

293 Ibid, p.179.

294 Gaakara wa Wanjau, quoted in Durrani, p. 219.

295 Durrani, p. 219.

distributing about 15,000 copies of *Witikio wa Gikuyu na Mumbi* (the Mau Mau Creed) in large baskets in the Rift Valley.²⁹⁶

Many of the songs were composed using metaphorical language. Popular Christian hymns would also be fitted with localised political lyrics to conceal the messages. They could, therefore, be sung, as Leakey notes 'in the homes of thousands in Gikuyu reserves, squatter villages, European farms, and even in the staff quarters and kitchens of European homes without the singers getting into trouble'.²⁹⁷ The detention and guerrilla songs have also been recorded largely as sections in textbooks and in audio formats but mobilisation songs remain the best recorded. This is a crucial area which could constitute studies for the future.

Inter-Textuality, Orality and Ideology in Mau Mau Songs

Intertextuality, as defined by Julia Kristeva (1967), is 'the relational orientation of a text to other texts'.²⁹⁸ As a literary theory, it is based on the belief that 'each act of textual production presupposes antecedent texts and anticipates prospective ones'.²⁹⁹ From this definition, it is evident that intertextuality was a dominant feature of Mau Mau songs. The Gikuyu myth of origin and popular Gikuyu legends were perhaps the greatest sources of inspiration for the Mau Mau and their compositions. The Gikuyu myth of origin, for instance, provided dynamic mobilising themes for the group. The myth emphasises the Gikuyu people's mythical origins and shared lineage through their common ancestors, Gikuyu and Mumbi. It also lays claim to a particular geographical space (the land around Mount Kenya) where *Ngai* (the Gikuyu god) placed Gikuyu and Mumbi. Gikuyu people were therefore, expected to maintain a close and permanent relationship with their ancestral land in order to continually commune with their deity and ancestors. Consequently, the Europeans' occupation of this geographical space not only denied the Gikuyu people their source of physical sustenance, but it was also an affront to the Gikuyu god and ancestors.

296 Durrani, p.175.

297 Leakey (1954), p. 75.

298 Bauman, R. A., *World of Others Words: Cross-cultural Perspectives on Intertextuality* (Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2004) p. 4.

299 Ibid, p. 4.

By invoking this myth in the songs, the Mau Mau emphasised the Gikuyu people's inalienable rights to this territory. This also explains their bad treatment of loyalists as the failure to support the movement that sought to reclaim 'their' land was equated to a lack of commitment to *Ngai*, Gikuyu ancestors, and to the entire house of Mumbi (as the Gikuyu people refer to themselves). The following song (whose Gikuyu version Kinyatti does not provide) is a good illustration of how the myth of origin was a source of mobilising and politicising themes:

Gikuyu and Mumbi

Ngai created Gikuyu and Mumbi
And he gave them land for their children
That has now been stolen by foreigners

(Chorus)
Wuui,³⁰⁰ children are wailing
Because of being oppressed
Wuui let us weep for Gikuyu and Mumbi
Are we all going to perish?

He who thinks of only of his own personal gains
Must remember that Gikuyu once said
Such person does not benefit the people
Let the hypocrites of the land remember that
A time will come
When they will be like Judas.³⁰¹

The song chronologically communicates the impetus behind the Mau Mau movement. Stanza one confers spirituality to Mau Mau's demand for land by invoking the Gikuyu god, '*Ngai*'. It also emphasises the idea of land being a communal resource thus the need for collective efforts to regain its control from the colonisers. Stanza two brings out the anguish the people as a community are undergoing under colonial rule. The lament interjection '*wuui*' that in Kikuyu represents pain is consistent with the aim of the song, which is to win the people's sympathy and therefore support for a collective action to address their communal deprivation and suffering. The reference to Judas in relation to the loyalists underscores the high moral ground on which Mau Mau fighters placed themselves and their actions. They are saviours and

300 *Wuui* –an interjection to indicate sorrow, fear and need for help.

301 Kinyatti, p. 24.

redeemers of the community as opposed to the loyalists, whose treachery deserves the suffering Mau Mau meted out to them.

Other songs appropriated legendary figures who were deemed to have sacrificed for the communal good. Names such as Waiyaki wa Hinga and Wangombe wa Ihura, who led early anti-colonial activities, Mugo wa Kibiro (the legendary Kikuyu seer who foretold the coming of the British), Jomo Kenyatta and Kimathi, featured prominently in the songs. The following song, for instance, invokes Waiyaki:

Andu Aitu Kirimu na Mugi

*Andu aitu kirimu na mugi
Nuu utekwona mithukirie?
Uria nyakeru, aratuthukia
Na maundu ma kumukumu
Chorus: Bururi uyu witu Gikuyu,
Ngaai ni aturathimiire na a kiuga
Tutikoima kuo*

*Mwatura, muhithagia ciana
Na itonga nguru cia Gikuyu
Tutangionera ciana Waikaro
Kai muhoi agathimaga*

(Chorus)
*Andu aitu Waiyaki niakuire,
Na agitutigira kirumi,
Ng'undu ici citu tutikendie
Na ithui no guciheana
(Chorus)*

Our People Wise and Foolish

Our people wise and foolish
Who cannot see the shakings?
How the white man is troubling our lives
On many issues

This land of ours Gikuyu people
God blessed it to us and said
We should never let it go.
You hide your children
With the rich of our people
Because you have no home our children
A squatter can never claim to be rich
(Chorus)

Our people when Wayaiki died
He left us a curse
That we should not sell our lands
And you are just selling them.³⁰²

The song adopts a class-based interpretation of the struggle. The colonialists and the loyalists are living in plenty while the masses are suffering and have no hope of a better life as depicted in the line '*A squatter can never claim to be rich*'. This then justifies the call for communal action. Another example is the following song that focuses on Kimathi, the purported leader of Mau Mau. The song is also an illustration of how popular Christian hymns were appropriated to carry political messages. The source is Kinyatti, so the Kikuyu version is not provided:

Kimathi

When our Kimathi ascended
Into the mountain alone
He asked for strength and courage
To decisively defeat the colonialists

He said that we should tread
The paths that he had trodden
That we should follow his revolutionary footsteps
And drink from his cup.

If you drink from the cup of courage
That cup I have drunk from myself
It is a cup of pain and of suffering
A cup of tears and of death [...]³⁰³

The song borrows from Jesus' retreat to mount Gethsemane just before his crucifixion. Jesus is replaced by *Kimathi* in an attempt to confer messianic attributes to him. By invoking messianic themes, the songs elevated the stature of their leaders, like Kimathi, to 'mythical figures' who like other religious messiahs, would lead their people to freedom. This also reveals the important role spirituality played in Mau Mau movement. The appropriation of Christian songs and themes was not only a concealing device to enable the people sing without being noticed, but was also a significant way of

302 As performed by Gerald Murimi and transcribed and translated by the researcher.

303 Kinyatti, p. 81.

employing the coloniser's own instruments of culture to fight him. Such songs would normally be sung using the hymn tunes.

The Significance and Use of Orature

The use of orature enabled the fighters to record the 'essence of the moment' in the battlefield, in detention camps and in prisons with spontaneity.³⁰⁴ The following song is, for instance, a record of a memorable journey of one of the fighters.

Twathiaga Tukenete

*Twathiaga tukenete, tugacoka tukenetei,
(Rugendo ruitu rwari rweга tugiithii na tugicokax2)
Na twakinya Longonot, tugikora kamuthuri, gakiuga nige kuga mbu
(General akiuga karekwo koige, koigithanie na Njirungix2)
Twathia thia hanini, tugikora mburi ikuite,
(General akiuga tutikarume tuti kanyitwo ni thahu x2)
Twathiaga tukenete, tugacoka tukenete,
(Rugendo ruitu rwari rweга tugiithii na tugicokax2)*

We Went in Happiness

We went in happiness and returned in happiness
(Our journey was good when we were going and when we were returning
X2)
When we reached Longonot, we met an old man, who threatened to scream
(General told him he will shoot him if he screams x2)
When we proceeded a short distance, we found a dead goat
(General told us not to touch it lest we bring evil on ourselves x2)
We went in happiness and returned in happiness
(Our journey was good when we were going and when we were returning
x2)³⁰⁵

The song also deconstructs the image of a 'trigger happy' and savage people, as the colonialists portrayed the Mau Mau in their attempt to discredit the movement. For instance, the *old man* is threatened with death only because he poses a danger to the fighters by threatening to scream. Further, the refusal to eat the *dead goat* indicates some of the moral codes

304 Bantu Mwaura, 'Orature of Combat: 'Cultural Aesthetics of Song as Political Action in Performance of Mau Mau Songs', in *Songs and Politics in Eastern Africa*, ed. by Kimani Njogu and Herve Maupeu, pp. 201-220 (p. 205).

305 As performed by Murimi and transcribed and translated by the researcher.

that guided the group and emphasises the cultural orientation of the Mau Mau.

The achievements and challenges of the fighters were also stored mainly songs. Bantu Mwaura, for instance, notes that the murders of colonial chiefs, Waruhiu and Nderi, and collaborators, Ofafa wa Tom and Mbotela, in 1953 were seen as huge achievements for the movement, and songs were composed in celebration.³⁰⁶ The following is a stanza from a song that was composed to celebrate the assassination Chief Waruhiu:

I will never sell out the country
Or love money more than my country
Waruhiu loved money
He died and left the money.³⁰⁷

The use of 'I' invites both the singers and listeners to make a personal pledge of their commitment to the ideals of the movement. This, therefore, bestows the responsibility of the struggle on the individual, rather than the whole movement. In the song the colonial loyalist, Waruhiu, is depicted as a greedy and inordinately materialistic person who risks communal existence for personal gain. The celebration of his death is underpinned by subtle but stern warnings about the consequences that are likely to befall anyone who flouts the ideals of the struggle.

From the fore going, it is evident that Mau Mau songs are, 'an important pool of information, a kind of archive,' on the activities, principles and ontologies of the Mau Mau movement as well as the Kenyan society in the colonial era.³⁰⁸ The songs enable us to probe deeper into Mau Mau history to really understand its political objectives. They are perhaps the most accurate sources of information on the movement, particularly if collected from authentic sources such as the fighters or the songbooks that were recorded during the war.

In addition to the songs, other forms of orature used to come to terms with colonialism, not just during the Mau Mau uprising but even before were oral narratives and proverbs. Two narratives were particularly popular in addressing the colonial phenomenon. The first is the legend of Mugo wa

306 Mwaura, p. 208.

307 Ibid.

308 Kinyatti, p. 3.

Kibiro, the legendary Kikuyu seer who purportedly prophesied colonialism. The story blames the loss of land and colonial domination on the people's disobedience and refusal to heed an ancient prophecy that warned them not to welcome Europeans into their midst. The second was an aetiological story of a man who is displaced from his house by the elephant after his kind gesture of sheltering him from a storm. The story counters the narrative of imperialism as being a 'civilising' mission by depicting the Europeans as aggressors as opposed to saviours. Proverbs, by their very nature, were spontaneously invoked particularly in situations where people wanted to pass the information in a coded and metaphorical way.

Ritual Oaths

Of all the activities associated with the Mau Mau, oaths were perhaps the most controversial. To the colonisers, they were 'horrible, filthy and degrading' rites that were deliberately designed to cause insanity in the oath-takers to make them commit 'unnatural...act[s] of arson, massacre and disembowelling of victims'.³⁰⁹ L.S.B. Leakey, a British-cum-Kenyan anthropologist, further dismissed oaths as lacking any cultural basis. He premised his argument on the idea that, traditionally, the Kikuyu people only administered oaths for social control, but not to sanction violence.³¹⁰

Another important anti-Mau Mau writer was the British psychiatrist, J. C. Carothers who argued that the movement was an innovation by ambitious, highly placed Kikuyus like Jomo Kenyatta who wanted to selfishly, raise consciousness among the ordinary people for personal gain.³¹¹ Carothers saw the Mau Mau oaths as 'peculiarly obscene and bestial' activities whose purpose was to induce a state of hypnosis in participants to make them commit horrendous actions. This, according to him, left permanent effects on the oath takers.³¹² He further claimed that those who had taken the most advanced oaths could not be rehabilitated

³⁰⁹ Leakey, pp. 80-85.

³¹⁰ Ibid (also see Kenyatta, 1970; Kanogo, 1987; Bunga, 2013 for more discussions on the purpose of oaths among the Kikuyu.)

³¹¹ John Carothers, *The Psychology of Mau Mau* (Nairobi: Colony and Protectorate of Kenya Printers, 1955), p.14.

³¹² Ibid.

because, as he argued, Africans were not endowed with a conscience or a sense of guilt about their actions.³¹³

Obviously, these one-sided and negative views of the Mau Mau ritual oaths by Europeans did not consider the functional and utilitarian role of the oaths to the Mau Mau revolutionaries who held them in the highest esteem. This is because they were the main means through which they enforced commitment to the group and its purposes. This explains the reasons behind the re-oathings, especially for those who were involved in combat. As Tom Askwith (1995), a colonial administrator stated, the repeated oathings were meant to make the fighters and supporters 'withstand the moral pressure confronting them to throw in the sponge'.³¹⁴

My observations during fieldwork appear to support this view because, from what I noted, people who took the oaths are still unwilling to readily volunteer details of the oathing process. This is especially so with advanced oaths. When they do, the information is highly censored. This explains why I have used an account from a written source to describe a typical oathing ceremony below as the ones I got from the field were either incoherent, or I had doubts about their authenticity.

The number of oaths administered by the movement remains a contentious subject, but two are adequately documented in the literature. The first is the oath of unity which was administered to both Kikuyu men and women.³¹⁵ The second is *batuni* or warriors' oath, which was administered to those involved in actual combat.³¹⁶ The *batuni* oath was viewed as a form of second circumcision and men who had not taken it were often referred to mockingly as *Kihii* (uncircumcised male).³¹⁷

The extent to which oaths can be described as ritual drama is debatable. In this study, I adopt Lokangaka Losambe and Devi Sarinjeive's (2001) definition of ritual drama to support my view that indigenous oaths can indeed be classified as theatrical. According to them, ritual drama

313 Ibid.

314 Tom Askwith, *From Mau Mau to Harambee. Memoirs and Memoranda of Colonial Kenya*, ed. by Joan Lewis (University of Cambridge: African Studies Centre, 1995), p.11.

315 Green, p. 76.

316 Ibid.

317 Ibid.

involves repeated action that is closely bound to religious beliefs and symbolism.³¹⁸ It incorporates elements such as role playing, costume, dialogue, song, dance, symbolic gesture, movement and mime, to express 'communal fears, hopes wishes, placation of the gods, and the natural elements'. The aim of such dramas is to produce desirable behaviours in people. According to these writers, 'the drama and theatre of ritual is not dependent on the narrative but on spectacle and action'.³¹⁹ The following description of a typical oath of unity ceremony by Mia Green shows how Mau Mau oathing ceremonies fitted within the definition of ritual drama by the two scholars:

In general, seven candidates loosely bound together by goats' small intestines on the shoulders and the feet took the oath together [...] The candidates stood bare feet while a bracelet of raw goatskin was placed on the right wrist, the middle finger pricked and the blood smeared on the thorax of the carcass of an un-castrated male goat. The piece of meat was bitten off and swallowed after the repetition of each vow. This together with the licking of blood from each other's fingers made those undergoing the ritual 'blood brothers' [...] who would therefore not invoke sorcery against each other [...]. A cross was made on the forehead and the candidates' joints marked in goat's blood. Holding each other's' hands the initiated had to pass through an arch of banana, maize and sugar cane stalks seven times. Each time the administrator cut a piece of goat's intestine while the audience repeated 'may you be cut like this! May the oath kill him who lies [...]?' Two soil balls held together with milk, fat and blood were presented to the group who held them, one high in the right hand and one on the left hand pressed to the navel. Facing Mount Kenya, the home of *Ngai* they swore [...] a number of vows relating to the action and objectives of the movement. These were repeated while performing further actions, usually pricking of the goat's eye with *kei* apple thorn seven times [...] pricking of seven Sodom apples seven times [...] 'and if I fail [...] may this oath kill me' was repeated after each vow [...]³²⁰

From this highly dramatic event, we gain insights into the symbolism of the various activities involved in the oathing rite. For instance, mixing of soil, blood, milk and fat could symbolise the unity of purpose, a pledge of

318 Lokangaka Losambe and Devi Sarinjeive, 'Introduction', in *Colonial and Post-Colonial Drama and Theatre in Africa*, ed. by Lokangaka Losambe and Devi Sarinjeive, pp i-xi (p. viii).

319 Ibid.

320 Green, p.77.

commitment and an attachment to the land, which were sources of sustenance for the community. The pricking of goats' eyes or Sodom apples imposes commitment to the rite and its objectives since anyone who flouted the oath may suffer the same fate as the goat's eyes or the apples. Additionally, the emphasis on the number seven in the oathing rites is significant as the number is associated with bad luck in the Kikuyu community. This further reinforces the repercussions of breaking the oath.

Activities such as repeated chanting, the movement of the initiates through the arch, pricking of goats' eyes and Sodom apples, and repeating the various activities seven times enhanced the spectacle and theatre of the ritual. These dramatic features illustrate what Chinyowa refers to as the 'histrionic aesthetics' of ritual drama.³²¹ The *batuni* oath was even more elaborate. It included many of the rituals I have described above. The major difference with the oath of unity was that it was administered individually and not *en masse*. This is perhaps because it was mostly given to the combatants in the battlefield thus a need to emphasise individual responsibility in realising the goals of the struggle.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter reveals that culture was a crucial weapon against colonialism especially where other ways of confrontation may have been disastrous. The discussion has also revealed the dynamic nature of indigenous performance forms and its ability to re-invent itself to address communal problems. In addition to voicing their discontent with colonialism through performance, the indigenous people were able to envision an ideal world without their oppressors as some of the performances in this chapter have revealed. The next chapters will examine the changes in performance in the post-colonial and contemporary periods.

³²¹ Chinyowa, 'Context, Performance, and Meaning of Shona Ritual Drama', pp. 3-13 (p. 4).

Chapter 4

Theatre after Independence: The Early Years of President Jomo Kenyatta's Rule (1963-1967)

Introduction

The immediate post-independence period (the 1960s) is associated with little theatrical activity. Even the few plays that emanated from this era have been dismissed in many writings as being of abysmal literary achievements.

Scholars have blamed the poor growth on the 'neo-colonial' nature of the policies that the first post-independence government adopted for not only the sectors of culture and arts, but also the entire Kenyan political economy.

Robert Maxon, for instance, argues that Kenyatta's policies were 'inimical to indigenous cultures' given the serious abuse and subjugation they (cultures) had suffered under colonialism.³²²

This chapter is concerned with the way the various aspects of theatre and theatre spaces evolved in the first decade of independence. It begins by outlining why Kenyatta's policies are often termed as neo-colonial and capitalist and the implications of these policies for the growth, form and thematic concerns of early independence theatre.

The Political Context: The Making of the Neo-Colonial State

Kenya gained independence in 1963 with Mzee Jomo Kenyatta as her first her prime minister. He became the president in 1964. As in other former colonies, the declaration of independence was accompanied by a strong sense of hope and expectation among ordinary Kenyans. The struggle for independence had been marked by a great sense of nationalism and patriotism that saw both ordinary people and their leaders put up a united front in an effort to emancipate the country and its people from colonial rule and deprivation.

It was therefore expected that the same comradeship would characterise the relationship between the two even after independence.

³²² Mumma, p.137.

However, as William Ochieng notes, the 'revolution' that the pan-Africanists had hoped the declaration of independence would herald for the good of all Kenyans did not materialise. This lack of transformation has been blamed majorly on the 'neo-colonial' nature of Kenyatta's policies.³²³ According to Ochieng, upon taking power, the 'call to forgive and forget became the keynote of [Kenyatta's] government. Youth-wings and radicals who spoke of revenge were loudly rebuked'.³²⁴

Kenyatta's pacification efforts were received with mixed feelings. His allies applauded them as crucial in averting an imminent political and economic crisis that it was claimed a sudden withdrawal of European and Asian investments and labour portended for the new state of Kenya. His critics, however, accused him of encouraging the 'recolonisation' of the country and betraying the ideals of self-determination upon which the struggle for independence was anchored.³²⁵ Kenyatta was also accused of favouring capitalism where free enterprise and private ownership were emphasised over wealth and resource distribution for the benefit of all Kenyans.³²⁶ This was despite the regime having stipulated clearly in the Sessional Paper No.10 of 1965, entitled 'African Socialism and its Application to Planning in Kenya', how it would govern using the egalitarian principles of African Socialism.

Due to the close partnerships that the post-independence regime established with not only Britain but also other Western capitalist superpowers, foreign investment, as Ross Kidd notes, moved to Kenya in 'a

323 See Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Barrel of the Pen: Resistance and Oppression in Neo-colonial Kenya* (University of Michigan: Africa World Press, 1983) and Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-colonialism: The last Stages of Neo-Colonialism* (London: Nelson, 1965) for a detailed discussion of the term neo-colonialism.

324 William Ochieng, 'Kenyatta Era 1963-1978: Structural and Political Changes', in *Decolonisation & Independence in Kenya: 1940-1993*, ed. by Bethwell A. Ogot and William R. Ochieng, pp.83-109, (p. 93).

325 See Oginga Odinga, *Not Yet Uhuru: The Autobiography of Oginga Odinga* (London, Heinemann: 1967). Odinga was Kenya's first vice-president. He was also one of the politicians who spearheaded the leftist wing of thought in the 1960s. The book is a story of himself and the Kenyan nation within the period under consideration in this chapter

326 Ochieng, p. 85.

big way' after independence.³²⁷ Multinational corporations also took dominant economic positions that were formerly occupied by European settlers in the colonial era.³²⁸ Under the principle of 'mutual social responsibility', the foreign investors were expected to:

- Make shares in their companies available to Africans who wished to buy them,
- Employ Africans at managerial levels as soon as qualified people [could] be found and
- Provide training facilities for Africans.³²⁹

These provisions paved way for well-placed individuals to enter into partnerships with multinational companies as junior shareholders, partners or directors. This enabled them to amass huge amounts of wealth and live in plenty while a majority of Kenyans suffered in extreme poverty.³³⁰ These were the socio-economic inequalities that the radical Kenyan politician, Josiah Kariuki, was referring to when he christened Kenya a nation of 'ten millionaires and ten million beggars' just before he was killed in 1975.³³¹ Although the law provided for all Kenyans to be involved in such investments, the reality was that the majority of the people had no access to resources to buy shares or education and skills to secure prominent jobs in these companies.

The land transfer and redistribution process that the colonial government started in the late 1950s and which were followed through by the post-independence regime in the 1960s and the 1970s was problematic.³³² Both governments appeared to focus more on 'preserving the capitalist agrarian economy [that was] prevalent in the white highlands',

327 Kidd, p. 290.

328 Ibid.

329 The Republic of Kenya, 'Sessional Paper No.10: African Socialism and its Application to Planning in Kenya' (Nairobi: Government Printers, 1965), pp1-62 (p.13).

329 Kidd, p. 290.

330 Kidd, p. 290.

331 Ochieng, p. 103.

332 Karuti Kanyinga, 'The Legacy of the White Highlands: Land Rights, Ethnicity and the Post- Election Violence in Kenya', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 27:3 (July 2009),329-331 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02589000903154834>> [accessed 5 January 2015]

than addressing the issue of landlessness.³³³ Thus, European settlers continued to control huge chunks of prime land in the highlands even acquiring more after independence.³³⁴

The 'Africanisation of the highlands' initiative which involved buying land from European settlers under a willing settler arrangement and allocating it to Kenyans was also seen to favour the indigenous elite who could engage in commercial farming. They were allocated huge parcels of land even as many ordinary Kenyans remained landless or were given just enough for their subsistence needs.³³⁵ The focus on squatters who had lived or rented in the European farms for long time in the redistribution of white highlands, as Kanyingi further notes, 'ethnicised the land question and cultivated conditions for 'mobilising ethnicity' as a means of accessing land rights as the majority of the squatters were Kikuyus.³³⁶ The much focus on the Kikuyu people was also out of the need to prevent forceful seizures of European farms by former militants.

Moreover, despite the efforts at land distribution, significant numbers of poor ordinary Kenyans, including freedom fighters, were left landless and without a source of sustenance which increased poverty levels, the feeling of exclusion and discontent. The demand for land also forced those who could not be accommodated in their former ancestral lands to relocate to other parts of the country where they could find free or affordable land in the settlement schemes the government established in various parts of the country. The result of these migrations has been the creation of complex multi-cultural demographic patterns in areas that were once culturally homogenous. Over the years, some of these localities have become points of conflict whenever the migrants and native communities disagree over access and sharing of resources and power.

In view of all these happenings, it did not take long before Kenyans began to cast doubt on the independence dream. Jane Plastow's words in her study on theatre and politics in Tanzania, Ethiopia and Zimbabwe (1996) captures adequately this situation:

333 Kanyingi, p. 330.

334 Ochieng, p. 98.

335 Kanyingi, p. 330.

336 Ibid.

As the machinery of the new states became entrenched, it was in all cases perceived to be moving further from identification with the aspirations of the people. Given the heady joy of independence and the enormous expectations of the populace, contrasted with the poverty and problems inherited by the newly independent and revolutionary states, one can see by hindsight that the process of disillusionment was inevitable.³³⁷

The disillusionment that Plastow refers to began to engulf Kenya in as early as 1965. Just two years after independence KANU split due to ideological and political differences between the party leaders (Kenyatta and Odinga) into camps that were popularly known as 'conservatives' and 'radicals'.³³⁸ The 'radicals' included people such as Oginga Odinga, Bildad Kagia and Joseph Kariuki, who were once strong allies of Kenyatta but who now accused his government of undermining the aspirations of creating a better Kenya for all her citizens. While Kenyatta's conservative camp advocated a free enterprise economy, the radical camp was more socialist-oriented in its ideas.

The culmination of the fallout was in 1966 when the 'radical' camp formed the Kenya People's Union (KPU), supposedly to represent the interests of the ordinary people who had not benefitted from Kenyatta's capitalist regime. However, despite their claim of representing ordinary people, the KPU could not circumvent the ethnic consciousness that has bedevilled Kenyan politics since the colonial era to win significant popular support across all communities. Thus, it only gained significant support in Odinga's backyard in the Luo Nyanza.³³⁹ The crisis in KANU was also unfolding against a background of the 'cold war' between the capitalist West and communist East Europe and the fall-out in KANU was quickly entangled in this wider debate. The radicals were accused by Kenyatta's administration of propagating a communist agenda with the intention of destabilising the country. The situation worsened in 1969 when the government banned KPU and detained its leaders, including Oginga Odinga.³⁴⁰ Odinga would remain

337 Plastow, *African Theatre and Politics*, p.126.

338 See Ochieng, pp. 83-109 for a more detailed discussion of the political context in Kenya after independence.

339 Ibid.

340 Ibid.

in the political cold for the rest of Kenyatta's rule even after his release two years later.

The dissent against Kenyatta's administration was not limited to politicians. With time, civil society organisations, trade unionists, intellectuals and students at the University of Nairobi (Kenya's only university during the Kenyatta era) gradually joined in the agitation against the regime, using various platforms, including theatre. The result was a highly politicised state as the dissidents sought to have their say and the regime tried to assert its authority in ways that were sometimes extremely draconian.

As years went by, detention became a commonplace practice for intimidating state critics. Political alliances were formed for expediency, constitutional reviews that transferred immense powers to the presidency were enacted as Kenyatta and his allies struggled to tighten their grip on power. There were also several prominent murders that were controversially linked to the state. The effect of these developments on theatre is the focus of the rest of this chapter.

The 'Three Theatres' after Independence (1963-1967)

The easiest way to look at Kenyan theatre by independence in 1963 is along the lines of the three racial identities that dominated the country in the colonial era. These are European (Western), Asian and indigenous Kenyan theatres. As I have shown in previous chapters, each of the three had followed separate paths in their practices in the colonial era. While European theatre focused on fulfilling an entertainment and imperial agenda, Asian theatre was concerned with not only entertainment, but also cultural assertion. Indigenous theatre was, for its part, firmly focused on the struggle for independence over and above cultural assertion.

After independence, Kenyans expected the three 'theatres' to at least 'harmoniously coexist' with one another, if not totally integrate in their objectives. They also hoped the three would reinvent themselves to respond adequately to the challenges and needs of the new nation.³⁴¹ Instead, each continued to follow the same individualistic paths they had taken in the

341 R.M Osotsi, 'The Theatre in Independent Kenya', in *Themes in Kenyan History*, ed. by William Ochieng , pp. 209-217(p. 213).

colonial era. Mumbi Kaigwa, the Director of The Arts Canvas, who has been on the Kenyan theatre scene for the last forty years had this to say about theatre in the early independence period:

At the time, there were people who were doing only Indian theatre, only South Asian theatre and there were people who were doing only white theatre. In the University of Nairobi, you could occasionally have a white person in the play but in a small role and often as the enemy...I can't speak for the whites but I know that the blacks felt that they were not welcome when there were shows by white people [...] there was always that tension.³⁴²

This was particularly the case with professional and semi-professional theatre as I discuss shortly.

European Theatre

Even after independence expatriate theatre groups such as the Donovan Maule Players (popularly known as DM), the City Players and the Nakuru Players continued to entertain the still considerable populations of Europeans, Asians and the emerging indigenous elite who lived in major towns along lines similar to those of colonial times. As Gichangiri Ndigirigi (1990) notes, 'imitations of Broadway and London West-End plays and musicals' continued to dominate important theatre spaces such as the Little Theatre Club in Mombasa, the Nakuru Players, the Donovan Maule Theatre as well the government-owned KNT. Writing about the Donovan Maule Players which up to 1980 was still the most influential theatre company in the country, Ndigirigi notes that of the over 450 productions the group put up between 1948 (when the group was initiated) and 1982 (when it closed down), none of these was an African play.³⁴³ With a government that did not seem interested in establishing similar spaces for Kenyans or enforcing equal access in existing spaces, this meant that theatre continued to be a preserve of the expatriate community and Kenyan elite.

The failure by the KNT to transform to what Aghan Odero, the current KCC director called 'a Kenyan space' was a particular concern to Kenyans.³⁴⁴ This made the theatre a constant site of contest and negotiation

342 Interview with Mumbi Kaigwa held at ABC Place in Nairobi on 05 February 2014.

343 Ndigirigi, 'Theatre after Kamirithu', p. 80.

344 Odero, Interview, 21 November 2013.

regarding the kind performances it prioritised.³⁴⁵ The discontent was fuelled by the fact that up to 1968, there was little Kenyan representation in the management of the KNT. The directorship of the theatre and the Governing Council that ran the entire Kenya Cultural Centre, where the KNT is located, had also remained exclusively European and Asian.³⁴⁶ The KNT's proximity to the University of Nairobi, from where most of the pressure to de-colonise Kenyan performance emanated, accentuated these tensions leading to concessions that from 1968 guaranteed Kenyans more access to the KNT, as I shall discuss in the next chapter.

Western theatre also continued to dominate the Kenyan school syllabus and the KDSF, a situation that was also attributed to a lack of new thinking in both sectors. At the KDSF, for instance, until 1969 when the festival was placed under the Ministry of Education, the British Council which still ran the festival, sourced adjudicators from America and Europe. This led to an emphasis on Western norms of judging plays such as 'diction, delivery, timing, pause and clumsiness'.³⁴⁷ Since the festival was organised (and still is) on the basis of competition (over and above celebration of Kenyan culture) the producers were forced to focus on the above aspects in order to win trophies and awards. This reduced even further the prospects of experimenting with locally based aesthetics.³⁴⁸ Moreover, up to 1982, the yearly KDSF continued to be held at the KNT in Nairobi. This made the festival an affair of elite schools who could afford to travel or were located near the city. The emphasis on the play form in the festival was also a deterrent for the rural schools as drama was not an area that was taught with great emphasis to Kenyans in the colonial era as I discussed in Chapter Two.

The most notable European contribution to Kenyan drama in the early post-independence was that of Graham Hyslop who even after independence continued to publish plays in Kiswahili language for school festivals. His plays *Mchimba Kisima* (He who digs a Well) (1974) and *Kulipa Matanga* (Paying Back is Mourning) (1975), followed the same style as his

345 Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*, p. 38.

346 See Mumma, pp.100-112 for a more detailed discussion of this.

347 Peter Nazareth, 'East African Drama' as quoted by Kerr, p.109.

348 Ibid.

earlier plays where the dramatic action was centred around narratives that expanded on important indigenous proverbs.

His plays were often allegorical, discussing some of the serious social-political challenges the country faced. *Mchimba Kisima* warned people against dishonesty. The clerk who steals money from his office parallels the theft of public resources by the well-placed elite which disenfranchised the country and Kenyan people. *Kulipa Matanga* dramatised the ease with which people borrow money from others and how difficult it is for them to pay back. The play appears to be an allegory on the growing national debt which was becoming a problem to service as a result of mismanagement of public funds.

Asian Theatre

Asian theatre also continued to thrive in spaces such as the Goan Institute and the KNT with groups such as the Jolly Boys and the Oriental Art Circle (OAC) being the leading Asian performance groups.³⁴⁹ Jolly Boys was founded in the 1950s. It comprised mainly of Goans, a subgroup of the Indian community.³⁵⁰ Although Indian theatre, even after independence, comprised mainly European and Indian plays in English and Indian languages (such as Gujarati, Punjabi, Goan and Hindi), in the new era some of the cultural groups appear to have developed interest in original and locally written material.³⁵¹

The OAC, which was still the most important Asian cultural group, was one such group. Several of their productions at the KDF in the early years of independence were original plays written by Kuldip Sondhi. Sondhi was an American trained aeronautic engineer and a hotelier in Mombasa who combined business with writing plays.³⁵² He could, arguably, be described as the most prolific writer of post-independence Kenya having written over twenty titles ranging from plays to short stories and poems from 1963 to the contemporary period. By 1967, he had written nine plays, seven

349 Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*, p.38.

350 Mumma, p.133.

351 Robert Gregory, 'Literary Development in East Africa', p. 440.

352 Aamera Jiwaji, 'Hotelier Who has a Way With Words', *Business Daily*, 24 January 2013, p.1.

of which were produced by the BBC as radio plays.³⁵³ Some were also published in various African play anthologies and by the author in a collection that he entitled *Undesignated and Other Plays* (1973).

His plays were mainly political satires that can be classified as post-colonial. Though he mainly wrote on issues afflicting Asians in the post-colonial Kenya, Sondhi was always able to detach his plays from the narrow confines of 'race-victimhood' to depict the Asians' problems in Kenya as another symptom of the failing Kenyan independence dream. Thus, in his drama, he often presented the various perspectives of the issue at hand and then revealed the ironies in some of the strong beliefs people held regarding them.

In 1963, the OAC contracted Sondhi to write for the group an original play for that year's Kenya Drama festival. This led to *Undesignated* (1963) which was also Sondhi's first play. It was a satire on race relations in the post-colonial Kenya. It won most of the awards in that year's festival including that of the best script.³⁵⁴ The play was later toured by Makerere Travelling Theatre to various parts of Uganda.³⁵⁵ *Undesignated* explores how experience, knowledge and talent were sacrificed on the altar of race in the process of nationalisation of the public service jobs in Kenya. However, in the play, Sondhi refuses to confine himself to the dialectics of 'Asian' versus 'Black'. Thus, Majid and Savitri Guru are made subjects of ridicule for trying to play the victim when all they are concerned with is how the loss of jobs will affect their personal comfort.

They are a sharp contrast with Engineer Prem Guru who is mainly concerned with the implications of having unqualified personnel in positions that required skilled labour. The play takes almost an agitprop form towards the end when June Mwendwa tries to urge her boyfriend Solomon who is expected to replace the experienced Guru to refuse the job. Though Solomon is a trained engineer, he lacks not only experience, but also passion for the job as his interest is in painting. The author's message to the ex-colonies in this play appears to be that they should resist the urge to

353 Ibid.

354 Ibid.

355 Robert Gregory, *The Rise and Fall of Philanthropy in East Africa*, p.168.

replace 'White/Asian racism' in the colonial era with 'African racism' in the post-colonial era. He is also calling for individual responsibility in ensuring the ex-colonies realise their dreams as depicted in the character of June Mwendwa who would rather marry a poor painter than a rich engineer at the risk of damaging the whole country.

His second play, *With Strings* (1965) was also written for the OAC performance in the Kenya Drama Festivals of 1965 where it won the prize for the best original play.³⁵⁶ It was later performed by Makerere students in various parts of Uganda³⁵⁷ and published in *Ten One-Act-Plays*, an anthology edited by Cosmo Pieterse in 1968. His focus in this play was still on race relations in post-colonial Kenya. In the play, Sondhi exposes the irony of Njoroge (a retired Kenyan administrator) and Dev (a retired Kenyan-Asian engineer) relating closely as business partners yet they are unable to accommodate the idea of intermarriage between Mohan (Dev's son) and Cynthia (Njoroge's niece and ward). Cynthia and Mohan as well as the determination with which they fight for their love, are symbolic of the post-colonial nation that Sondhi envisages - one where race is not a determinant in people's lives.

Though race-relations inform most of Sondhi's drama to date, he also wrote on other Kenyan and universal issues. In *Encounter* (1967), first published in *Ten One-Act-Plays* where *With Strings* was also published, the main theme is the Mau Mau uprising. The focus of the play was the irony of the British discrediting the Mau Mau movement as barbarian while, in reality, both parties were engaged in a nationalistic endeavour of defending their territorial rights. In his characteristic style, Sondhi's presents his audience with various perspectives about Mau Mau using stereotypical characters. Thus, we scoff at Superintendent Paddy's racial-based and narrow perception of the war as much as that of the first terrorist whose main aim of going to war is to have for himself the property in the hands of white people.³⁵⁸ The terrorist is a sharp contrast to his colleagues who want an enabling environment to fend for themselves and their families. The most

356 Ibid.

357 Ibid.

358 'Encounter', in *Ten One-Act Plays*, ed. by Cosmo Pieterse (Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books, 1968), pp. 24-25.

notable performance of this play was during the South African Black Theatre Union Festival (SABTU) by the black students of the University of Natal in July 1972. The play was banned from the second SABTU festival that was held in December of the same year purportedly, for its 'inflammatory' themes.³⁵⁹

Another play by Sondhi was *The Magic pool* (1970), a play that is based on an African oral narrative mocking a universal problem of foolhardiness. Chengo, a hunchback is struck to death by the sea-goddess who had shown him mercy at an earlier date when he tried to lure her out of the magic pool just to prove he is important to his playmates. This play was published in *Short African Plays* (1972), edited by Cosmo Pieterse. The fact that Sondhi's plays were featured in various African anthologies and were widely performed on radio and stage indicates his importance as an East African playwright.

Another Kenyan-Asian who contributed to theatre in the early independence era was the Mombasa-born teacher, and a graduate of Makerere University in 1965, Sudru Kasaam. He is popularly remembered for his sketch play *Mifupa*, that was translated into English and published under the title of 'Bones' in *Short East African Plays* in 1968. The play was performed twenty times in Uganda and Kenya in 1965 by Makerere Travelling Theatre.³⁶⁰ Kasaam played the leading role of the butcher and according to Cook and Lee, he elaborated the role with a 'burlesque comic miming in keeping with the broader satirical idea [...] which unmistakably got home his points'.³⁶¹

In *Mifupa*, Kasaam's focus is on the theme of corruption. The dramatic action in the play revolves around the idea of 'bones' which in the play are used to symbolise both corruption and exploitation. The butcher is depicted as corrupt because he inflates his profits by adding bones to the customers' measures of meat which are said to have littered the floor for days. The theme of corruption is also seen through the actions of the

359 Loren Kruger, *The Drama of South Africa: Plays, Pageants and Publics Since 1910* (Routledge, London and New York, 1999), p.130.

360 Gregory, 'Literary Development in East Africa', p. 447.

361 *Short East African Plays in English*, ed. by David Cook and Mile Lee, (Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books, 1970).

licencing officer who stops seeing the filth in the butchery the moment he is shown the 'bones' (money). He proceeds to issue the trading licence to the butcher despite the unhygienic conditions of the butchery. The woman customer captures the dehumanising nature of rising corruption when she likens the butcher's actions of adding dirty, meatless bones to people's purchases to reducing them to the level of dogs.³⁶²

One way to explain Asians interest in local Kenyan issues is that writing and performing original material was a symbolic way of celebrating independence from colonial rule and theatre. They may have also seen in theatre an ideal platform to express their frustration with the lack realisation of their hopes and aspirations after independence.

Further, the above discussion appears to contradict the dominant narrative on East African Asians' contribution to the literary culture of the region. Taban Lo Liyong in his much-publicised essay, 'East Africa, O East Africa, I Lament Thy Literary Bareness' published in 1965, for instance, indicts 'our citizens of Asian origin' for 'taking more care of family business than engaging in literary works'. He goes on to urge the Asian community and religious leaders to play a more active role in fostering the cultural growth of East Africa.³⁶³

The Asians' contribution to Kenyan drama may not have been much but the same can be said of indigenous Kenyans. Indeed, Liyong underscored this fact when in the above-quoted essay he described the East African region as 'a dry, desolate, barren stretch of wilderness where literature [had] simply refused to sprout'.³⁶⁴ According to Gregory (1996) and Gaurav Desai (2011), the perceived lack of contribution of Asians to East African literature stems from a lack of recognition of Asians' works in mainstream literary and performance forums.³⁶⁵

Indigenous Theatre

The attainment of independence in Kenya appears to have brought little relief to indigenous theatre. Indeed, the arts and culture do not appear to

362 'Bones', in *Short East African Plays in English*, p.127.

363 Taban Liyong, 'East Africa O East Africa I Lament thy Literary Bareness', *Transition*, 4.19 (1965), p.11.

364 Ibid.

365 Ibid.

have been areas of focus for the post-independence regime. This is despite the regime having highlighted, as Robert Maxon notes, the significance of the two sectors in various official documents. In the *Kenya Official Handbook* of 1973, for instance, the government emphasised the need to 'revive and enhance the dignity and relevance of Kenya's cultural heritage'.³⁶⁶ In the *Republic of Kenya Development Plan* of 1966-1970, culture was defined as:

A unique way of life peculiar to a people, encompassing social institutions, values, norms and ethics as well as attire and various forms of artistic and literary expression...through the nation's unique artefacts, diversity of song, art, dance, theatre, literature, and other traditions.³⁶⁷

However, as Maxon further notes, no 'truly Kenyan national culture' emerged in the first and a half decades of independence.³⁶⁸ This partly explains why in the cultural awakening of the 1970s, the question of what constituted a national Kenyan theatre was pertinent. The lack of regard for culture by the post-independence government was further demonstrated through its failure to designate a specific ministry to coordinate the cultural affairs of the country, a situation that persisted up to 1968 when the ministry of social services was initiated with culture being one of the departments in the Ministry.³⁶⁹

Theatre remained out of reach of many ordinary Kenyans even after independence. Apart from the location of the KNT in a place in an upmarket area that was inaccessible to ordinary Kenyans, the use of English in productions also contributed to the exclusion of the ordinary people from theatre as a majority of them could not speak or write in the language.³⁷⁰ While the schools would occasionally tour plays in rural areas, there were few options to take to the ordinary people given that even the few dramas that were published by Kenyans within this period were mainly in English. The only notable theatre initiative that tried to address the marginalisation of

366 'Kenya Official Handbook', 1973 as quoted in Robert Maxon, 'Kenyatta Era: 1963-1978. Social and Cultural Changes', in *Decolonisation & Independence in Kenya: 1940-1993*, ed.by B.A Ogot and W.R Ochieng , pp. 110-145 (p.139).

367 'Republic of Kenya Development Plan', 1966-197 as quoted in Maxon, p.139.

368 Maxon, p.139.

369 Ibid.

370 Ezekiel Mphahlele, 'African Drama', *Proceedings of the Seminar on African Culture and New East African Writings in December 1965*, pp.1-14 (p.1).

ordinary people from theatre in the period under consideration was *Chemi Chemi* Theatre Company that was founded by Ezekiel Mphahlele in 1964. It specialised on performing plays in Swahili and English in Eastlands and Eastleigh where most Africans lived in Nairobi and to schools outside the city.³⁷¹

Indigenous Dance

The only mode of indigenous performance that prospered and gained national appeal after independence was indigenous dance or what Kerr and Chifunnyise (2004) call 'choreographic nationalism'.³⁷² Dance flourished for two reasons. The first is attributed to Kenyatta's love for this form of performance. This made dance a core entertainment mode in state functions, a culture that has continued to this day.³⁷³ The rest of the political class followed his example, leading to the emergence of hundreds of traditional dance societies across the country. The *Nyakinyua* women dance groups from the Central and the Rift Valley regions were the most popular and were a common feature at many state functions.³⁷⁴

The main focus of such dances was (and still is) to praise and entertain the political class in exchange for fame, status and material gifts that accrued from participating in such functions. As such, there was rarely any criticism of the excesses of the leaders in the songs. Thus, the growth of the dance in relation to its traditional functions of education, protest or entertainment during the pre-colonial and colonial eras was seriously compromised. Maina Mutonya (2010) claims that even 'the resistance songs of the Mau Mau era' were not spared from this abuse. They would often be 'performed in formal ensembles at official functions and events'³⁷⁵ not with a view of reminding Kenyans of their history or to empower them culturally, but

371 Ibid, p.1.

372 David Kerr and Stephen Chifunnyise, 'South Africa', in *A History in of Theatre Africa*, ed.by Martin Banham (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 265-311 (p. 283).

373 Maxon, p.140.

374 Maina Mutonya, 'The Beat Goes On: Performing Postcolonial Disillusionment in Kenya', *Humana del Sur*, 5.8 (Enero-junio, 2010)
<<http://erevistas.saber.ula.ve/index.php/humaniadelsur/article/view/5120/4927>>
[accessed 26 July 2016] (p. 47).

375 Mutonya, p. 53.

to validate the positions of the political class against a background of growing dissatisfaction with their leadership.

The second factor that made dance a popular form was the increased recognition of dance's potential in cultural tourism. This led to even greater abuse and exploitation of not only the dance, but also Kenyan people and cultures as the motive in the tourism industry was to make money rather than preserving/developing these performances. Moreover, most of the dance performances, particularly those targeting Western audiences are normally characterised by highly eroticised dance movements perhaps, in an attempt to uphold the 'popular imagination' of Westerners that dance from Africa was anchored on 'spectacle'.³⁷⁶ This, arguably, contributes in making Africa seem 'backward' and 'traditional' in a negative sense. Augustin Hartar's description of dancers in Tanzania as 'half-clad women, sweating away in a dance at the airport to welcome state guests' and tourists (which is also true for Kenya) highlights further the exploitative dimension of some of these performances.³⁷⁷

Published Drama

The other sector of theatre that appeared to make some gains in the early independence period was published drama. The growth was closely linked to Makerere University College, where most of the literary and intellectual activity in East Africa appears to have been centred in the 1960s. It was there that the first Kenyan post-colonial plays were written mainly by Kenyan students studying at the College. However, most of the plays were later performed in Kenya and other parts of East Africa, particularly by educational institutions.

Makerere Travelling Theatre that was founded in 1963 played an important role in the dissemination of these plays to ordinary people. According to Cook and Miles, they would perform in various languages (English, Swahili, Luganda, Lwo, Runyoro/Rutoro) in rural areas in Kenya and Uganda. The two scholars note further that when plays were in English

³⁷⁶ Christy Adair, 'Engaging Communities in Contemporary Dance in East Africa', in *African Theatre Media & Performance*, ed. by David Kerr and Jane Plastow (Britain: James Currey, 2011), pp. 91-111 (p. 96).

³⁷⁷ Augustin Hartar, 'The State of Theatre Education in Tanzania', (unpublished manuscript, University of Dar es Salaam, 2001), pp. 1-30 (p. 20).

and audiences ordinary people, the strategy was to give a 'synopsis of the plays in English' verbally in 'Kiswahili and the local vernacular before performance'.³⁷⁸ In this way, rural people were accorded the opportunity to engage with formal modes of theatre even though only as spectators.

The focus of published plays and theatre in the early independence period appears to have been on narrating post-colonial stories and providing East African audiences with alternative drama to the Western plays that still dominated the various theatre platforms. The idea of developing locally based dramatic styles and aesthetics was still not a core area of interest at the time. Thus, most of the plays of the early post-colonial era were realist and written in conventions of Western drama. Indeed, a significant number of them betray the heavy influence Shakespearean and Greek tragic writing had on these writers, as they are one to three act tragedies that focused mainly on the themes of love and family or inter-community conflict.

The dramatic conflict often revolved around the clash between individualistic needs of the protagonist against those of his/her conservative community or family. The plays often ended with catastrophic deaths that led to improved relations between the warring parties. There was also a heavy reliance on dramatic irony, soliloquies, foreshadowing and asides to build and resolve conflicts. As David Cook and Michael Okenimkpe note about Ngugi's plays, most the plays of this period were 'rudimentary' and didactic.³⁷⁹ Nevertheless, for a theatre historian these plays offer important insights into the evolution of the intellectual and artistic ideas of some of the key Kenyan writers and are a good source of information on the thematic concerns of the time.

Among the first Kenyan playwrights of this period was Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Ngugi made history in 1962 when, as James Ngugi, he published *The Black Hermit* (1962), the first full-length play in English to be written by an East African in the post-colonial era. The play was written for the first Ugandan Independence Day celebrations in September 1962, out of the country's need for 'something original' and to indicate a 'break with the

³⁷⁸ *Short East African Plays in English*, p. ix.

³⁷⁹ David Cook and Michael Okenimkpe, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: An Exploration of his Writings* (London: James Currey: 1997), p.166.

past'.³⁸⁰ Though the play could not be performed at the celebrations, as it had not been completed, it was later staged at the Uganda National Theatre in November 1962 by Makerere College Students Dramatic Society in a production that had a multi-national and multi-racial cast.³⁸¹

The opening performance is said to have 'moved many in the audience to tears',³⁸² perhaps not only because of how the themes resonated with the African elite, but also because it was the first time an indigenous play graced that Theatre.³⁸³ Unfortunately, the performance was stopped before its full run and the director of the theatre fired when the European community accused him of attempting to 'Africanise the theatre'.³⁸⁴ This experience forced the University community to revert to Makerere University's Main Hall where they could freely perform drama that resonated with their intellectual persuasions. In Kenya, the play was among the successful performances the National Theatre Company (NTC) staged at the KNT in the 1970s. The NTC was a state-sponsored theatre group whose details are discussed in the next chapter.³⁸⁵

The Black Hermit has been criticised for weaknesses such as 'sporadic and poorly constructed plot', lack of 'depth and development of characters', 'overly sentimentalised' rendition of ideas and 'clumsy and cold' poetic diction.³⁸⁶ However, Ngugi (who many critics have labelled a better novelist than a playwright) appears to compensate for the problems of form in his plays with the relevance of his themes. In *The Black Hermit*, the tragedy that is Remi's life is used to communicate the cultural and national dilemmas facing post-colonies such as Kenya as well as colonially educated Africans.

380 *The Black Hermit*, 'Preface'.

381 Ibid.

382 *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: Text and Contexts*, ed. by Charles Cantalupo, (New Jersey: Africa World Press, Inc. Trenton, 1995), p. 40.

383 *The Black Hermit*, p.vii.

384 Jessica A. Kaahwa, 'Ugandan Theatre: Paradigm Shifts', *Satj* 18 (2004) pp. 82-110, (p. 91).

385 Mugo Muhia and James Gibbs, 'Ngugi's Plays Production', in *African Theatre. Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Wole Soyinka*, ed. by Martin Banham and others (Woodbridge Suffolk: James Currey, 2014), pp-60-76 (p. 68).

386 L.A Mbughuni, 'Old and New Drama from East Africa', in *Africa Literature Today*, ed. by Eldred Durosimi Jones (London: Heinemann, 1976), pp.85-97(p. 96).

In the play, Remi cannot reconcile himself to what he calls 'bad customs', through which he is compelled to marry Thoni, his brother's widow.³⁸⁷ Though he loves her, he does not like the idea of her becoming his wife out of the need to fulfil a custom. Therefore, when he returns home after many years in the city, he refuses to see her, which makes her decide to kill herself.

The second tragedy in this play is a national one. Remi is disappointed with the 'tribal manacles' that he feels will destroy the new nation.³⁸⁸ This is in reference to the strong tribal affiliations among his people who perceive independence in terms of how it benefits them as a group rather than the entire nation. However, as Richard Peck notes, Remi holds 'abstract principles of nationalism' and is insensitive to the sensibilities of his people. He has also lost touch with them through his education and by living in the city and his attempt to address their problems only leads to the 'mawkish and melodramatic tragedy'.³⁸⁹ Thoni dies and Remi is alienated even further from his people. Simon Gikandi has noted that, through Remi, Ngugi appears to be questioning the preparedness of the colonially educated elites, himself included, to shape the destinies of the post-colonial nations.³⁹⁰

Ngugi's second play *The Rebels* (1961) was written for inter-halls competition at Makerere University in 1961. Ngugi was one of the actors in this performance. It was then published in *Penpoint* in October 1961 and broadcast a year later on the Ugandan Broadcasting Service. *Penpoint* was a literary magazine that was founded in the English Department of Makerere in 1958.³⁹¹ In 1970, Ngugi published the play in a collection that included *A Wound in the Heart* and *This Time Tomorrow*. The latter play also gave the

387 *The Black Hermit*, p. 45.

388 Ibid.

389 Richard Peck 'Hermits, Saviours, and Healers: Artists and Intellectuals in the Works of Ngugi, Osagyefos and Armah', in *Research in African Literatures*, 20.1 (Spring, 1989), 26-34 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3819082>> [accessed 26 August 2013]

390 Simon Gikandi, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.150.

391 Benson, p.115.

collection its name.³⁹² *The Rebels* has similar themes and tragic structure to *The Black Hermit*.³⁹³ In the play, Charles' homecoming reception from his studies abroad ends tragically when he arrives with a Ugandan girlfriend, Mary, only to find that his community has arranged for his wedding to the chief's daughter, Mumbi. The two women are symbolic of the dilemma the educated people such as Charles were faced with during this period. By marrying Mumbi, Charles will be adhering to tradition. By choosing a wife for himself, he will be asserting not only his freedom, but also his Pan-Africanist beliefs which Mary, as a Ugandan, embodies. As in *The Black Hermit*, Charles chooses to sacrifice his beliefs and freedom and to please the community by marrying Mumbi.

The arranged marriage does not, however, take place. In another melodramatic turn of events similar to Thoni's tragedy in *The Black Hermit*, Mumbi drowns while trying to escape the village. The monologue at the end of the play is particularly revealing. It summarises the author's stand on the issue of clash of cultures. Upon receiving the news of Mumbi's death Charles laments in the following words:

There is no need to sorrow for her. Let us rather sob and sorrow for our blind adherence to custom. This was your doing. You wanted her to marry against her wishes. It is also my doing. I was not strong enough to stand by the light and truth of my conviction.³⁹⁴

What Charles is suggesting here is the need to accommodate new values such as inter-group marriages and the freedom to choose one's spouse.

Ngugi's third play, *A Wound in the Heart* (1962) was also written for the inter-halls competition at Makerere.³⁹⁵ Martin Banham describes it as 'dramatically static and rather forced and moralistic play'.³⁹⁶ The play is significant because it introduces the theme of Mau Mau, a theme that occupied Ngugi and several other Kenyan writers up to the 1980s. It is also one of the major themes that distinguish Kenyan literature from the rest of

392 Gibbs and Muhia, p. 69.

393 Chesaina and Mwangi, p. 219.

394 'The Rebels' in *This Time Tomorrow*, p.15.

395 Gibbs and Mugo Muhia, p. 70.

396 Martin Banham and Clive Wake, *African Theatre Today* (London: Pitman Publishing 1976), p. 84.

East African writing. The other is the issue of settler economy in colonial Kenya. The idea of return and lack of restoration that dominated the two plays I discussed earlier is also dominant here. Ruhiu returns home only to find his wife with a child that she conceived through rape by a white administrator. Both Ruhiu and his wife later commit suicide. As Brendon Nicholls notes, the decision by Ruhiu's mother, Wangari, to raise the mixed race child is an act of 'resignation that precludes justice'.³⁹⁷

With Rebecca Njau's *The Scar* (1963), we see the first serious attempt to deal with gender and patriarchal issues in Kenyan drama. The play was published in *Transition*, a literary journal founded by Rajat Neogy, a Ugandan of Asian origin in 1961.³⁹⁸ Its premiere was at the Uganda National Theatre in 1963 during the country's Drama Festival where it won an award for original drama.³⁹⁹ Other countries where it was performed in the 1960s include Kenya, Ghana, Tanzania and the USA.⁴⁰⁰ The play deals with the theme of female circumcision. Mariana, a former prostitute, uses her experiences to advocate a form of initiation that focuses on the mental and economic empowerment of the girls. Ironically, the greatest barrier to her efforts is the elderly women.

This exposes how patriarchy thrives by colonising the minds and perceptions of women who, in most cases, are its worst victims. Njau's view on female circumcision can be contrasted with that of Ngugi in *The River Between* (1965) where *Ngugi* seems to regard female circumcision as important in enhancing social integration. In a way, *The Scar* seems to resolve the major question that Ngugi poses in *The River Between* in that the author points to alternative, but less dehumanising and intrusive forms of initiation of the girl-child.⁴⁰¹

Another play of Njau was the *In the Round Chain* (1964) which was never published but was performed in Uganda in that year before being banned by the Ugandan government for being subversive. In the play

397 Brendon Nicholls, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: Gender and the Ethics of Post-Colonial Reading* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2010), p. 54.

398 Benson, p.115.

399 Julius Sigei, 'Author Bares it all in a Memoir Coming Soon', *Saturday Nation*, 16 February 2013.

400 Ibid.

401 Ibid.

although David would like to see the colonialists uprooted, he does not want to join in the Mau Mau movement because he views fighting and killing as immoral. He is, however, forced to join the movement when the Mau Mau threatens to rape his sister. The description of David's character as 'water on the leaf of an arrowroot that cannot stick to anything' in reference to his indecisiveness highlights the dilemmas people experienced at the time of Mau Mau war. Njau's choice of themes at the time when people were concerned with politics and glorifying the nationalistic nature of the anti-colonialism struggle may explain why her works have not attracted a lot of attention in scholarship and in performance.

With Ngugi's *This Time Tomorrow* (1967), we see the earliest indications of the emergence of the drama of social protest. The play also signalled Ngugi's ideological shift from being a realist to a Marxist. In this play, Ngugi deviates from the 'suicide tactic'⁴⁰² as a means of resolving dramatic conflict in the other three plays I have discussed. Here, characters are made to play a more proactive role in solving the problems that confront them as indicated by the slum dwellers attempt to, albeit unsuccessfully, stop the demolition of their homes. The failure of communal solidarity in the play is blamed on the slum dwellers' focus on 'unimportant' issues such as ethnicity in the face of the bigger challenges of capitalism and bad governance. Njango is, for instance, suspicious of the Stranger and Asinjo because they are from another community.⁴⁰³ Nicholls has suggested that the inclusion of the unnamed stranger in *This Time Tomorrow* as in *The Rebels* is a 'device that opens localised communal relations to the broader possibilities of national consciousness'.⁴⁰⁴

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on performance in the early years of independence. The dominance of Western theatre is understandable to the extent that it was a period of transition from colonialism to independence. However, what was worrying was that the government did not seem

402 Gikandi, p.174.

403 *This Time Tomorrow*, p. 34.

404 Nicholls, p. 55.

bothered about this situation and maintained status quo. The delayed reforms led to impatience that caused some of the radical reactions to Western theatre as discussed in the next chapter. This discussion has also revealed the extent to which the East African educational and literary scene continued to be interconnected even after independence. While in the 1950s, Kenya was the centre of theatrical activity in East Africa particularly through the theatre initiatives at the Jeanes School, in the early independence period Uganda appears to have taken over with Makerere becoming the base of East African dramatic activity. The contribution of Asians to the corpus of Kenyan drama is another crucial factor in Kenyan theatre history because through their plays we get an 'insider' perspective on how independence affected other races, a view that is generally lacking in plays by African authors.

Most of the plays I have discussed here are one-act plays that were published in *Pen-point*, *Transition* and various play anthologies and collections. Without such platforms, many of the one-act plays that were written during this period would not have been published. Apart from the fact that some of the plays were too diminutive to be published on their own, there was also the problem of accessing publishing facilities, particularly for upcoming African writers. In the 1960s, for instance, the East African Literature Bureau (EALB) was the only government-owned publishing house for the whole of East Africa. The few others which existed were mainly multinationals that were under no obligation to prioritise or publish Kenyan works.⁴⁰⁵ The situation has not improved much as I shall discuss subsequently.

405 Maxon, p.141.

Chapter 5

Contesting Neo-Colonialism and Western Hegemony in Kenyan Theatre: The Birth of New Literary and Theatrical Aesthetics 1968-1978

Introduction

The period from 1968 up to the end of the 1970s was a crucial one for Kenyan theatre. This clearly came out during the interviews I conducted in 2013/2014 for this study as most people I talked to had very fond and nostalgic memories of this period. They felt that the most memorable theatre initiatives and productions in the history of Kenya emanated from this time. The following response from Jacob Otieno, a Kenyan theatre director, is typical of the kind of the responses I got regarding the state of theatre in the 1970s.

Theatre used to 'boom' during the time of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Francis Imbuga and John Ruganda [...]. That was in the 1970s, part of 1980s [...] People used to do serious plays. They would do all genres. From absurd to Shakespeare [...] everything! People would sit in the National Theatre discussing: did you see that work? And people would discuss the merits and demerits of the work. Yea [...], that is long gone [...]. That is long gone now.⁴⁰⁶

Nevertheless, this 'boom' (to use Otieno's word) was not credited to the government of the day. It was attributed to the efforts of passionate and nationalistic intellectuals and artists who used their positions in schools, universities and other public offices to fight for the dignity of Kenyan cultures and to harness them in service to Kenyans. The Kenyatta government has particularly been blamed for occasioning the state's repression of political theatre that in the following regime dealt a heavy blow to the country's theatre sector. This was by arresting Ngugi wa Thiong'o in 1978 over his cultural activities at the Kamiriithu Education and Cultural Centre. The following Moi regime intensified the repression even further and

⁴⁰⁶ Interview with Jacob Otieno, a Kenyan theatre director held at the KNT on 17 January 2014.

in the process reversing most of the gains made in the 1970s as I shall discuss in the next chapter.

This chapter is concerned with the theatrical aesthetics that emerged in Kenya in the second decade of independence. It explores the institutions and forces that were critical in the struggle for 'de-colonisation' of Kenyan theatre in the 1970s. Of particular interest are the ideological viewpoints that influenced these changes. In the discussion, the terms 'national theatre' and 'national theatre movement' are critical and are used in direct contrast to 'colonial theatre'. In his PhD thesis (1996), Opiyo Mumma uses the two terms to describe Kenyans' clamour from the late 1960s for performance modes that a majority of people could identify with in terms of language, style and content.

The Beginning of a New Era

One of the major problems that faced Kenya at independence was a lack of adequate skilled personnel to staff the various sectors of the economy. Education was such a priority for Kenyatta's government that in its first year in the office, it convened the Ominde Commission to advise on how to reform colonial education in ways that would quickly help to develop a human resource base for national development.⁴⁰⁷ Among the recommendations of this commission was the abolition of the racially based system of education. The commission also recommended an elite system of 7:4:2:3 (seven years in primary, four years in secondary and two years in high school and three years in the University).

By the late 1960s, the investment in education had begun to pay off and the country could boast of a sizeable pool of educated youth who had been trained either in the three colleges of the University of East Africa⁴⁰⁸ or

407 Betty Karanja, John Muthee Gikungu and Ruth Thinguri, 'A Critical View of the Historical Development and Concerns of the Curriculum in Kenya', *International Journal of Education and Research*, 2.5(May 2014), 197-204
<<http://www.ijern.com/journal/May-2014/18.pdf>> [accessed 14 September 2016] (p.198).

408 The University College of Nairobi was one of the three constitute colleges of the University of East Africa that were founded in 1964. The others were Makerere and Dar es Salaam. The University College of Nairobi started as Royal Technical College in 1956 offering mainly Advanced Level Certificate. In 1961, it became the

abroad through various scholarship programmes. The turmoil that engulfed Uganda from the late 1970s also led to a significant number of her educated populations seeking refuge in Kenya. Most of them were opportunely absorbed into the public service, particularly in teaching posts in secondary schools and tertiary institutions where staffing was still a challenge.

At the University College of Nairobi (as the University of Nairobi was called then), the late 1960s witnessed the arrival of a significant number of young intellectuals. Most of these had been exposed to radical Marxist ideology and were gearing up to not only take the teaching positions occupied by their European teachers but to also use the knowledge they had acquired to help in re-directing and reclaiming the independence dream that by the end of the 1960s most Kenyans agreed was not unfolding as expected. Maurice Amutabi captures the changes at the University of Nairobi in the following words:

In the late 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s the University of Nairobi was enjoying its golden age and was indeed at its zenith with regard to influencing events and thinking at the national level. The presence of perceived leftist luminaries or radical lecturers like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Taban Liyong, Okot p'Bitek, E. S. Atieno Odhiambo, Maina wa Kinyatti, Willy Mutunga, Ali Amin Mazrui [...] and William Ochieng caused a lot of excitement among students and increasingly aroused the suspicion of the secret police (special branch) and politicians [...] the university was academically vibrant and tumultuous, a hub of political activism and Marxian sloganeering. Popular and political literature, public speeches and pamphleteering became widespread.⁴⁰⁹

Even though these radical intellectuals were found in almost all departments of the University College of Nairobi, the concern of this study is the events and changes that took place in the English Department. Among those who joined this department in the late 1960s was Ngugi wa Thiong'o. He arrived in 1967 after completing his graduate studies at the University of Leeds from 1964-1966 and after a brief sojourn at Makerere in 1967. Judging from the two publications he wrote around this time, *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) and

second Royal College of East Africa after Makerere to award degrees from the University of London. This partnership ceased in 1964 when the University of East Africa was allowed to offer its own degrees. It was not until 1970 that it became a fully-fledged Kenyan National University.

409 Amutabi, p.165.

This Time Tomorrow (1967), it is clear that his philosophical and literary disposition had shifted from being the realist he was when he wrote *The Black Hermit* to a Marxist who was seriously disillusioned with Kenya's independence.⁴¹⁰ Various scholars have noted that it was at Leeds that Ngugi's socialist thinking was 'refined' after encountering Frantz Fanon's works and interacting with a group of radical students and lecturers at that University.⁴¹¹

Ngugi was followed in 1968 by Owour Ayumba (a Kenyan) and Taban Lo Liyong. Liyong had just completed his studies at Howard University and the University of Iowa in the United States but was prevented from returning to Uganda by the tyrannical regime of Idi Amin. The Ghanaian Scholar, Joe de Graft, followed in 1969 after being appointed by UNESCO in 1969 to teach English as a second language at the University of Nairobi.

The 1970s saw the arrival of more scholars from Kenya and African diaspora who became lecturers in either University of Nairobi or Kenyatta University College that was instituted in 1979. The Kenyans included Kimani Gecau, Miceere Mugo and Wachira Waigwa who were returning home after studies in various institutions abroad. Those who came from the diaspora included prominent scholars such as Okot p'Bitek, John Ruganda and Austin Bukonya, all from Uganda. They were part of those who were escaping the political turmoil in Uganda in the 1970s. There was also David Rubadiri who came from Malawi.

The efforts of these intellectuals were complemented by the activities of leading theatre professionals from the country and the African diaspora. Notable Kenyan theatre professionals included Seth Adagala, Mark Mshai, and Titus Gathwe, all of whom worked in various positions at the KNT from 1968 to the 1970s. Some of the well-known names from the diaspora were Janet Badjian Young, a Gambian and Mumbi wa Maina who was African-American. Young came to Kenya in 1973 to work as a drama advisor to the City Council of Nairobi, 'teaching drama to Kenyan teachers and directing

410 Jane E. Plastow, 'Interrogations of Law and State Legitimacy in the Theatre and Life of Ngugi wa Thiong'o', *Moving Worlds: A Journal for Trans-Cultural Writings*, 14.1(2014), pp.77-89, (p. 77).

411 Ibid.

theatre for African youth'.⁴¹² She had just completed her studies in Theatre Arts at Rose Bruford College of Speech and Drama in Kent in the United Kingdom. Maina was a theatre director who had been trained at the American Community Theatre of Harlem. She also taught theatre and directed plays at Kenyatta University College.⁴¹³ The two women were the founders of the Tamaduni Players in 1978. This was a professional theatre group through which many Kenyan theatre artists were nurtured in the 1980s.

Though these scholars and artists were from different countries, they shared many similarities in terms of their thinking, educational backgrounds and colonial history as they all came from countries that were formerly colonised by, or strongly connected to Britain. Many of the East Africans had schooled at Makerere in the 1950s, 60s and 1970s. A good number had proceeded for further studies abroad, particularly in Britain and America. Here, the conscientisation journey that had commenced at Makerere as I discussed in the previous chapter appears to have continued. In addition to acquiring higher and more liberal forms of education, their sojourn in the Western countries connected them to other like-minded intellectuals from other colonised nations. With these people, they could engage more freely and proactively on the politics of race, colonialism and neo-colonialism which shaped their intellectual and ideological perspectives a great deal. Peter Nazareth, another graduate of the University of Leeds in the 1970s describes his evolution thus:

Until I went to England [...] I had read literature as though I was part of the same literary–cum–cultural situation as that of England [...] Previously, when I read literature, I asked, how good is this work. What does it mean? What moral values emerge from it? Now I started asking, in addition, what does the work reveal about the society the writer is dealing with? Does it reveal anything about my society? [...] Coming nearer home, I started asking questions about the African writer--that is, the African writer already in existence and the African writer to come [...] can the African writer in a period of colonialism,

412 Margaretta Swigert-Gacheru, 'Kenya', in *International Women Stage Directors*, ed. by Anne Fliotsos and Wendy Vierow (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2013), pp.198-210 (p. 200).

413 Ibid.

nationalism and post-colonialism remain uncommitted? If so, is it desirable that he should remain uncommitted?⁴¹⁴

The ideas, theatre initiatives and play publications that emanated from this convergence at Nairobi in the 1970s tended to be socialist in tone. Ordinary people became the focus of theatre. Great emphasis was also laid on the need to liberate Kenyan theatre and theatre spaces from the dominance of Western theatre.

The major ideological influence that comes to mind when one looks at the intellectual and literary developments of the 1970s is African Socialism. This is the socio-political ideology that most African post-colonies committed to after independence in an attempt to break away from their colonial past, to restore the eroded dignity of their people, and to deal with emerging problems of neo-colonialism. Even in Kenya where the state leant towards capitalism, African Socialism provided the libertarian intellectuals and artists with the ideal platform to enhance their reformist agenda. The socialist theatre was for them a way of going against the grain of capitalism which the radical politicians, artists and intellectuals blamed for the disenfranchisement of ordinary people. This was unlike the case of Tanzania where the pro-socialist literature and theatre was a way of supporting the state and the *Ujamaa* ideology that in the initial years of its existence offered great promise in terms of improving the living conditions of citizens and indigenous cultures.

The ideas of the time have also strong echoes of the conceptualisations of liberation thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral and Cyril Lionel James who wrote extensively on colonialism and decolonisation. Fanon's concepts on the role of the intellectual and culture in the decolonisation process are particularly relevant to the Kenyan case. A more detailed discussion of his ideas and African Socialism follows.

The Influence of African Socialism

As a political, economic and cultural ideology, African Socialism was based on its rejection of both Western capitalism and Eastern Europe communism

⁴¹⁴ Peter Nazareth, *Literature and Society in Modern Africa* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1972), p.1-2.

as foreign and inadequate ideologies to help African people realise meaningful social-economic and political independence. Instead, it advocated the revival of communalism, collectivism and egalitarianism of pre-colonial Africa. Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, who was a vocal advocate and founder of the ideology, for instance, noted the following in 'African Socialism Revisited' in 1967:

The term 'socialism' has become a necessity in the platform diction and political writings of African leaders. It is a term, which unites us in the recognition that the restoration of Africa's humanist and egalitarian principles of society calls for socialism.⁴¹⁵

While differentiating African Socialism from communism, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, noted that, 'the African is not 'communistic' in his thinking but communitarian.⁴¹⁶ This means that the idea of 'community' was the backbone of African societies rather than simply communal ownership of resources that communism emphasises. This perhaps explains the reason behind the creation of *Ujamaa* villages. They were a means of nurturing the social and cultural connections between people over and above economic equity that is the emphasis in the Marxist theory of historical materialism which views socialism as the fifth stage of evolution towards communism.

Like other Black race consciousness movements such as negritude and pan-Africanism, African Socialism emphasised a strong assertion of Black historical roots, (re)discovery of the black authentic self and denunciation of demeaning myths and stereotypes associated with the Black people.⁴¹⁷ As an economic, political and cultural movement, however, African Socialism was a highly problematic movement. This is because there was no consensus on how to implement its principles. This left individual countries to interpret and apply the tenets of African socialism as they deemed fit as Nkrumah observed:

415 Kwame Nkrumah, 'African Socialism Revisited', in *Africa: National and Social Revolution* (Prague: Peace and Socialism Publishers, 1967).

416 Julius Kambarage Nyerere, as quoted in *The New York Times*, 27 March 1960.

417 Adimir Klima and others, 'Contemporary Approaches to African Writing', in *Black Africa* (Dordrecht, Holland: D.Reidel Publishing Company, 1976), pp. 279-28 (p. 36).

All of us, therefore, even though pursuing widely contrasting policies in the task of reconstructing our various nation-states, still use “socialism” to describe our respective efforts.⁴¹⁸

These differences in interpretation were perhaps made even more evident by the different terms the various leaders used to describe their political and ideological thought. Kwame Nkrumah used the term ‘philosophical ‘consciencism’, Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia used ‘humanism’. Mwalimu Nyerere had *Ujamaa* and Leopold Senghor of Senegal called his version negritude.⁴¹⁹

Critics have argued that no country was able to engage with socialism fully. As Plastow notes, many states practised what she calls ‘mid-capitalism’.⁴²⁰ In East Africa, for instance, though all the three countries claimed to rule by the principles of African Socialism, Tanzania was the only country that appeared to be fully committed to socialist/communal principles through the *Ujumma* programme. Kenya, as I noted earlier, emphasised private ownership, while Uganda was in between the two extremes.

The lack of actualisation of the ideals of African socialism has been blamed on the inability of the post-colonies to realise genuine economic transformation. This made them economically dependent on their former colonisers and other Western powers for loans, aid and grants. The failure to realise the aspirations of independence also led to disillusionment which, in many former colonies, boiled over into political instability. In dealing with the political and military predicaments and in their endeavour to maintain their grip on power, some of the leaders became dictatorial which worsened the dilemmas in these countries. Moreover, since many of these states were ill equipped militarily, many of them were forced to seek the intervention of their former colonisers to resolve not only the economic quandaries, but also the military ones. In Kenya, for instance, the Lanet mutiny of January 1964

418 Ibid.

419 O’Connor T., ‘African Socialism and its Varieties’

<<http://www.drtoconnor.com/3160/3160lect03.htm>> [accessed 20 June 2015]

420 Plastow, *African Theatre and Politics*, p.129.

by members of the Kenya Rifles saw Jomo Kenyatta seek Britain's assistance to restore order.⁴²¹

The disenchantment that swept across the continent in the 1970s saw some of the founding fathers pushed out power through military coups. Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Senghor of Senegal and Milton Obote of Uganda were all overthrown in the late 1960s and 1970s. Others like Nyerere resigned in the 1980s and a few like Jomo Kenyatta died in office leaving behind them nations that were shaky both politically and economically.

African Socialism and Kenyan Theatre

It was arguably in the arts and culture that the liberating themes of African Socialism found expression and made lasting impacts, particularly in East Africa. Nazareth explained the East-African intellectuals' and literary artists' support of African Socialism in the following words:

Capitalism is the wrong system for the new societies of Africa because it just cannot solve the social problems[...]pre-independent African tribes had essentially socialistic social organisations and something of the quality of life and the aspirations of these organisations must be carried over to the creation of a new social order. It follows that people in a manner of speaking aspire to socialism [...] Most African writers who condemned colonialism will find themselves committed to socialism.⁴²²

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, whose novels and plays had become increasingly socialist and angry with capitalism from the late 1960s, made a similar call in *Homecoming* (1972). Like Nazareth, he saw a 'socialist context' as the only way that real transformation of the post-colonies could be achieved.⁴²³ He, therefore, called on the artists to delve deep into the collective consciousness of their people and wean their works off 'the romantic and sentimental glorification of the past, reactionary traditionalism, tribal

421 Daniel Branch and Nic Cheeseman, 'From the Cold War to M-Pesa: Events that have Shaped Kenya's History', *The Daily Nation*, 31 May 2013 <<http://www.nation.co.ke/news/politics/From-Cold-War-to--MPesa-events-that-shaped-our-history-/-/1064/1868838/-/wha7y1z/-/index.html>> [accessed 12 February 2015].

422 Nazareth, p. 4.

423 Ibid, pp. 43 and 46.

solidarity and elitism'.⁴²⁴ He also urged the writers to give attention to the evils of the capitalist state and the realities of neo-colonialism.⁴²⁵

The 1970s witnessed the emergence of what came to be known as the literature of 'commitment'.⁴²⁶ In theatre, plays and productions that emphasised the empowerment of the ordinary people, African cultures and languages were prioritised. The agitprop mode of performance that was 'constructed with an aim of raising the consciousness of marginalised sections of society to induce in them the urge for self-empowerment', became a dominant form, particularly from the mid-1970s when initiatives such as Kamiriithu were conceived.⁴²⁷ There was also an emphasis on the need to reconstruct the history of the Kenyan people, particularly that of the struggle against colonialism and enslavement. Mau Mau, for instance, became a popular theme and metaphor that informed major literary works as I shall discuss shortly.

Another pre-occupation of theatre and drama at this period was the search for what Kerr termed as, 'ingredients' in pre-colonial performance modes that could be reassembled to constitute 'validly authentic' dramaturgical styles.⁴²⁸ The drama that was written at this time tended to consciously appropriate oral forms such as songs, narratives, proverbs, and other aspects of the indigenous idiom as structuring devices in the plays. Indigenous languages also began to be used in major productions in an attempt to assert them and to reach the ordinary people who were the main audience for this highly class-conscious drama.

The publication of *Song of Lawino* (1967) and *Song of Ocol* (1969) by the Ugandan Okot p'Bitek in his native Acholi before the two works were translated into English had blazed a trail and showed that indigenous languages and aesthetic forms could be used in major literary productions. The two works relied heavily on the style of indigenous song with Acholi imagery constituting the major style and aesthetic form. Even more relevant

424 Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics* (London: Heinemann, 1972), p.19.

425 Ibid.

426 Nazareth, p. 4

427 Swati Pal, 'Theatre and Activism: The Agit Prop Theatre Way', *Music and Arts in Action*, 3.1 (2010), pp.48-64 (p. 48).

428 Kerr, p.114.

to East African society were the themes of the two texts. In *Song of Lawino*, for instance, a seemingly jealousy-motivated personal quarrel between an abandoned rural wife and her middle-class husband who prefers the 'Westernised' Clementine to the traditional Lawino is used to humorously indict the Western-educated African middle class for ignorantly abandoning their traditions, aping Western ways. Ocol's responses to Lawino's accusations in *Song of Ocol* only confirm the extent to which he is alienated from his culture and people. Cultural alienation was a particularly important theme in the drama of the 1950s to 1970s.

It appears to me the way the intellectuals (particularly in Kenyan theatre) interpreted African Socialism differed sharply from the way it was conceptualised by politicians, including progressive ones such as Nyerere and Nkrumah. While the intellectuals saw socialism as a tool for raising the consciousness of ordinary people, the political elite were only interested in economic equity, affirmation of indigenous cultures and histories. This perhaps explains why these African social democrats developed dictatorial tendencies when they began to face opposition and criticism from their citizens.

Influences of Frantz Fanon's Ideas on the Development of Revolutionary Literature and Intellectual Thought

Although Fanon's ideas on colonialism, neo-colonialism and liberation are applicable to many other sections of this work, the essay 'On the National Culture' in the *Wretched of the Earth* (1961) is the most relevant. In this work, Fanon identified three stages of cultural and intellectual development among the colonised people. Stage one is what he called the phase of 'unqualified assimilation'. During this stage, Fanon claims that the 'native' throws himself 'greedily upon Western culture' and tries to make it his own.⁴²⁹ The works of the intellectual at this stage show that he has assimilated the culture of the coloniser and follows the trends of the literature of the colonising country.⁴³⁰ The theatre of the early years of independence as I have discussed in the previous chapter can easily fit into this stage. In

429 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (England: Penguin Books, 1963), p.176.

430 Fanon, pp.178-179.

the discussion of published plays, for instance, I showed how the early Kenyan writers continued to use Western style of drama and languages without making much effort at evolving more localised ways of dramatising African realities. Even when Kenyan local idiom was used in the productions, it was more out of the need to make the plays appear realistic rather than to invent a more relevant dramatic form.

The second stage as, Fanon postulated, occurs just before the start of the anti-colonial battle' and the 'emergence of a fully conscious and concerted decolonising force'.⁴³¹ According to Fanon, the native intellectual at this stage becomes disturbed and remembers the past happenings of bygone days. The childhood and old legends are rekindled but interpreted in light of borrowed 'aestheticism'.⁴³² *The Long Illness of ex-Chief Kiti*, as well as the earlier activities of the University of Nairobi Free Travelling Theatre (UNFTT), can easily fit within this stage. Despite their revolutionary themes and concerns, English and Western theatrical forms were dominant in these works.

The third stage marks the emergence of nationalistic war as well as revolutionary literature.⁴³³ It is in this 'fighting phase' where the native intellectual 'turns himself to an awakener of the people'.⁴³⁴ The native writer joins the ordinary people in 'their liberation movement' and composes literature, which 'expresses the heart of his people'.⁴³⁵ This stage produces a national literature. It is also a phase of great literary output because the artists will often find themselves in 'exceptional situations' such as being imprisoned, which make the desire to record experiences urgent. In this phase, the intellectual also begins to question the literary tools of the coloniser such as language and its appropriateness in espousing the concerns of his people.⁴³⁶ Kamiriithu and the plays that were produced

431 Nooor Al-Abbood, 'Native and Literature under Colonialism: Fanon's Theory of Native Resistance and Development', *English Language and Literature Studies*, 2.3 (2012) pp.121-133. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ells.v2n3p121> [accessed 21 April 16] p.121.

432 Ibid, p.179.

433 Ibid, p.121.

434 Ibid.

435 Ibid, p.121.

436 Fanon, p.180.

through this initiative and the later activities of the UNFTT can be seen in the light of these ideas. The rest of the discussion in this chapter will focus on how these ideological and intellectual developments influenced various theatre initiatives and spaces within the period under consideration. The discussion will include the literary education curriculum (as theatre was taught as an appendage of literature), the KNT, the KSDF, Kenyan professional and community theatre and published drama.

The Literary Debate

The first serious indication that a new literary era had dawned in Kenya was in 1968 when three lecturers at the University College of Nairobi, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Awour Ayumba, and Taban Lo Liyong, initiated what came to be known as the literary debate and which engulfed scholars up to 1974.⁴³⁷ The debate focused on the need to restructure the literary education curriculum in Kenyan schools and universities to reflect the learners' social contexts. At the heart of the debate was the argument that:

Education is a means of knowledge about ourselves [...] after we have examined ourselves; we radiate outwards and discover peoples and the worlds around us.⁴³⁸

In a paper entitled 'On the Abolition of the English Department', the three intellectuals pleaded for the need to make African literature, modern and pre-colonial, the 'dominant object' of literary education in Kenya.⁴³⁹ This was in opposition to the existing curriculum where the African continent and literature, as they argued, was taught 'as an appendix or a satellite of other countries and Literatures'.⁴⁴⁰ The literary curriculum they anticipated was to emphasise knowledge in the following sequence:

African Orature; literature by Africans from the Continent, the Caribbean and Afro-American; literature of 'third' world's peoples from Asia and Latin America; literature from the rest

437 Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*, p. 74.

438 Ngugi wa Thiong'o and others, 'On the Abolition of the English Department', in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp.438-442 (p. 441).

439 Ibid.

440 Ibid.

of the world including Europe and North America; roughly in that order of relevance, relationship and perspective.⁴⁴¹

The emphasis on orature was based on the belief that it is a 'living and vigorous tradition and not a dead past' as it had been seen in the colonial and post-colonial periods, thus 'a dynamic source of content and form in a search for an authentic African literature'.⁴⁴² They also wanted different languages, both Kenyan and foreign, to be included in the curriculum to enable learners to study diverse kinds of literature effectively. According to them, English was to be taught as just one of the languages rather than as the dominant language.

Such an education was viewed as a starting point towards producing graduates who could interpret the world in relation to their environments and who could respond appropriately to the issues affecting these environments. They also wanted the name of the English Department to be changed to the Department of African Literatures and Languages to reflect its Afrocentricity. A conference whose theme was, 'The Teaching of African Literature in Kenyan Schools', in 1974, made equally revolutionary recommendations for literary education in secondary schools. This forum had been organised by the English Department of the University of Nairobi and the Inspectorate of English in the Ministry of Education to bring together all stakeholders in literary education and to discuss the objectives and the areas of knowledge to be emphasised at school level.⁴⁴³

Although many of these proposals did not see the light of day, the debate led to some important changes in the way literature and by extension, theatre was taught and performed in Kenya. The most obvious was the change of names of the department as the three lecturers had proposed (from the Department of English to the Department of African Literatures and Languages). Other curriculum overhauls were the inclusion of literary works by radical authors such as Bertolt Brecht, Anton Chekov and Henrik Ibsen into the syllabus. The revolutionary nature of the dramatic

441 Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*, p. 95.

442 Bethwell Ogot, 'The Construction of a National Culture', in *Decolonisation and Independence in Kenya: 1940-1993*, ed. by Bethwell Ogot & William Ochieng, pp. 214-236 (p. 220).

443 Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*, p. 7.

styles and themes of these writers were in agreement with political and intellectual mood in the country in the 1970s.

Another major change was the mainstreaming of oral literature as a major area of knowledge in schools and universities. This hugely boosted research on the orature of the various Kenyan communities. The 1980s were particularly fruitful years of orature research as it was the period when publications such as *Kikuyu Folktales* (1970) by Rose Mwangi; *the Oral Literature of the Maasai* (1984) by Naomi Kipury and *Oral Literature of the Kalenjin* (1988) by Ciarunji Chesaina were done.

The Kenya National Theatre (KNT): Key Developments

From 1968, the government and the KCC Governing Council began to accede reluctantly to pressure from Kenyans to reform the National Theatre and the KCC at large. This led to some key changes at the that favoured local cultures and particularly theatre. However, most of the changes were not sustained for long, as the discussion below reveals. Among these changes was the appointment of Mark Mshai, a former schoolteacher, and Seth Adagalla into the management of the KCC in 1968. Mshai was appointed in March 1968 as the deputy to Lawrence Hayes, the white Director of the Theatre at the time. Among his duties was to coordinate drama groups in the suburbs of Nairobi to produce performances that would then be toured to outlying districts of the country in the attempt to stimulate dramatic creativity in these areas.⁴⁴⁴

Later in the same year, Adagalla was appointed to the position of Director of National Theatre. The Governing Council justified the change of title from the Director of Theatre that the previous directors had borne as being in line with the spirit of developing theatre nationwide rather than just focusing on the KNT.⁴⁴⁵ Nonetheless, it was not lost to Kenyans that both Mshai and Adagalla had been appointed to positions that did not guarantee them direct control of day to day running of the KNT.

It was during Adagalla's term at the KNT that the Kenya Drama School and the National Theatre Company were initiated. Both were state-

444 Mumma, p.141.

445 Mumma, p.144.

sponsored initiatives that operated from the KNT. The drama school was established in 1968 to offer a one-year formal training in theatre through an evening class programme. The main aim of the training was to enable Kenyans to compete favourably with other races in the country's theatre spaces.⁴⁴⁶ According to Gathwe, who was a teacher in the school, the trainees were taught 'the usual drama school curriculum', including play production, acting, stagecraft (i.e. making props), stage management, how to interpret a script, playwriting, 'and all the things related to drama and dance'.⁴⁴⁷

The students also ran a theatre in education programme for the city schools from 1972-1974 in collaboration with the City Council of Nairobi as part of their practical work. The programme involved training the pupils in various aspects and uses of theatre. The school also conducted workshops for individuals and amateur theatre companies in the country.⁴⁴⁸ Thus, even though the school has been criticised for being an 'exclusive club' of those 'able to act',⁴⁴⁹ in that it did not factor in other performance modes, it provided a starting point for a significant number of Kenyans who in subsequent years became important pillars of Kenyan theatre. Some of the notable graduates of the school included Edwin Nyutho, Ann Wanjugu, Paul Onsongo, Kenneth Watene and Franco Kimotho. Most of these developed successful careers in theatre, television and radio after completing their studies.⁴⁵⁰ The school closed down in 1975, mainly due to a lack of funding from the government.⁴⁵¹

The National Theatre Company was the performing arm of the Drama School. It was started in 1973. According to Gathwe who directed the NTC's plays, they would perform works by Kenyan writers such as Francis Imbuga and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, other African writers such as Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark, Robert Serumanga and John Ruganda and relevant plays by Western and other writers across the globe. The plays would be performed at the

446 Mumma, p.145.

447 Interview with Titus Gathwe at Kenya National Archives on 20 January 2014.

448 Ibid.

449 Mumma, p.146.

450 Gathwe, Interview, 20 January 2014.

451 Ibid.

KNT, schools and 'among the people' in 'social halls on the outskirts of the city, at Kariokor, Shauri Moyo, and in open spaces in other major towns such as Mombasa, Kiambu, Machakos and Nyahururu'.⁴⁵² Gathwe said one of the reasons they started taking plays to community halls around Nairobi was because of difficulties in accessing the KNT. As he further noted 'the place', (the KNT) would sometimes be pre-booked even for a year by European groups:

We had to struggle to get a booking as European groups were given the first priority. We could just get squeezed in, but we did not mind as long as we got into the ship. [sic] It is one of the reasons we started going to Kariokor and other community halls around Nairobi.⁴⁵³

The community halls that Gathwe refers to here were multipurpose public buildings that were constructed on the outskirts of the city by the KCC Governing Council with the support of the City Council of Nairobi from 1968. Their aim was to provide various localities within the city with a multi-purpose space where they could meet or perform in the spirit of making 'national theatre' a national-wide movement.⁴⁵⁴

The halls were simple buildings that were not equipped with basic play-production facilities. However, and as Mumma further notes, these halls marked the first serious attempt to locate performance spaces among the people. In the 1970s and early 1980s, they essentially became the 'national theatres'⁴⁵⁵ where performances that were relevant to Kenyans were staged. Their use was short-lived because when in the 1970s the KCC began experiencing cash flow problems due to the withdrawal of the major donors, the management of the halls was bequeathed to the provincial administration which did not bother to maintain them properly.⁴⁵⁶ This was perhaps because the provincial administration as an arm of government did not have the will to support spaces that contested the very powers they represented.

452 Ibid.

453 Ibid.

454 Mumma, p.143.

455 Mr Norman Montgomery, Vice President of KCC Governing Council as quoted in Mumma, p.139.

456 Mumma, p.144.

The NTC was closed down in 1983 due to lack of funding from the government. By this time, Adagalla had long been replaced by John Falkland who became Director of the Theatre in 1975.⁴⁵⁷ Falkland was perhaps the most divisive director in the history of the KNT and this had little to do with his expertise in administration or theatre. The writers' Association in an open letter to the Minister for Housing and Social Services under which the cultural sector fell captured the gist of the matter when they noted that Falkland might be 'a good administrator and an accomplished stage director'. However, only 'a Kenyan African director, supported by a largely Kenyan Governing Council of the Kenya Cultural Centre [...] can liberate theatre'.⁴⁵⁸

It was during Falkland's tenure that two highly publicised controversies occurred. The first was the debacle regarding the Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC 77). The second was the controversy surrounding the staging of *Mother Sing for Me* in 1982 as I shall discuss in the next chapter.

Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC 77)

FESTAC 77 was an international African cultural festival that was held in Lagos, Nigeria in 1977, and which Gathwe described as a 'brilliant' and huge continental 'cultural force'.⁴⁵⁹ The event brought together African countries, providing them with a platform to exhibit and share their culture and artistic talent through their stories, plays, songs and other forms of cultural expression.⁴⁶⁰ The Kenyan productions at the festival included two plays, *Betrayal in the City* (1977) by Francis Imbuga and *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976), co-authored by Ngugi and Mugo. As part of the preparations in 1976, those who were co-ordinating the productions decided to have the plays staged at the KNT before they were taken to Nigeria. What appeared to be a rational and patriotic endeavour, however, degenerated into an argument when the FESTAC group was denied a licence to stage the two plays at the National Theatre. The main reason that the KNT management

457 Mumma, p.143.

458 *The Weekly Review*, 'Unwanted Head', 19 January 1976, p. 7.

459 Gathwe, Interview, 20 January 2014.

460 Ibid.

gave was that the venue had been pre-booked obviously for some Western plays such as *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. This was a musical comedy which first opened on Broadway in 1962.⁴⁶¹

While the idea of the theatre being pre-booked was nothing new, it was not lost on Kenyans that the management of the National Theatre had ignored two things in their bookings policy. The first was the fact that October was the month that Kenya celebrates her freedom struggle heroes. The management also appeared oblivious to the fact that a UNESCO conference was taking place in Nairobi at the time, which made it only logical to showcase a play that either suited the occasion or was relevant to the Kenyan socio-cultural context in a national theatre.⁴⁶² This raised questions about the extent to which those who ran the National Theatre were committed to upholding the dignity of Kenyan cultures and history. As Gathwe put it the whole situation led to 'temperatures rising very high' because, as he further noted, Kenyans had come to realise, they too had a culture and the right to express it in their national cultural space.⁴⁶³

The FESSTAC'77 group was eventually granted the use of the theatre following the government's intervention. The huge attendance during the eight days that the plays were staged, as Gathwe told me, dismantled the 'theory' that Kenyans were dis-interested in theatre which the KNT's management always quoted whenever the question of the dominance of Western plays and groups at the theatre arose.⁴⁶⁴

According to Gathwe, who directed *Betrayal in the City*, the FESSTAC' 77 in Nigeria was a huge success as an event and for the Kenyan plays. He further narrated to me how at the end of the festival, the participants joined hands and sang victoriously, 'Let's meet in Ethiopia' in the hope that the festival would continue in future. However, this did not happen because, in

461 Thiong'o Ngugi, 'Enactments of Power: The Politics of Performance Space', *MIT Press*, 41.3 (1988) 11-30 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/114606>> [accessed 21 February 2013], (p.150).

462 Ibid.

463 Gathwe, Interview, 20 January 2014.

464 Thiong'o, 'Enactments of Power: The Politics of Performance Space', p.15.

his words, the 'neo-colonial forces in the continent could not allow such a huge cultural force to move forward'.⁴⁶⁵

Mumma partly attributes the exclusion of Kenyans from the KNT even after independence to funding. Out of the approximately KSh.1.3 million budget of the KNT, the Kenyan government's contribution was only Ksh. 100,000.⁴⁶⁶ The rest came from European and Asian cultural bodies such as the Colonial Development and Welfare Fund, the War Memorial Fund, the City Council of Nairobi and the Theatre Fund. By the 1970s, a majority of these funders had withdrawn their support.⁴⁶⁷ The government also withdrew its support by 1973.⁴⁶⁸ Wabende Kimingichia, a theatre lecturer at the University of Nairobi and a member of the current KCC Board told me that for a long time, the KCC was forced to rely on the earnings they made from renting the performance spaces to pay even the salaries.⁴⁶⁹ This was obviously not enough and the result was the gradual decline of the theatre facilities due to poor maintenance, making it unattractive for theatre groups and forcing them to seek alternative spaces.

Intellectual Theatre

In addition to leading the clamour for 'decolonisation' of the various theatre spaces, the intellectuals in schools and universities were the brains behind some of the highly radical performances, theatre initiatives and play publications that were witnessed in the country during this period. At the University of Nairobi groups such as the University of Nairobi Travelling Theatre (UNFTT) (1973), the Nairobi University Theatre Company (1976) and the Literature Students Association (1975) staged radical plays at the Education Theatre 11 (popularly known as ED 11) and other spaces in the country. The plays were written by lecturers, students and other authors. ED11 was a highly politicised performance space that also hosted other

⁴⁶⁵ Gathwe, Interview, 20 January 2014.

⁴⁶⁶ Mumma, p.143.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁸ Mumma, p.149.

⁴⁶⁹ Interview with Mr Wabende Kimingichia, the University of Nairobi on 15 January 2014.

liberal theatre groups when they could not access the KNT because it was already booked or their productions were regarded as anti-establishment.⁴⁷⁰

The formation of the UNFFT was a particularly important development in Kenyan theatre. As Amutabi further notes, through this group, 'political and social satire' that was emanating from the University was disseminated to 'public and democratic spaces' in 'schools, colleges and villages'.⁴⁷¹ John Ruganda was the brain behind this initiative.⁴⁷² This was not surprising as he had witnessed and actively participated in Makerere Free Travelling Theatre before coming to Kenya. Ruganda stated UNFTT's aims as being to take theatre to 'where it rightfully belonged' (that is, among the ordinary people) and 'to perform with the people'.⁴⁷³

The other aim of the UNFTT as Kimengichia, the current coordinator and a former student member of UNFTT in the 1990s told me was to 'give something back to the community' and to demystify higher education and the University as 'an ivory tower':

By then there was a different semester system where the students would do exams by the end of the year, then you would have a long break before you come back. That time the FTT would move around schools, performing in the markets and other places. So, that used to be for them a way of giving back to the community and just telling people that though you call this an ivory tower, we are also grateful to give back to the community. More or less like making sure that, the university serves as a public institution.⁴⁷⁴

Like other University Free Travelling Theatres in countries Malawi, Zambia, Uganda, the UNFTT would tour plays to various parts of the country. There being no theatres in many of such places, the group would perform in village squares and halls, churches, schools and other non-conventional performance spaces. Thus, even though UNFTT was based on the much-criticised notion of 'taking theatre to the people' which critics note is based on the assumption that people have no theatre and have to be given

470 Maurice Amutabi, 'Crisis and Student Protest in Universities in Kenya: Examining the Role of Students in National Leadership and the Democratisation Process', *African Studies Review*, 45.2(Sep 2002),pp.157-177(p.165).

471 Amutabi, p.165.

472 Osotsi, p. 214.

473 Free Travelling Theatre Programme as quoted in Mumma, p.150.

474 Kimingichia, Interview, 15 January 2014.

theatre,⁴⁷⁵ it was important in demystifying the notion of performance as an endeavour that did not have to happen in proscenium theatres. The initial productions in the mid-1970s were mostly in English. However, with time, they became more radical and emphatic on Kenyan languages as Kimengichia further told me:

Part of it was to be able to perform plays in vernacular so that if you went to Ukambani, you go to a market and perform something in that vernacular [...]. The educative element depended on how to look at it. There was the issue of passing the messages in the performances and then there was the issue of saying we are doing something cultural. We are also promoting our culture, that is, who we are through performances.⁴⁷⁶

Kimengichia notes further that students would be sent to communities to collect stories, riddles, proverbs and other orature material during university breaks. The students would then translate the pieces they collected into English to be studied. Some of the pieces would be used in the UNFTT productions.⁴⁷⁷

Since the University of Nairobi was the highest institution of learning in the country, its theatrical activities set the trend on the role of intellectual theatre in a post-colonial state that the schools and other institutions of higher learning emulated. Kenyatta University was one of the institutions that followed closely in the footsteps of the University of Nairobi in its theatrical engagements. The students, under the guidance of among others, Mumbi wa Maina, Austin Bukonya, David Mulwa, Francis Imbuga, and Arthur Kimoli, staged radical performances at Harambee Hall and the Mwangaza open-air theatre.⁴⁷⁸ The *Mshido* Players was the equivalent of the UNFTT at Kenyatta University. The group performed plays within and outside the university. Another significant theatre group at Kenyatta University was University Players (1979). It performed plays in schools, at the KNT and other spaces around the around the country.

475 Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*, p. 41.

476 Ibid.

477 Ibid.

478 Mumma, p.151.

The Kenya Schools Drama Festivals (KSDF)

According to Ndigirigi, the University of Nairobi was in the 1970s, a 'home of radical intellectuals [...] who nurtured radical theatre among students'.⁴⁷⁹ One of the spaces that benefitted directly from this 'radicalism' was the KSDF. When some of the graduates joined secondary schools and mid-level colleges as teachers, they brought with them this revolutionary attitude. This gradually made the festival as Gichora Mwangi noted, to become a 'hotbed of radical theatre' in the 1970s.⁴⁸⁰

People began to experiment with original texts in English, Kiswahili and other Kenyan languages and local themes. In 1971, *Olkirkenyi*, an original play in the Maasai language by Olekajuodo High School made history when it became the first indigenous play to win the Kenya National Schools Drama Festival. The play was also ground-breaking because it was written and produced by students in school.⁴⁸¹ The success of this production paved way for more original plays and use of indigenous languages in the productions at the festival.⁴⁸²

In 1973, out of the ninety-seven plays which were performed at the festival, over fifty were original entries in fifteen different languages - English, Kiswahili and thirteen other Kenyan languages, with some plays combining a number of languages.⁴⁸³ The themes of the plays also indicated how the festival had changed since its inception in 1959 from being a forum for improving students' proficiency in English and in literary texts, to a platform for nurturing performances that responded to challenges facing Kenyans.

The *Iron Snake* by Kisumu Girls and Boys High Schools, for instance, dramatised the historical arrival of the Kenya-Uganda Railway in Nandi and the community's resistance to the British rule. Though it used conventional play styles, its focus on such an important historical issue was pioneering. *Nyamgondho* (Daughter of the Lake), another production in 1973, by

479 Ndigirigi, p. 79.

480 Mwangi, p.131.

481 Wasambo later became the first Literature Officer at the Ministry of Education in 1982. Currently, he is a lecturer at the Literature Department of Kenyatta University

482 Mumma, p. 216.

483 Longman Kenya Limited, *Four African Plays for Schools: Winners of Kenya schools Drama Festival in 1973* (Nairobi: Longman, 1973), p. v.

Mosoriot College Group was based on a Luo folklore about a sea-goddess who helps a poor man to become rich in exchange for marriage. She eventually destroys him when he attempts to seek the love of humans.⁴⁸⁴ Original Luo traditional tunes composed by students were used in this production.

Twanangane (Let us Destroy One Another) by Machakos Schools' Drama group was an indigenised version of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. It interrogated the futility and destructiveness of inter-family quarrels in a highly localised way. *Kikamba* names, songs, dances, mimes and improvised dialogue were used to indigenise the play.⁴⁸⁵ This play highlighted yet another important trend in responding to Western theatre. As Kevin Lillis, the then Inspector of Literature and Drama in the Ministry of Education in Kenya, observed in 1973, these productions indicated that in the fifteen years the festival had been in existence, it had evolved to become a leading cultural and educational event.⁴⁸⁶

The changes in the performances were accompanied by organisational changes by the Ministry of Education (MOE) that addressed some of the teething issues I mentioned in the previous chapter such as the adjudication process. In 1971, for instance, Yinka Olumide, a Nigerian theatre practitioner, became the first African to adjudicate at the KSDF.⁴⁸⁷ This marked the beginning of the gradual indigenisation of the adjudication process. As I noted in the previous chapter the MOE took over the management of the festival in 1969 from the British Council that had managed the festival since its institution in 1959.

Another important development was the institution of the Kenya Colleges Drama Festival (KCDF) in 1975. This festival featured teacher training colleges, polytechnics and other mid-level colleges and was run separately from the main festival. Joe De Graft who initiated this idea regarded the KCDF as a necessary step in equipping the teachers with skills in theatre and drama in an attempt to establish performance in colleges and

484 Ibid, p. 67.

485 Longman, p. 3.

486 Ngugi, p. 94.

487 Mumma, p. 216.

schools.⁴⁸⁸ This would mark the beginning of inclusion of more school levels in the subsequent years that has made the KSDF to become the biggest theatre event in the country.

Other Professional Theatre Groups

In addition to University based groups and the National Theatre Company, another group that significantly influenced the growth of indigenous theatre in the late 1970s was *Tamaduni* Players.⁴⁸⁹ As I noted earlier in this chapter, the group was formed by Maina and Young in 1977. According to Mumbi Kaigwa, a leading female theatre artist who has been in the Kenyan theatre scene since the 1970s, the two women met during the casting of *Tambourines to Glory*, a musical performance by Langston Hughes and the first major performance she saw with a multi-racial cast in Kenya. The play was staged at the KNT in 1976 with Young as the director and Maina playing the leading role.⁴⁹⁰ *Tamaduni* had also the support of other leading theatre figures such as Kimani Gecau who directed some of their plays.

Through this group, the talent of many upcoming Kenyan theatre artists in the late 1970s who are now important figures in Kenyan theatre was nurtured. Kaigwa further told me the following about them:

With *Tamaduni* I feel it was really impactful not only in regard to the material that was chosen for performance, but also, the approach in the way plays were rehearsed [...] how much the rehearsal was taken as an opportunity to teach us as actors about the craft.⁴⁹¹

She also credited the two women with promoting multi-racial performances at the KNT:

They were doing a lot of multi-racial work [...]. In the University of Nairobi, you could have a white person in the play but in a small role as the enemy. Whereas this was everybody. These were the first shows where characters had equal weight regardless of colour. Politically, [their] work was a lot more about integrating; bringing people together. That in itself was a completely huge political statement at the time.⁴⁹²

488 Mumma, p. 219.

489 Ngugi, p. 40.

490 Ibid.

491 Ibid.

492 Ibid.

One of the most innovative productions by Tamaduni was *Portraits of Survival* which they produced in the late 1970s. The play was based on real stories collected by cast members through interviews with street children.⁴⁹³ Tamaduni was also the first group to perform *Mzalendo Kimathi* (Patriot Kimathi), the Kiswahili translation of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, in 1979.⁴⁹⁴ The use of Kiswahili enabled Kenyans in rural areas, particularly those from Kimathi's birthplace in Nyeri, (one of the places the Kiswahili version was toured) to understand a play about a son they still revere to this day.

Kamiriithu Popular Theatre and *Ngahika Ndeeda (I Will Marry When I Want)* in 1977-1978

The discussion so far indicates that from 1968 when the National Theatre Company was established, to 1975 when the UNFTT was at its peak, the indigenous theatre was becoming more and more nationalistic and radical in its ideas and style. However, the distinctive feature of all the theatre initiatives I have discussed in this chapter (the National Theatre Company, the UNFTT, the KSDF) was the fact that most of them were located in elite spaces such as the KNT, schools, and universities, from where some of them 'took theatre' to the people. Thus, as the battle to decolonise Kenyan theatre from the hegemony of Western modes made major strides, a majority of ordinary people were still excluded from participating in theatre, particularly due to the use of English in these spaces. In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngugi captures this situation in the following words:

Looking back now, it's clear that Kenyan theatre in the early 1970s was trying to break away from the imperialist colonial tradition [...] its main handicap was still its petty bourgeois base in the schools and university colleges from where the majority of the actors, directors and plays were based [...] English was still accepted as the main medium of revolt and affirmation. Original scripts, even the most radical, were often written from the standpoints of the petty bourgeois [...] theatre was still confined within walls.⁴⁹⁵

493 Gacheru, p. 200.

494 Kerr, p.126.

495 Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*, p. 41.

It is against this background that the importance of theatrical activities at the Kamiriithu Educational and Cultural Centre can be understood. A lot has been written about Kamiriithu by Ngugi himself who was one of the initiators of the venture [see *Detained* (1979) *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) and *Moving the Centre* (1992)] and other scholars such as Bjorkman (1983) and Ndirigiri (1990). In this section therefore, the focus is not on the history of Kamiriithu but rather where the initiative and the plays that emanated from it can be located in the history of Kenyan theatre.

Kamiriithu was (and still is as I discovered during my fieldwork) an impoverished village that started as one of the colonial settlements where Kenyans were confined during the State of Emergency in 1952-1959. It is approximately thirty kilometres from Nairobi near major multinational companies and coffee plantations that are owned by both foreign and local elite. It is, therefore, an important source of labour for these establishments.⁴⁹⁶ This is also the background and setting that informs the play *Ngahika Ndeenda* (I Will Marry when I Want) (1978).

The other intellectuals who were involved in the initiative were Ngugi wa Miiri, Kimani Gecau and Waigwa Wachira. The intellectuals worked with the workers, peasants and community mobilisers of Kamiriithu to revive and convert an abandoned Village Youth Centre into an educational and cultural hub for the benefit of all stakeholders. The aim of the Centre was to pull together the various skills that stakeholders could offer to facilitate programmes that would lead to the empowerment of the villagers. Basic literacy skills, followed by cultural activities such as music, dance, drama, basket weaving and leatherwork were prioritised in the endeavour to enable the villagers to gain life skills that they could use to improve their lives.⁴⁹⁷

The first group of fifty-five peasants and workers completed adult-literacy classes from June to November 1976. After that, it was time to engage in cultural activities. Drama was chosen as the first of these cultural undertakings because it would provide the new literates with follow-up material for collective self-education and would help to raise money to

496 Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Detained. A Writers Prison Diary* (London: Heinemann, 1981), p. 74.

497 Ibid, p. 75.

finance other programmes.⁴⁹⁸ With this in mind, in 1977, the production of *Ngahika Ndeeda (I Will Marry When I Want)* commenced.

The Play and its Production

Ngahika Ndeenda is about the exploitation of the poor by the rich and the playwrights' spotlight on how the poor were being robbed of their small parcels of land through expensive banks loans that were difficult to service was a reality that resonated with many Kenyan peasants. Some were living with this predicament at the time. In the play, a rich man by the name Kio, after unsuccessfully seeking to persuade his poor peasant neighbour Kigunda to sell him his piece of land, convinces him to take a bank loan using the land as collateral. The loan is to finance the church wedding of Kigunda and his wife though they have been accepted as married in the community for many years. Kigunda is unaware that this is part of a wider scheme by Kioi to take away his only property. Kioi needs the land to expand his business interests that he co-owns with some foreign associates. Eventually, the bank auctions the piece of land which Kioi buys, leaving Kigunda with no source of livelihood.

The choice of names of the two characters here is deliberate and symbolic and reinforces the exploitative relationship between not only the two characters, but also between the rich and the poor in Kenya. Kioi means 'one who just grabs' and implies a kind of hobby to acquire more and more wealth by fair means or foul. He is a contrast of Kigunda whose name means 'a tiller of land' and connotes hard work and suffering. Exploitation is also evident in the relationship between Gathoni, Kiguunda's daughter and Kioi's son, Muhuuni (lover boy). Muhuuni impregnates Gathoni but refuses to marry her. Ultimately while Kioi prospers Kigunda's situation become worse and worse.

Kiguunda's predicament and the poverty his family and friends suffer make them remember the exploitation of colonial days by white masters. They recall how ordinary people liberated themselves from colonialism. Gichamba, whose name is also symbolic as it means 'cockerel or brave one', for instance, recalls the solidarity of ordinary women and men against

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid, p.76.

the British since the 1920s that eventually dethroned the colonialists. He also laments the ruin of this solidarity. This 'performance of [the] memory'⁴⁹⁹ of the peasant struggle is significant because it goes against the state's call for people to forget the evils of colonialism in the name of national unity. It is also the authors' way of reminding ordinary people that they still have the tool in the form of unity that they can use to redeem themselves from the exploitation of the likes of Kioi. The title of the play reinforces further the revolutionary themes of the play. 'I Will Marry When I Want' is an expression of both defiance and freedom, particularly when it comes from Gathoni, a woman who in the play is doubly oppressed. First, by the poverty of a family and secondly by patriarchy as Muhuni's mistreatment dehumanises her not just as a poor peasant, but also as a woman.

The uniqueness of Kamiriithu and what distinguished *Ngahika Ndeenda* from the previous work of Ngugi and other Kenyans was not the socialist themes as such drama was already the dominant mode in the country. It was the dialogical nature of the whole theatre making and performance process that can easily be located within Paulo Freire's ideas of 'dialogic education practices' and Brecht's epic theatre.⁵⁰⁰ At the heart of the ideas of the two theorists are democratic techniques of education and theatre respectively, to enable the empowerment of the 'oppressed'.

To start with, the script was developed through a collaborative effort between the villagers and the intellectuals. Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii wrote the original script but the villagers contributed songs and other oral forms. They were also involved in amending the original dialogue to suit communal tastes.⁵⁰¹ According to Ndigirigi, the villagers would be left to argue out divisive aspects regarding the themes and style of the script until they found answers with little intervention from the intellectuals, thus increasing their self-awareness.⁵⁰²

Additionally, the Kikuyu language was used in the production. This enabled ordinary people to speak to themselves and to each other using not only a shared linguistic norm, but also idioms and axioms that spoke deeply

499 Gikandi, p.188.

500 Ndigirigi, 'Kamiriithu in Retrospect', p. 54.

501 Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*, p. 41.

502 Ibid, pp. 54-55.

to their hearts and minds.⁵⁰³ It also demonstrated that local languages were adequate vehicles for profound literary expressions. For the intellectuals, the use of their indigenous language was, as Ngugi noted, 'an epistemological break'⁵⁰⁴ from the language of the coloniser and a way of showing 'social and cultural solidarity' with the ordinary people.

The play also borrows heavily from indigenous orature, particularly the song-mode as a means of passing important messages. The song *Mwiku Mwiku*- 'Where are you?' at the opening of the play, for instance, invites the audience to the performance. The last song *Ngwataniro* (Unity) calls upon the workers and the peasants to be united to overcome oppression and exploitation by the rich. The use of indigenous songs in a modern play was also a way of recalling, recording, performing and storing aspects of Kikuyu cultural life that were quickly fading in the face of modernisation. Another epic quality of this play was that it was staged in an improvised amphitheatre that was constructed by the villagers. This demystified the idea that theatre can only occur in elite theatres and spaces. As Ngugi noted the whole Kamiriithu process had the feel of 'a collective festival', which is what theatre was before colonialism.⁵⁰⁵

Despite the enthusiasm of the participants and the audience, the 'festival' was cut short on 16 November 1977 when the play was banned making it the first play to be banned in post-independent Kenya. In December of 1977, Ngugi was arrested and detained for the rest of the following year by Kenyatta's administration, which in its last years had become increasingly dictatorial.⁵⁰⁶ The first question that Ngugi's arrest begs revolves around the threat Kamiriithu activities posed for the state. The second question was why Ngugi was arrested after Kamirithu when in the past he had published highly political novels in English, which did not seem to bother the government. The only outstanding difference between Kamiriithu and the earlier activities of Ngugi was the use of Kikuyu language in a theatre initiative that involved ordinary people.

503 Gikandi, p.188.

504 Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*, p. 44.

505 Ibid, p. 57.

506 Makaru Ng'ang'a, 'Mau Mau, Loyalists and Politics in Murang'a 1952-70', *Kenya Historical Review*, 5 (1977), pp. 382.

Kamiriithu and *Ngahika Ndeeda*, therefore, marked an important step in defining what 'Kenyan' theatre should prioritise. To the ordinary people, participating in such a profound production renewed their hope that culture was still an important means through which they could empower themselves. The whole process was also a lesson on unity, that together, they could realise their goals. For the intellectuals involved, Kamiriithu was, as Waigwa Wachira who helped direct the play stated, an opportunity for learning about their history and cultures that they never knew about their people or had forgotten. It was also a way of demystifying higher education as a tool for the service of the people that was not necessarily peopled by the remote elitist community working class Kenyans believed it to be.⁵⁰⁷

Kamiriithu was particularly important for Ngugi because as Simon Gikandi notes, it afforded him a platform for 'rethinking the epistemology of literary expression' in his search for ways in which 'political action' could be represented in a way that resonated with the subjects and audience of his work.⁵⁰⁸ It was soon after Kamiriithu, that Ngugi resolved he was abandoning English, the language of his artistic creation for seventeen years, for Kikuyu. As he notes in *Decolonising the Mind*, while the Literature Department at the University of Nairobi may have influenced his thinking on language and literature, it was Kamiriithu that helped him to decisively break with his 'past praxis' in terms of the language of his fiction and theatre.⁵⁰⁹ More about Kamiriithu is discussed in the following chapter.

After Kamiriithu a few other initiatives that sought to locate theatre among the people also emerged all which demonstrated how Kenyan artists and intellectuals had decided to take the destiny of Kenyan art and people into their hands. Among these was the work of John Diang'a at Esiepala Cultural Centre at Maseno from the early 1980s. Diang'a was a visual artist with interest in theatre and a lecturer at Siriba Teachers' College. His perception of the purpose of art appears to have experienced a radical shift after participating in FESSTAC in 1977, as from then on he became more people and community focused in his artistic work. The fact that the Centre

507 Kerr, p. 249.

508 Gikandi, p.163.

509 Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*, p. xii.

was established on family land speaks volumes of how the whole definition of community theatre was being revolutionised at the time.

Esiepala was conceived as a 'total artistic and educational' centre and 'permanent arts centre for the community'.⁵¹⁰ It consisted of an art gallery, an open-air theatre, a library and other utility rooms'.⁵¹¹ The open-air theatre staged mainly plays by writers such as Felix Osodo and Francis Imbuga that were staged by students as well as other community oriented performances. *The Weekly Review* reported that the community was yet to appreciate his work and his audience consisted mainly of children from the area, but Dianga kept 'creating, teaching and conceiving new ways to contribute to Kenyan culture'.⁵¹² Esiepla was also the setting for television series *The Land of Majitu* (The Land of Ogres) written by Osodo and costumed by Diang'a that was aired on Voice of Kenya in the late 1970s.

Other Published Works in from the 1970s

In the early 1970s, published drama continued to be influenced mostly by the traditions discussed in chapter four. The themes I have discussed in the previous eras as well as newly emerging post-colonial issues informed some of the notable plays of this period. The Mau Mau uprising, for instance, continued to influence several major dramas with writers adopting varied standpoints on its place in Kenyan history. Miceere Mugo, the other significant female writer of this period, focused on this theme in *The Long Illness of ex-chief Kiti* (1973). The play was presented as part of her Master's dissertation at Brunswick University Canada but information about its performance is scanty. The focus of the play is the trauma of Mau Mau war and colonialism on ordinary people. The play adopts a psychoanalytic narrative approach in that it delves into the consciousness of the characters to explore the various dimensions of this trauma. Using the symbol of a family at war with each other, the playwright demonstrates that there were no winners between the so-called colonial loyalists and the Mau Mau fighters in the conflict. The suffering in the war front and the lack of recognition for

510 Ibid.

511 *The Weekly Review*, 'An Interview with Artist John Diang'a', 2 May 1986, p. 26-27.

512 *The Weekly Review*, 'A Method in Diang'as 'Madness', 30 April 1982, p. 43.

his efforts traumatises Mata to an extent ostracising himself from his community and family. On the other hand, those dubbed corroborators like Chief Kiti have to live with the reality of being on the wrong side of history.

As Plastow has noted, Mugo seems to advocate the need for the society to esteem indigenous cultures in the search for healing from the trauma of colonialism.⁵¹³ This is demonstrated through Musa, the educated son of Kiti. When the play ends, he is organising a performance festival of all Kiti's youth to help heal their father's mental sickness.⁵¹⁴ The play is also notable for the strong roles Mugo accords her female characters. Mama Karingo is, for instance, depicted as the family head now that the men in the family are either deranged or away from home. Though we admire the way her mature and firm leadership contributes to order and harmony in this polygamous family, the 'annihilation' of males through death, casting them as drunkards or by making them physically absent from home in the process of creating strong female characters is major weakness of not only Mugo's work, but also most Kenyan feminist writings as discussed in other sections.

Another significant work that was influenced by Mau Mau was Kenneth Watene's *Dedan Kimathi* (1973). The play is written in verse and in the structure of Greek tragedy. It was among the plays that were performed by the NTC in 1975 at the KNT. Watene was a graduate of the Kenya Drama School in the early 1970s whose performing arm was the NTC. In his words, Watene notes that in *Dedan Kimathi* his concern was the 'question of heroism [...] was he [Kimathi] a hero? Must we make him a Demigod?'⁵¹⁵ However, in his attempt to do this, Watene failed to strike a realistic balance between the negative and positive attributes of the movement and Kimathi. The result was the portrayal of Kimathi as a tragic hero who is more

513 Jane Plastow, 'Three African Women Playwrights and the Dream of Equality: Ama Ata Aidoo, Micere Mugo and Nawal El Saadawi', in *Emerging Perspectives on Nawal El Saadawi*, ed. by Ernest N. Emenyonu and Maureen N. Eke (Africa World Press, 2010), pp 239-251 (p. 241).

514 Ibid.

515 Joyce Nyairo, 'Kenneth Watene: Man of Theatre, Song and Trade', *Daily Nation*, 23 August 2013 <<http://Mobile.Nation.Co.Ke/Lifestyle/Kenneth-Watene-Man-Of-Theatre-Song-And-Trade/-/1950774/1965812/-/Format/Xhtml/Item/1/-/No6fhh/-/Index.Html>> [accessed 24 May 2015]

obsessed with personal gratification than the movement. This led to what Outa Odero calls a 'barrage of criticisms' that according to Outa ended Watene's playwriting career.⁵¹⁶ The strongest reaction to Watene's play came from Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Miceere Mugo. Their play *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1975) was, according to them, an attempt to correct the image of Kimathi and Mau Mau by Watene and other writings that presented colonialism in a sympathetic way.⁵¹⁷

The early 1970s also witnessed the emergence of Francis Imbuga as playwright. He was a product of the radical theatre environment at the University of Nairobi in the 1970s who later became a distinguished playwright and theatre teacher in Kenya until his death in 2012. As a playwright, Imbuga has been credited with introducing the style of satire in Kenyan drama. His plays in the early 1970s were mainly tragicomedies that satirised various moral issues. In *The Fourth Trial* (1971), the conflict between modern and traditional medicine is dramatised. An infertile couple Musa and Helen conceive after the intervention of both modern and traditional medicine. In the end, they are not sure which of the methods achieved the results. The author's position in this play is confusing as at the end the traditional doctor is unmasked as a cheat who is out to enrich himself out of peoples' desperate situations.

Kisses of Fate is a tragic story that also relies on dramatic irony to tell the story of two siblings who are separated in childhood only to meet again while studying abroad and to unknowingly fall into an incestuous affair. The play was the author's way of lamenting the gradual death of African communalism in the face of emerging globalisation.

The *Married Bachelor* (1973) revised as *The Burning of Rags* (1989), is a more serious play that in addition to satirising the selfish way the educated Kenyans exploit their indigenous cultures, it is also concerned with gender questions. Denis, a lecturer of culture delivers splendid lectures on indigenous cultures in international conferences and decorates his house with indigenous cultural artefacts. Ironically, he has no respect for the culture

516 George Outa, 'Watene Kenneth', in *Of African Literature*, ed. by Simon Gikandi, (New York: Routledge, 2003) p. 56.

517 *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, 'Preface' p. iv.

he preaches as depicted in his refusal to preside over the 'burning of the rags' ceremony of his only son. He is also a male chauvinist who breaks up with his girlfriend, Hilda, when she reveals to him about a child she bore out of wedlock. Yet, he sees nothing wrong with himself having one simply because, as he argues, he is a man and Hilda is a woman.

The New Drama: Political Plays

The publication of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1975) by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Miceere Mugo marked a beginning of a new mode of drama that has been described as socialist realist. The plays published from this period were polemic, anti-elitism and focus on empowerment of ordinary people. The playwrights were also interested in indigenous performance forms and with *Ngahika Ndeenda* and *Maitu Njugira* that followed it, the question of language for Kenyan drama also became pertinent. In this study, I will use the term 'African socialist realism' to encompass the cultural consciousness that accompanied the socialist literature. I borrow the term from Plastow who in her analysis of *The Trial* notes that the play demonstrated Ngugi's evolution from being a Marxist writer to 'an African socialist, deeply involved in the semiotic codes of his Gikuyu people, operating as a 'Gramscian' organic intellectual'.⁵¹⁸

The Trial can be classified under what has been termed as the theatre of reconstruction, along with plays such as *Kinjeketile* by Ebrahim Hussein of Tanzania, which sought to re-write the history of the African people from their own perspective. Indeed, in *The Trial*, the authors note that their play is based on research they conducted at Kimathi's village by talking to those who knew him. By relying on oral records, the playwrights, as Plastow further notes, were 'challenging the authorised written record which both under colonialism and post-colonialism inscribed Mau Mau as a movement which was a savage and brutal form of extreme nationalism.'⁵¹⁹

The setting of *The Trial* is in the 1950s after Kimathi, the leader of the Mau Mau has been captured while fighting in the bush and is being tried by an unjust colonial court. The supporters of the struggle also hatch a plan to

518 Ibid.

519 Ibid, p.78.

rescue him during the trial. As the playwrights note, the actions in the play, however, go beyond the trial of the Mau Mau leader so that Kimathi and Mau Mau function more as metaphors that are used to glorify ordinary Kenyans' struggle against colonialism, capitalism and neo-colonialism.

The playwrights are categorical that the war against imperialism is still far from won as neo-colonialism has replaced colonialism of the 19th century. This is clearly depicted through the four trials Kimathi undergoes under the various agents of imperialism and capitalism. Henderson, who in the first trial appears as a colonial administrator and bankers of the colonial era in the second trial want Kimathi who has now been captured by the colonialists to stop the war so that the colonial economy can thrive in exchange for his freedom. In the third trial agents of neo-colonialism who include selfish politicians, priest and businesspersons want Kimathi to stop the war without the total emancipation of the Kenyan people. This group is only thinking of their own comfort. Kimathi is adamant and continues to insist on total liberation of the country and the Kenyan worker.

The fourth trial is the most important as here the colonialist and the neo-colonialist become one and the same entity personified by Henderson. Persuasion is replaced by torture and even murder in the attempt to kill the struggle. However, the workers' struggle is presented as long enduring and brave. As the colonial trial is going on in court, the 'fruit seller' and the 'woman', who in the play represent the Kenyan workers are busy planning on how to rescue Kimathi and recruiting new members in this case the 'boy' and the 'girl'. Notably, the playwrights accord the 'boy' and the 'girl' though newly recruited into the struggle by the woman the responsibility of rescuing Kimathi. They fire the brave shot in the courtroom when they discover the hidden gun in the bread they were to deliver to the fruit seller but could not find either him or the woman at the court premises. As the woman puts it, the struggle will continue as long as 'women continue to bear children' despite the death of people like Kimathi, arrest of characters such as the woman or desertion of uncommitted members such as Wambararia, Kimathi's brother.⁵²⁰ The failure by the playwrights to give personal names to

⁵²⁰ *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, p. 21

characters like woman, fruit seller, boy and girl emphasises the mass nature of the workers' struggle.

The play employs extensive use of song and mime. The opening song, for instance, sets the mood of the play, while the 'Freedom Song' that comes at the end summarises the message of the play. It also encourages the audience to join in the singing. Indeed, some of the emotive responses that have characterised the performances of *The Trial*, beginning with the way the audience responded during its premiere at the KNT have a lot to do with this song.⁵²¹ The play has been translated into Kiswahili under the title of *Mzalendo Kimathi* in 1983 and into Kikuyu under the title of *Magerio ma Kimathi* in 1995. These versions have been performed to packed houses in Kenya. *The Trial* has also enjoyed wide performance internationally, the criticisms of the problems its large cast pose to producers notwithstanding. As late as 2014, it was produced by Claire Trevor School of Arts and Drama at the University of California.⁵²²

Another significant drama of this period was Francis Imbuga's *Betrayal in the City* (1975). The play is an allegory of bad leadership in post-colonial Kenya. Chesaina and Mwangi describe the play as a 'sophisticated dramatic gem' through which Imbuga's literary maturity was clearly demonstrated.⁵²³ Like *The Trial*, *Betrayal* has also enjoyed equally significant attention, particularly in the universities and schools as an examination set book and a theatrical piece. The events in the play appear to have been informed by the unrest that characterised the University of Nairobi in the 1970s when students were protesting against bad governance and influx of expatriate workers in major institutions.⁵²⁴

521 See Ngugi, 'Enactments of Power: The Politics of Performance Space', p.19 for more discussion of audience's response to the performance of the play at the KNT in 1976. Ngugi notes how after the performance, the audience and the performers would dance in the theatre grounds and hold a procession to the Central Police Station singing other songs of liberation including those that were sung during the detention of Harry Thuku by protesters who went to demand his release in 1924.

The police and the settlers at Norfolk Hotel opened fire that killed many protesters.

522 Muhia and Gibbs, p. 68.

523 Chesaina and Mwangi, p. 220.

524 Amutabi, p.160.

However, unlike Ngugi and Mugo who bestow the responsibility for social change on peasants and workers, Imbuga sees the intellectual as best suited to 'awaken his people' and confront the oppressive regime. Soldiers such as Jere, University lecturers such as Mosese, and University students are the initiators of change not only in *Betrayal*, but also in all his other plays. The play is also notable in its use of what Ruganda calls 'dialects of transparent concealment' to disguise and distance 'setting, social context and the *dramatis personae*'⁵²⁵ from the political messages.

One of the concealing devices is the use of 'serio-comic' characters through whom most of the follies of the regime and the author's vision are communicated.⁵²⁶ The serio-comic characters in Imbuga's works are usually people who are linguistically or mentally handicapped but who are close to the seat of power. Though they are depicted as clowns, they have information we do not have by virtue of being close to power. They can also say things that normal people will not say and not cause offence because of their supposed handicap. These characters are also the main vehicles of humour in the plays.

In *The Betrayal*, Mulili is the main source of humour. Having been promoted to a position he does not merit by virtue of being the Boss's cousin, he tries to instil fear and command respect by over-playing his relationship with Boss and lying about his colleagues. He also lacks education which makes him speak in broken English. The way he inverts popular sayings is not only humorous but is also symbolic of his twisted way of thinking. For instance, instead of saying, Kabito is a green snake in the grass, he says 'that one, he be a green grass in the snake.'⁵²⁷

Another concealing device in this play is insanity. For instance, because Jusper has been labelled mad and therefore not responsible for his actions he can interrogate Tumbo about his greedy ways without the burden of being arrested. The clowns and the insane in the play are, thus the voices of the author. The play has also widely appropriated indigenous idiom and

525 Ruganda, p.1.

526 Ruganda, p. 24.

527 *Betrayal in the City*, p. 59.

modes. For instance, Doga and Nina's way of narrating events has an oral quality that reminds one of a traditional oral narrator.

Equally revolutionary plays were written by the intellectuals from the diaspora. *Muntu* (1975) by Joe de Graft can also be classified under this new dramatic tradition. It is an allegory on neo-colonialism. The play uses Muntu's family and their strife as symbols of the strife the African continent has gone through from precolonial era through slave trade, colonialism and up to the neo-colonial period. The church is also indicted for helping the political authorities achieve their goals of exploiting the continent from colonial time to present. The play was commissioned by the World Council of Churches and was first performed at the African Challenge Plenary Session of the Fifth Assembly of the Council of Churches which was held in Kenya in 1975. It indicated the changing roles and directions of church drama in Kenya. The play has been widely performed and read as a school and university set book in Kenya.

Another important drama of this period was *The Floods* (1978) by John Ruganda. It depicted the experiences of ordinary people at the hands of a brutal dictator, Idi Amin, during his tyrannical rule in Uganda in the 1970s. The villagers board the boat that is meant to rescue them from death on the land only to meet with the death in the sea. Such inconsistencies highlight the absurdity of life in such difficult times. The play is divided into waves instead of acts and scenes, perhaps to emphasise the intensity of state terror and destructiveness. The terror is epitomised by Kyeyune's discoveries in the sea. The brigadier with nails driven into his head and the man whose genitals are cut off and stuck in his mouth clearly highlight the way people were being killed in the most cold-blooded manner possible. *The Floods* was broadcast on the Voice of Kenya and staged at the French Cultural Centre, Nairobi in 1979. Portions of this play were toured in Europe in the late 1970s in Ruganda's attempt to mobilise international support against Amin's atrocities even before it was published.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, I argue that though *Ngahika Ndeenda* also suffers from some of the weaknesses that have been attributed to Ngugi's plays

(didacticism being the most significant), its creative process, performance and language epitomised the dramatic aesthetics that African socialist realists like Ngugi endeavoured to promote. The theatre initiatives of this period also highlight the transformation of the intellectual/artist from being a conflicted and alienated being in the 1960s (as depicted by Remi in *The Black Hermit*), to a custodian of his people's culture and history. The changes in Kenyan theatre in the 1970s should not be, however, misconstrued to mean that Western theatre became less dominant in the country in the 1970s. Ngugi, in an interview that was published in *The Weekly Review* of 5 January 1979, just a few months after Kenyatta's death, emotively described the situation of Kenyan theatre in the following words:

Our theatre is dominated by foreigners. The so-called Kenya National Theatre is controlled by foreigners and foreign-based groups, like City Players. This is reflected in the administration of the Kenya Cultural Centre[...] 99 percent of the plays at the Kenya National Theatre and in other Theatres in Kenya are all foreign. Look at the plays currently in fashion at the National Theatre. *Oklahoma*, for instance. Other titles are equally interesting. *Gulliver*, *Carmen*, *King and I*; this is the fanfare which is being ladled to us, Kenyan people. If you look at the records you will see that foreign theatre in foreign languages has been allowed to flourish freely with government encouragement [...] there has been government suppression of theatre in Kenyan languages.⁵²⁸

All in all, and as Mumbi Kaigwa noted, 'Kenyatta did not live long enough [...] to begin to shine a light on thinking unnecessarily' as it was still the 'euphoria of independence'.⁵²⁹

528 *The Weekly Review*, 'Ngugi wa Thiong'o Still Bitter over His Detention' (Ngugi's Interview with Margareta wa Gacheru), 5 January 1979, 30-32, p. 31.

529 Kaigwe, Interview, 5 February 2014.

Chapter 6

Repressive State: Theatre during the era of President Daniel Toroitich Arap Moi (1978-2002)

Introduction

During the presidency of Daniel Toroitich Arap Moi from 1978 to 2002, theatre underwent torrid times. Ngugi captures the tensions between theatre and the Kenyan state in 'Enactments of Power: The Politics of Performance Space' where he writes of political states and the arts routinely engaging in a struggle between the 'power of performance in the arts against the performance of power by the state'.⁵³⁰ According to Ngugi:

The artist and the state [are] not only rivals in articulating the laws, morals or forms that regulate life in society but also rivals in determining the manner and circumstances of their delivery.⁵³¹

Ngugi was actually writing about the repression of theatre by the Kenyan state during the period under consideration and how this reversed the gains theatre had made in the 1970s.

This chapter is concerned with how the Kenyan state used its coercive apparatuses to control performance. I begin by contextualising the political landscape of the time and then showing how this affected the various performance spaces. The discussion goes beyond the dominant narrative that often portrays Kenyan theatre as having 'died', particularly after Kamiriithu, as I will also highlight how some theatre spaces challenged the government repression. I will conclude the chapter by exploring how the repression accounted for the emergence and dominance of comedy and a return to Western plays by, particularly, professional theatre groups.

The Socio-Political Context of the Immediate Post-Independence Era

The second post-independence regime in Kenya, after Kenyatta's death in 1978, was that of Daniel Toroitich Arap Moi. According to Koigi wa

⁵³⁰ Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*, p.12.

⁵³¹ Ngugi, 'Enactments of Power: The Politics of Performance Space', p.11.

Wamwere, a former political detainee, this was a regime that did the country more harm than good in all fronts - economically, democratically, socially and politically.⁵³² The excesses of Moi have been attributed mainly to what James Kariuki terms as 'paramoia'. Kariuki uses this term to describe a state of 'mutual fear between the ruler and the ruled'.⁵³³ According to this scholar, Moi lived under excessive fear of 'threats' to his leadership and this greatly influenced how he dealt with issues and citizens'.⁵³⁴

The origin of Moi's 'paramoia' can be traced to 1976 when a group political elite, led by Kihika Kimani, attempted to change the constitution with a view to blocking Moi, then the vice president of Kenya, from automatically succeeding Kenyatta who was old and unwell. Their efforts were thwarted by the then Attorney General Charles Njonjo, possibly on Kenyatta's orders. Njonjo reminded them that it was a criminal offence for any Kenyan to 'compass, imagine, devise or intend the death or the disposition of the [sitting] president'. He further threatened to jail those behind the campaign.⁵³⁵ The actual transition after the sudden death of Kenyatta in 1978 was smooth and without much political drama. As 'Kenyan's congratulated themselves on being the first black African state to transfer power peacefully and constitutionally',⁵³⁶ Moi's priority was on how to consolidate his political base given that some of those who were opposed to his rule still held important positions in the government.⁵³⁷

Moi's policies, particularly in the first four years of his rule, have been termed 'populist', inconsistent and focused mainly on disarming his enemies, sanitising and distancing himself from the wrongdoings of the previous

532 Koigi Wamwere, 'Moi Admit your Many Mistakes and Apologise Kenyans', *The Star* (Kenya) < <http://www.the-star.co.ke/article/moi-admit-your-many-mistakes-and-apologise-kenyans> > [6 September 2014].

533 James Kariuki (1996) 'Paramoia': Anatomy of a Dictatorship in Kenya', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 14:1, pp. 69-86 < <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02589009608729582> > [accessed 18 November 2014] (p.70).

534 Ibid.

535 *The Weekly Review*, 'It is Time for Moi's Turn to Smile', 18 October 1976, p. 3-21(p. 3).

536 Charles Hornsby, *Kenya: A History since Independence* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2012), p. 333.

537 Murithi Mutiga, 'The Genesis of Moi's Ruthless: Campaign against Opponents', *Daily Nation*, 30 June 2012.

regime in which he had been, ironically, a crucial player as the Vice-President.⁵³⁸ To, reassure the country and particularly his opponents that he meant well, Moi, promised to continue Kenyatta's policies. *Fuata nyayo* (Kiswahili for 'following in the footsteps'), thus became Moi's phrase for rallying political support across board. The meaning of *fuata nyayo* was, however, to mutate with time to connote Moi's intolerance of opposing views. Those who criticised his policies would be reminded to *fuata nyayo*, that is, toe-the-line.⁵³⁹ Other populist policies in these early years included release of political detainees incarcerated by Kenyatta (including Ngugi), abolishment school fees for classes one to six and distribution of free milk in primary schools.⁵⁴⁰

Such policies did for a while endear him to the people. However, as Charles Hornsby notes, Moi would gradually transform from being a 'brother to monarch'⁵⁴¹ whose policies aroused the radicalism that Kenyatta had battled for most of his rule. In October 1979, for instance, the government barred Oginga Odinga and five former KPU members from contesting the 1979 parliamentary elections. The students of the University of Nairobi staged a strike to oppose this decision. They also wanted Ngugi wa Thiong'o reinstated at the Literature Department of the University.⁵⁴² According to James Kariuki (1996), the university students were regarded as a 'fairly accurate barometer of political conditions in Kenya and the strike was indicative of a worsening political situation.'⁵⁴³

Moi's way of handling the unrest at the universities was a particularly draconian possibly because of its socialist tone that had come to be associated with pro-Odinga politics.⁵⁴⁴ This led to a crackdown on what the state called 'self-styled revolutionaries' who were out 'to disturb the peace by

538 Hornsby, p. 333.

539 See Ogot, Bethwell, 'The Construction of a National Culture', in *Decolonisation & Independence in Kenya: 1940-1993*, ed. by Bethwell Ogot and William Ochieng (London: James Currey, 1995), pp. 214-236, (p. 38) for a detailed discussion of these intrigues.

540 Ogot, p. 41.

541 Hornsby, p. 334.

542 Amutabi, p. 68.

543 Kariuki, p. 74.

544 *The Weekly Review*, 'A Mercifully Short Reign of Terror', 6 August 1982, 3-28, p. 5.

importing foreign ideologies'.⁵⁴⁵ In the early months of 1982, for instance, several lecturers were detained under the Preservation of Public Security Act.⁵⁴⁶ Among these were Maina wa Kinyatti, Kamoji K. Wachira and Al Amin Mazrui, all from Kenyatta University and Mukaru Ng'ang'a, George Mwangi and Willy Mutunga who were lecturers at the University of Nairobi. Other lecturers were forced to run into exile before they were arrested. The lecturers were accused of teaching what the state called, 'nothing but politics of subversion through textbooks majoring on violence'.⁵⁴⁷ Al-Amin Mazrui's detention is significant to this study as it came two weeks after his play *Kilio cha Haki* (A Cry for Justice) (1982) premiered at the University of Nairobi.⁵⁴⁸ His detention was widely seen as related to the production.

Moi also embarked on enacting constitutional amendments that were geared towards consolidating power around the presidency. The most significant legislation was the amendment of the famous Section 2A in the Election Laws Amendment Bill of June 1982 in which the country essentially reverted to a one party state.⁵⁴⁹ The amendment was widely viewed as an attempt to suppress Odinga, who earlier in the year had announced his plans to start an opposition party. This led to him being expelled from KANU together with Anyona Anyona, a trade unionist and the Member of Parliament for Kitutu East.⁵⁵⁰ Anyona was later detained together with his lawyer John Khaminwa when he attempted to go on with the plans to form an opposition party.⁵⁵¹

Two months after the above-mentioned review of the constitution, the Kenya Airforce Cadet Squadron stationed at Embakasi staged a coup that the regime thought had the backing of some politicians such as Odinga. But perhaps the most shocking thing for Moi, his government and the Kenyan public, in the whole coup affair was a radio announcement that was issued by the students of the University of Nairobi stating that they supported what

545 Ibid.

546 Ibid.

547 Ibid.

548 Ngugi, *Moving the Centre*, p. 93.

549 Mutiga, 'the Genesis of Moi's Ruthless: Campaign against Opponents'.

550 *The Weekly Review*, 'A Mercifully Short Reign of Terror', p. 5.

551 Ibid.

they called, the '1 August Revolution'.⁵⁵² This led to the closure of the University of Nairobi for almost a year. Some of the students were arrested and detained while others died in the mayhem. The 'purge' on radicals and 'dissidents' that followed the coup led to more intellectuals, artists and other progressive forces fleeing to exile. Among these were Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Kimani Gecau and Ngugi wa Miiri who were forced to run following the aggressive way the state clamped down on the second Kamiriithu theatre project in 1982. Analysts have noted that after the coup Moi became even more paranoid and draconian. Kaigwa, for instance, told me that:

Under Moi and particularly after the coup in 1982, you certainly felt there was a huge light being shone on the University of Nairobi; you had to be careful what you said. In the lectures, we knew that there were special branch officers in our lecture rooms. We knew that people had police officers come to their rooms at night and take them for questioning. All these things used to happen in all the areas of society but certainly, with theatre, you could not just put up a play, without worrying [...] you began to feel that there was a light being shone on criticism and on thinking. That you were dangerous if you thought too hard. Plays began to be banned [...] You began to feel that a lot more during Moi era [...].It was terrible, it was terrible and the repercussions continue to this day.⁵⁵³

The state aggressively used the Films and Stage Plays Act that the colonial government had introduced in the 1930s, and which was variously amended by subsequent regimes, to 'criminalise' political theatre as I learnt from some of the respondents who witnessed these events first hand. The authority to licence performances, as in the colonial era, was bestowed on the Provincial Administration. However, the whole process of securing the licence to stage a performance was, as Gathwe told me, frustrating and would take weeks. Moreover, securing the permit did not always guarantee the play would be staged without problems:

You take the script there for two weeks; they have to look at it before they licence you to perform it. Sometimes you get that licence and then they come and revoke it later.⁵⁵⁴

552 Ibid, p. 10.

553 Kaigwa, 5 February 2014.

554 Gathwe, Interview, 20 January 2014.

He further recollected how one of his performances was banned in front of an audience:

I remember one day we were performing at KICC [Kenyatta International Conference Centre [...]] I had rehearsed and all was ready. I cannot remember the title but they waited until the opening night and there is the audience there and they come and say from above, the licence is cancelled. This was really suppressing to the development of the arts and the country.⁵⁵⁵

Gathwe's sentiments were corroborated by Kaigwa who told me the following:

There was a censorship board that looked over the material that was going to be performed and several plays would not see the light of day. They would be rehearsed and you would find they would be banned even before the audience saw them.⁵⁵⁶

Gathwe further articulated the extent of Moi's repression of theatre this way:

The intelligence, the so-called informers, were too hard on us. I do not know, but they thought everything we did on the stage was fighting their survival [...]. They did not take the artists positively; they thought we were just anti-government. I did not know where this attitude came from. They did not realise it is another area of creation of jobs and work. They only looked at the other angle [...] but like our time it was terrible. The government was our enemy. They were negative about us, not positive.⁵⁵⁷

According to Ndigirigi the worst year for theatre was in 1991, when eight plays of European, Kenyan and other African background were banned because they were thought to be too politically conscious. They included *An Enemy of the People* by Henrik Ibsen, *Can't Pay? Won't Pay* by Dario Fo, *The Fate of the Cockroach* by Tewfik al-Hakim (where, as Ndigirigi humorously notes, the censor wanted to know who the cockroach was), *Drumbeats on Kerinyaga* by Oby ObyeroOdhiambo and *Master of Frauds* by Bode Sowande.⁵⁵⁸

I need to emphasise here that, broadly speaking Moi, appeared more interested in the cultural sector than Kenyatta. In 1980, for instance, he

555 Ibid.

556 Ibid.

557 Gathwe, Interview, 20 January 2014.

558 Ibid.

created the Ministry of Culture and Social Services with a Department of Culture as an autonomous entity within the ministry.⁵⁵⁹ However, Moi's sense of culture revolved around encouraging 'the distinct cultural practices of Kenya's ethnic groups'.⁵⁶⁰

In primary schools, the teaching of mother tongues was encouraged during his rule. This may also explain why he found it easy to mainstream the teaching of oral literature in schools from 1982 despite his problems with intellectuals. Moi was also interested in music as seen in his appointment of a National Music Commission in 1982. This was perhaps because music was a vehicle that he could easily use to 'sell' not only his government, but also himself as a president. This was unlike theatre which from the 1970s had become highly critical of the government. Thus, as in the Kenyatta era traditional dance groups continued to be important features in state functions.

The *Muongano* national choir that mainly composed songs in praise of Moi and government was formed in 1979. Their songs were commonly performed in state functions and broadcast on national radio and television. The strong focus on music and indigenous cultures on the part of Moi and the officials he put in charge of the cultural sector may also be blamed on a lack of understanding of what else culture involved over and above a deliberate attempt to suppress forms such as theatre whose tone was generally viewed as anti-establishment.

Moi was able to maintain a firm grip on power for twenty-four years despite these excesses because of his ability to manipulate tribal loyalties to prevent the emergence of nationally based political consciousness. During his rule, cronyism, nepotism and tribalism were entrenched in public service appointments thereby eroding efficiency in the services and leading to mismanagement of the economy. Sycophancy, adulation and reverence for the president and his close allies became a popular means of accessing both political and economic power as opposed to ability. The following quotation cogently reveals the conceited way Moi treated those under his command and the kind of citizens he envisaged under his rule:

⁵⁵⁹ Hornsby, p. 348.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid.

I call on all ministers, assistant ministers and every other person to sing like parrots. During Mzee Kenyatta's period, I persistently sang the Kenyatta tune until people said: This fellow has nothing to say, except to sing for Kenyatta [...]. Therefore, you ought to sing the song I sing. If I put a full stop, you should put a full stop. This is how the country will move forward. The day you become a big person, you will have the liberty to sing your own song and everyone else will sing it.⁵⁶¹

The democratic spaces began to open up again from 1992 when Moi, half-heartedly, gave in to pressure from liberal forces that included human rights activists, politicians, the church, the Law Society of Kenya and the international community, to affect some constitutional reforms. This paved the way for the re-establishment of multi-party politics and a gradual expansion of democratic spaces. The culmination of the reforms was the formation of Inter-Parties Parliamentary Group (IPPG) in 1997 through which many of the draconian laws that the state had used to harass people were reviewed. The IPPG also recommended a comprehensive review of the constitution. This set the stage for the writing of the new constitution that after many false starts was promulgated in 2010.⁵⁶²

The constitutional amendments of the 1990s did not provide for the immediate termination of Moi's rule. He continued to be the president for another ten years after he contested and controversially won two 5-year election terms in 1992 and 1998. With him still at the helm of affairs, people were still afraid of harassment despite the constitutional guarantees. Moi was constitutionally barred from seeking a third presidential term and in 2002, his 24-year rule of Kenya was brought to an end when the National Alliance Rainbow Coalition (NARC) beat KANU in that year's national election. Mwai Kibaki, a Makerere graduate in Economics, who had served under both Kenyatta and Moi, became the country's third president of Kenya after beating Moi's choice of successor, Uhuru Kenyatta (the current president of Kenya) in the elections.

Critics such as Hornsby have argued that Moi was a besieged man who was forced by circumstances to become autocratic. First, he was from a

561 Wamwere, 'Moi Admit your Many Mistakes and Apologise Kenyans'.

562 Godwin Murungu and Shadrack Nasong'o, *Kenya: The Struggle for Democracy* (London: Zed Books, 2007), p. 44.

minority community and so lacked popular support. He also came to power at a time when Kenya's economy was beginning to experience difficulties that were worsened by the drought of the early 1980s and the structural adjustment programmes of the mid-1980s. He also lacked the charisma of his predecessor and did not have the backing of the Kikuyu, who at the time were in control of economic and political power. He had, therefore to build his own support base within the minority tribes a process in which the Kikuyu became the main losers of power.⁵⁶³ While it is difficult to address the complexity of politics of the time within the scope of this study, the fact of the matter is that Moi's presidency went down in history as one the most difficult periods for a majority of Kenyans.

Silencing the People's Voices: The Second Kamiriithu Work and the Making of *Maitu Njugira* (1982)

It was arguably, in the ruthless way the Moi government clamped down on the Kamiriithu Education and Cultural Centre during their second production, *Maitu Njugira* (*Mother Sing for Me*) in 1982 that the regime's intolerance of political theatre was epitomised. Upon his release in 1979 and perhaps construing this to mean the new political order was more open-minded and liberal, Ngugi and his partners embarked on the production of a new play in 1981. Their efforts culminated into a three-act musical, *Maitu Njugira*. It was a radical play with socialist ideas and overt critiques on capitalism. The play makes extensive use of Brechtian techniques such as the use of placards to highlight important situations, songs to encourage participation and communicate important messages and characters changing their costumes on stage and playing multiple roles. These aspects made the production even more interactive than *Ngahika Ndeenda*.

The action of the play spans three historical periods. Act one deals with the establishment of the settler economy in Kenya, which in the beginning of the play is signalled by the hoisting of the Union Jack and playing of the Reveille against a background of chained workers. The combination of the two symbols (flag and Reveille) implies political dominance even through force. Its setting is on George Scott's farm whom

⁵⁶³ Hornsby, p. 334.

the locals have nicknamed Kanoru, literally meaning the 'fat one', although the meaning may be extended to connote the 'owner of it all'. With the assistance of his Kenyan supervisor Nyabara, Scott treats his Kenyan farmhands like objects. He forces them to wear a metal tag, popularly known as *Kipande*, around their necks which they view as a form of dehumanisation. He also whips and overworks them and rapes their women. Any attempt to resist the mistreatment and humiliation is dealt with ruthlessly. For instance, when Kangethe leads the workers to burn the *Kipande*, he is killed after Mwenda-nda betrays him as the one who incited the workers. Mwenda-nda, meaning one who loves his stomach, symbolically implies a traitor of the liberation struggle. In the same scene, a pregnant woman worker is beaten until she miscarries.

However, the murder of Kangethe does not kill the workers' resolve to fight for a better life. They dress Kariuki in Kangethe's clothes and he subsequently takes over the role of leading the workers. Kariuki's name is symbolic as it means 'reborn' and signifies 're-incarnation'. This means that Kariuki has the same revolutionary qualities as Kangethe and killing him only leads to the rise of another revolutionary. Thus, in acts two and three of the play, the woman who is searching for her lost child in mimed birth keeps giving birth to 'Kariuki'.

In act two, Kariuki leads the workers in a successful revolution. A peace conference is convened and since Kariuki cannot speak English, he is accompanied by Mwenda-nda to negotiate the terms of independence. The workers are wary of Mwenda-nda's involvement in such a delicate mission but Muhunjia (priest) convinces them that all will be well. The alliance of the loyalist/comprador bourgeoisie and the church that Mwenda-nda and Muhunjia respectively symbolise in both colonial and post-colonial eras is a theme that runs across many Ngugi's works.

Mwenda-nda returns alone from the conference and announces that *Kipande* is no more and that the workers will have to buy their land back. This indicates that independence has been 'given' by the colonisers but with neo-colonial conditions. The main reason for this is because the workers entrusted their destiny in the hands of people like Mwenda-nda who are only interested in their 'stomachs' to negotiate the terms for them.

The third act is even more symbolic as it deals with neo-colonialism. It begins with workers being chained as in Act One. Elliot Scott's banner has been replaced by another with 'a map of the country and the words EURO-AMERICAN CORPORATION'.⁵⁶⁴ The placards in this act are symbolically held out by a police officer. Placard one warns against strikes while the second warns against trespassing onto the farm that is now owned by capitalists from Britain and America. The third requires the workers to carry identity papers while the fourth announces the presence of *Mbwa Kali* (fierce dog) on the plantation. In the scene, Mwenda-nda has taken the place of Elliot Scott on the rickshaw and is dressed in Western attire. He carries a whip and a whistle and rapes Nyathira. The implication these symbols and actions communicate is that the new Black government is capitalist and the only thing that has changed is the colour of the person in power. The systems of power and production remain as they were under the coloniser with the worker still at the losing end. The use of a police officer and the message on the placards also connote fear and the use of force to sustain the capitalist/neo-colonial order.

The climax of the scene is the return of Kariuki. His hands have been amputated, his tongue cut and eardrums broken and he is mute and immobile. We learn that all along he has been in prison. However, the torture has done little to stifle his fighting spirit. Therefore, at the end of the play he uses symbols to communicate his revolutionary ideas. From one armpit he drops an untied bundle of sticks which Nyathira easily breaks one by one. From the other, he drops a firmly tied bundle which she finds impossible to break. The symbolism of this is that as long as the workers remain united the struggle continues and can triumph. The woman who miscarries in Act One is also pregnant again which implies a rebirth of the workers' resolve. The play ends with a song of unity that emphasises the workers' solidarity and encourages participation.

There are other significant aspects of this production. While Kikuyu was the predominant language in *Ngahika Ndeenda*, in *Maitu Njugira*, songs from other Kenyan communities were included. This not only gave the play a semblance of national appeal, but was also a way of widening its audience

⁵⁶⁴ *Mother Sing for Me* (unpublished manuscript), p. 88.

by engaging the cultural sensibilities of a cross-section of Kenyan communities.⁵⁶⁵ The performers in the production also included teachers, students, peasants and workers from those other communities. It was obvious from this production that Ngugi and his colleagues were determined to include even broader sections of Kenyans as performers and audience and in the process conscientising them.

The group planned to stage the play at the KNT as a way of demonstrating that productions in Kenyan languages had a place in the National Theatre.⁵⁶⁶ However, they did not succeed because, to begin with, their request was not honoured with as much as a response by the KNT management. On 19 February 1982, the day they had scheduled to start the shows at the National Theatre, they found the gates locked and armed police officers stationed at the premises. Undeterred, they moved the production to ED11 at the University of Nairobi, the alternative performance space that had a history of accommodating 'national theatre'. Even there, they could only stage ten 'rehearsals'.⁵⁶⁷ The University administration, obviously under instructions from the government, evicted the group from the premises despite the enthusiastic crowds that came to watch the play daily and who Bjorkman estimates were over ten thousand people. She notes the following about the performance and audience:

Rehearsals [...] were attended by thousands of people who came daily from all over the country. There were such crowds that Uhuru Highway was blocked each afternoon. Rehearsals began at 6.30 p.m. But by 3 p.m., all the seats were already occupied. People sat on the stage, in the wings, on the chairs and even on the light and sound rooms. The corridors and stairways were crowded and those who could not get inside sat on the grass and listened through the open doors and windows.⁵⁶⁸

⁵⁶⁵ Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*, p. 59.

⁵⁶⁶ Ndigirigi, 'Kenyan Theatre after Kamiriithu', p.73.

⁵⁶⁷ Ngugi uses the term rehearsals instead of performances to contest their being barred from the KNT. As he explained during the opening of the newly refurbished National theatre in August 2015, in which he and Miceere Mugo were the chief guests, he resolved the play would only be termed as performed if it took place in the national theatre. Listen to his speech on 'New Look Kenya National Theatre' Citizen TV Kenya on 5 September 2015

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NYomyU9W_Oo> [accessed on 6 June 2016]

⁵⁶⁸ Bjorkman, p. 59.

The government then banned the play and razed to the ground the open-air theatre in Limuru for what it regarded as its 'anti-development activities'.⁵⁶⁹ The government's interpretation of 'development' was in the form of a technical school, which was built on the site where the destroyed amphitheatre previously stood.⁵⁷⁰ It was at this point that Kimani Gecau, Ngugi wa Miiri and Ngugi wa Thiong'o fled the country.

With these developments, an initiative that was obviously becoming a popular example of how ordinary people could reclaim their 'silenced voices' and take 'charge of their own destiny' was nipped in the bud even before it was properly established.⁵⁷¹ Chesaina and Mwangi have observed that after the Kamiriithu initiative, people became more and more afraid of venturing into theatre.⁵⁷²

The life span of Kamiriithu was too short for us to gauge objectively what it might have achieved in terms of empowering ordinary people and Kenyan theatre. The initiative is, however, important to a Kenyan theatre historian for two reasons. The first is that it provided a locally based model of how theatre can be used to mobilise communities for development purposes. It also epitomised the theatre tradition that emerged from the mid-1970s by effectively blending Kenyan languages, history, culture and Marxist aesthetics in communally produced texts. Thus, the project was successful in demonstrating how ordinary people can be involved in theatre and how theatre can be harnessed in expressing communal hopes and aspirations.

The Kenya National Theatre (KNT) after Kamiriithu

Another theatre space that appears to have been seriously affected by the repression of Moi's regime and particularly after Kamiriithu was the KNT. Under Moi, the stature and importance of the National Theatre as a symbol of national culture gradually diminished. The fear of reprisals by security

⁵⁶⁹ Ndigirigi, 'Kenyan Theatre after Kamiriithu', p. 70.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁷¹ Kennedy Chinyowa, 'By Whom and for Whom? An Aesthetic Appraisal of Selected African Popular Theatre Workshops', *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 28.1 (2008), pp.5-23 (p.12).

⁵⁷² Chesaina and Mwangi, p. 256.

agencies if one staged a performance that the state considered anti-establishment forced local groups to opt for other spaces such as the Phoenix Theatre and the French Cultural Centre.⁵⁷³ Moreover, as Ndigirigi notes, by the late 1980s, the National Theatre was completely rundown and therefore unattractive to many theatre groups due to poor maintenance of the facilities.⁵⁷⁴

The state's lack of regard for culture and theatre, in particular, was perhaps best manifested in 1992 when the government attempted to sell the land where the Kenya Cultural Centre and the National Theatre stands to the Norfolk Hotel opposite the KCC.⁵⁷⁵ This would have meant that the capital city of Kenya would have been left without a public cultural space. The sale was stopped when a group that called itself Friends of Theatre Lobby agitated against the sale. The President was forced to intervene and stop the transaction. However, Norfolk still managed to lease the land on which they constructed a car park.

School Drama under Moi

Theatre education in Kenyan schools diminished even further when the Moi government changed the education system from the 7:4:2:3 to the current 8:4:4 year system in 1985. Under the new education system Literature and English, which in the former system were taught as different subjects, were merged into one subject. This essentially reduced the number of hours for literary studies. It also reduced the number of drama texts the students studied as the new curriculum provided for one drama text, a novel, a short story, some poetry and oral literature. The literary set books (novel, play and short story) were to be taught in forms three and four. The teachers were expected to decide what texts to teach in the lower levels.

Additionally, in the new curriculum literature and English were treated as one subject. This meant that if a teacher was allocated to teach English he had to tutor in both areas. This obviously compromised on the quality of teaching and was frustrating to many teachers, some of whom had not

573 Gathwe, Interview, 20 January 2014.

574 Ndigirigi, 'Kenyan Theatre after Kamiriithu', p. 82.

575 Kaigwa, Interview, 5 February 2014.

combined the two subjects during their training or were not comfortable with teaching both subjects. Mumma notes that a few teachers actually resigned and became involved in Theatre for Development, which had begun to dominate theatre from the 1990s.⁵⁷⁶

An indirect consequence of the 8:4:4-system was the mushrooming of private theatre companies that majored in performing school texts for students at a fee from the late 1980s. Even though theatre has never been a subject in Kenyan schools, the syllabus encourages the performance of the literary texts as a teaching method and as way of giving students some practice in performance. Drama clubs are also important forum for theatre practice and learning. A major accusation of the 8:4:4-system of education was that it was over-loaded with too many subjects, sometimes of 'no relevance to real life'.⁵⁷⁷ The syllabus in each of the subjects was also too broad. This left both the teachers and students struggling to finish the course content and with little time to 'play'. As one of the students who pioneered the system, I experienced this first hand. I studied fourteen subjects in form one and two and was examined in 11 for my Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education. Teachers had to teach us during our private study hours, play hours and over the school holidays in the struggle to finish the syllabus. Though some of these issues have been addressed gradually, even today, the students in the normal school system in Kenya have little time for play as David Opondoe, a parent and the current director of Phoenix Theatre Company who blamed the dwindling theatre fortunes in Kenya since the 1980s on the education system, noted:

The new generation is challenged. These things start from school. Now kids have to choose between passing exams and co-curricular activities. The workload in school is too much. Primary school kids are carrying big bags that I never carried. Now this homework, what time will they have to do theatre? I pity my kids, they come from school, by the time they are getting to the house it is 6 o'clock, they start doing their homework immediately. They finish their homework at eight. They eat, they have to sleep and wake up early for school tomorrow. Even if the child is interested in theatre when will he or she go? Not just theatre but all extra-curricular activities. We used to study up to

⁵⁷⁶ Eugène Van Erven, *Community Theatre: Global Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2001) p.179.

⁵⁷⁷ Murungu, Interview, 20 December 2013.

3.30 p.m. From there you have time to do other things like drama, football, dancing. Even Physical Education (P.E) these days [...] how many P.E lessons in a week? Those days, people used to have double P.E. Those things have been left to international schools. They have time to do drama. The young ones in the normal schools have no time for it.⁵⁷⁸

This is how the private theatre companies stepped in to offer the students the opportunity to watch the enactment of the literary texts which the schools had (and still has) little time to do. Kaigwa had this to say about the school textbooks productions of the 1990s, which according to her were mainly by people 'who had an eye on the shilling':

It involved collecting a group of actors and bursting into the National Theatre to perform to masses of kids sometimes even four performances in one day. One at ten, one at three, one at six and one at eight, or those groups jumping in a van and performing in dining halls or wherever it is [...] They would fill a room four times a day with kids paying fifty shillings each.⁵⁷⁹

Because of the good returns that appeared to accrue from these productions, an element of copying also set in as more players joined. This compromised the standards of the performances even further:

They sounded like sometimes people were holding the texts, sometimes it was the director who was performing because somebody had walked out or somebody was playing two roles. They sounded a bit shambolic and a bit chaotic.⁵⁸⁰

From the above, it can be deduced that such performances contributed little to the understanding of the texts as well as the development of theatre among the students.

The other facet of school theatre is KSDF. It experienced mixed fortunes during the Moi era. On one hand, even with all the repression of theatre, KSDF continued with its expansionist trend with more school levels and performance genres being included in the festival. This growth has been attributed to the efforts of Wasambo Were, who was appointed the Drama and Literature Officer in the Ministry of Education in 1979 and who had a long history in school drama since his days as a teacher at Olkajiado High

578 Interview with David Opondoe held in his Office at Phoenix Theatre on 11 February 2015.

579 Kaigwa, Interview, 5 February 2014.

580 Ibid.

School in the early 1970s. Under his watch, the Kenya Primary Schools Drama Festival (KPSDF) was established in 1980. This meant that the entire range of educational levels, except the university, had been incorporated into the school drama festivals, as the mid-level colleges had been incorporated since 1975.

The primary schools' festival was held between May and August, while the secondary and tertiary institutions' festivals were held January-April and September-December respectively. Wasambo was also responsible for breaking of the yearly cycle of schools trouping to the KNT for the festivals, a situation that was likened to 'cultural only benefitted Nairobi.'⁵⁸¹ From 1982, a rotational programme around the eight provinces was introduced. This was important because it afforded schools in far-flung areas who could not afford to travel to the city an opportunity to participate whenever the festivals were held in or near their home provinces.

The 1980s and 1990s saw the gradual inclusion of more performance genres into the festival, challenging the dominance of the play in the KSDF since 1959. Creative dance, dramatised solo verse and choral verse were introduced into in 1982. In 1999, the oral narrative genre was also included. This enabled schools that had no teachers to direct plays for them to participate in these other categories.⁵⁸² The inclusion of indigenous genres such as dance and oral narrative provided these forms with an opportunity to re-invent themselves to address modern issues. Today the traditional form of narration that was popular when this category was first introduced has been replaced with stories that combine both modern and traditional storytelling techniques to examine complex modern Kenyan problems.⁵⁸³

As most of the participants in this research told me, the KSDF was the only artistic venture in Kenya where one would find a semblance of serious and original performances written by both students and teachers during the Moi era.⁵⁸⁴ Since theatre education has never been seriously addressed in Kenyan education curriculum, it was (and still is) the main avenue through

⁵⁸¹ Mumma, p. 224.

⁵⁸² Mumma, p. 223.

⁵⁸³ See the edition of Kenya National Schools Drama Festivals Rules and Regulations of 2012 by the Ministry of Education.

⁵⁸⁴ Otieno, Interview, 17 January 2014.

which many Kenyans were (and still are) introduced to stage performance. However, with the other platforms of theatre reduced to near extinction due to government censorship, the theatre careers of most students came to a halt the moment they left school. Kaigwe lamented this waste of talent in the following words:

These kids with the most amazing talent left the school drama festival, thrilling all of us audience. The ones who go to the state house, and maybe we see a clip of it on television, and you are thinking oh my God, that boy, that girl. Then they become something else and we do not see them again or hear about them again.⁵⁸⁵

Repression at the KSDF

The KSDF was not spared the censorship that characterised theatre during the period under consideration. In June 1982, the then Minister of Education, Joseph Kamotho, announced that ‘commencing the following year, the Director of Higher Education will provide the themes upon which plays performed in the National School Drama Festivals would be based’.⁵⁸⁶ The 1993 Kenya Schools Drama Rules by the Ministry of Education went further to explicitly stipulate that ‘political plays ‘were to be excluded from the festival.’⁵⁸⁷ The result of these directives was the banning of several plays, sometimes just hours before the commencement of an event for what was called failure to adhere to the key guiding philosophies of the country.⁵⁸⁸

Human Nature by Kenya Science Teachers’ College, which tackled the theme of corruption was, for instance, removed from the programme barely twenty-four hours before the start of the 1982 Colleges’ Drama Festivals.⁵⁸⁹ Tim Wandiri the producer of *Makwekwe* (Weeds), a play written collectively by students of Kapsabet High School in 1981, lost his job as a teacher when the government instructed the Ministry of Education to punish the authors of

585 Murungu, Interview , 20 December 2013.

586 Livingstone Njome Waidhuru, as quoted in John Ruganda, *Telling the Truth Laughingly: The Politics of Francis Imbuga’s Drama* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1992), p. 2.

587 The Kenya Schools Drama Festival Rules, Ministry of Education, Nairobi, 1993.

588 Wahome Mutahi (1982) as quoted in Ndigirigi, ‘Kenyan Theatre after Kamiriithu’, p. 75.

589 Ibid.

such 'a negative and pessimistic drama among the youth'.⁵⁹⁰ The play, as Mumma notes, used 'minimalist effects and flashbacks and foreshadows',⁵⁹¹ to depict the plight of slum-dwellers and their hope for the day when weeds would breed and choke their exploiters. It was written in Kiswahili and as Mumma further noted, was the 'theatre attraction of the year' because its themes cut across class and culture.⁵⁹² Another play that was banned from the festival was *Visiki* (Stumps) (1984) by Khaemba Ongeti of Cheperit Girls' School. It focused on the theme of bad leadership and how this compromised the ability of the government to deliver on the independence aspirations of the people. The play was banned from that year's state gala and from the list of plays that were to tour the country after the festival.⁵⁹³

The annual state gala was another avenue for censoring plays. The gala involved (and still does) the winning pieces being performed before the Head of State. Thus, provincial administration and Ministry of Education had the duty to ensure that 'offensive' material was not brought before the Head of State. Performances that were deemed dangerous could be disqualified before they got to the state gala level. Moreover, because of the huge gifts that accrued from performing at the state gala (such as school buses and money), the school administrators may have deemed it more profitable to avoid material that would antagonise the government in order to access these gifts as well as to keep themselves out of trouble.⁵⁹⁴

This direct and indirect censoring of KSDF productions, did with time, take a toll on the revolutionary traditions that the festival had come to be associated with from the 1970s. However, the way KSDF coped with the new situation was quite significant. According to Murungu, a theatre teacher and producer of several winning plays at the national festival since 1986, from the late 1980s, the focus of the festival gradually shifted from the actor, the story and the script to other visual production 'gimmicks' such as costuming, stage set and other stage techniques.⁵⁹⁵ According to him, the

590 Mumma, p. 228.

591 Mumma, p. 227.

592 Ibid.

593 Mumma, p. 232.

594 Murungu, Interview, 20 December 2013.

595 Ibid.

'simple but powerfully acted plays with storylines and acting that gripped the audience up to the end' and which inspired him to write plays from 1986, became fewer and fewer on the KSDF stage. The producers began to focus more on 'sheer spectacle'. According to Murungu, even when people knew they had weak storylines and acting skills, they would include something spectacular, which would draw 'a rapturous applause from the audience simply because of that production technique'.⁵⁹⁶

This situation could be explained in various ways. The first is that it was an act of defiance against the government's attempt to arrest creativity by dictating themes in which the teachers and the learners may have had no interest. They, therefore, decided to excel in other aspects of drama even though those aspects were the less core areas of drama. The other reason could have been the competitive nature of the KSDF, which made people come up with new tactics in order to win. The situation could also be explained as evidence of the dwindling skills in scripting and acting as opportunities for theatre training in the country gradually diminished.

However, not all plays that made effective use of stage effects and won in the festivals were badly scripted and acted. The period also produced talented dramatists who are associated with powerful productions in all aspects. Murungu, who as he informed me, is known for what he referred to as 'doing crazy ideas on stage is an example of this group of producers at the KSDF. Among his notable productions was the 1997 winning play *Boomerang*. The play was allegorical and focused on the character of Bishop Mamba, who though a pastor is mean and selfish. He, for instance, refuses people to fetch water from a communal well and food from the communal granary. At the end of the play he is killed by a greedy crocodile. *Mamba* is the Kiswahili name for crocodile. The implication here is that his own character of greed has consumed him. The play, though moralistic, had a political message that the greedy leaders will be destroyed by their own greed. Murungu told me the following regarding the production of this play and his so-called 'crazy ideas on stage':

I introduced something new in the festival. Something people had never seen before. I took production to other levels. Because I had this rebound stage and a crocodile stage [...] It

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid.

was just costuming a human being to look like a real crocodile. And we had a river on the stage [...] and you see the bishop struggling with the crocodile in the river [...] and the river turns red when Bishop Mamba is swallowed by the crocodile.⁵⁹⁷

Another winning production of his was *Fire Fire* in 1998. He directed this play when he was teaching at Kabare Girls. This is what he told me about this production:

In 1998, I was at Kabare girls. We produced the play called *Fire Fire*. Again, I took production at another level. This time, I had a helicopter flying on stage. Everyone was like I have never seen this before. The helicopter just flew. I just worked with [...] some tricks in theatre and I was able to convince people that the helicopter had flown using curtains [...] using a miniature helicopter and sound effect and people saw a helicopter flying and the play *Fire Fire* was number one.⁵⁹⁸

By 2002, the adjudicators, who, Murungu contends 'are the people who shape and give guidance to the festival', were forced to intervene to make the festival re-focus more on the script and actor. They did this by allocating more weight to acting and scripting and less to production aspects in the marking schemes. To some extent that improved the quality of scripting and acting, but spectacle remained an important focus of the festival, as Murungu told me:

Can you imagine costuming is only ten percent but you find people investing over sixty thousand on costuming? They pay professionals to paint the backdrops. Because there is a general spectacle, you want your play to have.⁵⁹⁹

Murungu notes further that the focus on spectacle encouraged laziness and killed creativity because one only needed to carefully study the winning productions of a particular year and copy some of the ideas to win in the following year.⁶⁰⁰ This scenario may partly explain why despite thousands of plays being staged in the festival every year, few of them have attracted the eyes of publishers. The Kenyan directors and producers I spoke to in their professional capacity told me that among the reasons there was a dominance of Western plays on the Kenyan professional theatre stage was

597 Ibid.

598 Ibid.

599 Ibid.

600 Ibid.

partly due to a lack of well-written locally published plays, and KDSF as the only serious theatre initiative at the time cannot escape blame for this state of affairs. Indeed, some of the people who have produced winning productions at the KDSF could not produce the scripts for these major performances when I requested them, which indicates that there was little follow up after the festival.

Other teachers who were noted for their winning productions in addition to the ones I have mentioned above included Barnabas Kasigwa who until his death in 2014 taught English and Literature and produced plays for Kabarak High School. Some of his winning plays at KDSF have been published under the title of *An Anthology of East African plays* (1991), one of the rare attempts to publish KDSF plays. There is also Oliver Munishi who is currently the Principal of Kakamega Boys. His winning plays include *A Step in the Mind* that won in the national KDSF of 1989 when he was a teacher at Butere Girls and *The Radar* that won in 1992 when he was teaching at Bongoma Boys. Both institutions are located in the Western part of Kenya.⁶⁰¹

The Response of University Theatre to Government Repression

The exodus of radical intellectuals from the country did not allay the regimes suspicion of university theatre as a source of trouble for the regime. The government, as Wachira Waigwa noted, continued to see a 'monster' in the university theatre initiatives.⁶⁰² Their suspicions were justified as the university was one of the places from where significant political theatre continued to emanate and state repression met with some resistance.

At the University of Nairobi, 'highly radical' theatre continued to take place under the supervision of, among others, Opiyo Mumma, Waigwe Wachira, Gacugu Makini and Oby Obyero Odhiambo in defiance of the state.⁶⁰³ The annual Harvest of Plays, which according to Kimingichia was 'a culmination of everything artistic', was a weeklong event where people came together to stage plays written and performed in the course of the year. The

601 Murungu, Interview, 20 December 2013.

602 Buzz Team, 'What Happened to University Theatre?', *Saturday Nation*, 17 April 2010 <<http://www.nation.co.ke/magazines/buzz/What%20happened%20to%20university%20theatre/-/441236/901448/-/kdituqz/-/index.html>> [accessed 10 April 2015]

603 Ndigirigi, 'Kenyan Theatre after Kamiriithu', p. 76.

origin of this festival is also interesting. According to Ndigirigi, in 1988 the Department of Literature was asked to produce a play to mark 25 years of Kenya's independence. They chose *Kongi's Harvest* by Wole Soyinka, a play whose themes of corruption and abuse of office were of course comparable to the political situation that existed in Kenya then. The committee organising the national event was not comfortable with the play, thus rejecting it a week before the event. The students, in their boldness, decided to hold a week-long celebration by staging all the plays that had been performed in that year which marked the birth of Harvest of Plays festival.⁶⁰⁴ There was also the Annual Poetry Night that was sponsored by the Literature Students Association at the University of Nairobi. During the former event, 'anybody could present a short skit or read poetry to university students assembled at Education Theatre 11'.⁶⁰⁵

The lecturers at the university were also involved in various performance-related initiatives that sought to promote theatre within and outside the University. Opiyo Mumma was, for instance, the brain behind the Kenya Drama and Education Association (KDEA), the Kenyan arm of International Drama/Theatre and Education Association (IDEA) that was established in 1996. IDEA is a drama in education initiative that was founded in July 1992 in Portugal to 'promote and advocate drama/theatre as part of a full human education and to provide an international forum for those working as drama/theatre educators throughout the world'.⁶⁰⁶ In Kenya, KDEA became the forum through which drama teachers were trained in various drama and theatre skills through workshops. Mumma is best remembered for bringing the 'whole world of theatre' to Kenya when he successfully pushed for the third congress of IDEA to be held at Kisumu in July 1998.⁶⁰⁷

It was also Mumma and his colleagues at the University of Nairobi, Gacugu Makini and Oby Obyerodhiambo, who founded Theatre Workshop Productions (TWP). Like TWP programmes in other countries such as

604 Ibid, p. 77.

605 Kimingichia, Interview, 15 January 2014.

606 Idea, 2014/2015 < <http://www.ideadrama.org/> > [accessed 29 March 2016]

606 Ibid.

607 Ibid.

Canada where the movement started since 1959, the emphasis was on collective play creation techniques. In Kenya, TWP brought theatre professionals and students together to create original productions through the workshop method. The most notable production from this initiative was *Drumbeats of Kerinyaga* (1991) that was created when ObyeroOdhiambo was coordinating the activities of TWP. It was the production that led to the eviction of TWP from Education Theatre 11 (ED 11) because it was deemed too political for the liking of the University administration. *Drumbeats* is a dance-drama that envisages the unity of the various Kenyan communities. It uses songs, dances, languages and stories of nationalism from various Kenyan communities. According to Chesaina and Mwangi:

It draws from historical movements such as the Mumbo cult of 1912 in Luo-land, the colonial administration shooting of 160 people demonstrating for release of nationalist Harry Thuku in 1922, the rebellion spearheaded by a woman nationalist, Mekatilili against the British colonialists in 1918 and the uprising led by Arap Manyei against the British in 1923.⁶⁰⁸

Like *Mother Sing for Me* therefore, this play blended history and culture to promote the theme of unity. However, in *Drumbeats*, the histories, cultures and languages of the various communities were given almost equal prominence.⁶⁰⁹ ObyeroOdhiambo was also behind the Mizizi Creative Centre, which he founded together with George Kindenda, Fred Owour and Hilda Oby ObyeroOdhiambo in 1997. The Centre is associated with the *Sigana*, a story telling initiative where participatory storytelling techniques were used as a means of performance research and dissemination. His second play *Kit Mikaye* (Rock of the Oldest Wife) was the winner of the Best New Kenyan Play category at a theatre awards ceremony organised by Balamwezi Players in 1995.⁶¹⁰

At Kenyatta University, equally radical performances were witnessed under the supervision of, among others, Francis Imbuga, Arthur Kimoli and David Mulwa. Radical dances, plays, poetry and other manifestations of culture continued to be staged in the annual Cultural Week that the University that has been held since the early 1990s. Imbuga and Mulwa

608 Chesaina and Mwangi, p. 225.

609 Ndigirigi, 'Kenyan Theatre after Kamiriithu', p. 84.

610 Ibid.

were also among the few Kenyans who continued to publish political plays even during Moi era.

Kenyatta University was also not spared from the confrontations that characterised the relationship between university theatre and the government throughout Moi era. In 1982, for instance, a struggle ensued when the government attempted to stop their production of *Muntu* at the KNT which critics had described as the best of the play since the first by De Graft in 1975.⁶¹¹ The performers included lecturers and students from that University. Being a high school set book at the time, the attendance was extremely good for the over ten days the play graced the National Theatre from 27 January to 10 February.⁶¹²

On 29 January 1982 and on the third day of the production, the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Higher Education, Mr J. Arap Leting, ordered the play be stopped because the text was deemed to be too 'violent' for public consumption at the National Theatre'.⁶¹³ The cast, however, chose to go on with the production throughout the weekend hoping to address the issue the following week. Though both the Provincial Commissioner (PC) and the Minister of Education denied any knowledge of the ban, the PC did not issue the tickets for the remaining ten days that the play was expected to run. In an act of defiance, the cast decided to admit the audience without tickets for the remaining days.⁶¹⁴

The form of University theatre that appeared to suffer most during Moi era was the Free Travelling Theatres (FTT). After failing to stop radical performances within the universities, the state appears to have focused on stopping the university theatre from reaching the ordinary people mainly by crippling the funding of the free travelling theatres. Eugene Erven for instance notes the following regarding the University of Nairobi FTT:

Just like any other grass-root and cultural activity in the early 1980s, the FTT work was beginning to arouse the suspicion of the authorities [...] Even the name FTT disappeared for a while from the public view.⁶¹⁵

611 *Weekly Review*, 'A Matter of Misinterpretation', 5 February 1982, p. 24.

612 *Weekly Review*, 'Poetry and Lyrical Language in Muntu', 29, January 1982, 40.

613 *Weekly Review*, 'A Matter of Misinterpretation', 5 February 1982, p. 24.

614 Ibid.

615 Erven, p. 178.

As Kimingichia, the current coordinator of the UNFTT told me, from 1998 to 2002 the University funded only one production for the group which focused on the theme of HIV/AIDS.⁶¹⁶ The bad blood between the University of Nairobi FTT and the university administration was so bad that one time, Wachira Waigwe, who coordinated the group in the 1980s, recalls the university rejecting a donation of a bus on behalf of the UNFTT from a theatre group in Finland.⁶¹⁷ Without enough funding, the FTTs were forced to restrict their activities to occasional performances within the university, at neighbouring colleges and schools or occasional projects funded by non-governmental organisations.⁶¹⁸

Professional and Community Theatre

The other space where theatre activities seriously declined in the 1980s and 1990s was in professional and community theatre. Western theatre declined because due to the worsening economic and political situation in Kenya, considerable numbers of Europeans left the country. This forced some of the Western-oriented theatre groups to close down or adapt their performance traditions to suit local realities. The most significant exit was that of Donovan Maule Players in 1982 after operating in Kenya for forty-four years since 1948.⁶¹⁹ Those that remained, such as Lavington Players, Nairobi City Players and Braeburn Theatre, had to adjust their practices to survive the turbulent times by, for instance, recruiting non-European Players. However, their repertoire remained largely Western. The Little Theatre Club in Mombasa, which since 1948 had operated as a private theatre facility staging mainly Western performances changed ownership and became a public multicultural centre from 1995.⁶²⁰ Asian theatre became more restricted to the Asian community with *Nakta* that was founded by Allaudin

616 Kimingichia, Interview, 15 January 2014.

617 Ibid.

618 Buzz Team, 'What Happened to University Theatre?'

619 Ndigirigi, 'Kenyan Theatre after Kamiriithu', p. 80.

620 Ibid, p. 81.

Qureshi being the dominant Asian theatre group.⁶²¹ The repertoire for Asian groups continued along the lines discussed in Chapter Five.

The closure of DM led to the establishment of Phoenix Players that as its name connotes (Phoenix and the idea of rising from the ashes), was keen to continue the performance traditions of the DM. The group was formed in 1982 by leading members of the Donovan Maule Players. Among them was James Falkland, who by then was the KNT director. Phoenix ran (and still does) its activities from the basement of the Professional House next to Kenya's Parliament. It operated on repertory basis and its repertoire was mainly Western plays for the entertainment of middle-class Kenyans, European, and Asian audience members, as Kaigwa told me:

They always did the Shakespeare in February; they always did the musical at the end of the year and they tried in between to balance the number of productions that were drama, comedy or thriller but nothing political. Very very rarely did they touch on anything political.⁶²²

Considered the 'mother of Kenyan theatre' today, over the years, Phoenix has managed to adjust itself to the demands of Kenyan theatre market to remain relevant, as I shall discuss in the next chapter.

Indigenous theatre groups for their part continued with the struggle to survive and stage nationalistic performances against a background of inadequate skills, government censorship and lack of funding. In the early 1980s, groups such as Capricorn Players, Friends Theatre, Living theatre group, Balamwezi Players and university-based theatre groups continued to keep the Kenyan theatre scene alive with radical performances that were staged at the KNT, school halls, the ED11, the Goethe Institute, the French Cultural Centre and other theatre spaces in the country. Plays such as *She Ate the Female Cassava* by Jimmi Makotsi-Makotsi, *The General Rises Again* by Simon Gikandi, *The Island* by Athol Fugard, *The Road* by Wole Soyinka rivalled *Othello*, *Ghosts*, *Antigone* and *Someone is Waiting* that were staged by Donovan Maule Players and other European groups.⁶²³

621 Ibid, p. 82.

622 Kaigwa, Interview, 5 February 2014.

623 Information got from a survey of *The Weekly Review* culture and theatre sections during Moi era.

Popular novels and stories were also adapted into plays. In 1982, for instance, the Living Theatre Group adapted three of Grace Ogot's short stories from *Land without Thunder* (1968). These included *Land without Thunder*, the story that gives the collection its name, *The Veil* and *The Rain Came*. In 1981, Shangari Players' adaption of *The Concubine* by Elechi Amadi was staged at the KNT.⁶²⁴

By the end of the 1980s, many of these groups had ceased to exist due to lack of funding, the fear of state harassment and a deteriorating theatre situation in the country. An attempt by Miujiiza, a group that was formed by the 'the regulars' of the Phoenix Players such as Steven Mwenesi, James Falkland and Sam Otieno in 1992 to revive the theatre culture of the 1970s and early 1980s by staging African and political material did not go far.⁶²⁵ The groups operated from old Rahimtulla Trust Library in Nairobi from where they performed plays such as *Lion and the Jewel* by Wole Soyinka, *Gods are not to Blame* by Ola Rotimi and *She ate the Female Cassava* by Jimmi Makotsi-Makotsi.⁶²⁶ By 1996, Miujiiza had folded due to poor patronage.⁶²⁷

The gradual decline of these groups and university theatre meant fewer opportunities for training and enhancing local people's theatre skills. The local artists found refuge and benevolence from the most unexpected quarters: - European groups, missions and non-governmental bodies. These groups were instrumental in offering training, funding and alternative performance spaces for Kenyan groups and artists from the late 1980s. Phoenix was a particularly important training ground for Kenyan theatre artists within this period as Otieno informed me:

James Falkland, when he started the Phoenix Players, he used to train people. All the directors and actors who went to Phoenix were trained. They were being taken through the basics- if you want to learn you were being trained.⁶²⁸

The French Cultural Centre (now Alliance Française) was the other important player in supporting Kenyan theatre. In 1990, for instance, the

624 *The Weekly Review*, 'Contrast of Perception', 5 February 1982, p. 24.

625 Ndigirigi, 'Kenyan Theatre after Kamiriithu', p. 83.

626 Ibid.

627 Ibid, p. 83.

628 Otieno, Interview, 17 January 2014.

Centre opened the National Theatre Academy, which according to the current head of culture at the Centre, Harsita Waters, trained many of the new crop of theatre practitioners:

Many of the actors that you see on stage now here in Kenya and also the ones that have now progressed from stage to film, especially to documentary and the local television programmes that we have, lots of them do credit their skills in theatre to the Nairobi Theatre Academy programme. It was the only one of its kind in Kenya those days.⁶²⁹

The academy ran a full-time and part-time theatre programme under the coordination of the Kenyan theatre practitioner, Ben Ateku.⁶³⁰ The lecturers were locally sourced professionals, though experts from abroad would occasionally be invited to teach short-term courses in specialist areas. The Centre also organised theatre workshops with visiting theatre directors and actors from France through which many Kenyan artists and theatre directors polished their skills. They also hosted the annual Nairobi Cultural Extravaganza from 1991-1995 where different theatre groups came together for two weeks in December to stage their productions.

Other cultural bodies that supported Kenyan artists through funding, training, cultural exchange programmes and by provision of space for performance included the British Council and Goethe Institute. Though these Centres had little interest in nurturing nationalistic theatre traditions and mostly promoted Western theatre, they afforded Kenyan artists the much need theatre skills and opportunities at a time when few other alternatives were available.

The Emergence of Aesthetics of Laughter

When the fortunes of Kenyan theatre began to rise again in the late 1990s after the constitutional changes that significantly checked the excesses of the state, the highly radical plays of the 1970s and the early 1980s were no more. In their place was the lighter genre of comedy that mainly dealt with social issues through exaggerated humour and sometimes highly 'sexualised' productions. Although many of the productions scored poorly in

⁶²⁹ Interview with Harsita Waters, Head of Culture at Alliance Française de Nairobi, Held in her Office on 20 December 2013.

⁶³⁰ Ibid.

terms of production and directing they were performed to enthusiastic audiences in various parts of the country which demonstrated the peoples' hunger for relevant theatre. Kaigwa explained the reasons for emergence of comedy thus:

With comedy, you felt you were safe. You will not have your doors shut. People began to censor themselves [...] there was very little of that which was critical of the government.⁶³¹

This was because, despite the constitutional guarantees, Moi's government continued to muzzle criticism of his government, including banning critical plays. In 1993 for instance, *Miujiza's* licence to stage *The Master and the Frauds* (1986), a play by Cameroonian Bode Sowande whose theme is corruption, was cancelled under unclear circumstances. The only difference, this time, was that the group could move to court to challenge the ban. When they did, the judge ruled in *Miujiza's* favour and the play was staged.⁶³²

Among the theatre groups that were instrumental in popularising the comedic theatre in the 1990s was *Redykulass* group. It was founded by Walter Mong'are, Tony Njuguna and John Karie who at the time were students at Kenyatta University. In 1992, the three revived the Kenyatta University Travelling Theatre (KUTT) and began to stage stand-up comedy at the university and other commercial entertainment places. In the late 1990s the Kenya Television Network (KTN), the only private television channel at the time, began to air their productions which gave them a lot of publicity.⁶³³

Their productions parodied the mannerisms of important political figures, including President Moi and in the process demystifying 'the big man syndrome' and perception that the political elite were 'demigods' different from many ordinary Kenyans. To the surprise of many, the group continued to thrive and was not banned. While this may largely be attributed to the widening democratic and permissive atmosphere, the regime may also have seen in their performances a source of comic relief and laughter for a nation that was experiencing too many hardships.

631 Kaigwa, Interview, 5 February 2014.

632 Ndigirigi, 'Kenyan Theatre after Kamiriithu', p. 79.

633 Buzz Team 'What Happened to University Theatre?'

Another theatre group that significantly contributed to the new theatre culture was Sarakasi Players. The group had been founded by Weru Munyoro in 1989 with the assistance of the seasoned Kenyan theatre director Titus Gathwe.⁶³⁴ Their plays were mainly social comedies based on Kenyan-authored plays, their own creations and authors from other parts of the world. The written plays would be translated into Kikuyu, improvised and adapted to reflect the Kenyan social-contexts. Their main stage was at the Kenyatta International Conference Centre (KICC) where they had converted a big room into a theatre. However, in the 1990s, *Sarakasi* re-defined the whole idea of taking theatre to the people by not just touring their plays to rural areas, but also by taking performances into bars and hotels as Gathwe explained:

We could get those plays in English and then somebody would translate them into vernacular. We surprised ourselves because immediately, we built a very large audience coming to watch the plays in Kikuyu and it thrived very well [...] we were performing wherever people are. We started taking theatre to the people. Where people were. In the bars [...] literary taking theatre to the people [...] the audience of the theatre were people who have made up their mind that they are going to theatre.⁶³⁵

In this way, they were able to create new audiences for their plays, new performance spaces and as Bantu Mwaura notes, to 'sanitise' bars that in Kenya are often associated with drunkards to become spaces for family entertainment.⁶³⁶

The most notable production by the group was Protais Asseng's *Enough is Enough* which in 1991 they translated as *Ciagaina ni Ciaigana* in Kikuyu. The play was an absurdist comedy on the theme of family planning. It revolved around a woman who after twelve pregnancies was protesting against having any more children.⁶³⁷ Ndigirigi notes that the production may have gone down as the 'longest running play' in Kenya. It was staged over two hundred times to over thirty thousand people in hotel venues in Nairobi,

634 Gathwe, Interview, 20 January 2014.

635 Ibid.

636 Bantu Mwaura, 'Political Ridicule: Medialized Notions of Concealment', in *Media and Identity in Africa*, ed. by Kimani Njogua and John Middleton (London: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 218-225, (p. 20).

637 Ndigirigi, 'Kenyan Theatre after Kamiriithu', p. 87- 89.

Mombasa, Nakuru, Nyeri, Thika and Meru for one and a half years.⁶³⁸

Ndigirigi notes the following about its themes and performance:

The subtle themes of women's equality/empowerment and family were obscured by the production's emphasis on the exaggerated and absurd element, hence the plays uproarious reception.⁶³⁹

Another notable production by *Sarakasi* was Robert Serumanga's *Majangwa* (1993) which they translated as *Wamucuthi* meaning the tail, or figuratively, penis in Kikuyu.⁶⁴⁰ The name was meant to capture the sexual but political themes and scenes in the original *Majangwa*, which is an absurdist play on the futility of life in the post-colonial Uganda. In the play, Majangwa and his wife Nakirijja embark to a journey to nowhere. Their career as artists who entertain people on the streets is also going nowhere so that in the long they degenerate to the levels where they have to entertain their audience by engaging in sex publicly to survive economically. It had an equally good reception. They also produced *Wangu wa Makeri*, an original play written by Joni Nderitu and performed in both Kikuyu and English in 1991. The play was based on the legend of the authoritative female Kikuyu colonial chief who was known for her ruthlessness towards men. The Kikuyu version was particularly popular in Central Kenya where the language and legend originates.⁶⁴¹

As Gathwe informed me, they had to cut short their activities in 1996 when the government demanded 'their' space (room at KICC) back, because as he sarcastically put it, they 'had better uses for it'. Gathwe further told me that following the success of *Sarakasi*, a myriad of groups mushroomed in the country copying their techniques and themes. However, many of the groups collapsed after a short time, an occurrence he attributed to poor production techniques, over-reliance on slapstick, themes and scenes that sometimes bordered on the indecent.⁶⁴²

638 Ibid.

639 Ibid.

640 Gathwe, Interview, 20 January 2014.

641 Gichora Mwangi, 'Kenya', in *The Cambridge Guide to African and Caribbean Theatre*, ed. by Martin Banham and Errol Hill (London: Cambridge University Press 1994), pp. 45-51.

642 Gathwe, Interview, 20 January 2014.

From 1995, Wahome Mutahi, a Kenyan novelist and satirist who until his death in July 2003 wrote the weekly column, 'Whispers' in the *Daily Nation* would inspire this comedic tradition even further through the *Igiza* (perform) productions that he co-founded with one Dr Nyamu. Mutahi's productions were mainly political satires in Kikuyu that he mostly co-authored with like-minded artists lampooning the excesses of the political class in highly symbolic ways. The group's main performance venue was the Citrus Bar Theatre in Ngara. However, like Munyoro, he also toured his work to various parts of the country, staging them in bars, hotels and other non-conventional places where he performed to enthusiastic and sometimes anxious audiences.⁶⁴³

The anxiety was out of the fear that security agencies might interrupt the performances because of the unapologetic way the plays tore into the excesses of the political elite. This actually happened during the performance of *Ngoma cia Aka (Whirlwind)*, a social farce on infidelity that was being staged at White Rhino Hotel in Nyeri in 2002. The police stopped the production without any valid explanations though it was by no means the most political of *Igiza's* productions. Another popular play by Mutahi was *Makarirara Kioro (They will Cry in the Toilet)* (2001) which he co-authored with Ndungu Githuku. It revolved around the hallucinations of a raving president who after being kicked out of office finds himself and his members of cabinet bundled into a public toilet. Coming just before the 2002 national elections, it was prophetic of the fall of the autocratic KANU regime.

Thus, through the productions of these three groups, we see two types of comic mode emerging- the social and the political farce- that is staged in form of stand-up comedy or plays. These forms dominate Kenyan theatre even today, as I shall explore in the next chapter.

Published Drama in Moi Era (1978-2002)

In the Moi era the already bad situation of published drama worsened as there were even fewer plays published. The concerns of the late years of Kenyatta era continued to dominate the major plays written at this period, but painting an even grimmer situation of the country and its leadership. The

⁶⁴³ Ibid.

fear of harassment by the state and the exile of intellectuals from whom most of Kenyan published drama originated are some of the factors that contributed to worsening situation of published drama and theatre in general. By leaving the country, the playwrights were uprooted from the environments and social connections that shaped their publications. Those who remained began to focus more on social themes, embracing the allegorical mode of writing to hide the political messages in their plays or stopped writing drama altogether.

I have discussed *Maitu Njugira* (1982) and *Drumbeats of Kerinyaga* (1991) both of which are yet to be published. Other notable works of this period are the plays of Francis Imbuga, the only playwright who published quite significantly during Moi era. Except for *Aminata* (1985) whose theme is on gender empowerment, Imbuga continued to be concerned with excoriating the problem of poor leadership in not only Kenya, but also other parts of Africa. Though most of the issues he discusses in his plays are typically Kenyan, some are informed by happenings outside the country.

In *Game of Silence* (1978) first performed at the KNT in 1977, Imbuga's concern is the 'psychopathology'⁶⁴⁴ of those in power and the extent to which they are willing to go to suppress the threat of ordinary people to their social positions, wealth and power. In the play, the playwright adopts a psychoanalytic approach in that most of the action happens in Raja's subconscious mind. Through his psychic insights and dream that in the play take the form of extensive soliloquies, flashbacks or play within the play, we learn of Raja's and other ordinary people's tribulations under the repressive regime. The state, for instance, deploys an intelligence agent to follow him during his studies abroad to monitor the progression of his revolutionary ideas. Convinced he is a danger to the regime, the state declares him insane and locks him up in a mental institution upon his arrival home to prevent him from conscientising the ordinary people. Thus, like in *Betrayal in the City* where Jusper is declared insane in the state's attempt to discredit his radical ideas, revolutionary thinking is also equated to insanity in *Game*. The extent to which the state is willing go to maintain the status quo is further revealed by the murder of Raja's sister Flora to prevent her

644 Mumma, p.164.

from climbing the social ladder by marrying Jimmy, who is from a rich family. By setting the play in Raja's mind, the author seems to suggest that the state has silenced the peoples' voices and it is only in their subconscious minds that they can express their revolutionary ideas.

At the end of the play, a dance is collectively enacted to celebrate 'the goodness of tomorrow' and to pay tribute to Flora who had been killed for the noble cause of uniting the citizens across the social classes.⁶⁴⁵ This is the author's way of artistically suggesting communal solidarity in the fight against repressive forces. The dance follows Raja's poem that calls on the masses to 'sleep no more'.⁶⁴⁶ This juxtaposition of a poem against a traditional song suggests both Western and traditional values have a place in society. The use of the psychotherapeutic dramatic mode, arguably, depicts John Ruganda's influence on the playwright since the latter uses this approach extensively in most of his plays. Ruganda taught Imbuga at the University of Nairobi and was instrumental in helping nurture his theatrical skills.

The Successor (1979) followed *Game of Silence*. It is an intense play in which the author effectively uses dramatic irony and suspense to explore greed for power. The betrayal and intrigues that characterise the race to succeed the ailing Emperor Chonda parallel the intrigues that characterised Kenyatta succession. In the play, Oriomra is depicted as the personification of evil and greed who connives against everyone and uses his colleagues to achieve his ambitions for power. His character reminds one of an ogre, the greedy, half-human character who in many Kenyan narratives uses trickery to lure humans to his home only to kill and consume them. In the play, he convinces the gullible Sasia and his naive girlfriend Zira to lie against Jandi, Chonda's choice of successor, that the child Zira is expecting is Jandi's and not Sasia's. Subsequently, both Jandi and Sasia are seemingly eliminated from the race, leaving the coast clear for Oriamra to ascend the throne.

The audience's sense of relief is therefore immense when Jandi reappears from the shrine of Dr See Through, where he has been hiding all along. Dr See Through is the community's diviner and custodian of

645 *The Game of Silence*, p. 54.

646 *Ibid*, p. 34.

communal morality. With the help of Zira (who by now has realised Oriomra's deception) and Dr See Through, Jandi thwarts and exposes Oriamra's evil plans. Jandi's return, which is also the climax of the play, is relived through a play-within-the-play device. This has the effect of heightening the dramatic action. At the end of the play, the 'masses' troupe to the shrine of the 'God of peace' to seek forgiveness and healing. This is the author's way of suggesting communal responsibility in shaping communal destiny.

Man of Kafira (1984) is a sequel to *Betrayal in the City*. It was first performed in 1979 as *Day of Truth* at Kenyatta University before an audience that included President Moi shortly after he got to power. The events in the play remind one of the fate of leaders like Idi Amin who after being ousted from power were roaming the world looking for sympathetic hosts.⁶⁴⁷ Much of the action of the play takes place at Abiara where Boss has run to exile after he was deposed from power and where his demented mind makes him continue to behave as if he was the president of Abiara. His troubled mental state, as his dreams reveal, is attributed to the guilt he harbours regarding his past misdeeds. He, for instance, keeps on seeing a phantom of Bishop Luwam, one of the victims of his bloody leadership. Imbuga's message here appears to be that the engineers of bloody regimes can run but they cannot hide from their deeds.

The play ends with the return of Boss to Kafira after his hosts, who are tired of his demands, lie to him that he is still popular at home. At the end of the play, he is murdered by Regina whom he had abducted as he fled to Abiara after he killed her brother Mosese. By letting Regina perform the act of eliminating from Kafira the evil that Boss embodies, Imbuga is also highlighting how far she has come in her conscientisation journey from being the private and disinterested observer in *Betrayal* to one who is ready to play a more leading role in effecting change.

However, the author appears to be doubtful if the death of Boss will solve the problems of Kafira. Jere or Chairman, as he is called in the play and the new president of Kafira is already showing inconsistencies that signal he is gradually degenerating into a dictator. Though he adopts Juser

647 Ruganda, p. xix.

as a son, he refuses to give him the government post he promised him before taking power. He prefers to continue the narrative that Juser is mad to justify locking him up in a mental institution in the name of treatment because he is afraid of his revolutionary qualities. He also threatens to use force on the citizens when they object to the return of Boss. By casting doubt on Jere's democratic ideals and strength of character, Imbuga was trying to portray the post-colonial reality of many African nations where the removal of one dictator only led to the installation of another.

In *Aminata* (1985), first performed during Forum 85 and the UN Decade for Women Conference held in Nairobi in 1985, Imbuga deviates from his usual political themes to address cultural and gender issues. In addition to women's empowerment, the play also examines a wide range of contentious socio-cultural problems in traditional and modern society. In this play, Imbuga has adopted a dialogical approach, refusing to take a definite stand on the issues he examines. Rather he depicts both the good and the bad in the issues he highlights. By so doing, he is inviting the audience to continue the debate on some of the controversies on issues of gender and culture that are the subject of this play. He is also suggesting that many of the contentious cultural issues are not easy to resolve and caution is needed in addressing them. This makes the text highly adaptable for educational purposes.

In the play, Aminata's quest to inherit the piece of land which her father bequeathed her before his death and which her uncle Jumba and brother Ababio are determined to deny her by hiding behind custom that hinders women from inheriting their fathers is a highly debatable issue. While we admire her struggle against repressive customs, one cannot fail to notice the author's veiled criticism of the way Aminata approaches the whole issue. Since Aminata is economically independent and without heirs, her quest for this piece of land is reduced to an egoistic pursuit that is driven by the need to enforce her legal rights as opposed to need. The characterisation in *Aminata* is also problematic. Like other Kenyan feminist works I explored earlier, the male characters are either drunkards as in the case of Ababio or emasculated beings as in the cases of Jumba and

Aminata's husband who cannot only reproduce but are living in the shadow of their stronger women.

That, between *Aminata* (also the least political of Imbuga's plays from 1975), to *Return of Mgofu* (2011) Imbuga's major publications comprised mainly of two novels is telling of just how much Moi's repression and killed dramatic creativity. The two novels are *The Shrine of Tears* that focused on the plight of artists in Kenya and the woes that faced the KNT and *Miracle of Rimeria* (2004) whose theme is HIV/AIDS. As I noted in the discussion on Ngugi, the Kenyan state appeared more accommodative of the political novel than the play which Gikandi attributes to the elitist nature of the novel. As he further argues, the novel is also mostly suited for private reading, unlike the play which is meant for communal entertainment.⁶⁴⁸

Imbuga's plays, however, continued to be performed and to feature in the school curriculum even during the Moi era even after Ngugi's plays were banned from the 1980s. This apparent immunity from prosecution can be attributed to what John Ruganda calls, the 'masquerade' nature of Imbuga's plays.⁶⁴⁹ This means that he is able to hide the radicalism in his work through use of humour and irony and to appear rather 'conformist' while still 'contesting the status quo'.⁶⁵⁰

Experiments with drama that fused indigenous performance cultures with modern dramatic forms also continued through plays such as *Lwanda Magere* (1991) by Okoiti Omtatah. The play is based on a popular Luo oral narrative that has similarities with the biblical story of Samson and Delilah. In the play and oral narrative, Lwanda Magere is a warrior whose body is endowed with supernatural powers so that he cannot be harmed by spears. He loses his powers when he allows himself to be seduced by a woman from the rival community thereby risking the welfare of his people. The play is infused with local idioms, proverbs and chants that contribute in giving the it a feel of an authentic African setting.

An important development in this phase was the increase in plays in local languages particularly, Kiswahili. Like plays in English, the playwrights

648 Gikandi, p. 236.

649 Ruganda, *Telling the Truth Laughingly*, p. 9.

650 Ibid.

of Kiswahili drama were also academicians in universities and schools. The most notable of these plays was *Kilio cha Haki* (A Cry for Justice) by Al-Amin Mazrui for which, as I noted elsewhere, he was detained for 18 months, two weeks after its premiere at the University of Nairobi in 1982.⁶⁵¹ After his release from detention, Mazrui could not secure a job in Kenya and was forced to exile in the United States.⁶⁵²

Kilio is a militant drama that takes the form of agitprop. It is comparable to *The Trial*, *Ngahika Ndeenda* and *Maitu Njugira* in terms of the radical way the author explores the themes of capitalism and neo-colonialism. As Mumma notes, the events in the play appear to have been informed by the happenings at a multinational fruit processing company, Delmonte which in the play is called Delmon farm.⁶⁵³ The workers at the farm are an ignorant and chauvinistic lot who see each other through the lenses of gender and tribe. What is unique about this play is that Mazrui accords a woman, Lanina, the responsibility of conscientising and leading the workers. In the ensuing struggle between the workers and the owners of capital, three of Delmon's assistants are murdered. This leads to incarceration of the entire workers' leadership. The workers, in turn, effect a revolt that leads to the liberation of the whole country.

Another significant writer was Kay Kitsao, a lecturer at the University of Nairobi and arguably Kenya's most prolific playwright in Kiswahili. His plays included *Uasi* (Sins) (1980) *Tazama Mbele* (Looking Ahead) (1981) *Bi Arusi* (The Bride) (1983) and *Malimwengu Ulimwenguni* (Wonders of this World) (1983). His plays dealt with social problems particularly of patriarchy, women's exploitation and emerging materiality. In *Uasi* and *Tazama Mbele*, for instance, the young girls are forced to marry without love because of the suitors' economic standing. There was also Felix Osodo, a teacher trainer and a prominent figure at the Kenya School Drama Festivals. His plays infused drama into traditional performance modes to explore political themes. In *Hatari Kwa Usalama* (Security Risk) (1979), the greed of modern Kenyan leaders is allegorically compared to that of an ogre. In the play, the

651 Murungu and Nasong'o, p. 204.

652 Ibid.

653 Mumma, p.169.

greedy king sends the anti-hero Hatari Kwa Usalama on a dangerous mission to bring him the ogre's tail in order to enrich himself. His greed eventually leads to the destruction of the whole community.

The corpus of drama in Kenyan languages was also enlarged by translation of plays in English into Kenyan languages. Heinemann Educational Books translated Ngugi's *The Black Hermit* as 'Mtawa Mweusi' (1978) while *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, as noted earlier was translated into both Kiswahili and Kikuyu in the 1980s. *The Trial of Brother Jero* by Wole Soyinka was translated as 'Masaibu ya Ndugu Jero' (1982) by A. S. Yahya, while *The Burdens* by John Ruganda was translated as 'Mzigo' (1978) by Oxford University Press. Kamiriithu plays offer the best example of plays in other Kenyan languages.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the discussion in this chapter has focused on Moi's repression of theatre in the 1980s and 1990s. The most notable of these effects was the gradual decline of most of the theatre forms and spaces in the country. The repression also led to an emphasis on humour in theatre as a way of avoiding censorship and tackling the difficulties of life. In school drama, there was an emphasis on spectacle. The discussion has also demonstrated that theatre did not give in to state's machinations without a fight and in spaces like the University, the intellectuals continued to engage in political theatre despite the repressive conditions. All in all, the drastic decline of theatre under Moi is clear manifestation that political regimes in Kenya have played a significant role in the narrative of Kenyan theatre. The next chapter focuses on the changes that have occurred in the contemporary era under more tolerant political conditions.

Chapter 7

Theatre in the Contemporary Period-2000 to Present

Introduction

The 21st century ushered in major socio-political changes in Kenya which had significant implications for the development of the entire cultural sector and theatre in particular. The most noteworthy and relevant to this study was the ending of the 30-year KANU administration in 2002. This paved the way for the institution of more democratic and tolerant governments in the recent past. These are the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) government that ruled from 2002 to 2007, the Grand Coalition that was in power from 2008 to 2012 and the Jubilee administration that is currently in power from 2013. The focus of the chapter is on how the various theatre spaces have transformed under these three regimes. I will also explore some of the major challenges that the performance industry in Kenya continues to grapple with despite the expanding democratic spaces. The chapter further discusses some of the implications of the 2010 Constitution of Kenya on performance.

Kenya's Political-Culture from 2002 and Its Implications for Theatre

KANU's loss in the 2002 national election was celebrated by many Kenyans as a step forward towards consolidating the gains the country had made from the 1990s in the fight for re-democratisation. Though the constitutional amendments of 1992 and 1997 had widened democratic spaces significantly, many Kenyans were convinced that only a new constitution could significantly change their lives for the better. Although Moi had succumbed to political pressure in 1997 and established the Constitution of Kenya Review Commission (CKRC) to overhaul the country's laws, by 2002 the Commission had achieved little. Apart from a lack of consensus among stakeholders on important issues such as the system of government, devolution and the length of presidential terms, the ruling party did not seem committed to reforming a system under which they enjoyed immense powers

and privileges.⁶⁵⁴ Thus, even though Moi was constitutionally barred from contesting the 2002 national elections, people were afraid that another win for KANU, even with another person as president, might mean the continuation of his policies.

The 2002 national electoral contest was, therefore, a watershed in the history of Kenya. The main contenders were Uhuru Kenyatta of KANU and Mwai Kibaki of the National Rainbow Coalition. The way the two became foremost contenders for the country's top political seat was interesting and reminiscent of the political drama that had characterised KANU and KADU in the 1963 elections.⁶⁵⁵ A few months before the ballot, Moi surprised his friends and foes when he, on 28 July 2002, announced the young and politically inexperienced Uhuru Kenyatta as his successor in KANU. Kenyatta was also from the Kikuyu community that was generally viewed as anti-Moi and KANU.

While Moi's decision may have been informed by the need to weaken Mwai Kibaki's political base by splitting the Kikuyu voters, it seems he did not anticipate the rebellion that his announcement precipitated within his political base. Senior KANU politicians and KANU's coalition partner Raila Odinga, who after the 1997 national elections had entered into a coalition with KANU to form government at a time when KANU was struggling with 'a thin majority' in parliament even after winning the elections,⁶⁵⁶ met Moi's move with strong resistance. In March 2002, KANU and the National Democratic Party of Odinga had formalised their merger in preparation for the election at the end of the year.

After failing to convince Moi to change his mind and institute a fair election for KANU's presidential candidate, Odinga and his colleagues including George Saitoti (the then vice president), Joseph Kamotho, Kalonzo Musyoka and William Ole Ntimama left the party and formed the Rainbow Alliance.⁶⁵⁷ After a few months, they entered into a partnership with the National Alliance (Party) of Kenya (NAK) that was led by Mwai Kibaki, Charity Ngilu and Kijana Wamalwa to form the National Alliance and Rainbow

654 Hornsby, p. 624.

655 Ibid, p. 697.

656 Ibid, p. 621.

657 Ibid, p. 677.

Coalition (NARC) that ran against KANU in that year's elections.⁶⁵⁸ This was followed by the famous Kibaki *Tosha* (Kibaki is an adequate presidential candidate) declaration by Odinga at a rally that was attended by over '100,000 people to inaugurate the new NARC 'super-alliance'. It later emerged that Odinga's declaration came as a surprise to his colleagues who were still agonising on the best way to choose a presidential candidate for the new party without causing a major political fallout that would only give KANU another easy win.⁶⁵⁹ When the elections results were announced on 3 January 2003, Kibaki had won by 3.6 million votes, representing 61 percent of the votes cast. Kenyatta managed to garner only 1.8 million votes.⁶⁶⁰ The polls had been held on 27 December 2002. Kenyans' jubilation at having a new government after thirty years of KANU rule was immeasurable. For the first time since 1963, they had also managed to hold an election that was not an 'ethnic census'.⁶⁶¹ This is in reference to political mobilisation almost exclusively along ethnic lines. Many saw NARC's win as an opportunity for the nation to begin life anew and to right many of the things that had gone wrong with Kenya's independence dream.

Unfortunately, the NARC government did not live up to the expectations of ordinary Kenyans. Power and resource sharing wrangles and corruption in government derailed its vision within months as Hornsby articulates:

Every decision was coloured by a resurgence of the same themes of cleavage that had dogged Kenya since the early 1960s. The ethnicisation of politics and zero-sum attitude to resource allocation decisions that had emerged with the executive presidency and been strengthened by its abuse left every decision and its ethnic and patronage implications contested [...] Initial differences gradually turned into all-out war, destroying NARC from within.⁶⁶²

The political-fallout in NARC was not surprising particularly when one considers the fact that NARC was 'an opportunistic' entity formed with

658 Ibid, p. 680.

659 Ibid.

660 Ibid, p. 690.

661 Michael Bratton and Mwangi Kaimenyi 'Voting in Kenya: Putting Ethnicity in Perspective', *Journal of East African Studies*, 2, 2, (July 2008) pp.272-304 (p. 272).

662 Hornsby, pp. 697-698.

the sole aim of capturing power from KANU and preventing Kenyatta from winning the election.⁶⁶³ Moreover, with the exception of a few people like Charity Ngilu and Kijana Wamalwa, most of the players in NARC were KANU orphans who at various dates had found shelter in the opposition while escaping the burning house of KANU. Odinga's cohabitation with KANU after the 1997 elections had also seriously dented his revolutionary credentials. Thus, the party lacked a common philosophy and the ideological grounding to hold it together once they got into power.

By 2005, the political divisions in NARC had become so bad that during the constitution referendum of that year, the two sides (NAK and Rainbow) were on opposing sides despite being in the same government. Odinga led those who opposed the draft constitution and subsequently won the referendum. The embarrassed President reacted by expelling Odinga and his allies from the government. Re-energised by their victory and angry at the loss of their positions in the government, among other grievances, Odinga and his allies formed a new party, the Orange Democratic Party (ODM).

The next presidential race in 2007 and whose top contenders were Mwai Kibaki and Raila Odinga proved to be a disaster for the whole nation. Kibaki ran on the ticket of the Party of National Unity (PNU) while Odinga led ODM. The inter-tribal conflict that followed the announcement of the presidential election results went down as the worst in the history of the country since independence. Citing massive rigging by the PNU, ODM disputed the declaration of Kibaki as the winner. The PNU stood their ground that they had won fairly. In no time, the dispute degenerated into the mayhem that led to the death of about 1200 people, destruction of property and displacement of thousands of people in various parts of the country.

It took the intervention of the international community to calm down the explosive situation and bring back normalcy by striking a deal that led to the formation of what came to be referred to as 'a Grand Coalition' in 2008. The two contenders were compelled to share power with Kibaki as President, while Odinga assumed the role of Prime Minister. This position

⁶⁶³ Ibid, p. 680.

was created hurriedly to deal with the political and security emergency. Despite occasional power struggles between the two sides of the coalition, the Grand Coalition government was able to run its full five-year term and to provide Kenyans with the much-anticipated new constitution that was promulgated on 27 August 2010.⁶⁶⁴

The 2007 Post-Elections Violence (PEV) also led to the indictment of six Kenyans at the International Criminal Court (ICC) for their alleged roles in the unfortunate events. The indictments, in turn led to unexpected and interesting political re-alignments in the country that exposed further the fleeting and shaky nature of Kenyan politics. In 2013, two of the accused, Uhuru Kenyatta and William Samoilie Ruto, who in 2007 were in opposing political camps, came together as the Jubilee Coalition with the aim of 'uniting and reconciling' Kenyans after the PEV. Their message on the need for generational change in Kenya's leadership also appeared to resonate with many young voters, particularly in the communities of two leaders. Uhuru and Ruto belonged to the Kikuyu and Kalenjin communities respectively, which have borne much of the brunt of not only the PEV in 2007, but also previous land-based conflicts since the 1990s.

Despite a national and international outcry against the bid of Kenyatta and Ruto to lead Kenya, they proceeded to win yet another very closely contested presidential election. The opposing party was Coalition of Restoration of Democracy (CORD), another hurriedly constituted alliance by Odinga, Kalonzo Musyoka (Wiper Party) and Moses Wetangula (FORD-Kenya), formerly rivals in the Grand Coalition. As in 2007, they too disputed the Jubilee win and contested the results in the newly established Supreme Court but the court upheld the results.

The above discussion exposes the fragile nature of Kenyan politics where parties are formed along ethnic lines and for political expediency. As John Githongo in 'Riding the Tiger' (2008) has noted, the Kenyan political class often capitalises on historical issues such as problems of resource allocation⁶⁶⁵ to win support from their ethnic base. Once in power, they fail

⁶⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 779.

⁶⁶⁵ John Githongo, 'Riding the Tiger', *Journal of East African Studies*, 2, 2, (July 2008), pp. 359-367(p. 363).

to address these historical issues as well as the genuine questions of class inequalities, poor governance and corruption which are the root causes of Kenyan's problems. The result is more marginalisation of the ordinary people and 'ethnicisation' of the country.⁶⁶⁶

Currently, both coalitions are busy preparing for the 2017 elections. On 10 September 2016, the parties affiliated to the Jubilee Coalition, converged for a merger into one Jubilee Party under which Uhuru and Ruto are expected to run for a second term in August 2017. The CORD fraternity remains hopeful they will garner enough support to dethrone the ruling coalition in 2017 though they are yet to agree on a presidential candidate. The tone of Kenyan politics today paints a picture of a country whose situation is both precarious and fragile as there is little ideological differences between the two sides. Ethnicity appears to be still the strongest mobilising factor.

The Impact of Recent Regimes on Theatre

In the contemporary era, the culture and arts sector continue to be lowly prioritised by the government. The growth of the theatre sector has also lagged behind that of other aspects of the performing arts such as music and film.⁶⁶⁷ Nevertheless, theatre has made important strides since 2000, particularly if one considers the onslaught it endured under the previous regime.

The relatively democratic and tolerant political environment since 2003 has seen the state interfering less in the business of arts and artists and plays that could not see the light of day during the Moi era can now be staged or taught in schools without fear. Kaigwa, for instance, told me how she was able to stage *The Virginia Monologues* in 2003 when Kibaki came to power after unsuccessfully trying to secure a licence to perform the play twice in the Moi era. *The Virginia Monologues* by Eve Ensler comprises of a series of monologues that explicitly examine various aspects of female sexuality and body and how women relate to them. According to Kaigwa, the Moi regime may have considered the play too 'feminist' for Kenyan

⁶⁶⁶ Githongo, p. 364.

⁶⁶⁷ Kaigwa, Interview, 5 February 2014.

audiences. Since many of the issues Ensler explores in the play are relevant to Kenya where women's sexuality is often hushed up and denied by demeaning taboos, performing plays with such 'strong female themes' is an important step towards challenging the oppression of women.⁶⁶⁸

Political plays such as *Ngahika Ndeenda* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Miiri and which had been banned in Moi era have also been staged by various theatre groups without opposition from the government since 2003.⁶⁶⁹ Moreover, more Kenyans are now engaging in theatre as the perception of it being a dangerous field that could easily land one in trouble has waned. Schools, universities, professional and community theatre spaces have been gradually recovering from the repression of the past years and have once again began playing active roles in growing the country's theatre as I discuss below.

Theatre Training in the Universities

Perhaps the most important development in theatre in recent years has been the establishment of theatre, film and other performing arts faculties and departments in various universities in Kenya. The significance of these courses can only be fully comprehended when one considers that before then, the only form of training that was available to most Kenyans after the KSDF was through apprenticeship where people auditioned for roles and learnt by working with experienced theatre practitioners. Opondoe had this to say about this form of training at the Phoenix Players:

We have many young people we train here and they get jobs in movies and TV stations. We do on the job training. We will not give you a syllabus that you have to do this or that. Like if you come to us we do everything practically. In the process, you learn everything. You become a producer, you become a director, assistant manager, first aider, you learn about lights, sound projection, voice training and script rehearsals.⁶⁷⁰

Since most of those who train the upcoming actors had no formal training themselves the result is a recycling of practices that have not helped the industry much in realising its full potential. The other mode of training is

668 Ibid.

669 See Ndigirigi (1999) for some of these performances.

670 Opondoe, Interview, 11 February 2014.

through workshops and residential sessions with visiting and seasoned Kenyan artists.

By 2013 most of the major universities were offering courses from certificate, diploma, undergraduate and master's levels with Kenyatta University also offering PhD courses since 2009. Their first PhD candidate graduated in 2012. Many of the departments are still in their foundational years and facing challenges of adequate staff and facilities. However, Zipporah Okoth, a theatre lecturer at Kenyatta University, noted that the interest among Kenyans in theatre and film courses was encouraging. In her University, for instance, the enrolment had risen from 12 students in 2008 to over 200 in 2013 for undergraduate courses. Enrolment in the other courses was also encouraging.

Staffing has remained a major challenge given that the departments are reliant on a few people who have had the opportunity to train abroad and recent graduates from local universities. As Okoth told me, in extreme cases, they have had to source staff from abroad to teach in areas where local expertise was non-existent. However, with PhD degrees being offered locally, staff shortages may soon be over.

The interest in theatre programmes at University level is interesting because up to today theatre remains a subject outside the curriculum in Kenya's school system. The only schools that offer theatre are the private international schools that follow educational systems such as General Certificate of Secondary Education (GSCE), International Baccalaureate and General Certificate of Education (GCE). Since such schools are inaccessible to the average Kenyan, it means that the only way most people experience theatre within the school system is through KSDF. Thus, the great interest in the subject at the university level could only mean the learners see immense opportunities in the subject, particularly with regard to job openings. This may also be a wake-up call to the Ministry of Education to rethink the continued exclusion of the subject from the school curriculum, particularly now that a good number of the local universities have the structures to train teachers for the subject.

I need to emphasise here that university training may not solve the current skills gaps in Kenyan theatre in the short term. First, only a few

Kenyans can access university education. Secondly, there are already millions of people practising various modes of theatre without any form of training except what they learn on the job. This perhaps emphasises the need for non-formal modes of training such as the Drama School (discussed in Chapter 5) to offer immediate skills to Kenyans. Unfortunately, attempts to establish such initiatives have not met with the necessary support from the government. In 2003, the NARC government's attempt to revive a theatre school at the KNT collapsed after only three years. Insiders of the project (such as the current KNT Director, Murungu, who is also a member of the KCC Board) blamed the closure on a lack of funding from the government.

Jacob Otieno also spoke of the National Talent Youth Academy that the government instituted in collaboration with UNICEF in 2009, purportedly to tackle the 'youth bulge' after the 2007 conflict. It aimed at imparting practical skills to youth in areas of their interest and talent such as theatre, sports, music and film. The national centre was situated at Kasarani Sports Centre and the students were recruited from all parts of the country after intensive auditions for a one-year foundational course in the above-mentioned areas. As Otieno, who was a theatre lecturer there put it, 'the government saw it fit not to recruit students for theatre in 2014 though they recruited students' for music and sports, the other departments in the academy.⁶⁷¹ This underscores my previous point that culture and arts are still marginalised sectors even in the contemporary era.

Private Efforts at Training

During my fieldwork, I came across a particularly innovative mode of training by The Theatre Company which offers some insights on some of the ways individuals are trying to address skills gaps in the industry. The company was co-founded by Mumbi Kaigwa and her ex-husband Keith Pearson in 1999 as a performance and training company. The training initiative was called the Performance Skills Training Programme and had been running since 2004 through grants from non-governmental bodies. The aim of the programme was to address the gaps in theatre skills among practising and aspiring artists. Pearson's interest in training was not accidental as he holds

⁶⁷¹ Ibid.

a master's degree in theatre practice from the University of Exeter. He had also spent many years teaching and practising theatre in Kenya. He has continued with the training programmes even after Kaigwa left in 2008 and established her own outfit The Arts Canvas through which she has continued to engage in highly innovative theatre initiatives, as I shall discuss shortly and in the next chapter.

According to Pearson, the company had been running four kinds of courses. The first was the one-three-day programme that was meant to address specific skills gaps in the industry among practising artists. The second was a one-week course for aspiring theatre artists or people interested in learning a specific theatre skill. It was the training programme that was taking place at the company's headquarters when I went to interview Pearson in December 2013 where participants, whom I learnt were from diverse fields - theatre students, bloggers, media personalities and ordinary Kenyans - were being taught acting skills.

Those with talent and focus joined the six weeks' programme. In this programme the trainees 'lived together, worked together, travelled together' to various parts of the country to research and perform for various projects under the supervision of professionals. After the six weeks, they became trainers in any of the four centres the company ran in Nairobi (at The Theatre Company's main centre in Westlands), The Little Theatre in Mombasa and other two centres in Nakuru and Mount Kenya regions. The most elaborate training was the six-month performance laboratory, which, according to Pearson, was meant for the 'very serious ones' who wanted 'just to absorb themselves for a long time'. After the auditions, those successful lived, travelled, researched and created works on issues relevant to Kenyans.⁶⁷²

The productions were created using a 'documentary technique'. It involved interviewing people, recording and transcribing their personal stories and then turning them into performances that reflected 'the hopes and desires of African people in the present and past'.⁶⁷³ Both Kaigwa and

⁶⁷² Interview with Keith Pearson at his Studio Theatre at Westlands Nairobi on 23 December 2013.

⁶⁷³ The Theatre Company Report, p.14.

Pearson told me that these plays had been staged in many towns in Kenya, East Africa and in international theatres and festivals. In Kenya, the plays have been used for peace-building initiatives and other community empowerment drives all over the country by both The Theatre Company and The Arts Canvas. Their performances were conducted in both formal theatres and in open spaces such as football grounds in places like Mathare and Korogocho slums as a way of showing that serious theatre could be staged in any locality. Performing in the open spaces was also a way of reaching communities with stories that were relevant to their lives.

Among the plays produced through this strategy was *Kigezi Ndoto* (Swahili for Hooks for Dreams), in 2006. It was a musical in Kiswahili and English versions.⁶⁷⁴ It tells stories of African women, their suffering under patriarchy and their hopes and dreams for a better future. In the performance, modern and traditional dance steps and movements, modes of narration, costume and instrumentation were used to capture what Kaigwa called 'the full spirit of African life now and in the past'.⁶⁷⁵

Their second production was *Githaa* (*Sheng* for Time) (2006). It focused on the tribulations of Kenyans living in the street. Kaigwa told me that the narrative was highly influenced by the life of one of the trainees who, according to her, was the star of the show.⁶⁷⁶ The production was also important because it was performed in the Kenyan street language, *Sheng*, an urban dialect that has evolved in the last twenty years. It combines many Kenyan languages. By using *Sheng* the play spoke to the youth and people living in the streets in a language with which they could easily identify.

A more recent production by The Theatre Company is *Shungwaya* (2012). According to Pearson, the producer of the play, the aim was to demonstrate 'how people come together, live together, do things that pull them apart and how they bring themselves back together'.⁶⁷⁷ In 2013 when I was conducting fieldwork, The Theatre Company was working on yet another play entitled *Kimbia* (Run) because, as Pearson noted, Kenyans are fascinated with athletics. During the research phase, the trainees lived with

674 Ibid.

675 Pearson, Interview, 23 February 2013.

676 Kaigwa, Interview, 5 February 2014.

677 Pearson, Interview, 23 December 2015.

the runners in their camps, run with them, listened to their stories and produced a play based on these experiences.

From the above, it is evident that the two artists have been working to evolve a performance culture that resonates with Kenyan performance traditions, Kenyan people and their fears and aspirations. As Pearson told me, they 'try to listen to all of those stories and then bring to [their] audiences what [they] feel they are most interested in at [that] moment'. They also try to 'build on [our] traditional strength, [while also] looking at the world around [us]'.⁶⁷⁸

The impacts of the training may be difficult to establish in this current study but according to company records, in Nairobi area alone they had trained more than 400 young performers between 2006 to early 2008. The training programme covered areas such as performance and public education, developing and promoting an experimental, interactive and participatory performance practice. The Company also ran intensive workshops in auditioning techniques, dance, movement, voice training, acting, writing and directing in various parts of the country.⁶⁷⁹ Many of these trainees are working with local theatre companies and in TfD sector. However, more still needs to be done, as such individual efforts are few and are largely located in the major cities.

Other University Theatre Initiatives

The university-based performance initiatives have been injected with new life in recent years. At the University of Nairobi, the UNFTT is once again active. Among their productions in 2013 when I went for fieldwork was Francis Imbuga's *The Return of Mgofu* (2010) that was staged for the University community. The funding of the UNFTT activities by the University had also resumed after many years, as Kimengichia informed me. At Kenyatta University, their Free Travelling Theatre (KUTT), which as I noted elsewhere had been active since the 1990s, is still growing strong. According to Okoth,

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁹ The Theatre Company Report 1999-2007, pp 1-20 (pp. 14-17).

though comedy accounted for most of the KUTT's performances, the group was also involved in more intellectually engaging forms of theatre.⁶⁸⁰

During the 'Kenya @ 50' celebrations in 2013, Kenyatta University was among the institutions that staged a performance. Their production was a musical that used the symbol of the family to denote growth. It followed the generational and socio-political experiences a family man who turned fifty in 2013 may have gone through over the years. The production was later staged at the KNT from the 14 -17 February 2014 on public demand.

Figure 9: A banner advertising a production by Kenyatta University at the KNT.



Moreover, from 2012 the universities were included in the KSDF, thus bringing the whole spectrum of Kenya's educational system into the festival and creating an influential forum for sharing skills across the various educational levels. It remains to be seen if the developments in university theatre are significant enough to restore its place in shaping the themes and style of Kenyan theatre as it had done in the 1970s and 1980s.

680 Interview with Zipporah Okoth, lecturer Kenyatta University at her office in the University on 13 February 2014.

Kenya Schools Drama Festivals

The Kenya Schools Drama Festivals (KSDF) is perhaps the most colourful theatre event in contemporary Kenya. Apart from the inclusion of the universities in the festivals, new genres have also been added. The film category was started in 2012. According to Simon Otieno of the University of Nairobi and the person behind the initiative, it involved schools making films on pertinent issues and presenting a DVD for adjudication. The films were screened for the audience in the evening after the theatrical performances during the KSDF. According to Otieno, the reception was so good that in 2013, they received 79 films in comparison to 12 in 2012.⁶⁸¹

As observed in the *Daily Nation* of 6 April 2015, the school films may go a long way in helping the media houses meet the requirements of the total local content they should air which currently stands at 40% and 60% by 2018. They are also a source of funds for schools as the producers sell the films they make. Other categories that have been added to the festival in the recent years include *Sakata* dance (Swahili for the modern dance), mime and stand-up comedy. This is in addition to existing genres of dramatised solo and choral verses, creative dance and dramatised narrative. The aim of the new genres, according to Otieno, is to make the festival reflect the realities of the local drama scene and to give the emerging performance forms an opportunity for growth and recognition.

Currently, although the Ministry of Education still provides the guiding themes for the festival each year, there is more freedom in the way the various producers interpret the theme. Plays tackling themes such as official corruption and poor service delivery have made their way back into the festival. Among the thrilling performances during the 2016 State Gala was *Teacher* a comedy by Nyabondo Boys High School that humorously depicted the frustrations of a Kenyan teacher due to poor remuneration and the failure of the government to heed the teachers' pleas for better pay.

Another notable play was *The Cross* by Kakamega High School, which tackled the theme of cheating in examinations. The play linked this

⁶⁸¹ Simon Peter Otieno, theatre lecturer at the University of Nairobi and a National Official at the KSDF interview held at his Office at the University of Nairobi on 18 December 2013

vice to wider official corruption, as those who facilitate the malpractice are greedy well-placed people in public service.⁶⁸² Further, the continued emphasis on original productions has made the festival a platform for interrogating varied issues facing students, Kenyan youth and society as the two plays demonstrate.

However, as many of my respondents noted, the lack of adequate theatre skills among the teachers and students, inadequate theatre facilities in schools and the emphasis on competition are huge challenges the festival must address to realise its full potential. Muraguri, for instance, noted that the KSDF was still dominated by what she called 'unnatural melodramatic' performances which have unfortunately, been transferred to the professional theatre stage. She also lamented the lack of adequate theatre facilities in schools in the country. Nevertheless, the KSDF remains a major cultural force in Kenyan theatre and a launching pad, for many Kenyan artists. If harnessed and empowered through adequate training and funding, it could revolutionise the country's performance industry.

Kenya Cultural Festival (KCF)

Another national theatre event whose stature has improved in recent years is the Kenya Cultural Festival (KCF) which is managed by the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Sports. This festival started as a music festival eighty-nine years ago, featuring mostly Western and traditional music performances and instruments by schools and other institutions. After the colonial era, the schools started their own music festival leaving the KCF to non-educational organisations and adult populations. It is organised along the same lines as the KSDF, with groups competing at county level and winners proceeding to the national competition.

Over the years, the festival has grown to become a forum for sharing and preserving Kenyan traditional cultures and performances, while at the same time, encouraging the growth of modern aspects of culture and performance. During the 2013 national festival that took place at the KNT the

⁶⁸² George Orido, 'Pomp and Laughter as Winners Of Kenyans Drama Festival are feted' <<http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2000198396/pomp-and-laughter-as-winners-of-kenya-s-drama-festival-are-feted>> [accessed 12 June 2016]

audiences were thrilled by not only the vigorous traditional dances from various parts of the country, but also the acrobatic modern dances such as the *sakata* alongside other forms such as *taarab*, bands, choirs, verses and plays in English and Kenyan languages. With the traditional dances, the rules of the festival insisted on authentic instrumentation, costuming and movement. The participants could also enter a dance from any community, not necessarily their own, provided they adequately researched on its performance. Thus, the festival is also a forum for learning and researching about other cultures. The performances were complemented by displays of aspects of material culture such as indigenous foods, clothing, ornaments and weaponry of the various communities. Watching, interacting and listening to the performers, organisers and adjudicators at the 2013 event, I had the feeling of being treated to a slice of the entire spectrum of the diverse cultures of Kenya.

The dearth of theatre skills in the country was even more evident in this event. Most of the plays presented appeared overdramatised and poorly directed, a situation the adjudicators at the festival also lamented while calling on the groups to polish their skills in order to put on a better show in the future. Nonetheless, the 2013 Festival, as Callistus Musiomi of the Ministry of Culture Arts and Sports told me, was a massive improvement in terms of organisation and participation. He attributed this to better co-ordination and competition under the devolved government system.⁶⁸³

Emerging Performance Spaces: The Regional Festivals

In addition to the KCF, the Ministry of Sports, Culture and Arts was supporting the regional cultural festivals in various parts of the country. At these events, communities that live close to each other come together at least once a year to celebrate their culture through performances, both traditional and modern, their rituals, artefacts and food. Unlike the KSDF and the KCF where the entertainment aspect is often clouded by the competition element, the idea behind regional festivals appears to be celebration of culture.

⁶⁸³ Interview with Callistus Musiomi of Ministry of Sports Culture and Arts at his Office in Nairobi on 19 December 2013.

In the Lamu Cultural Festival that I attended in 2013 the residents and visitors, who were both local and international, were treated to three days of traditional Swahili performances such as *mashaira* (verses), *taarabu* and dances such as *chama cha Matodoni*, *uta*, *vugo*, *chakacha*. Other indigenous Lamu communities including the orma, Sanye, Boni, Pokomo and Mijikenda, also performed thrilling dances. There was also the dhow sailing competition that was held in the Indian Ocean, donkey-riding competitions along the narrow streets of Lamu town and displays of indigenous foods and artefacts from the various Lamu communities. The highlight of the three-day event was the simulation of the traditional Swahili wedding, which, as custom dictates, was a women's affair.

Such festivals are a forum for re-claiming the 'empty spaces' of the communities. These open spaces include land around churches, schools, stadia, marketplaces, among other venues where communal performances can take place. The Lamu Cultural Festival took place at the popular Mkunguni square. This is an open space in the centre of the town where on normal days, people met and sat under trees or shop verandas to catch up on the latest happenings in the country, town and their lives.

As Musiomi informed me, the Ministry of Culture Arts and Sports was also using the community festivals as a forum for enhancing inter-ethnic harmony by encouraging groups to participate in festivals in other parts of the country not just their area. In 2011, for instance, the organisers of the Ikolomani Cultural festival in Western Kenya invited a group from Pokot in the Northern part to participate in their annual festival.⁶⁸⁴ The Ikolomani Cultural Festival whose highlight is the bull-fighting event is among the popular initiatives in the country. Another is the Murang'a Cultural Festival whose main attraction is the annual ritualistic visit and prayers at the famed Mukurwe wa Nyagathanga, the mythical origin of the Gikuyu ancestors, Gikuyu and Mumbi.

Professional Theatre in Contemporary Kenya

The numbers of professional theatre and semi-professional theatre companies had increased, particularly in the major cities. Comedy was still

⁶⁸⁴ Musiomi, Interview, 19 December 2013.

the dominant mode of performance in the country as the following quotation from Otieno indicates:

People want to have fun [...] they don't want to think [...] life is full of tragedy so they find the British slapstick humour and the bedroom farces a means of escapism [...] so they won't adapt serious Kenyan plays or even serious Greek plays. When you attempt to stage serious plays [...] you have to struggle to sell [...] the audience are forcing the theatre practitioners to do what they want [...]. Humour is the central point of the plays [...] Make people laugh at whatever cost, it does not matter whether there is a message or not [...] people tell you if you want to do message-laden plays, do TfD [...]. It's just comedy. Let us laugh [...] and the disease is very infectious. You go up to Mombasa; people tell you- can you get me a nice comedy? That is the question.⁶⁸⁵

The major themes revolved around social, family and political issues. The style of making the plays and language, however, differed between groups. Fanaka Arts, a theatre company founded by Eric Ndungu in 2004, exemplify one of the dominant ways comedies were being staged in the country. Their performances were mostly social comedies that at the time were largely based on Western plays and which they translated into Kikuyu to suit the local sensibilities and tastes of the audience. The major themes they tackled revolved around love and family. According to Tash Mitambo who directed most of the groups' plays, the production technique of this group can be referred to as 'author-director'. This is because, in the process of directing a play, they were also creating a new play that had motifs of the original play but had been localised to suit the tastes of the audience. Mitambo noted further that, in this strategy, the written texts act just as a guide to the overall theme of the show, but the lines and the way the plot was enacted were much localised. The process begun with actors reading the play to understand the main theme. They were then invited to imagine how the key scenarios in the play could be depicted or dramatised in a typically Kenyan way. What came out of this process is what was presented to the public.

In 2013, I observed this group's production of *The Perfect Wedding* by Robin Hawdon, translated as *Uhiki wa Ma* in Kikuyu. It was staged from 15-18 February 2014 at the *Ukumbi Mdogo* (smaller hall) of the KCC as the

⁶⁸⁵ Otieno, Interview, 17 January 2014.

re-innovation of the KNT had already started. From the production, the theme of infidelity and love that are the subject of Hawdon's play were evident. However, the linguistic nuances, the costuming and the accompanying music created a completely new play so that had I not seen the script during the rehearsals, I would have thought I was watching an original production. Indeed, none of the patrons that I interacted with after the show appeared to think they were watching a play by an American writer. Other local languages that dominated comedy were Luo, Kikamba and Luyha. These are the languages of the largest communities in Kenya. Social comedies that were adapted to fit local situations to varying degrees also occurred in English.

While this approach makes Western plays accessible and appealing to Kenyans audience, the demand for more intellectual material from theatre groups was gaining ground. According to Pearson, the dominance of comedy and social themes in Kenyan productions indicated that people were still afraid to tackle serious political issues.⁶⁸⁶

Figure 10 : A scene during the rehearsal for *The Perfect Wedding* by Fanaka Arts at the KNT in 2013.



The productions of Heartstrings Kenya, a group founded in 2010 by the current director Sammy Mwangi and others, offers another example of how comedy was being enacted in Kenya in 2013. Their plays were mainly

686 Ibid.

original productions created through the workshop method where actors, directors and producers came together to produce a script dealing with typically Kenyan issues of mainly political nature. English was the dominant language of their plays but they occasionally performed in other Kenyan languages. During my fieldwork, I watched their play *50% Kenyan* that was staged at the French Cultural Centre on 23 December 2013. It was a satire on corruption in Kenya. The play invited the audience to imagine that their citizenship as Kenyans had been revoked and they had to re-apply and be re-vetted. The more one could demonstrate his ability to steal public funds and other corrupt official dealings the higher the score and the more Kenyan one was judged to be. Petty thieves had the shock of their lives when their citizenship was revoked because they were not smart enough at their activities. Another highlight of the production was the décor. The wall was scribbled with other topical issues that were happening in the country at the time and not just images relevant to the play on stage. This reminded the audience that the play was just addressing a small slice of the many problems that bedevilled Kenyan society.

The more intellectual theatre was found among groups such as The Phoenix Players, The Arts Canvas and The Theatre Company. Here again, there were variations in terms of genres. The Phoenix Players was still associated with elite audiences, Asian and Western plays of all genres. However, in recent years, they had also embraced locally written materials. Among plays that they performed in 2013 were *Role Play* by Sibi Okumu that I discuss below. According to Opondoe, they would like to do more local plays but they were simply not available.

As I noted earlier, The Theatre Company appeared primarily interested in training and developing their own plays that tried to blend African and Western modes. However, they also did other genres of theatre. Their production of *Merry Wives of Windsor*, in Kiswahili as (*Wanawake wa Heri wa Winsa*) was commissioned for the globe in London in 2012.⁶⁸⁷ In their production, the setting of the play was trans-positioned from Elizabethan England to Kiambu in Central Kenya which enabled the

687 Ibid.

producers to tackle social tensions of women's empowerment, love and greed in a localised way.

The Arts Canvas of Kaigwa was more concerned with feminist issues. Apart from *The Vagina Monologues* that I mentioned earlier, other productions included Ariel Dorfman's *Death and the Maiden*, solo performances of Alan Bennett's *Talking Heads*, Ntozake Shange's poem *For Coloured Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*. According to Kaigwa, all her productions were well attended by Kenyans from all walks of life, including men. Western theatre groups such as Braeburn Theatre still operated in the country, performing mainly Western plays. Asian theatre still revolved mainly around Asian productions and themes. However, most of the productions were open to all Kenyans.

Community Theatre Groups

Community theatre groups here refer to amateur theatre groups that operated mainly in the rural areas and estates in the outskirts of the major cities. Most of them were started by youths of particular localities with an aim of addressing cultural, economic and artistic needs of the members. These kinds of groups have been on the rise since the 1990s mainly doing TfD performances. However, as the fortunes of TfD gradually dwindle, due to competition for scarce funding opportunities and the emergence of new ways of conscientising people such as television, community theatre groups were shifting their focus to other performance interests. Some of the new avenues included comed, school literature set books and indigenous modes of performance. The comedies were enacted usually in local languages, in community halls, church halls and other open spaces in the communities. This emphasises the need for investment in better theatre facilities in the rural areas. The set book performances were normally toured to schools.

The interest in traditional modes of performance was, however, a new development and deserves greater attention here, particularly because the audiences were not the rural ordinary people, but were often the elite. I surveyed three community groups that performed indigenous forms to understand the reason behind the growing interest in this area of performance. They told me they learnt the ceremonies, songs and dances

they performed mainly by consulting older knowledgeable members of the society on the dance moves, wording and purposes of the various dances. Thus, these groups were bridging an important gap in research and preservation of indigenous cultures. These were: - Kigera Dancers of Nyeri County, a mixed group of people between ages 18-80 and which was initiated in 2008.

At the time of the visit, they were in the process of learning the *Kamanu* courtship dance from an elderly woman in the area.⁶⁸⁸ The other was Kigamba Dancers, a youth group established in 2004 and based in Kamiriithu village. They told me that in addition to relying on senior citizens, they also conducted their research at the National Archives. I also talked to Charity Muraguri of the Prime Theatre Company, a semi-professional, multi-cultural youth theatre group based in Limuru from 2009.

From what I learnt from these groups, the current generation of Kenyans, in an attempt to come to terms with their past, was becoming more inward looking culturally. People were increasingly, looking into their traditions with a view of salvaging whatever is positive in their cultural heritage. Thus, it was not surprising to see people opting to conduct ceremonial activities such as baby showers, weddings and boys' circumcision festivities as they were performed in the traditional societies, or including aspects of tradition in the modern ceremonies. Muraguri, for instance, told me the following:

We perform for them what they want. If it is *ngurarario* (Kikuyu traditional wedding) in the traditional ceremony, there are several songs that you must perform. We already know the songs. We are normally hired to run the whole ceremony or just to perform the dances.⁶⁸⁹

From my interviews, the charges for each performance ranged from between Ksh.20, 000 to over 100,000 (150-750 pounds) per performance or event and depending on the distance and nature of the event. The events took place in exclusive clubs, hotels or homes of the rich, to which many ordinary

688 Interview with Mary Wangui, Julius Ndegwa and Alice Wachira of Kigera Cultural Dancers at Nyeri on 11 January 2014.

689 Interview with Charity Muruguri, Lecturer, Theatre Director and Adjudicator at the KSDF on 23 January 2012.

people might never be invited. Thus, the consumption and participation in such ceremonies and performances appeared to be driven by the realisation that modernity was not synonymous to Westernisation and the ability to express oneself in their indigenous language and to share in other important cultural manifestations is an important social capital.

The above scenario emphasises further, the need to strengthen community festivals I mentioned elsewhere in this work as they offer the best opportunity for ordinary people to partake in theatre. Nevertheless, these groups were playing an important role in enhancing social cohesion, particularly in multicultural areas. They were also a source of income for the members. The Kigamba group, for instance, emphasised how the group had been instrumental in tackling drunkenness among members as the performances provided them with a source of income and social support especially after school.

The interest in theatre in local languages in elite theatre spaces and in major cities can also be understood along similar lines of 'demystifying modernity'. Unlike in previous eras where the use of vernacular languages was mainly a way of the reaching ordinary Kenyans who could not speak in English, in the contemporary era there appears to be a conscious attempt to assert those languages and by extension, the cultures of those languages. This is because the actors and the audience were mostly young, educated people who from my interactions with them were very proud of their proficiency in their indigenous languages. Moreover, most of the drama in local languages, even in elite spaces, was mostly what had come to be known in Kenya as 'bedroom' comedies, conceived purely for entertainment. However, English and Kiswahili were still the dominant languages of theatre, though many Kenyan productions tend to mix various languages in one performance.

Figure 11 : The Kigamba dancers in a practice session for *Mwoboko* dance.



The KNT and other Performance Spaces

The lack of adequate performance spaces remains a huge challenge, as even though the situation of theatre had improved significantly under the contemporary regimes, investment in the development of cultural spaces was still low. The KNT, which had been in a dilapidated state since the 1990s, was refurbished from 2014 through the funding of Kenya Breweries. The refurbished National Theatre was opened in August 2015, in a colourful event that was attended by, among others, Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Micere Mugo as state guests. Their presence was symbolic of how things had changed politically from the 1980s despite the immense challenges culture,

theatre and country still faced. During this event, the President also announced the reverting back to the KCC of the piece of land that was controversially leased to Norfolk Hotel in the 1990s as I discussed in Chapter Six. According to him, the piece of land would be used for the construction of a 5,000 capacity modern arts and cultural centre as part of legacy projects to celebrate 50 years of independence and as a way of empowering the youth.⁶⁹⁰

Other changes at the KCC and the KNT included the institution of a functional board and a KCC Director, which according to Kimengichia, had not been possible previously due to interference from the government. The KCC was also receiving regular funding for salaries and other administrative activities since 2012. The National Theatre still operated mainly as space that groups hired to stage their performances. Perhaps it is time for the National Theatre to diversify its functions to play a leading role in growing Kenyan theatre. A drama School such as the one it ran before could be an important starting point. Linkages with universities and other national and international cultural and educational bodies to facilitate theatre research in diverse forms of performance could be another way.

Over the years, a few more privately and corporate-owned spaces that Kenyans could hire to show their works had been established. Among the privately owned spaces is the 110-seat theatre of The Phoenix Players Theatre, the Oshwal Centre Auditorium that is owned by the Indian community, and the three Braeburn School theatres, which include the 409-seat Braeburn Theatre, the 114-seat Austin Room and the 400-seat Braeside Auditorium. There was also the 210-seat French Cultural Centre Auditorium and the Goethe Institut that are owned by the French and Germany embassies respectively. Corporate-owned spaces include the 301-seat Louis Leakey Auditorium at the National Museum headquarters, the 400-seat modern Michael Joseph Centre of Safaricom and the Bomas of Kenya. There was also the Arts Go Down that was reclaimed in 2003 from a building that was formerly a car warehouse through an initiative that was led

⁶⁹⁰ President Uhuru Kenyatta's Speech during the opening of the refurbished KNT on KTN Television. https://youtu.be/NYomyU9W_Oo [accessed 25 October 2016]

by Kenyan artists and funded by the FORD (Rockefeller) Foundation'.⁶⁹¹ It caters for multi-disciplinary performances particularly the visual and performing arts including theatre, dance, puppetry, acrobatics, music and filmmaking. Another space is the Sarakasi Dome that is owned by Sarakasi trust and which is home for acrobats, jugglers and related performances.

Many of the theatre spaces are located in Nairobi and in upmarket areas that make them inaccessible to many Kenyans due to high charges. By 2013, for instance, the KCC was charging Ksh.12, 000 to theatre groups and Ksh 20,000 to corporate groups for *Ukumbi Mdogo* (smaller hall). The charges for using the KNT were as high as 60,000. I learnt that this was the average charge for most of the other spaces. Such high costs restricted upcoming theatre groups to unconventional theatre spaces such as community halls, schools, churches and open spaces in the community with no proper facilities. Mitambo also noted that they would have liked to rehearse more for the plays but challenges of lack of funds often forced them to rehearse for only two weeks:

I usually have like 14 official days to rehearse. That is two weeks, then we have the last week which the technical week. But I normally give it like three days. We would like to rehearse for many days but there are challenges. You have to pay for space, which is quite expensive.⁶⁹²

Muraguri underscored the connection between the lack of proper theatre facilities and poor quality of the productions thus:

Because of our bad halls, with poor acoustics, we project voices in a funny way. There is shouting, and then there is some stereotyped kind of acting that is not close to the natural character because of our bad halls. Probably if we had good acoustics where we do not need to shout. You can just talk normally and sustain a conversation that is as close to real life as possible. And of course, there is a problem with the directors [...] Have we trained them?⁶⁹³

691 Joy Mboya, 'The Story of the Godown Arts Centre a Journey to Freedom through the Arts in Kenya', *Cultural Production and Social Change in Kenya: Building Bridges* ed.by Kimani Njogu and Garnette Oluoch-Oluny (Nairobi: Twaweza Communications,2007) pp.169-186.

692 Interview with Tash Mitambo at the KNT on 7 February 2015.

693 Muraguri, Interview, 23 January 2012.

The use of unconventional theatre spaces in Kenya was, however, not limited to a lack of funds. As I noted in the previous chapter, theatre groups were still opting for unconventional spaces, such as bars, as a way of 'taking theatre to the people' rather than waiting for the people to come to the theatre.⁶⁹⁴

Figure 12: Inside the newly refurbished KNT.



The Management of Cultural Affairs and Policy Formulation

The co-ordination of the cultural sector had gradually improved over the years. Though arts and culture were yet to be accorded an autonomous administrative ministry, which would have helped in making the management of the two sectors more focused there had been a progressive attempt to combine them with departments that were more relevant. The current administration had, for instance, culture, arts and sports in one ministry.

Some important strides had also been made with regard to policy formulation to help manage the arts. The national Policy on Culture and Heritage had been in place since 2004 and was revised in 2009. According to Musiomi, the Ministry organised a stakeholders' meeting on 18 December 2013 to discuss a zero draft of the National Culture Bill of 2014, which, according to the new constitution, should have been in place by 27 August

694 Second interview with Mumbi Kaigwa at Shell Drive in Thika Road on 13 February 2014.

2015.⁶⁹⁵ However, the Act is a general document that offers general guidelines on matters of culture and the arts. Unless specific policies are developed on how to improve the various art forms such as theatre, film and music, the growth, funding and management of the arts will remain problematic.

Another challenge was the continued lack of realisation of the role of culture and arts in realising the wider national goals. The Kenya Vision 2030 offers the best example of this situation. This was a policy document that was prepared under the NARC regime in 2007. It stipulates the developmental milestones and roadmap the government wished to achieve by the year 2030 in an effort to make Kenya a middle-level industrialised economy. The only mention of culture in the entire document occurs under the section on youth, gender and vulnerable groups.⁶⁹⁶ Egara Kabaji, while arguing for the inclusion of a 'cultural pillar' in the Kenya Vision 2030 in the *Saturday Nation* of 26 September 2015, explained the importance his idea in the following words:

Culture [c]ould expand our sense of time, history and social imagination. It should help Kenyans grasp complexities that they hardly comprehend and be able to construct new social realities of inclusivity. This should inevitably influence feelings about ourselves and others with whom we share this country. In essence, this pillar should create a civic tradition that defines how we share common spaces, resources and opportunities.⁶⁹⁷

The dearth of official policies to guide the theatre industry was compounded by the lack of any formal body through which theatre artists could increase their bargaining power and lay down basic guidelines to regulate the industry for the benefit of their members. The following quotation by Gathwe perhaps indicates the large extent to which the theatre industry needed proper policies and regulation:

695 Musiomi, Interview, 19 December 2013.

696 Government of Kenya, 'Kenya Vision 2030, the popular Version'(Kenya, Government Printers, 2007) <http://www.vision2030.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Popular_Version1.pdf> [accessed 05 October 2015]

697 Egara Kabaji , 'Not yet Uhuru for Theatre Despite the Fine Makeover', in *Daily Nation* (26 September 2015) <<http://www.nation.co.ke/lifestyle/weekend/Not-yet-uhuru-for-theatre-despite-the-fine-makeover/-/1220/2885718/-/7yr734/-/index.html>> [accessed 20 November 2012]

I think there is a lot of unworthy competition. There are many 'quacks' [sic] We lack discipline. Because every profession has to have discipline. You have rules and don'ts. But you find in Kenya it's for everybody. And it can't work that way [...] the actors are not trained they don't know what to do with themselves. As I always say, theatre is a discipline; people have to go for formal training. How you approach theatre and how you develop [...] in performing, you do it either right or not. You cannot fake. There is no corruption in performance. You either have the talent or you do not [...] you cannot create an audience that way.⁶⁹⁸

As Gathwe we further noted, as long as the status quo remains, theatre will continue to 'go two step forward and one and a half steps backwards'.⁶⁹⁹

The Devolved Government System and Theatre

The promulgation of the new constitution injected new energy to the arts such as theatre through provisions that favour culture and the arts. One such provision is the devolved government system, which in my opinion, if properly implemented, portends good news for growth in the arts and culture. Each of the forty-six administrative units has now a minister in charge of culture, thus reducing the official red tape in the management and funding of cultural programmes in the country. However, if the postings on the websites of the various counties on the role of culture are anything to go by, then there is the need for a 'mind shift' among Kenyans regarding what culture really entails as there is still the tendency to view culture narrowly from the perspective of traditional heritage.

Some counties are already reaping the gains of devolution. Nakuru county government, for instance, allocated Ksh. forty million to refurbish and modernise the Nakuru Players Theatre in 2015.⁷⁰⁰ The Mvita Constituency Development Fund (CDF) in Mombasa County has allocated Ksh. five

698 Gathwe, Interview, 20 January 2014

699 Ibid.

700 Magdalene Wanja, 'Mixed Reactions as County Reveals Plan to Renovate Theatre', *Daily Nation*, 31 July 2015

<<http://www.nation.co.ke/Lifestyle/Weekend/Mixed-Reactions-As-County-Reveals-Plan-To-Renovate-Theatre/-/1220/2815508/-/4nevwbz/-/Index.html>> [accessed 13 October 2015].

million for an ongoing upgrade of the Mombasa Little Theatre Club.⁷⁰¹ The Little Theatre is only second to the KNT in terms of its national cultural significance in Kenya. Its repertoire has changed from the 1980s when it was bequeathed to the government to more multicultural productions from various Kenyan groups.⁷⁰² In Machakos County, among the first projects to be undertaken by the current Governor, Alfred Mutua, who is also a filmmaker, was the building of the Machakos Entertainment Centre for Film, Media, Music and the Arts (MACHAWOOD). The Centre has a theatre and is managed by people with an arts background.⁷⁰³

Other Media and Development of Theatre

Theatre had also benefited from the liberalisation of the media sector. The establishment of more private media houses since the 1990s has created more outlets for Kenyan artists to articulate their creative endeavours. The stipulation that 40% (and 60% by 2018) of the content that any media station airs should be local is particularly beneficial to theatre, as it has meant more Kenyan plays on television and radio and thus more jobs for Kenyan playwrights, directors and actors. TV series such *Siri (Secret)*, which focuses on HIV/AIDS and *Tahidi High* which focuses on challenges of people in high schools are now part of Kenyan home cut life every week. Both programmes are aired on the Citizen Television. From what I learnt from my respondents, the dream of many aspiring theatre artists was to get roles in television drama because it paid better and was a more prestigious job.

However, like other sectors of theatre, this area also suffers from problems of inadequate training, a lack of clear policies on how to grow the sector, a lack of funding, poor scripting and stereotypical performances that

701701 Sylvania Ambani, 'Little Theatre Club gets Sh5m for upgrade', *Daily Nation*, 7 August 2014 <<http://www.businessdailyafrica.com/Corporate-News/Mombasa-Little-Theatre-Club-gets-Sh5m-for-upgrade/-/539550/2411916/-/ktkn70z/-/index.html>>[accessed 12 October 2015].

702 Mwangi, p.106.

703 Government of Machakos County, Official Website, 'Governor Mutua Launches Machakos Festival', 17June 2015.
<<http://www.Machakosgovernment.Com/Newsfrommachakosgovernment.aspx?Newsid=141>> [accessed 20 December 2015].

703 Ibid.

are affecting the growth of the film industry. With more Kenyan universities teaching theatre, it is hoped that the poor quality and quantity of films will continue to improve.

Published Drama in Contemporary Era

The situation of published drama has not improved much in contemporary era as only handful of notable plays have been published in recent years, both in English and Kenyan languages. The lack of adequate skills, apathy towards theatre that was occasioned by the government censorship in the previous era and a lack of a vibrant professional theatre industry are some of the factors that could account for the poor state of published drama.

Presently, the only space where there is significant consumption of published drama in the country is in the schools and universities. Thus, the playwrights and publishers may be finding it difficult to invest in ventures that have low and unpredictable returns. In this section, I will discuss the recent publications of four Kenyan playwrights to show how their works exemplify the dynamics and concerns of contemporary dramatic creativity. These are Francis Imbuga, David Mulwa, Cajetan Boy and Sibi Okumu.

Within the period under consideration, Imbuga published two plays. *The Return of Mgofu* (2011) and *The Green Cross of Kafira* (2013). In both plays, he continues to adopt a socialist realist approach and to focus on the political world. *The Return of Mgofu* (2011) focuses on the horrific experiences of those who were caught up in the mayhem of the 2007 post-election violence. It is the play he wished had been picked as the Kenyan High Schools drama text in 2012 instead of *Betrayal in the City*, perhaps because its themes are more relevant to contemporary Kenya.⁷⁰⁴ In the play, the 2007 inter-ethnic mayhem and previous inter-ethnic conflicts are blamed on among other things, the breakdown of communal ties that held communities together, giving way to greed and corruption across all sections of society. Even the sacred places had not been spared from this moral rot,

704 Tom Odhiambo, 'Why the Return of Mgofu is Imbuga's Best Legacy for Kenya', in *Daily Nation*, 5 January 2013 <<http://www.nation.co.ke/lifestyle/lifestyle/-/1214/1658266/-/view/printVersion/-/mlwl28z/-/index.html>> [accessed 12 December 2015].

much to Imbuga's disillusionment. As he marvels in the text, 'if they can burn a place of worship, they are beyond redemption'.⁷⁰⁵

The play uses the same inter-textual features that are characteristic of all Imbuga's plays, such as satire, use of clowns to pass important messages, 'insane' revolutionaries, and indigenous settings and imagery to examine the causes of the violence. However, as Tom Odhiambo notes, Imbuga has dispensed with the complicated 'subtleties and linguistic intricacies' that are characteristic of his earlier plays. Instead, he has opted for a simple didactic language and style.⁷⁰⁶ In the play, the spirit couple, Thori and his wife Thoriwa, return from the ancestral world to teach humans the value of human life and good neighbourliness. They move from village to village alternately, pushing each other in a wheelbarrow and encouraging one another to move on when one of them gets tired and is unwilling to continue with the journey. Through them, the theme of being each other's keeper as well as the overall message of the play, which is revealed through Thoriwa's words that, 'the only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing' is passed.⁷⁰⁷ By invoking the ancestors, Imbuga is also highlighting the need to venerate traditional values in the attempt to heal the nation.

The Green Cross-of Kafira (2013) was written just before Imbuga's demise in 2012. It completes the trilogy that started with *Betrayal in the City* in 1975 and *The Man of Kafira* (1985). It explores issues such as tyranny and political intolerance, environment degradation, multi-party politics and land grabbing, with undertones that are reminiscent of the happenings of the Moi era. The revolution that takes place at the end of the play through a popular vote that institutes a more democratic rule is also reminiscent of the NARC victory in 2003. Through the narrator, *Sikio Macho* (Ear and Eye), we learn about the woes of the Kafira people under the monolithic National Party headed by Chief of Chiefs. Instead of spending resources and time to improve the lives of the people, the paranoid regime is more concerned with curtailing the activities of the revolutionaries that it regards as 'rejects'.

⁷⁰⁵ *The Return of Mgofu*, p. 23.

⁷⁰⁶ Odhiambo, 'Why the Return of Mgofu is Imbuga's Best Legacy for Kenya'.

⁷⁰⁷ *The Return of Mgofu*, p. 29.

These 'rejects' are in fact the progressive forces and workers who include university lecturers, church leaders, environmentalists, soldiers, policemen and trade-unionists.

The play ends on an optimistic note when the progressive forces under the Green Party of Kafira led by Pastor Mgei defeat the National Party in a ballot where 'people refuse to sleep because they want to be counted' and to participate in showing the 'evidence of the resolve of Kafirans' to change the status quo.⁷⁰⁸ Imbuga's recent plays have been performed mainly within university circles which as I have noted elsewhere in this work, have begun reclaiming their space in intellectual theatre. *The Return of Mgofu* was, for instance, performed in 2013 by both Kenyatta University and University of Nairobi Travelling Theatres to commemorate Imbuga's legacy after his death in 2013.⁷⁰⁹

With the plays of David Mulwa, a Kenyan theatre lecturer, playwright and actor, from 2000, the focus of drama appears to have shifted from governance issues to the anxieties within and between the various social-economic classes. The plays by this third generation⁷¹⁰ of Kenyan playwrights are mainly psychodramas that interrogate motivations and fears that drive the actions of the Kenyan middle class today. The playwrights also interrogate the symbols of class such as religion, education and materialism. Mulwa's dramatic style has been described as tragi-comic, often relying on characters who are 'crossbreeds of between the tragic hero and the comic fools' to explore tragic situations through irony.⁷¹¹ This style runs through all his plays that also explore a range of themes such as hypocrisy, religion, HIV and AIDS, among other concerns.

Among his plays is *Glasshouses* (2000) that was originally written and performed on *Voice of Kenya* television in 1985 and published in 2000. It examines a number of topics such as child abuse, the hypocrisy of the

708 *The Green Cross-of Kafira*, p. 64.

709 Kimingichia, Interview, 15 January 2014.

710 In this work, I take the first generation as comprising people such as Ngugi and Mugo. The second is their students such as Imbuga. The third is the contemporary writers such as Boy and Sibi.

711 Esther Wahu Karanja, 'An Analysis of Tragicomic Techniques in Selected Plays of David Mulwa' (unpublished masters dissertation, Kenyatta University, 2011), Abstract.

middle class and gender empowerment.⁷¹² In the play, Kawira the protagonist of the play, is a leading children's welfare activist and an admirable Christian wife and mother. However, as the details of her life unfold, she is unmasked as a cold-hearted person who has no warmth and genuine love for children. Years before, she did not think twice before throwing away her child into a dustbin in order to secure a good marriage and promising future. The child was born through rape by the husband of her mentor, Mrs Mwashaka, another unhappy couple that hides behind success and religion from their unhappy childless marriage. When the child is saved through the timely intervention of her mother and mentor, she abandons her into an orphanage and continues to put on the face of a good Christian.

Kawira's husband is, on the other hand, a male chauvinist who uses Christianity to oppress his wife and daughter by demanding a strict code of dressing and morality from them. Her work as a children rights activist is satirised as a strategy to cope with an abusive marriage, which she cannot leave for fear of losing her status in society. The ending of the play is rather moralistic with the writer advocating reconciliation and the need to start a new life for all the characters.

Clean Hands (2000) has HIV/AIDS as its main theme. It was written at the invitation of World Vision to sensitise people about the illness in 1998. Characters in this play are also depicted as living in the prison house of both religion and culture, factors that contribute to the spread of the AIDS pandemic. Moses Mulei Ndakika is a school principal and staunch Christian who delays his marriage to Veronica Mwendu because his father, a traditionalist cannot accept Veronica, a daughter of a corrupt tycoon, as a daughter in law. He believes children born out of such a union will be cursed. As a Christian, Mulei cannot engage in sex with Veronica before marriage. Meanwhile, Veronica is also worried about her ticking biological clock. In a moment of weakness, Veronica succumbs to the advances of Joram Kalama who infects her with the HIV virus. The play ends with Veronica committing suicide seven years later after this act when she discovers her positive HIV status. She blames Mulei for her predicament while Mulei blames himself for following his father and religion blindly.

712 Chesaina and Mwangi, p. 228.

In *Redemption* (2007), Mulwa's focus is on the hypocrisy of the emerging splinter churches and their obsession with material gains from their congregations. This play has been praised as one that 'speaks to the church, family and the nation'.⁷¹³ It was first performed during the National Council of Churches Conference in Kenya in 1989 before 600 church leaders. In the play, the self-proclaimed Archbishop, Muthemba, is portrayed as a morally bankrupt individual who uses his flock to enrich himself. In cahoots with a corrupt lawyer, who wishes to use the Bishop's congregation to realise his political ambitions, he exploits the poor by sending videos and pictures that depict the poverty of the members to the mother church in the West. The money he gets is used for his own materialistic needs.

Class anxieties also inform the plays of Cajetan Boy and Sibi Okumu, the other writers who have written notable works recently. Though the two have written a good number of plays for the stage and film that have had positive reviews from Kenyan audiences, only two plays have been published *Benta* (1999) by Boy and *Role Play* (2005) by Okumu. As Christopher Odhiambo in 'The Anxiety of Class in Kenyan Drama: A Reading of Boy's *Benta* and Sibi Okumu's *Role Play*' notes, both plays 'use the materiality of every day to lampoon the emergent middle class in Kenya'.⁷¹⁴

The two plays are concerned with 'the performance of class' of the Kenyan middle class. In the plays, the middle-class characters are depicted as 'trapped' by class-consciousness to the extent of losing their individuality. In *Benta*, Tabitha Fulani's main worry is what people think of her family rather than the family's genuine happiness. In *Role Play* as the title of the play suggests, the characters repeatedly engage in fantasies concerning the expected behaviour of people of their class. Mzee, for instance, imagines how his death will be accompanied by an affirmation of class through speeches that will be delivered and the people who will attend among other symbols of status in such occasions.

713 Ibid.

714 Christopher Odhiambo Joseph, 'The Anxiety of Class in Kenyan Drama: A Reading of Boy's *Benta* and Sibi Okumu's *Role Play*', in *Syncretic Arenas: Essays on Postcolonial African Drama and Theatre for Esiaba Irobi*, ed. by Isidore Diala (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), pp. 223-236, (p. 223).

Christopher Odhiambo has further argued that, the way the two rich families mistreat their house-helpers stems from the fear of 'class contamination'. In *Benta*, for instance, Mr Fulani sees Benta, the house-help, as only an object of work and sexual gratification but cannot accommodate the idea of his son having serious interest in her as a wife. In the *Role Play*, marriages are arranged to prevent the poor from encroaching on the territory of the upper class. It is also an unconscious manifestation of the fear of poverty that the house girls symbolise and constantly remind their employers.⁷¹⁵

In the plays, Western education is depicted a major avenue through which the poor can break the class-barriers. Thus, in both plays, the house girls, Benta, in *Benta* and Jenifer in *Role Play*, though aware of their oppressed state, persevere the ill treatment that is meted on them because it is the only way they can acquire money to educate their offspring or siblings to enable them also climb the social ladder. Both plays end on an optimistic note with Dedan, the son of the Fulani family, determined to marry Benta despite the opposition from the rest of the family. In the *Role Play* John Juma, the son of Mzee Juma, rebels against an arranged marriage. This signals hope and freedom from the chains of class for the new generation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has explored the developments, challenges and dramatic trends in the contemporary era. The discussion reveals that theatre is still struggling to emerge from not only the onslaught of the Moi era, but also the neglect it has suffered since the colonial period and which has persisted until this day. The Kenyan government is yet to fully comprehend what culture really entails and how it contributes to development thus invest adequately in its growth. The next chapter focuses on Theatre for Development.

⁷¹⁵ Ibid, p. 231.

Chapter 8

Theatre for Development in the Contemporary Kenya: A Case for Dialogical and Sustainable TFD Practices

Introduction

The use of theatre for development purposes is grounded in the idea that performance provides a platform for both actors and audience to discuss, analyse and seek solutions to communal problems. At the heart of Tfd is the notion of participation, dialogue, critical reflection and empowerment of the oppressed. In this chapter, I explore the extent to which the Tfd practices in Kenya have adhered to these tenets and the challenges that have bedevilled participatory theatre in the country. In the discussion, I do not attempt to give a comprehensive cover of Tfd as this is one of the few areas where there is a good Kenyan research base (see among others Mumma 1996; Otieno, 2008; Odhiambo, 2006; Ladan, 2010). These studies have explored areas such as theories, practices, challenges, methods, application of Tfd and its benefits to the country. Instead, I will draw from these studies and other sources to briefly contextualise the development of Tfd practice in Kenya. I will then discuss three examples of recent Tfd work to highlight the lessons that can be learnt from these initiatives in the search for more dialogical and sustainable participatory theatre practices in the country.

Contextualising TFD in Kenya

In Kenya, the use of theatre for pedagogical purposes, as in most other African communities, is as old as oral forms whose main purpose was to not only entertain, but also teach and comment on pertinent communal problems. Even though in this discussion am interested in the modern use of the term Tfd where, to use Augusto Boal's words 'people reassume their protagonist function'⁷¹⁶ and become both the actors and subjects of theatre, I must add that indigenous forms are still an important component in the search for dialogical Tfd methods. It is a fact that Tfd is mostly about those

⁷¹⁶ Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, trans. Charles A. and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride and Emily Fryer (London: Pluto Press, 1970), p. 95.

who have been 'dehumanised' and marginalised by an 'unjust order'- those without formal education and lack access to important social-economic necessities.⁷¹⁷ The majority of this category of people in Kenya are located in rural areas where indigenous forms are still the central modes of entertainment and education. Thus, the use of indigenous performance forms in TfD activities could make the learning experience more concrete and familiar to the people. I do not suggest TfD be reduced to a performance of a series of traditional songs and narratives but rather a careful integration of these forms in theatre making to achieve varied aesthetic and pedagogical objectives. It is not by accident that some of the most successful TfD initiatives in Kenya are those that have attempted to use community wealth and knowledge as a starting point in the learning process. Indeed, Boal underscores the need for familiar theatrical methods when he says the following:

The theatrical experience should begin not with something alien to the people (theatrical techniques that are taught or imposed) but with the bodies of those who agree to participate in the experiment.⁷¹⁸

In the preceding chapters I have already discussed some examples of past initiatives that constitute the earliest TfD efforts in Kenya. I have also shown some of the strategies that these ventures adopted to conscientise communities on various social-economic and political issues, particularly their tendency to blend both the traditional Kenyan performance forms with modern theatre. In Chapter Two I explored the Jeanes School educational programme in the colonial era and its use of theatre to convey the colonialist's ideas of development. In Chapter Four I highlighted how indigenous performance forms were appropriated to support the struggle against colonialism. In Chapters Five and Six I highlighted the role of University of Nairobi Travelling Theatre (UNFTT), the Kamiriithu Educational and Cultural Centre and the Esiepala Cultural Centre in empowering ordinary Kenyans culturally and politically in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Progressive as these theatre initiatives were, they were not without challenges of not only political interference, but also theatre methods.

717 Freire, p. 42

718 Boal, p.103.

Eugene van Erven description of a performance by the UNFTT in the 1990s offers a good illustration of some of these challenges:

The entrance to a remote village in Meru Province [sic] on that 12 September 1997 was overwhelming; to say the least [...] the actors [...] had arranged to meet the local Kairithu youth group for a cultural interaction. Rather than collaborating, the 20-strong FTT troupe, with all their youthful exuberance and undeniable performance skills stole the show with some satirical educational skits and stage poetry interspersed with contagious rhythmic calls and responses. Their urban energy and confidence were received enthusiastically by the school kids and their teachers and had the effect of intimidating rather than inspiring the quiet and unassuming rural Kairithu performers, who listless took to the stage after the FTT's hard-to-follow-act.⁷¹⁹

Quoting Mumma who led the UNFTT in the 1990s, Erven adds the following regarding the play-making process:

We have a repertoire of twelve different plays in eight different languages. Two of these would be published plays, two collectively devised and authored, and the rest would be created by the group on their own. They perform these in all the eight provinces and districts over a three-month period. We also try to start amateur groups in school or in a community and leave those groups to find their own way of working.⁷²⁰

The two quotations highlight some of the issues that may arise when even the most well-meaning theatre initiatives stray into a top-down mode of performance. In Freirean terms, we can argue that the approaches described in the two quotations above reduced the villagers to 'depositories' of the university-made theatre.⁷²¹ Despite such weakness, the UNFTT and the other early theatre initiatives mentioned above still occupy an enviable place in the story of the evolution of TfD practice in Kenya as they formed the earliest attempts to make theatre 'with instead of for' people, albeit with varied degrees of success.⁷²²

719 Eugène Van Erven, *Community Theatre: Global Perspectives* (New York and London, Routledge, 1991), p.184.

720 Ibid, p.182.

721 Freire, p. 72.

722 Jane Plastow, 'Domestication or Transformation?: The Ideology of Theatre for Development in Africa', *Applied Theatre Research*, 2.2 (2012),107-118

The first initiatives that fall within the scope of TfD as we know it today occurred in Kenya from the mid-1980s. It was the period the non-governmental and governmental agencies began to increasingly embrace theatre and fund theatre groups to make and perform plays in communities in areas such as gender rights, drug abuse and illiteracy. Although the increase in TfD activities led to less attention being given to other areas of theatre, it was a crucial development because it provided theatre practitioners who at the time were greatly frustrated by government censorship with the opportunity and funding to continue their engagement with communities. The only major problem was that the artists had to sacrifice their freedom of choice in terms of the themes they explored and dramatic styles, as they had to tailor their performances to suit the demands of their sponsors. The other problem was the fact that many of the artists were unfamiliar with participatory theatre practices which, sometimes led to performances that had little effect on the targeted communities.

Among the TfD initiatives from the late 1980s was the Royal Netherlands Embassy sponsored venture that effected by the Theatre Workshop Productions theatre company. The aim was to engage communities in various parts of Kenya on issues of gender. The group used the play *Aminata* by Francis Imbuga that I have discussed earlier.⁷²³ According to Obyerodhiambo in an interview with Otieno, initially, the group would perform in the target communities and leave. With time, they began to discuss the issues emanating from the play with the people. From the discussions, they were able to discover that some of the communities did not even regard gender equality as a priority issue at the time when their 'economic survival' was a struggle.⁷²⁴ According to Otieno, this made the theatre practitioners involved to realise the importance of 'investigating the immediate needs of their audience' and 'using interactive theatre' approaches.⁷²⁵

<[http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/85712/2/PlastowDomestication%20and%20ideology%20\(1\)%20\(3\).pdf](http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/85712/2/PlastowDomestication%20and%20ideology%20(1)%20(3).pdf)>[accessed 13 June 2016]

723 Otieno, p.144.

724 Ibid, p. 172.

725 Ibid.

The full length but thematically relevant plays that characterised Tfd activities in the late 1980s were perhaps a better development in comparison to the performances that appeared from the 1990s when according to Odhiambo there was 'proliferation' of Tfd as the latest fashion of mobilising communities for development programmes.⁷²⁶ Many of the NGOs lacked real knowledge of how to commission impactful work and school leavers who at the time were faced with high levels of unemployment took advantage of the emerging opportunities to make a living. Theatre groups that were formed in the hope that they would secure contracts with the NGOs began to mushroom in the various parts of the country. Most these were formed by people who lacked not only knowledge in theatre, but also a clear agenda with respect to creating change in their communities.⁷²⁷ The only experience in theatre many of these youths could boast of was their participation in the KSDF. Thus, the funding bodies had to assume the duty of training them in participatory methods to enable them implement their programmes.

The training in most cases took the form of one to two weeks' workshops where participants were taught both participatory theatre methods and topics of interest to donors. Obviously, this was not enough for people who might have been hearing about these methods for the first time and in some cases, their performances ended up misrepresenting the very issues they were supposed to resolve. Speaking about HIV/AIDs productions, Otieno notes that the pandemic 'was made to look so terrible that it became a stigma in people's minds'.⁷²⁸ Plays would, for instance, employ 'terrifying creatures with long nails, tails, horns and sharp teeth (a replica of the drawing of the devil in many religious pictures) to discourage people from activities that could lead to the disease.'⁷²⁹

The most trying period for Tfd was the late 1990s when, according to Otieno, the government of Kenya and donors pumped a lot of money into

726 Christopher Joseph Odhiambo, 'Theatre for Development in Kenya: In Search of an Effective Procedure and Methodology' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 2004), p.91.

727 Otieno, p.183.

728 Otieno, p.147.

729 Ibid.

HIV/AIDS awareness activities. Most of the funding came through the now defunct National AIDS Control Council (NACC) that was formed in 1999 to coordinate activities on HIV/AIDS prevention.⁷³⁰ To use Plastow's words, at this point, people appear to have stopped investing in 'material' and started 'running businesses'.⁷³¹ This is because with so many groups competing for funding, the NGOs, most of whom had little knowledge of the arts, would go for lowest bidders. In order to secure funding, the theatre groups also became more concerned with writing 'winning' proposals than producing relevant theatre.⁷³²

Among the initiatives that came to define TfD practice in the 1990s was the Care Kenya sponsored Participatory Education Theatre (PET) project that also took place in Kisumu in 1992. The initiative featured two amateur theatre groups, Kama Kazi and Apondo. According to Odhiambo, the two theatre groups had been founded 'as a form of employment as many others did in the country'.⁷³³ They were incorporated into the project after their participation in a weeklong workshop that the British Council had organised to teach local theatre groups in Kisumu skills in Participatory Education Theatre. The workshop was facilitated by Roger Chamberlin from the United Kingdom. Prior to the workshop, the repertoire of the two groups comprised mainly of satirical plays and skits on HIV/AIDS that they performed within their communities and in festivals on occasions such as HIV/AIDS Awareness Day. Thus, and as Odhiambo notes, it was the first time the group members were being exposed to participatory theatre methods.⁷³⁴

I detail this background because even today this is how many of the TfD initiatives operate. NGOs with the help of supposed theatre experts identify theatre groups to work with, they train them for one or two weeks, the groups under the supervision of experts or on their own then make plays that they take to ordinary people with little input from them. The result is poor

730 Otieno, p.152.

731 Plastow, 'Domestication or Transformation?: The Ideology of Theatre for Development in Africa', p.100.

732 Ibid.

733 Odhiambo, p. 93.

734 Ibid.

participation from the people who sometimes find it hard to identify with the themes and styles of these projects.

In the 1992 Care Kenya project, the script was written by two Kenyan theatre experts, Lenin Ogolla and Ochieng Wandera, who Chamberlin had enlisted to help with the implementation of the project. It was entitled *Sigand Tom-Ngimani Thoni* (Red Ribbons for You) and was on HIV/AIDS. However, the final play was a product of discussions with the members of the two theatre groups.⁷³⁵ The play comprised of nine freestanding sections so that each episode could be performed on its own. Each was summarised into a question that during performances were written on a storyboard to 'invite informal interest, provide focus, act as a physical totem and hold the line of thought of the presentation', and thus encourage understanding and participation.⁷³⁶ Odhiambo summarises PET performances thus:

In PET, the drama is divided into scenes, each varying in length from 7 to 15 minutes. The duration of the participatory drama that follows each scene is entirely in the hands of the community and facilitators and usually, lasts between 15 and 75 minutes.⁷³⁷

Odhiambo does not comment adequately on the outcomes of this initiative on the communities but looking at the whole process, there does appear to have been some clear understanding of what participation entails, something frequently lacking in many TfD practices in Kenya.

In his research in 2006, Otieno reports that while many of the groups found participatory theatre a good method for engaging communities the training was often not enough to equip them with adequate skills to operate effectively. Most groups often went back to performing 'full-length uninterrupted plays' with which the 'members were more comfortable' without necessarily involving audiences in any active participation.⁷³⁸

It is my argument in this chapter that blaming the theatre groups for the poor state of affairs may not help much in resolving the problems of TfD practice in Kenya. As long as jobless youths continue to see a source of livelihood in TfD, and there are willing funders ready to hire their services

735 Ibid.

736 Odhiambo p.95.

737 Ibid. Odhiambo, p. 96.

738 Otieno, p.150.

without demanding or being aware of the best practices in TfD, the status quo will remain. Thus, in the subsequent sections of this chapter, I will highlight both an initiative that represents the common TfD trends in the country and two other initiatives that I think are good examples of dialogical and sustainable TfD practices.

Selection of Groups

Since my study is on the history of theatre, I decided to focus on groups and individuals who have been involved in TfD for some years now to find out if time has shaped their practices. My first point of call was at Population Services International (PSI) Kenya because I was aware they have a long history of using theatre in their health-education programmes in marginalised areas. Charles Ngatia, the Behavioural Change Coordinator at PSI, introduced me to some of the groups he had worked with to implement one of their key projects, the AIDS Population and Health Integrated Assistance (APHIA) from 2008 to 2013. These were Liberty Arts, Shangilia, Chipkizi and Zindua Jamii. All the groups are located in the slum areas of Nairobi.

Liberty Arts is located at Kasarani along Thika road. It was started in 2004 as a church drama group. In 2005, they decided to widen their membership to include other young people in their area and to do more community development oriented plays as opposed to just religious drama. Shangilia also started as a church drama group in 2007. According to Fredrick Okumu, who coordinated their activities, the main purpose of starting the group was to present the poor youth of Kangemi slums in the West of Nairobi with a platform to share their views and ideas through performance. The initial activities of Shangilia and Liberty Arts revolved around occasional meetings among the group members and workshopping plays that dramatised issues facing them as youths and their wider communities. The plays were then rehearsed and staged in community halls and churches in Kasarani and Kangemi areas often free of charge or for a small fee of ten to twenty Kenya shillings. They told me the charges had to be low or free because their audience were poor people, most of whom affording three meals a day was a struggle.

Zindua Jamii and Chipkizi were more commercially oriented right from the start. Their activities revolved around performing dances and plays at events for a fee even as they did what they referred to during the interview as 'community outreaches' on issues such as health, domestic violence and child-rights on their own initiative or in partnership with donor agencies. Zindua Jamii started in 2008 but was registered in 2010. The group emerged from a bigger group known as Utena with the intention of making their activities more community-focused. They operated in another low-income part of Nairobi known as Mukuru. They are also fifteen in number. Chipkizi was established in 2009 as Mabatini (a place in Nairobi) Solidarity Group, but changed its name in 2011 to the current one. The group had fifteen permanent members.

While I could have got most of the information I needed on the APHIA project from Ngatia, I decided to visit the four groups to get first-hand views on the project, training and the whole project cycle. From the group and one-to-one interviews with the coordinators, I learnt that the need to engage the youths in their localities in constructive activities to keep them from anti-social behaviours such as drug abuse, crime and unsafe sex practices was an objective that cut across all the groups. Fredrick Okumu of Shangilia, for instance, told me that Shangilia aimed at using a 'youth to youth strategy' to tackle shared challenges through shared values and linguistic norms that people outside the youth age bracket may not clearly understand.

By shared linguistic norms, Okumu was referring to *sheng*, which, as explained in the previous chapter, is widely spoken by the youth, particularly in urban settings.⁷³⁹ He insightfully informed me that 'when the youths get somebody of their age telling them and hearing them about their issues, they connect better'.⁷⁴⁰ With time, the activities of these groups began to attract the attention of the government and donor agencies. This led to the formation of working partnerships to implement programmes of common interest within their communities such as the APHIA One and Two programmes which are the focus of this discussion.

⁷³⁹ *Sheng* has been discussed in Chapter Seven.

⁷⁴⁰ Interview with Charles Ngatia at PSI Offices in Nairobi on 20 December 2013.

The second initiative I investigated was the 'Peace not Pieces' initiative in Mount Elgon, Nyamira and Bomet counties of Kenya. The project was a peace-building forum that was implemented by The Arts Canvas Kenya of Kaigwa with funding from the United Nations Development Programme's Peace Building and Conflict Prevention Unit. Kaigwa's other theatre activities have been discussed in the previous chapter. The emphasis of this initiative was capacity building of communities by equipping them with pragmatic performance skills that they could use even after the experts were gone to mount other peace-building initiatives.

The third group was Talent Empire Group. This youth group comprised of pupils and ex-pupils of Kayole One Primary School in a low-income area of Kenya. The group was formed in 2003 and their activities were reported in 'Of Codes and Modes: A Critical Evaluation of Kenyan Performances by and for the Youth', a PhD study by Simon Peter Otieno that was also conducted at the University of Leeds. The group engaged in varied theatre and film activities. The filmmaking and theatre activities that Otieno reported have continued but my interest in this chapter is the way the group were re-packaging oral narratives into film media to discuss children and adult issues within their communities.

APHIA One and Two Projects

The APHIA programme brought together a consortium of donor agencies including USA-AID, which was the main donor of the project, PSI Kenya, Pathfinder International and Child Funder. These groups worked in partnership with the Kenyan government in an attempt to address a number of health-related issues such as HIV/AIDS, family planning and maternal health care in some of the poorest areas of the country. The aim was to use multidisciplinary, community-based approaches to educate and empower the people on health and related issues and theatre was one of these core methods.

The project was rolled out across the country in two phases. The APHIA 1 was implemented from 2008 to 2010, while APHIA PLUS ('PLUS' for People Led Universal Sustainable to emphasise the community focus) was still going on by 2013 though they had suspended the use of theatre (at

least with the four groups) at time as Ngatia informed me. The reasons for this move are contained in this rather long but necessary quotation:

It becomes hard to report these activities. Even if you use a play, you can only pass one or two messages. You cannot pack more than one message. It will be too long. People will not be there to wait for that long. They have other commitments. Then again, if it is one or two messages per play, but you see in that area of intervention there are many issues. Therefore, if you do for example prevention methods and you talk of condoms there are other issues that you will need to cover in a follow-up theatre session. What is the likelihood of finding these same people? You will be dealing with different people. You will talk about a different topic. The follow-up for theatre becomes difficult. The difficulty also comes in that it is difficult to quantify /count people who have come for the session. When you mobilise people you get a crowd and you have to get all the number of people who came for that session. Thirdly, in the community when you are doing that drama after you have just drawn their attention some people will stand there for five minutes and the session is running for 30-45 minutes are you going to count the person who did not stay up to the end. Will you count him? He did not get the whole message and got only half of the message [...] we have to report on those activities, it becomes hard. If we could overcome that, it could be effective. Drama is very effective if we can overcome these issues.⁷⁴¹

The above-described scenario points to some of the teething problems bedevilling TfD practice in Kenya. In this case, the donors' way of measuring effectiveness of the programme was in terms of numbers of attendees. This ignored the unquantifiable indicators such as the skills gained by the group members who are also members of these communities. This is also a good example of how opportunities to conscientise communities are being wasted due to use of unsatisfactory TfD practices, as I shall discuss subsequently.

The Use of Theatre and Selection of the Groups

The use of theatre as a method of community mobilisation in the two APHIA initiatives, according to Ngatia, was informed by the fact that theatre 'has innovative ways of drawing the attention of people to what is happening and therefore creating a forum to communicate development-oriented messages'.⁷⁴² The chairperson of Chipkizi Youth Theatre Group echoed

741 Ibid.

742 Ibid.

these sentiments when she stated that through theatre, they were able to empower their communities by:

Characterising the things that happen in the community [to show people] these are things that can happen [...] to screen their realities so that they see them and seek solutions through theatre.⁷⁴³

The criteria that PSI Kenya used to select the theatre groups to help with the implementation of the projects, as Ngatia further told me, was that they had to be pre-existing for at least two years and based within the communities of the project. The rationale of focusing on community-based groups was that the group members were part of the communities, which placed them in an advantageous position to negotiate the geographical, cultural and socio-political challenges that may hinder effective delivery of key messages. The two-year criterion was to prevent people from taking advantage of the situation by forming groups just to implement the project. Community-based groups were also thought to be more empathetic to the problems facing their communities as the issues they were to address also affected them.

All the group members were taken through a one-week training programme for the APHIA One in 2008 and then a two-week training session in 2010 for the implementation of APHIA Two. According to Charity Muraguri, who was one of the trainers, the group members were taught mobilisation skills using magnet theatre (discussed in detail below), health knowledge and how to infuse drama into the messages.⁷⁴⁴ She further told me the following:

You do several scripts. The first few days they are taught by doctors the messages to be communicated. For example, about condom use, myths of HIV, how it is passed. Myths. In BCC (Behavioral Change Communication), you are dealing with myths. If it is VCT, (Voluntary Community Testing) unit what myths do they have that make them fear to go for VCT. You must develop your scripts along those myths so that you demystify them so that they can come for VCT. If you doing VCT you have the drama group as a VCT [...] and you see

743 After performance discussions with Paul Ombok of Chipkizi Theatre Group at Mathare area in Nairobi on 14 February 2014.

744 Interview with Charity Muruguri, lecturer, theatre director and adjudicator at the KSDF on 23 January 2012.

them once twice or thrice, you literally do the practical bit. You direct what they have. If they do not have the script, you write one with them. You leave them with about ten skits. Because they do skits. Then you simulate an outreach that you will attend. You tell them to go to a site you watch what they do [...] once you feel they are ready you tell their organisers.⁷⁴⁵

From what I learnt from all the groups, they would be given the topics to be covered in the next few weeks and the performance venues. The groups would then make skits along these themes. The mode of theatre that the groups were taught to use in the communities was known as 'magnet' theatre. As the name suggests, it involves the use of strategies such as drumming, dancing, acrobatics or oral invitations to attract the attention of the audience. Once the audience are gathered, the main performance is staged. According to Okumu of Shangilia, the structure of the play in magnet theatre has three parts. The first part is myth making. Here, the focus is on myths and misconceptions about the issue being discussed in the play.

The play then moves to the second phase of correcting the misconceptions. This is the part where collaboration of the audience and the actors is paramount. The audience are involved through strategies such as being invited to perform their thoughts on the issue, hot seating, questioning and debates during and after the performances. The final part focuses on revealing the facts on the issue at hand.⁷⁴⁶ It may involve a performance by the group, or the audience being called to act what they thought was the ideal situation.

A magnet theatre performance I witnessed at Mathare, which sought to demystify causes, symptoms and dangers of tuberculosis may help to exemplify some of the ways these groups constructed their performances. The performance was not part of APHIA Plus but was with another non-governmental organisation that allowed me to watch the performance as long as they remained anonymous in this work. After getting to the venue, which was the local market, the theatre group began drumming and dancing to entice the audience. After approximately twenty adults and a good number of schoolchildren had arrived, the main play was staged.

⁷⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁶ Interview with Fredrick Okumu in Nairobi on 15 February 2014.

In the play, some friends lure a pastor's daughter to drunkenness and illicit sex through which she gets pregnant and sickly. The parents and the girl conclude she must be suffering from HIV/AIDS. The situation leads to another conflict where the father blames the mother for not doing her job in raising the girl in a morally upright way. The main intervention comes in the form of a community worker who advises the girl to go for an HIV test and where to find the screening services. She is eventually diagnosed as HIV negative but having tuberculosis and is subsequently treated. The family then, become advocates of testing for both HIV and tuberculosis in an attempt to avoid stigmatisation that is not based on facts.⁷⁴⁷

The group members were aware that the part where the girl gets sick and the family begins to quarrel offered the best opportunity to engage the audience in interrogating the myths associated with HIV/Aids, tuberculosis and patriarchal issues. However, the audience were not involved at this point because, as the actors told me, there was no time. At the end of the performance, the theatre group continued to entertain the audience through lively dances as the NGO staff interacted with members of the audience, imploring them to ask any questions on the performance and tuberculosis.

The audience's reaction during this performance was particularly revealing to me and may help in explaining further some of the problems Ngatia highlighted in the quotation above. After the drumming began, a sizable group of people gathered at the performance venue which was a street at a market. However, by the time the main performance was taking place the crowds had thinned significantly (See Figure 15 below). The other groups reported similar challenges in engaging and sustaining the attention of the audience. This to me pointed to the need for more thought on the suitability of the TfD methodologies we adopt and the venues we perform.

In my opinion, magnet theatre is by its very nature an undemocratic TfD method particularly if performed in a commercial set up such as market place. It presumes people will drop everything else they were doing to listen and participate in the theatrical activities for a solid hour. It is not difficult to see the connection between the audience apathy that the four groups and

⁷⁴⁷ Community Performance Session with the Chipkizi group at Mathare Nairobi on the 14 February 2014.

Ngatia in the quotation I cited earlier complained about the methods such as magnet theatre. A group of energetic youths dancing the latest songs and acrobatic dance styles will surely cause a stir and people will gather in expectation and curiosity. They are likely to react in a similar fashion when a convoy of oversized four wheel-drive white vehicles squeeze themselves into the narrow streets of a slum settlement or dusty village as its characteristic with many donor-funded TfD activities. It is more or less the same way politicians arrive when they go to these areas to beg for votes in exchange for handouts. But what is likely to happen when their curiosity is satisfied? Those who are unoccupied may enjoy the distraction such performances bring along but those who were busy will most likely go back to whatever important things occupied them before they were distracted even if they liked the performance. The scenario may turn out very differently if you had involved people in all the stages of performance and allowed them to plan themselves and time better. That way you are also sure you are with an interested group.

Moreover, the whole idea of staging performances in market places as is the norm in Kenya does not take to account the definition of community as some of the audience may be visitors who came to trade and have little interest in the issues of that locality. As Otieno noted, it also confers on TfD the image of 'street preaching' an activity many Kenyans regard poorly and as a sign of failure in life.⁷⁴⁸ With time, people may even get familiar with the groups and their tactics and fail to turn up at all. This calls for the need for more careful planning and consultation with the target communities on the appropriate time, methods and topics of TfD performances.

Some groups appeared well aware of this problem and devised methods outside the scope of their training to reach their audiences better. The most interesting is the case of Liberty Arts who were unconsciously using what Boal describes as invisible theatre, even though as I learnt from Aswani, the co-ordinator of the group, they had never heard of the term. Though it is also an intrusive method, the audience participation was, as Aswani told me, better. In one of the performances, two women join the queue in a health facility to undergo an HIV test. Then the husband of one

748 Otieno. p.173.

appears from nowhere asking his wife why she left home without his permission. The woman explains that she had come to do an HIV test because they have not had one for a long time. The man starts accusing the woman of infidelity. The woman stands her ground saying that she is only interested in knowing her status. Her friend joins in the discussion which within no time, becomes an open one with some people supporting the man and others the woman. In the process, the misconceptions and facts about HIV/AIDS are actively interrogated with cast members only intervening when the discussion completely veers out of the topic.

In another incident, a woman supposedly runs away from home leaving her husband with a sick child. The man catches up with her in a busy street and a verbal exchange ensues. The woman (a cast member) accuses the man of refusing to give her money to take their child to a hospital. The man (also a cast member) accuses the woman of being irresponsible and unhygienic and a bad mother. The woman retorts that the child belongs to both of them and it is as much his responsibility to take care of him/her as it is hers. Within no time, other people join in the discussion that quickly veers into other sub-issues such as who owns the children, whether the couple should wash their dirty linen in public, and gender issues. According to Aswani, sometimes they would make the audience realise they were all along engaging in a performance. In such cases, they would follow the performance with a pre-rehearsed skit to depict and demystify the issues raised in the discussions. In other cases, they left people still debating the issues without identifying themselves. As Aswani told me, they were exploiting Nairobi's attraction and excitement with situations of public confrontation.⁷⁴⁹ Although invisible theatre, like magnet theatre disregards the need for involvement of the communities in the whole TfD cycle, the positive thing is that the group demonstrated the ability to think beyond the scope of their training.

Another performance aspect of the APHIA initiative was staging skits at health centres as mothers and patients waited to be attended. The skits, in most cases, were derived from relevant sections of two television plays,

⁷⁴⁹ Interview with Ezra Aswani coordinator of Liberty Theatre Group at Kasarani Health Centre 17 January 2014.

Siri and *Shuga* that were made as part of the APHIA project. The two dramas focused on the theme of HIV/AIDS and were aired on local television stations on weekly basis.

All the groups also ran what they called a youth desk. This is a desk located within their local health centres or any other strategic place in the estate to cater for youth issues, particularly concerning HIV/AIDS. This was still going on in 2013. Every day, two members of the group were deployed to run the youth desk as others were either rehearsing for the next performance or performing in communities. The work of the personnel staffing the desk was to listen to any health issues the youths might have and to advise them accordingly. Many of the issues that the audience could not raise during the community performances were discussed at this desk. If the issues were beyond the group, they were referred to specialists for further help and advice. Some of the health centres had even allocated the theatre group attached to them a doctor whom the youths could talk to confidentially regarding issues like HIV without following the normal hospital bureaucracies. The culmination of the year was the annual G-Pange festival in which community groups from various parts of the country staged plays, dances and poems on health issues.⁷⁵⁰

From the foregoing and despite the challenges of training and methodology I have cited above, it is evident that the APHIA Plus project is a good illustration of how a multidisciplinary community empowerment project can be mounted. The theatre groups felt that their activities were effective as the following quotation shows.

In our communities, we have built rapport. Sometimes when you walk in our community, you are even stopped by anyone on the road and they ask you questions on the issues you featured and even beyond. What we can deal with we deal with, what we cannot we refer you to the facility.⁷⁵¹

I could not independently verify the effects of the activities of these groups on their communities due to constraints of time and resources. What is not in doubt is the fact that the project had much to offer to theatre groups who were also members of these communities. Being involved in such high-level

⁷⁵⁰ Muruguri, Interview, 23 January 2012.

⁷⁵¹ Okumu, Interview, 15 February 2014.

initiative gave them the credibility a placed them at an advantaged position with regard to securing contracts with other NGOS. Some members have used these groups as springboards for better remunerating careers in other bigger theatre organisations. From a humble beginning at Kasarani, Aswani of Liberty Arts is now scripting and directing plays not only for his organisation, but also for schools and other theatre groups. Okumu of Shangilia co-ordinates another larger group in Nairobi called Guru Arts whose focus is on attitude change among students in high schools. He has also acted with some of the leading theatre groups in the country and in some TV theatre programmes.

From what I learnt from the members of these groups, they have a strong sense of attachment to and ownership of the groups so that even when they find better remunerating ventures, they still find time for their group and community's activities. At the time of my research, Liberty Arts were still staging up to four plays a year in their local church where they started and where most of their activities were still located. Shangilia was also regularly staging plays in their communities. Zindua Jamii and Chipkizi, in addition, to TfD also performed indigenous dances and plays at events to raise income for members. This sense of commitment if backed with adequate training and funding could make such groups important agents of change in their localities.

Figure 13 : Zindua Jamii during a dance practice session.



Figure 14 : Drummers practising during the same session.



Figure 15 : Chipkizi Theatre Group during a TfD session in Mathare area.



Figure 16: A certificate won by Liberty Arts in G-pange Festival.



Figure 17: A counselling consultancy session at Kasarani health centre.



Theatre and Peace Building in Kenya: ‘Peace not Pieces’ Project at Mount Elgon, Bomet and Nyamira Counties of Kenya

In Kenya, inter-ethnic conflicts that are usually based on historical, social, economic, cultural and political factors are a common phenomenon even today. Land, the main source of sustenance for many Kenyans, continues to be a contested resource even after independence. Tensions concerning its distribution and ownership account for most of the repeated cycles of inter-ethnic conflict in the country. Competition for the control of political and economic power in multi-cultural regions has also aggravated the situation. This perhaps explains why most of the serious conflicts in the country have occurred around general elections, especially from 1992 when the first multi-party elections were held.

It follows that peace building and reconciliation is a major concern of the government, communities themselves and non-governmental bodies. Pragmatic conflict resolution methods became an even more important concern to Kenyans after the 2007 post-election violence when the country witnessed the most intense and widespread inter-group conflict since independence. The conflict brought into sharp focus the dire consequences of negative attitudes in such an ethnically diverse nation as well as the pricelessness of peace and psychological well-being of the citizenry.

Many of the ethnic conflicts in Kenya are multi-layered which has called for varied and multi-agency strategies by both government and non-governmental bodies in an attempt to address the issues comprehensively. Theatre is one of the vehicles that some development-oriented agencies have employed to address inter-ethnic conflicts in Kenya. 'Peace not Pieces', which was ran by The Arts Canvas Theatre Company in 2012 with the support of the United Nations Environment Programme, was such a project. The project took place in Mount Elgon, Bomet and Nyamira counties. All the three areas have experienced repeated cycles of inter-group violence in recent years due to land boundary and control disputes, as well as cultural, political and other socio-economic factors. The programme was also to cover Turkana County, another conflict hot spot over pasture and cattle rustling problems between the Pokots and the Turkana groups, but due to logistical, funding and insecurity challenges, the visit did not materialise.⁷⁵² The information used in the discussion in this section was acquired through interviews with Kaigwa and an analysis of documented reports on the projects that she made available to me.

The Mount Elgon region is home to diverse groups including Saboats, Ogiek, Iteso, Bukusu and Kikuyu, among other groups. The Saboats are the dominant group. The conflict that necessitated the 'Peace not Pieces' project was complex as it was both intra-group (between the various sub-groups of the dominant Saboat community) and inter-group with other communities in the area. Access to land, political and cultural supremacy were some of the factors that fuelled the conflict. The peak of the violence was in 2006-2009 when an armed militia group known as the Saboat-Land Defence Forces (SLDF) emerged and overran the area, committing atrocities that forced the Kenyan government to deploy the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) to disarm the militias and restore order. The KDF was in turn accused of gross human rights abuses in the process of carrying out their mandate. The conflict at Bomet and Nyamira counties was also land and culturally based, fuelled mainly by a border dispute between the Kisii who populate Nyamira County against the Kipsigis of Bomet County. The Sotik/Boraba border of the two

⁷⁵² Kaigwa, interview, 5 February 2014.

counties was where most of the violence had been located and was felt most intensely during the 1992, 1997 and 2007 general elections.

According to Kaigwa, the aim of 'Peace not Pieces' initiative was to create performances with communities to communicate messages of reconciliation. The aim was to find out what went wrong, teach conflict resolution methods and find healing to prevent a recurrence of the violence in the future.⁷⁵³ The model that The Arts Canvas adopted in this project is known as Community Peace and Reconciliation (CPR). This model was created by the Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development (ACORD). It encourages conflicting groups to come together, discuss the root causes of the conflict and the tensions between them, and collectively resolve their differences.⁷⁵⁴

Theatre was seen as important in the CPR efforts because through performance, histories regarding the conflicts could be retrieved by use of forms such as orature that the ordinary people were versed with. The performance was also useful in breaking tension during the performances due to its entertaining quality. It was also an important means of communicating the outcomes of the sessions to the other members of the various communities.

The Bomet and Nyamira projects took place from February 2012 and lasted for six days. Approximately twenty-one participants from both communities and of various age groups and gender were involved. The Mount Elgon visit was in November 2012 and had twenty-five participants from different communities, ages and gender. The training and performance programme lasted for nine days. In both projects, the ages of the participants ranged from twenty to seventy years. The participants were selected on the basis of their good leadership qualities at the grassroots level and were people who commanded the confidence of their communities.⁷⁵⁵

This core group of community members was expected to learn TfD skills and to continue the peace-building activities within their communities

753 Ibid.

754 The Arts Canvas Report, 'Peace not Pieces' Performance Workshops at Cheptais and Kopsiro Divisions, Mt Elgon in November 2012', pp.1 -15, (p.7).

755 Ibid, p. 8.

by performing the pieces that were created during the period of the training and using the skills they had gained to create new pieces. They were also expected to pass on the skills they had learnt to other members of their communities so they can also use theatre to address conflict and other issues. This way the means of making theatre was transferred to the communities as opposed to professionals dominating the exercise.

The Use Communal History and Performance Forms in Conflict Resolution Theatre.

In each of the initiatives, the participants from each community worked together in small groups that were subdivided according to gender and age to allow for a deeper probe into the various levels and perspectives of the conflict. While the theatre experts provided the technical play-making skills, the communities were the custodians of their history and performance forms. In making the pieces, the participants within their smaller groups were invited to recount the first time they heard about the conflict between their communities and present their thoughts to fellow group members using the narrative, song and other performance techniques they were comfortable with. The stories generated from the discussions were used to create narratives or performance pieces in the small groups that were presented to other members at the end of each day. The dominant themes and forms in the presentations were used as the basis of making 45-minute productions that were presented in communities - two pieces at Mount Elgon and one piece at Bomet/ Nyamira. Thus, indigenous knowledge was combined with the knowledge of the experts to make plays that they could all own.

Kaigwa recounts that at the beginning of each project, the tensions were dramatised in a multi-layered manner, such as the way people grouped themselves in the meeting space or during meals and breaks. For instance, the Kipsigs would sit together in their corner while the Kisiis would do the same. As the days went by and as people worked together, the physical, emotional and psychological barriers were gradually broken enabling them to interact more freely.

According to Kaigwa, each performance would start with a song. Groups would alternately be asked to lead in a song on the topic under

discussion. The songs would be taught to everyone so that by the end of the week they all knew two or three songs from other communities. The songs would also be incorporated in the plays or would be performed as autonomous pieces to pass on messages or for entertainment.

The impacts of the project began to be felt right from the training venue as a story Kaigwa narrated to me about 29-year-old woman demonstrate:

One encounter amazed me [...]. I was sitting with this woman. She is a Kipsigs and she told me:- You know Mumbi I have never sat next to somebody who is Kisii. You see the way we are here. The first day we had lunch, all the Kisii sat together and all the Kipsigs sat together. Yesterday I found myself sitting next to Kisii and we talked about our children, about our farms and the things that are going on. As I was going home, I thought how I had never heard how similar my story is similar to the one of the Kisii. I asked her how old she was and she told me twenty-nine. I wondered to myself here is somebody who has lived twenty-nine years thinking somebody is an enemy simply because they do not speak your language.⁷⁵⁶

The stories were also gendered and generational. The men would, for instance, talk about how they had to protect their family from attacks while the women talked of how they watched their sons/husbands being hacked to death. The young would talk about how the conflict prevented them from marrying girls or boys they loved because they came from other communities.⁷⁵⁷ By focusing on individual stories and how the conflict had affected them, the conflict was made concrete. The participants also reached important conclusions about the root causes of their problems without being prompted and were able to empathise with the situation and with one another as Kaigwa told me in the following quotation:

At the end when we have a discussion, they themselves will say things like 'these are things the politicians are using this to divide us'. But I don't put words in their mouths, I have people saying it themselves, but no one can accuse me of taking political plays to the communities [...] because they are the people who are leaving this show, they can now use the skills as a tool in places where there is more animosity.⁷⁵⁸

⁷⁵⁶ Kaigwa, Interview, 5 February 2014.

⁷⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁸ Ibid.

According to Kaigwa, the greatest achievement of this strategy was the opportunity it provided for the 'humanisation of the other' at a community, generational and gender levels. In a controlled environment, the participants revealed to one another through their stories and inter-personal interactions what they felt about other communities as well as their experiences and motivations during conflicts.⁷⁵⁹ With each performance and day, they gradually came to the realisation that they were all fathers, mothers, sons and daughters hungering for the same needs that the conflict had denied them, irrespective of their ethnic communities.

Performance of the Plays

The performances at Mount Elgon took place at Cheptais and Emia Location in Kopsiro, areas which were greatly affected by the violence. In addition to the two plays covering the themes I have discussed above. The performances also included three songs that the group had learnt together. The song 'We should Sit Down and Talk to one Another,' was the plays' soundtrack. It was performed in low tones in the background whenever the performances were taking place. 'Let us Love One Another', which focused on the theme of orphans, followed the performance of the first play. The third song, 'We Need Peace to Develop', explored the theme of drunkenness and was performed at the end of the second play to encourage the participation of the audience.⁷⁶⁰

The group benefitted from the services of three experienced musicians, including one who could play the *Bukandit* (the traditional Kalenjin guitar). This emphasises the need to tap into the community's wealth in TfD practices in an attempt to make the performances not only entertaining, but also culturally relevant to the people. The language of the performance was mainly Saboat, the dominant language in the area. The fact that members from other groups sang in it was also an important way of breaking ethnic barriers.

A slightly different approach was used in the Bomet/ Nyamira initiative. The conflict here, as I indicated earlier, had much to do with a border dispute. One play was developed in this initiative. The play was on

⁷⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁶⁰ The Arts Canvas Report, 'Peace not Pieces', p.10.

the theme of marriage in an ethnically diverse locality where the protagonist's marriage to a woman from the other community exposes the couple and their families to rumours, ridicule and the prospect of being ostracised from the mainstream activities of their respective communities. The main question the play sought to answer was 'why should we not see ourselves and one another as part of one big Kenyan family?'⁷⁶¹ The performances took place in three places: Kamukuji market before an audience of about 300 people on Sunday 12 February 2012, Tembwo Trading Centre on 13 February before an audience of 200 and at Chepilat Trading Centre on 13 February before an audience of 500 people. The audience in the last performance included people from other areas who had missed the performances in their towns.⁷⁶²

Being a peace building and conflict resolution initiative, the characters in the play were drawn from mixed groups - a Kipsigs mother, a Kisii father and children and relatives from both groups making a family unit in a play. This obviously posed a problem of communication. While during the making of the shows discussions could be held in Kiswahili, during the performances in the communities local languages were emphasised even though the performers and the audience were multi-lingual. According to Kaigwa, the aim was to demonstrate that though the people were culturally different, they could still do things together and live harmoniously. Mumbi explained to me how the performances were conducted in multi-lingual scenarios:

The Kisii father would tell his son who is Kipsigs whatever she is telling him in Kisii. He repeats the question in Kipsigs and then gives the answer in Kipsigs. So, the Kisii may not understand what the Kipsigs is saying, but because the question has been asked in Kisii and the other person has repeated it in your language, you know that this person is saying in your language [...] As you know very often in the African context, we repeat the question even when we are talking in English.⁷⁶³

In most cases, the performances took place in the presence of government officials such as district commissioners, district officers, provincial police officers and chiefs. Thus, performances afforded the people at the

761 Ibid, p. 3.

762 Ibid.

763 Kaigwa, Interview, 5 February 2014.

grassroots the opportunity to control the *barazas* and talk to the 'government' as opposed to the norm where it was always 'the government talking at the people' through administrators or politicians.⁷⁶⁴

The initiative also afforded participants the opportunity to discover and rediscover their creative and performance abilities which the struggle to survive in such explosive environments had repressed. According to Kaigwa, the women participants in the Bomet/Nyamira group implored her to come back 'because they said they had always been good singers and always wanted to perform' but had never had the opportunity.⁷⁶⁵ The Mount Elgon group, at the end of the project, was invited by the PATH office in the area to perform at two of their functions at Kopsiro. The group was also registered with the Ministry of Culture and Heritage (Now Ministry of Culture, Sports and Arts) with the intention of touring the two plays and those they created later to different parts of the county with local government officials pledging support for the group.⁷⁶⁶ The extent to which these groups have continued with conscientisation efforts to date is an issue for future studies. The important thing for me is that this model reveals the importance of communities making the TfD work themselves rather than leaving it to theatre experts and theatre groups. It is a case of teaching communities to fish rather than giving them fish which is a more sustainable approach.

Re-Packaging Indigenous Oral Narratives into Modern Media – the Talent Empire Group of Kayole One Primary School

The Talent Empire is still going strong eight years after Simon Otieno's PhD research in 2006 under his mentorship. It is, therefore, a good example of how the linkages between the academia and communities can create sustainable theatre initiatives. The group continues to nurture the youth of Kayole One primary school in theatre, dance, storytelling and film techniques in the attempt to empower them to face the challenges of poverty that is rampant in this community and youth problems. During my fieldwork, I followed recent developments within this group through interviews with

764 Ibid.

765 Ibid.

766 The Arts Canvas, 'Peace not Pieces', p. 9.

Otieno, who is currently a lecturer of Theatre and Film at the University of Nairobi, and Tecla Wangari who heads the group.

Talent Empire has continued with its theatre activities at Kayole One primary school producing songs, plays, dances and narratives that focused on the youth and other issues in their communities. These are packaged as either theatre or films and are performed during various occasions within and outside the community or they are aired on local television stations. The activity that caught my attention during fieldwork and which Otieno has not reported adequately in his work was the way these young people were re-packaging oral narratives to symbolically comment on societal issues by infusing storytelling, drama and film media into the narratives. To me, this was a perfect example of how we can blend the modern and the traditional media to not only preserve our cultures but to also speak on modern social issues.

Among the stories that the group recreated and turned into film was 'Lwanda Magere'. This is a Luo narrative where a warrior is deceived by a young woman into revealing the secrets of his military prowess, which she later reveals to a rival community. The story was meant to comment on war and gullibility. Another story is 'Wangu Wa Makeri' which is a legend from the Kikuyu community which focuses on the exploits of a tyrannical woman leader in colonial era. It was meant to teach gender and leadership issues. Wangari's insights on this story were quite revealing to me. According to her, the performance was triggered by the position of some gender-rights organisations concerning a prominent woman government official who was accused of engaging in acts of corruption. The organisations tried to turn the issue into a gender one as if to suggest that women are always unfairly victimised. The story sought to open up a debate on leadership issues and to demonstrate that leadership was not about gender but about the ability of a person. It was also to remind the audience that there could indeed be oppressive female leaders.⁷⁶⁷

'The Rainmaker' is a story about a community that ignores a poorly dressed woman without knowing she is the rainmaker. She eventually

⁷⁶⁷ Interview with Tecla Wangari, the Coordinator of Talent Empire in Nairobi on 23 December 2013.

drowns the whole village in anger. It was meant to teach about revenge and respect for all in the society. The group has also worked on the popular Luo narrative 'Nyamgodha' which focuses on themes of kindness and selfishness. The story focused on a poor man who is saved from poverty by a sea-goddess only for him to start looking down upon her when he got rich.⁷⁶⁸ He eventually loses everything.

Through such simple stories, important political and moral lessons are imparted to young members of the group. According to Tecla, they also act as important catalysts for opening up debates on moral issues for children, thus helping them to discover new perspectives on important societal questions. For instance, in the story of 'The Rainmaker', the moral question was whether the Rainmaker was right to drown a whole village just because she has been ignored, while in 'Nyamgodha' the debate focused on the ugly sea goddess's right to tie the young man to herself and deny him his freedom in exchange for riches. A lot of debate also goes into costuming, characterisation, décor and lighting in the various productions. Thus, the members, most of who are students in primary, secondary and University (for those who joined the group in its first years) were in the process developing critical and analytical skills.

What is perhaps unique about this group is how they were able to discover and nurture various skills within the group even without formal training. As Wangari informed me, the scripting, choreographing, editing, filming and directing were done by the group members who learnt the skills through various informal ways such as on YouTube and other online programmes. At the time of my research, the group was heavily reliant on the goodwill of Otieno, who provided most of the equipment they used in their productions and a few donors, who as Wangari told me, gave them occasional tokens in appreciation of their good performances.⁷⁶⁹ The parents and teachers also sacrificed their time to escort the students to far-off destinations, sometimes without being paid the monetary allowances stipulated by the Ministry of Education. This indicates the dire for clear ways

768 Ibid.

769 Ibid.

of supporting such projects. It also shows the need to focus on communities if we want to create long enduring TfD initiatives.

Conclusion

This chapter has revealed the dominance of 'top-down' TfD approaches in Kenya where the performance process is dominated by donors, theatre experts and groups who decide the topics and methods of communication with little input from the communities. The target communities are only involved at the final stages of the performances where they are invited to perform interventions to problems that in the first place may not be their priorities. This calls for better understanding of what community theatre really entails for both the theatre groups and funding bodies.

The discussion also reveals that sustainability and community engagement in TfD is more than recruiting of theatre groups from within the target communities. For sound theatre practices, we need to go directly to the people themselves rather than engaging them through other people. The aim should be, as Boal noted, to convert 'spectators' who at the start of the dramatic action are 'passive beings' into subjects, actors and transformers of the dramatic action'. This way, they assume a 'protagonic role' and acquire the power to not only change the 'dramatic action' but to also train themselves for the 'real action'.⁷⁷⁰ Giving performance power to communities also leads to greater ownership of the theatre initiatives, participation and sustainability as the examples in this chapter have shown.

The discussion also reveals that in TfD the work of the theatre expert is also not to make and perform theatre for communities but to enable them to make plays for themselves on issues they deem pertinent. To use the words of Victor Ladan, a Kenyan theatre scholar, TfD is also not 'a mere set of dramatic techniques at the disposal of interested teachers who are out to deliver successful lessons' to communities.⁷⁷¹ It is rather an opportunity for both the communities and theatre experts to learn and discover new

⁷⁷⁰ Boal, pp. 998.

⁷⁷¹ Victor Ladan, 'Towards an Endogenous Model. The Contemporary Practice of Theatre for Development in Kenya: Concepts, Paradigms, Processes, Products and Prospects' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Northampton, 2010), p. 21.

potentialities using the most pragmatic and workable performance methods. These ideals are achievable even in Kenya if we invest adequately in training of Tfd practitioners.

Conclusion

This study has investigated how Kenyan performance culture has evolved from the colonial to contemporary times. It has also sought to find out what have been the major influences on Kenyan theatre. Here I present some of the conclusions that could be arrived at from the discussions in the body of the thesis. My major discovery was that politics has been a major factor in shaping the development and aesthetics of Kenyan theatre. I found that the various Kenyan political regimes have sought to determine the direction and the kind of theatre Kenyan people should consume either through direct censorship or by neglecting the sector in terms of policy and funding. While the colonialists engaged in a deliberate attempt to suppress Kenyan indigenous forms to eradicate traditions they regarded regressive or threatening, they did not encourage theatre either as a mode of entertainment among the colonised. This was a preserve of the Europeans and Asians.

What the colonisers prescribed for their African subjects was religious and propagandist theatre that was intended to convey colonial civilising messages or to extol the benevolence of British imperialism. It was only a few Kenyans who attended elite schools who had some access to formal theatre mainly to help them master English and literature lessons and to make them believe that by virtue of their educated status, they were part of the privileged class who should ignore and disparage the 'regressive' traditions of their communities. It was not until the 1950s that Kiswahili plays and local themes began to be published and performed at the Kenya Drama Festivals, the major theatre event in colonial Kenya. At this time, the country was nearing independence and the colonisers were beginning to extend many socio-political freedoms to Kenyans which explains these developments in theatre.

During the Kenyatta era, the growth of theatre was tied to the politics of capitalism and neo-colonialism. The capitalist nature of the Kenyan political economy at the time connected Kenya to global capitalism through foreign investment and multinational companies. The expatriate personnel who came to work in these companies added to the number of Europeans

and Asians who remained after independence to provide the audiences for Western style theatre. These numbers were augmented by what Hilary Ngweno calls cultural 'renegades' in reference to the indigenous elite who, having acquired Western education and positions in the government, equated status and modernity with acquiring Western mannerisms. They therefore, did not see the need to develop the indigenous cultures even after independence which led to the continued marginalisation of Kenyan theatre even as European and Asian theatre continued to thrive.

It took the efforts of intellectuals and artists with little official encouragement to champion theatre initiatives and aesthetics that responded to needs of ordinary people from the 1970s. Most of these intellectuals and artists were influenced by Marxist and African socialism thought which made them make the ordinary people the central focus of their creativity and to use styles and languages that enabled the participation of the mass of the population.

The censorship of the Moi time curtailed the growth of political theatre and led to artists reverting to putting on or adapting light Western plays. It also led to the emergence of comedy as a way of avoiding state censorship and dealing with the hardships occasioned by the misrule of the regime. Comedy of both a political and social nature and Theatre for Development are the dominant modes of theatre in Kenya today. Contemporary regimes, though tolerant to theatre, have shown no real commitment to funding and formulating policies that would help the growth of indigenous cultures. While there are a few artists who are championing some important theatre initiatives in the recent years, the sector is yet to recover from the abuse of the past years and Kenyans still regard the 1970s and early 1980s as the highlight of Kenyan theatre. To date, the sector continues to grapple with a myriad of problems, but most particularly with a lack of skills and facilities.

My research has led me to the conclusion that the suppression of indigenous performance spaces and forms under colonialism, modernisation and globalisation left ordinary Kenyans and theatre at the mercy of intellectuals, political elite and non-governmental bodies who across the years have determined the content and form of theatre that ordinary Kenyans access and consume. While the intellectuals see political theatre

as the best-suited form for ordinary people as a way of conscientising them and which led to projects such as Kamiriithu, the NGOs see theatre as a means of imparting their ideas of development. The political elite have on their part, frustrated not only political theatre, but also the growth of indigenous theatre as a whole and encouraged alien theatre forms to prosper. They do not seem to perceive theatre as core to the development of the country. The ordinary people are rarely consulted on the content and form of the theatre that these groups advocate for them. The proliferation of community theatre groups and community regional festivals from the 1990s is, therefore, good news to ordinary Kenyans and is a chance to reclaim control of performance and have a bigger say of how and what they consume as theatre.

The study has revealed that the school system has been a major pillar in the development of Kenyan theatre. It has been through the Kenya Drama Festival that a majority of Kenyans have experienced or engaged in formal theatre. KSDF is also the main way various genres of performance, traditional and modern, have been nurtured. However, the festival suffers from some systematic problems that have hindered the full realisation of its potential in growing the Kenyan theatre. One of the weaknesses is the emphasis on competition that has seen people focus more on winning trophies and certificates as opposed to nurturing theatre skills. The other major weakness is wastage of creativity and talent as only a few of the plays that are performed are published. Few performers after school get the chance to train and acquire further theatre skills or join the professional theatre industry which is still struggling to establish itself. The lack of proper theatre training of most of those who script, produce and direct plays as well as the lack of proper theatre facilities has compromised the quality of productions at the festival. Furthermore, audiences at KSDF at all levels are mainly students, teachers, education administrators and politicians during the state gala. This denies many ordinary people a chance to watch and learn from the performances. This emphasises the need to rethink the modes of dissemination of KSDF productions.

My study has highlighted the consistent lack of adequate training facilities and opportunities in the country since the colonial era. Theatre has

remained a subject outside the school curriculum where performance remains an extra-curricular activity by dramatic societies in schools, colleges and universities. There are few formal ways of teaching theatre beyond the KSDF and for many Kenyans the main form of training is 'on the job' or through short workshops provided by visiting professionals or experienced theatre experts in the country. Since the latter have also not been trained, the result is the recycling of old-age practices that have not helped the industry's development through the years.

While the launch of theatre courses at Kenyan universities is a welcome initiative, the lack of enough trained personnel and facilities are significant challenges that may hinder the effectiveness of the training. Moreover, without proper grounding on the subject at lower levels, the departments and learners may not realise their full potential, as four years may be too short to teach all aspects of theatre. This study has also highlighted how the lack of training has undermined the growth of all the other sectors of theatre. Published drama has shrunk over the years and poorly rehearsed, melodramatic productions continue to dominate most theatre spaces. The heavy investment in TfD by donor agencies is being squandered due to ineffective theatre practices that have little tangible outcomes for target communities. The Kenyan theatres and television screens are once again populated with foreign plays, as few Kenyans are writing plays.

Since its construction, the KNT has remained the symbol of theatre and culture in Kenya. However, this facility is yet to play its normative role of facilitating the growth of Kenyan theatre. To date the KNT still operates as space through which the various performance groups around the city display their works to paying audiences. It does not even have a national theatre troupe that other theatre companies can use as a benchmark for best practices. In sum, it has not been doing enough in performance research, training and in growing theatre nationally to justify its funding by the Kenyan taxpayer and the status of 'national' that is different from other private and corporate owned theatre spaces.

A further finding of this study is that indigenous languages have been largely ignored in Kenyan theatre. English and Kiswahili are the languages

that have dominated Kenyan theatre from the colonial period. Both are elite languages that are mostly spoken by those who have gone through formal schooling and who live in urban centres. Their dominance in the country's theatre has excluded many ordinary Kenyans who cannot speak these languages. The little theatre that has been made in indigenous languages has been mainly in Kikuyu, Luo, Luyha and Kamba, the languages of the big ethnic groups. This leaves about 38 other languages with no imprint on theatre save for their indigenous performance forms whose potential in modern society are limited. The lack of proper policies and efforts in growing theatre in Kenyan languages has partly helped sustain the perception of theatre being an upper-class affair for the consumption of middle-class Kenyans, Asians and Europeans who can speak English. This explains why many average Kenyan will pay over five thousand shillings to attend a music concert or for drinks as they watch European football in a bar while theatre shows that charge on average five hundred Kenya shillings for an over two hours' entertainment can barely attract patrons to fill a three-hundred seat hall.

Women's issues have generally been marginalised in Kenyan theatre and few Kenyan women have positions in the theatre business other than as actresses. There are also few Kenyan plays that celebrate women achievements, have strong roles for women or tell women's' stories. This explains why people like Kaigwa who are interested in women issues mostly stage foreign plays or create their own plays. One of the major reasons that account for the poor representation of women was found to be the patriarchal nature of the Kenyan society where femininity is equated to muteness and masculinity to extroversion.

The study has also revealed the role ideology has played in shaping the development of Kenyan theatre. In colonial era the belief that indigenous cultures were backward justified their suppression. After independence African socialism nurtured theatre of 'commitment' as writers tried to extol socialist values and to oppose capitalism. In the Moi era, it was the fear of 'foreign ideologies' such as communism that led to the attack on political theatre. The artists and intellectuals themselves in the attempt to assert the power of art against state excess have used theatre to champion their socio-

political ideologies. Writers whose works contradict dominant social political visions have been ostracised from mainstream theatre platforms irrespective of their creative prowess with producers and teachers ignoring their works. This is the same way the state uses its power to make it difficult for works and writers who contradict their philosophies to be published, studied or performed. Three examples of playwrights cited in this work as victims of ideological nature of Kenyan theatre are Kenneth Watene, Rebecca Njau and Kuldip Sondhi. Though all have produced works that are internationally acclaimed, they have not enjoyed much attention in Kenya. When they do, it is often to exemplify what Kenyan art should not do. Watene's plays generally questioned the heroism of the Mau Mau and Kimathi while Njau contested traditions such as circumcision, the heroic depiction of Mau Mau and gender issues. Sondhi interrogated race relations at a time when the focus of Kenyan writers was on celebration of independence and empowerment of ordinary Kenyans economically, politically and culturally after the brutal experience of colonialism. It is a good thing Sondhi's efforts are being recognised with some of his recent creations being performed in theatres in Nairobi and Mombasa.

The study has demonstrated how careful triangulation of varied methods of historical research such as archival and retrieval of oral memories through interviews may help in discovering knowledge that may help clarify contradictions in history and/or contribute to reaching a better understanding of current issues. The study has provided, for instance, a detailed analysis of the Jeanes School theatre initiatives whose theatrical works and the overall organisation of the curriculum offer important lessons on how to create dialogical theatre practices. The same applies to initiatives such as Kamiriithu, use of indigenous modes to oppose colonialism and 'Peace not Pieces', all which were highly interactive and dialogical initiatives. The study also discovered the early 'experiments' of Graham Hyslop, the colony's music and theatre officer who in the 1950s championed dramatic and theatre modes that resonated with the local languages, people and cultures by blending Western play forms with indigenous ones. The Theatre Company's training and play-making model offer good lessons of the ways the problem of training and lack of locally written plays could be addressed.

Careful analyses of these initiatives could contribute to theories of post-colonial theatre as well as dialogical TfD practices. The study has also detailed the significant contribution of Asians in Kenyan theatre. This finding contradicts the popular view that they were too engrossed in commercial activities to think of contributing to East African culture.

As an emerging researcher, this study has contributed to my personal development in various ways. The four-year process has sharpened my research ability and critical aptitude and opened my eyes to important ways of collecting, analysing and reporting research information. Most importantly, it has greatly helped my understanding of Kenyan theatre, its development and the challenges that need to be overcome to realise the full potential of theatre in the country. As a Kenyan teacher and researcher, these experiences will greatly shape and direct my future research and work.

It is my hope that despite the constraints of distance, time and funding that hindered more extensive research in the various parts of Kenya, the work has addressed most of the major questions regarding the development and major influences in the development of Kenyan theatre culture. I trust that this work has contributed to the under-developed area of scholarship in African theatre history and will offer an important starting point to other researchers who may be interested in the national theatre histories of other African countries. I feel as I go forward I need to keep collecting more stories from Kenyan theatre stakeholders in order to give a more detailed account of the issues that I have raised but which I could not explore extensively within the scope of this study. The vast material in the Kenya National archives and other archives in the various parts of the country still need a more careful analysis to add to some of the discoveries I have made. In future, I may need to collaborate with other scholars to do a comparative study on the history of African theatre which up to now is mostly given only as a last chapter of books on world theatre history. Finally, I hope the study has been successful in making a strong case for the need for better investment, policy formulation and training in theatre and showing how the various theatre spaces in Kenya could play a more proactive role in developing the country's performance cultures.

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Interviews

Aghan, Odero, Artist and Director Kenya Cultural Centre. Interview held at the KCC on 21 November 2013

Aswani, Ezra, coordinator of Liberty Theatre Group. Interview held at Kasarani Health Centre on 17 January 2014

Gathwe, Titus, actor and director since 1960s. He coordinated the Drama School and National Theatre Company at the KNT from the late 1960s to early 1980s. Interview held at the Kenya National Archives lobby on 20 January 2014

Kaigwa, Mumbi, (Interview 1) Kenyan Actress since 1970s and founder of The Theatre Company and The Arts Canvas Kenya. First Interview held at ABC Place in Nairobi on 05 February 2014

_____, (Interview 2) held at Shell Drive in Thika Road on 13 February 2014.

Mitambo, Tash, a theatre director with Fanaka Arts held at the KNT on 07 February 2015

Murimi, Gerald, Ex- Mau Mau member, Interview at his home at Kiandegwa village 13 December 2013

Muruguri, Charity, lecturer Thogoto Teachers College, co-ordinator the Prime Theatre Company, adjudicator and director KSDF and PhD student at Kenyatta University. Interview held in a hotel in Nairobi on 23 January 2012

Murungu, Joseph, Theatre lecturer Premier Academy, national official, scriptwriter and director at KSDF and television actor. Interview held in Nandos hotel in Nairobi on 20 December 2013

Musiomi, Callistus, Ministry of Sports, Culture and Arts. Interview held at his office in the Ministry headquarters, Nairobi on 19 December 2013

Mwaura, Eric, a Kenyan actor with various theatre companies. Interview held at the lobby of Kenya National Archives on 21 December 2013

Ngatia, Charles, behavioural change coordinator Population Studies International (PSI) Kenya. Interview held at his office in Nairobi on 17 January 2014

Njanja, Tecla Wangari, the coordinator of Talent Empire theatre group at Kayole. Interview held at a Mwandu hotel in Nairobi on 23 December 2013

Okoth, Zipporah, lecturer Kenyatta University. Interview held at her office in the University on 13 February 2014

Okumu, Fredrick, Shangilia Youth -Youth Network group and Guru Arts Nairobi. Interview held at Jeenvajee Gardens Nairobi 15 February 2014.

Opondoe, David, current director The Phoenix Players. Interview at Phoenix Theatre 11 February 2015

Otieno, Jacob, a Kenyan theatre actor, producer and director since the late 1970s. Interview was held at the KNT on 17 January 2014

Otieno, Simon Peter, theatre lecturer at the University of Nairobi and a National Official at the KSDF. Interview held at his office at the University of Nairobi on 18 December 2013

Pearson, Keith, theatre teacher at ASK International Schools, founder and current proprietor of The Theatre Company. Interview held at his Studio Theatre in Westlands, Nairobi on 23 December 2013

Wabende Kimingichia, theatre lecturer at the University of Nairobi, coordinator the UNFTT and a member of the KNT governing board. Interview held at his office at the literature department at the University of Nairobi on 15 January 2014

Wangui, Mary, Julius Ndegwa and Alice Wachira of Kigera Cultural Dancers. Interviewed together at Wachira's home in Nyeri on 11 January 2014

Waters, Harsita, Head of Culture at Alliance Française de Nairobi. Interview held in her office on 20 December 2013

Many informal chats with people who I felt would help me understand Kenyan theatre better.

Groups Observed

Fanaka Arts- three days of rehearsals for *The Perfect Wedding* at the KNT on 5, 9 and 13 February. Held one to one and group discussions with group members. Attended the opening night of *The Perfect Wedding* at the KNT on 13 February 2014

Chipkizi Theatre Group -TfD performance at Mathare area in Nairobi on 14 February 2014. Discussions held with Paul Ombok the Chairperson of the group and Grace Wambui the organising secretary.

Heartstrings' Kenya -performance of *50% Kenyan* at the French Cultural Centre Auditorium on 23 December 2013

Kenya Cultural Festival at the KNT 87th edition, 5-11 December 2013

Lamu Cultural Festival 22 November to 25 November 2016

Kigamba Dancers group at Kamiriithu-rehearsal session and group with discussion on 24 January 2014

Zindua Jamii theatre group- rehearsal session and group discussion with at Mukuru in Nairobi on 22 January 2014

The Theatre Company- training session that the company was hoisting for people of diverse fields but who had interested in theatre. The training took place at The Theatre Company's Studio theatre on 23 December 2013

Appendix Information Sheet

Research Project Title: A History of Kenyan Theatre: A Social-Culturally and Aesthetically Situated Analyses of National Performance Culture

Invitation paragraph

You are hereby requested to participate in this research by granting an interview/ allowing me to watch your performance/ use your library facilities. Before you decide it is important for you to understand, why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

What is the project's purpose?

Am a PhD student at the university of Leeds and I am conducting this research as part of qualification for my PhD in theatre studies. Your ideas will therefore provide the necessary information towards achieving this aims. The objective of my research is to investigate how Kenyan theatre has evolved over time and the social cultural and political factors that have informed its development. The overall objective is to determine the issues and situations that have defined national performance in Kenya.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been selected to take part in this research because I feel you can provide specialised information that will help me achieve the aims of your research.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a

consent form and you can still withdraw at any time without it affecting any benefits that you are entitled to in any way. You do not have to give a reason.

What do I have to do?

You simply have to answer the questions I pose to you/ let me observe your performances and respond to any issues that may need clarification after the observation of the performance/ facilitate me to use your library facilities.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

No risks or disadvantages. On the contrary, you will not only help me come up with a good dissertation, you will also be helping in contributing to theatre scholarship and knowledge in the country.

Do I have to take part?

You have the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time, including after the data have been gathered. If you decide to be interviewed, you will be given information sheet to keep and consent form to complete.

What do I have to do?

You will only be asked to answer questions which have a bearing on the thesis topic and are based on your specialty.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

This research is unlikely to pose any risks to you, since the research target is not human beings but theatre ideas and development in the future. In case of any sensitive questions, you can decide whether to answer.

Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

The following demands will depend on your permission:

- You can decide whether the process of the interview is recorded by multi-media facilities such as tape-recording.
- You can decide whether other information can be exposed such as meeting places, nationalities and job positions.

- The sound recording and transcripts will store in the university's secure storage system and on my personal laptop, which will be protected by a password.

What kind of recorded media will be used, if I agree the interview to be recorded by multi-media?

After getting your permission, the researcher will use MP3 to record the process of interview/ video camera to record performances. Manual note taking may also be done when necessary.

What will happen to the results of the research project?

The study expects to be finished before September 2015. The result of the research will be in PhD dissertation and probably published on journal articles or book sections. You can decide whether to remain anonymous in future publications.

Contact for further information

- Name of Researcher : Rose Wangui Komu
- Ethics Reference Number: PVAR 12-099
- Position: PhD Student, School of English University of Leeds
Woodhouse Lane Leeds, LS2 9JT UK
- Email: enrwk@leeds.ac.uk
- Tel: (+44) (0)113 343 4739 Fax: (+44) (0)113 343 4774
- Supervisor's Name: Professor Jane Plastow, School of English, and
University of Leeds

Date: 09/09/2013

Appendix B Participant Consent Form

Title of Research Project: A History of Kenyan Theatre: A Social-Culturally and Aesthetically Situated Analyses of National Performance Culture

- Name of Researcher: Rose Wangui Komu
- Ethics Reference Number: PVAR 12-099
- Address: School of English University of Leeds Woodhouse Lane
Leeds, LS2 9JT UK Tel: (+44) (0)113 343 4739 Fax: (+44) (0)113
343 4774
- Email: enrwk@leeds.ac.uk
- Supervisor's Name: Prof Jane Plastow
- Date : 09/09/2013

Mark the box if you agree with the statement to the left

- I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline. Please mark on the box if you agree with this statement. (If you want to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher by phone or the email provided above.
- I understand that I have the right to decide whether to remain anonymous in future publications including books, journal articles, book sections that will be published by the researcher as well as in this research.
- I am aware that the data collected may be used for other publications by this researcher.
- I agree to will inform the principal investigator of any changes in my contact details during the period of this researcher

Name of participant Signature

(Or legal representative)