

The City and the Comic Gĩkũyũ Comedies in Nairobi

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The City and the Comic

Gikūyū Comedies in Nairobi

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Abstract

This paper starts on the premise that comedy performed in vernacular languages in Kenya has proliferated over the last two decades. Specific focus is on Gikūyū language plays performed by Fanaka Arts, a theatre company based in Nairobi. I settle on three titles namely *Nyoori Momori*, *Tūirio Twega* and *ITINA SACCO* to demonstrate that: (a) these plays draw inspiration and thematic material from the everyday social cultural and political experiences and (b) they employ vernacular language and various literary techniques to provide entertainment as well as to impart didactic values to the audience. One feature that is common in the three plays is the marriage motif; there are convergences and divergences in the ways each reference and parody marriage, infidelity, urbanity, politics, and unpopular government policies. The key question I ask is: what makes these plays appealing to the audiences? References to the body as well as descriptions of sexuality in veiled figurative language are other common features in these plays. As such, it is the libidinous metaphors and sexual innuendoes in the titles of these lewd comedies that make them attractive to the audiences in Nairobi. Apart from being a form of entertainment, these monthly theatre performances in Gikūyū language enable the urban middle class to connect with their village and cultural roots. Moreover, through comedy, they articulate what may be considered as trite social-cultural issues in ways that other conventional media may not achieve. As such, these comedies make people to reflect upon and laugh at themselves concomitantly. The hilarious depictions of various social concerns can also be considered as subversive and aesthetic means of political critique.

Keywords

Gikūyū plays – performance – everyday – comedy – city – audience

1 Introduction

This paper discusses three Gĩkũyũ plays, namely *Nyoori Momori*,¹ *Tũirio Twega*,² *ITINA SACCO*,³ that have been performed on various occasions at the Alliance Française, the Kenya National Theatre as well as other locations in Nairobi. Because of their popularity, these performances can last for three days, from Friday until Sunday with three shows per day. In some cases, the shows are repeated in subsequent months due to public demand. Besides the fact that they are performed in Gĩkũyũ language, one other outstanding feature of these plays is their catchy titles, advertised through various media like short text messages (SMS), Facebook, posters and flyers, always bearing the rider “Hilarious adults-only comedy”. Using figurative language and such techniques as pun, these comedies poke fun at the everyday mannerisms and actions of the common man. Domestic affairs, relationships and infidelity are employed as commentary on political issues. The marriage motif in the three chosen plays thus becomes a window through which the comedies can explore a wide range of issues.

Another common feature of these plays is the manner in which the body and sexuality are presented in coded and figurative language, to which the audience can easily relate. Moreover, it is the sexual innuendoes and connotations with which the actors present various issues that make these plays attractive and entertaining to the audiences. But these comic performances achieve more than mere mirth. In particular, they enable the audience to appreciate and make sense of challenges of the everyday life.⁴ As such, the plays not only entertain the audience but they also subvert and break barriers of censorship. In so doing, they use imagery from the Gĩkũyũ language to describe what Bakhtin

1 *Nyoori Momori* can be translated as “The sledgehammer or the club that demolishes.” The Swahili word for *nyoori* is *rungu*, meaning a club or baton. There are several meanings suggested by this title. The sledgehammer or the club can be viewed as a phallic symbol of manhood. At the same time, it connotes political high handedness or dictatorship.

2 *Tũirio Twega* can be translated as “delicious food” or “nice food”. The title as well as theme of this play is inspired by a song of the same title by Jose Gatutura. In the play just as in the song, the phrase “*Tũirio Twega*” is used by a man as an endearing reference to a woman he loves.

3 *ITINA SACCO* is an acronym for a matatu (public transport vehicle) association plying the route between Ikinũ-Ting’ang’a-Nairobi, thus *ITINA*. But the way this acronym is pronounced and written, it means buttocks or the ass in Gĩkũyũ language.

4 Devorah Kalekin-Fishman, “Sociology of Everyday Life” in *Current Sociology Review* 61 (5–6) 2013: 714–732 examines the salience of the everyday life as presented by various major sociologists. The plays I analyse in this paper are based on contemporary social-cultural and political experiences. Current affairs in politics, as well as personal affairs between men and women, become a prism through which the everyday practices are re-enacted in these plays.

calls “material bodily lower stratum,”⁵ to address issues that could not otherwise be mentioned in ordinary conversations or through other conventional media. Indeed, the titles of most plays by Fanaka Arts,⁶ like the ones analysed in this paper are based on what Bakhtin calls “topography of the body.”⁷ Reference to the anatomy is thus a deliberate way of coming up with titles laden with layered meanings, which audiences are supposed to decipher. Before I turn to these plays, a short background of the performance of adults-only plays among the Gikūyū community is paramount.

Drama and performance have been part and parcel of many communities in Kenya since time immemorial. There were different categories of these dramatic performances, some belonging to children and others to adults. These activities were so important in that they were not merely forms of entertainment but they were embedded with strong moral values. In other words, it is not easy to separate the entertainment function from the didactic function of these performances. As such, performance in these communities was part of the day-to-day activities. For instance, among the Gikūyū people, children learnt a variety of songs, riddles, games, and stories. In profound ways, therefore, important knowledge was instilled in the children as they grew up. This was achieved not only in the evening story-telling performance around the hearth, but also as people worked in the farms. That is why we have a category known as work songs, performed to give morale and a sense of teamwork to people as they tilled the land.

Clearly, the roots of drama and theatre in many African communities can be traced in their day-to-day activities and rituals. As such, one can rightly conclude that these vibrant performances were realised through the various languages of the local communities, such as Gikūyū. It is therefore not possible to draw a line between religious rituals and other aspects of life such as education as Jomo Kenyatta observes in his anthropological work *Facing Mount Kenya*, underscoring the significance of the adult songs and dances. The content of these songs is oftentimes considered as vulgar because of the vivid manner with which matters of sexuality and the body are described. Kenyatta notes, “... the obscenity of songs and dances and the profligacy associated with many

5 Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984): 311.

6 Fanaka Arts is a theatre arts group based in Nairobi. They perform comedies in Gikūyū language at various venues within Nairobi, most notably at the Kenya National Theatre and the Alliance Française, the French Cultural Centre. See Facebook page https://www.facebook.com/pg/fanakaartstheatre/about/?ref=page_internal (Accessed 10 April 2020).

7 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 148.

of these ceremonies are held to prove unusual moral depravity.”⁸ Many ceremonies, like the rite of passage, were usually accompanied by performances of song and dance, and they could go on for more than one day. What this means is that it is impossible to divorce performance from the ordinary life among the Gĩkũyũ people. For instance, during the circumcision season, certain songs and dances were performed in readiness for this rite of passage. In particular, messages in these songs can be considered as adult content for the ways in which they describe the body as well as sexual relations. This was done through coded and metaphoric language that the participants could understand. These performances, as Kenyatta observes, helped to galvanize the community, creating a sense of communal identity. “The dances and songs connected with the initiation ceremony are called *mambura*, i.e. rituals or divine services. It is important to note that the moral code of the tribe is bound up with this custom and that it symbolises the unification of the whole tribal organisation.”⁹

It is the potency and power of these songs that made the colonial administration to outlaw them in the late 1920s when the movement agitating for political freedom started to gain momentum. Nonetheless, it is the explicit manner in which these songs described sexuality that made the government, aided by the Christian missionaries to ban them together with female circumcision that was part of the rite of passage among the Gĩkũyũ community.¹⁰ Christian missionaries and the colonial administration perceived circumcision songs and dances as obscene. But descriptions of the body and sexuality was not really vulgar in the context of these performances as far as the community was concerned. The Gĩkũyũ plays analysed in this paper clearly deconstruct perceptions as to what could be considered as taboo. The subversive elements employed in these plays help the actors to mention that which may be considered forbidden. Thus, the grammar of Gĩkũyũ theatre in Nairobi and the camouflage of humour enables these plays to evade censorship.

Doubtless, the lewd comedies performed by Fanaka Arts appeal to their adult audiences because of the catchy titles. Moreover, they tend to deal with trite thematic issues based on day to day occurrences, as exemplified in such titles as, *He Ngũhe*, *Nyonia Nguonie*, *Mumunya Wega*, *Hurunja Mbegũ*, *Hiũria*

8 Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gĩkũyũ* (London: Mercury Books, 1965): 110.

9 Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 134.

10 The rite of passage among the Gĩkũyũ community is called *irua*, meaning circumcision. This ritual marked the transition from childhood into adulthood. For more details see Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 134–154. Reference to this practice can be found in fictional works such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *The River Between* (London: Heinemann, 1965).

Mbakūri, *Anīka Nyanūre*, *Amba Wenje*, *Hihinya Ihūha*, *Niina Heho* among others. These titles are formulaic in that they are derived from a combination of two verbs, a verb and a noun, a verb and an adverb or an adjective and a noun. A sample of these Gikūyū plays is provided in the table below:

Gikūyū	English
1. <i>He Ngūhe</i> (Verb+Noun)	Give me and I will also give you
2. <i>Mumunya Wega</i> (Verb+Adverb)	Kiss (me) nicely
3. <i>Nina Heho</i> (Verb+Noun)	Please keep me warm or please help to keep off the cold
4. <i>Nyonia Nguonie</i> (Verb+Verb)	Show me and I will also show you
5. <i>Hurunja Mbegū</i> (Verb+Noun)	Scatter the seeds
6. <i>Hiūria Mbakūri</i> (Verb+Noun)	Shake the bowl
7. <i>Anīka Nyanūre</i> (Verb+Verb)	Spread (for me) and I will unspread
8. <i>Hihinya Ihūha</i> (Verb+Noun)	Squeeze the boil
9. <i>Cama Rīngī</i> (Verb+Adverb)	Taste again
10. <i>Nyinia Ngūinie</i> (Verb+Verb)	Shake me and I will also shake you
11. <i>Kindīra Wega</i> (Verb+Adverb)	Insert nicely
12. <i>Theci Nguhī</i> (Noun+Adjective)	A short hoe
13. <i>Gūtha Mūbira</i> (Verb+Noun)	Hit the ball
14. <i>Horia Mwaki</i> (Verb+Noun)	Put off the fire
15. <i>Haka Maguta</i> (Verb+Noun)	Apply the oil
16. <i>Ngūtha Kīndū</i> (Verb+Noun)	Hit me with something
17. <i>Rurumia Itinga</i> (Verb+Noun)	Ignite the engine of the tractor
18. <i>Cokia Thūnī</i> (Verb+Noun)	Return inside
19. <i>Njaūra Ciothe</i> (Verb+Adjective)	Undress (me) all (the clothes)
20. <i>Humbūria Nyone</i> (Verb+Verb)	Unveil (so that) I can see
21. <i>Munya Cong'e</i> (Verb+Noun)	Uproot the weeds
22. <i>Nduta Rūkūngū</i> (Verb+Noun)	Remove the dust from me

What is common in all these titles is that subtly and explicitly, they make reference to the body and romantic relationships. Although it is possible to translate them from Gikūyū into another language, the sexual nuances and connotations remain untranslatable. To cite one example is *Ngūtha Kīndū*, performed at the Alliance Française between 14 and 17 February 2019 and which was advertised as a special offer for Valentines season. In *Ngūtha Kīndū*, meaning is completely lost in translation. This can be described as translating the untranslatable. But

the audience who can speak Gĩkũyũ language are able to get the subtle messages and nuances the above titles insinuate. The word *Kĩndũ* which can be translated as “something” has multiple layers of meaning, a superficial level and a figurative one. In Kenyan parlance, it is used to refer to money; it may also be used in a romantic affair when a man wants to have sex with a woman and vice versa. The audience who are speakers of Gĩkũyũ language are therefore able to relate and discern what these titles insinuate more profoundly, as compared to when they are rendered in another language. At the same time, some titles of the plays performed by Fanaka Arts are inspired by English farce writers such as Ray Cooney. One such example is Cooney’s *Run for your Wife* (1983) the longest-running comedy in London’s West End Theatre (it ran for nine years). Just like Cooney’s farce, the Gĩkũyũ adult comedies are popular with audiences because of their bawdiness and the numerous instances of characters talking at cross purposes.¹¹

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Ngũgĩ wa Mĩrii’s Kamĩrĩthũ theatre project can be viewed as a vanguard in vernacular theatre in Kenya. As Mbũgua wa Mũngai notes, “that Kamĩrĩthũ was the pioneer of Gĩkũyũ theatre in post-independent Kenya cannot be disputed.”¹² But one fundamental difference is that Ngũgĩ and his colleagues at the University of Nairobi took the city to the village, when they teamed up with the peasants and workers at the rural Limuru. Ngũgĩ notes, “In 1977, together with the community of this village about thirty kilometres from the capital, Nairobi, we developed a play, *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (*I will Marry When I Want*) in which people sang songs about their own history.”¹³ But this Gĩkũyũ popular theatre project did not last long since it was considered as subversive.¹⁴ The political regime at that time became uncomfortable with the criticism it received from this aesthetic form, resulting not just in the banning of the performances but also burning down of the premises where the Kamĩrĩthũ project was located.¹⁵

11 Interview with Dr. Fred Mbogo, playwright, director and Senior Lecturer at Technical University, Nairobi. According to Mbogo, who has attended several of these performances, the Gĩkũyũ comedy shows do not necessarily borrow directly from English farce, but they often draw inspiration, titles and storylines from them. Mbogo adds that these vernacular performances do not follow a well-written script, but rather they are based on ad-lib improvisation based on a storyline (Interview on 08 March 2020).

12 Mbũgua wa-Mũngai, “The Big Man’s Turn to Dance in Kenyan Bar-Rooms: Wahome Mutahi’s Parody of Power,” *African Studies Bulletin* 65.3 (2003): 37–48.

13 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998): 52.

14 See Samuel Ndogo, *Narrating the Self and Nation in Kenyan Autobiographical Works* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2016): 143–144.

15 For a detailed analysis of the Kamĩrĩthũ theatre project see Gĩchingiri Ndĩgĩrĩgĩ, *Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o’s Drama and the Kamĩrĩthũ Popular Theatre Experiment* (Trenton & London:

As I have already indicated, performance was part and parcel of the Gĩkũyũ culture. In that regard, there is a way in which the Gĩkũyũ language plays can be considered as a way of re-connecting the city audience with their village and cultural heritage. We have also seen that Ngũgĩ et al's Kamĩrĩĩthũ project, which involved a collaborative effort between the University dons and villagers was really an attempt to take the city to the village. Ngũgĩ, however, insists that it was the villagers' achievement since "they had built an open-air theatre in the centre of the village by their own efforts, and with no hand-outs from the state. They had reclaimed their historical space."¹⁶ But the lewd adult plays analyzed here epitomize a vernacular art form that attracts a middle-class audience who are searching not only for entertainment but also for a way of connecting with their cultural roots. Therefore, as opposed to the Ngũgĩ project, the village via these Gĩkũyũ plays, is transported to the metropolitan and cosmopolitan space of the city. The middle-class audience who have a disposable income enabling them to patronize these monthly performances become part and parcel of what can be considered as "community theatre" in the city. Whether or not they change behaviour after watching the plays is a personal choice since the aim of the play is to satirize certain social issues that resonate well with the audience. But even as they provide entertainment, they are veiled critique of the political regime.

The chosen plays I analyze here are performed in conventional theatre as opposed to those performed in social places like pubs. A classic example of such non-conventional theatre practitioner is Wahome Mũtahi whose Gĩkũyũ language plays were performed in pubs or bar-rooms. Using the bar-room to stage the vernacular plays was therefore a way of taking theatre to the people in the city. Ironically, this kind of theatre thrived at time when the political regime was repressive. So what made these plays escape censorship? The key technique and strategy that Mũtahi employed was satire. The satirical titles of such plays as well as symbolic names of characters in these plays dramatize this as Mbũgwa wa Mũngai notes:

Notable for their exemplary referential quality are names such as *Professa Nyoori* (Professor Club), *Gakunia* (the sack hood), *Mureengani* (saboteur), *Kibuyu* (plastic container), *Mugaathe Mubogothi* (his excellency the bab-

Africa World Press, 2007). A detailed description of this project can be found in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* (London: Heinemann, 1981).

16 This argument is well articulated in the chapter "Enactments of Power: The Politics of Performance Space," in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams: Towards a Critical Theory of the Arts and State in Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998): 37–69.

bler), *Gathuku* (parrot), et al. *Kinya*, a wordplay on Kenya, in Gikuyu means a huge gourd, but in Kenyan political parlance means prison.¹⁷

These characters, featuring in Wahome Mũtahi's play titled *Makarĩĩra Kĩoro* (*They Shall Cry in the Toilet*) are caricatures of pot-bellied politicians who have to constantly visit the toilet to relieve themselves as a result of over-eating. The audiences can easily relate to topical issues in the plays through such symbolic and familiar references.

Over the last two decades, there has been phenomenal growth of vernacular theatre, particularly in urban centres like Nairobi. This trend can be attributed to several factors, namely: the liberalization of the media sector during the late 1990s; the emergence of new media technology, social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Viusasa and WhatsApp; milestones in the political landscape, most notably the onset of multiparty democracy in 1992, as well as a new constitution regime inaugurated in 2010. The popularity of the Gĩkũyũ adult drama in Nairobi is therefore engendered in such social-political reforms that have taken place in Kenya's recent history. These recent political developments have provided a conducive environment in which there is freedom of expression. Moreover, the way in which these plays present the everyday issues makes them appealing to the audience. For instance, how mainstream media will present an issue like infidelity is completely different from how a play like *Nyoori Momori* treats the same subject. What is unique in these plays is that they are capable of satirizing vice in society in ways that nobody wants to talk about. But these performances are an apt platform to articulate topical issues laden with political nuances and sexual connotations. In the following sections, I demonstrate how the selected plays are framed within the everyday discourse in contemporary Kenya, making them appeal to an adult audience.

2 Satire and Politics: *Nyoori Momori*

Nyoori Momori is a Gĩkũyũ theatre play that premiered at the Kenya National Theatre (KNT) between 13th and 15th September 2013. Because of its popularity with audiences, the show was later recorded during a live performance at a popular resort known as Wida Highway Motel located in Kiambu County (about 25

17 Mbũgwa wa-Mũngai, "The Big Man's Turn to Dance in Kenyan Bar-Rooms: Wahome Mutahi's Parody of Power," *African Studies Bulletin* 65.3 (2003): 37–48.

kilometres from Nairobi city) on the Nairobi-Nakuru Highway.¹⁸ *Nyoori Momori* is a fast-paced farce, which like many productions by Fanaka Arts follow a similar pattern. Actors do not necessarily follow a well-written script. Instead, they improvise dialogue *ad-lib* as the plot progresses.

Set in a presidential palace, the play can be read as a political satire, revolving around the President known as Kĩrĩani,¹⁹ who is also the protagonist and whose role is played by Njomo Nyathĩra²⁰ In his public appearances, Kĩrĩani presents an image of a faithful husband to an extent that his first promise, once he takes over government, will be to ensure all families in the republic will emulate his. Unknown to the public, however, is the fact that Kĩrĩani has a mistress known as Veronica, who works as his secretary. He is so daring in his cheating that he decides to invite Veronica to the presidential palace when Wambũi, the first lady, sets out for a journey to attend a two-day women's meeting in Kisumu city. Veronica turns down the invitation saying she is held up in the office, to Kĩrĩani's disappointment. He laments that he will die if Veronica fails to honour the invitation, subtly suggesting he had taken libido-enhancing drugs in anticipation of their rendezvous. Since he must get a quick alternative, he calls a brothel known as Karũma-indo,²¹ which eventually sends a call girl called Fluddah. From this point, the events take an opposite direction, and in quick succession. The call girl arrives in the house only to find young a man called Kĩmunya, who is Kĩrĩani's nephew. Fluddah is so excited since she assumes it is Kĩmunya who had requested for her services. Kĩmunya takes advantage of the confusion and decides to play ball. Coincidentally, Veronica decides to give Kĩrĩani a surprise by unexpectedly showing up at the palace. The arrival of the two women, Fluddah and Veronica, seems to confirm rumours that the president has turned the state palace into a brothel. A female journalist working with a leading media house is investigating those allegations. Series of mis-

18 The recorded version is available on YouTube uploaded on 11 January 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vr7wiz3gj5A&t=1866s> Nyoori Momori play (Accessed 10 April 2020).

19 The name Kĩrĩani means "one who eats." Often, names of characters can be symbolic, suggestive of the peculiar traits. The name Kĩrĩani in this context suggests opportunism and corruption. It also insinuates a womaniser.

20 Following his impressive performance in theatre, Njomo Nyathĩra was employed by CITIZEN TV to host a weekly Gikũyũ stand-up comedy show called *Centro Comedy*.

21 The name *Karũma-indo* means "a place that eats or consumes things or people." A veiled description of the exploitative relations in prostitution. It also connotes the hedonism that motivates the patrons of this brothel. For instance, Kĩrĩani is a regular visitor of *Karũma-indo*. He therefore insists that he has to be treated as a special client when he requests for a call girl.

taken identities and talking at cross purposes are presented in the unfolding plot. The better part of the play is a cat and mouse game as Kĩrĩani tries to conceal his intentions. Tension heightens when Wambũi, the first lady (Kĩrĩani's wife), returns home after the cancellation of her flight. Like a caged bird, Kĩrĩani and his other women can no longer hide. In the melodramatic ending Fluddah exposes the old man Ngarĩ, who also serves as the advisor to the President. Ngarĩ is one of Fluddah's regular clients whose sexual prowess surpasses that of the young man Kĩmunya. It is at this moment that Fluddah declares Ngarĩ as "Nyoori Momori", which gives the play its title. Although he should have retired from politics, Ngarĩ, who resides in one of the guest rooms in the state palace is a conniver who is taking advantage of Kĩrĩani's inexperience in politics.

Nyoori Momori premiered six months after the presidential elections in Kenya that were held on 4 March 2013. The country had just emerged from a period of heated political contest, when the current president Uhuru Kenyatta was declared the winner against his closest contender Raila Odinga. It is therefore possible to read how this play deploys humour as a subversive device to critique social-political issues in contemporary Kenya. Indeed, audiences familiar with Kenyan politics will easily connect the title of this play as a veiled allusion to the regime of the second president of Kenya, Daniel arap Moi who always carried a baton (*nyoori*) as his signature or trademark,²² viewed by many as a symbol of political power and authority. This social-political context is significant for us to have a nuanced understanding of the message the play intends to convey. In the run-up to the 2013 elections, pundits viewed Uhuru Kenyatta as Moi's protégé. For that reason, the younger Kenyatta's regime becomes a continuation of the old political order. Undoubtedly, *Nyoori Momori* effectively uses humour to package important messages. At the same time, it is the transgressive elements in this comic farce that make it possible for it to evade any form of censorship. To be specific, there are several levels of interpretation and nuances this play yields. At one level is the domestic front, where we are presented with Kĩrĩani's infidelity in marriage. It is rumoured that the first lady, aided by old man Ngarĩ, is conspiring to assassinate Kĩrĩani, although these allegations are quickly denied and a journalist who brings up this question is arrested. This is a classic case of irony. At another level, the play can be read as a dramat-

22 Daniel arap Moi, the second president of post-independence Kenya died on 4 February 2020. During his funeral at his Kabarak home, a decoy baton was handed over to his youngest son Gideon Moi, a gesture laden with political undertones specifically the politics of succession. See <https://citizentv.co.ke/news/reviving-kanu-gideon-moi-needs-more-than-fimbo-ya-nyayo-321790/> (Accessed 16 April 2020).

ization of political intrigues and betrayal. In the Kenyan parlance, political alliances have been compared to a marital union. Political parties come together with the sole aim of winning elections. To cite one example, The National Alliance (TNA) party was formed as Uhuru Kenyatta's vehicle for winning the 2013 presidential elections.²³ TNA was later transformed to the Jubilee Party, through which Kenyatta was re-elected in the 2017 elections. This pattern is evident in the 2002 elections that saw the formation of the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) that morphed into the Party of National Unity (PNU) in 2007 elections, which respectively saw the ascendance of Mwai Kibaki as Kenya's third president. Going by this trend, these political party alliances can be described as unions of convenience. Relationships between the politicians are characterized by conspiracy. People do not mean what they say, and they say what they do not mean. Politicians engage in double-speak. Mistrust is so well dramatized in this play. To cite one example, Kĩrĩani showers his wife with praise, promising that he will miss her for the two days when she will be away. But immediately she gets out of the house, he addresses the audience in a soliloquy saying he now has found a chance for an early Christmas, meaning he can invite his mistress Veronica to the palace. This play is characterized by numerous entrances and exits, creating a sense of a fast-paced farce, tension and laughter.

Nyoori Momori is based on a social phenomenon that the audience can easily relate to.²⁴ Unfaithfulness in marriage as depicted in this play acquires political significance. Politicians are portrayed as selfish, making false promises to their followers. Nepotism and opportunism are well brought out in this play. Moreover, there is betrayal mutual mistrust among the politicians themselves. *Nyoori Momori* portrays politics as a game of survival where politicians will do anything to guard their interests.

3 The Politics of Eating and the Body in *Tũirio Twega*

The play *Tũirio Twega* premiered on 26 January 2018 at the Alliance Française. It had eleven shows for three days between Friday and Sunday. It was produced by Ndũng'ũ Warũgũ and directed by Lawrence Mũrage. This play is a direct allusion to a popular song, that was released the previous year, of the same title by

23 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_National_Alliance (Accessed 16/04/2020).

24 In Kenyan parlance a mistress is known as *mpango wa kando*, Swahili word meaning a "separate or alternative arrangement." Under this arrangement, the man provides financial support to his mistress in return for sexual favours.

Jose Gatutura (Mashete), featuring Wangarĩ Gĩoche (Karey B). Using Intermediality,²⁵ we can establish the convergences and divergences between the play and the song in thematic as well as aesthetic terms.

Tũirio Twega follows a storyline upon which actors are supposed to improvise dialogue, in the same fashion of other farcical plays by Fanaka Arts. As such, instead of relying on a written script, actors are supposed to use their creativity to come up with their lines.²⁶ Just like *Nyoori Momori*, the play *Tũirio Twega* is based on the theme of infidelity in marriage. *Tũirio Twega* follows a predictable plot of a husband who leaves the village for the city where he keeps a mistress. His beautiful and faithful wife remains in the village, as the man goes to work in the city. As the plot unfolds, the man can no longer hide the secret affair. Confronted by his wife as to why he does not “eat her food,” he confesses that he started visiting the house of his mistress residing in the city because she knows how to make nice or sweet food (*tũirio twega*). Incidentally, the man is not referring to the food prepared in the kitchen. Rather, he is referring to the prowess of his mistress in bed. Although this play does not intend to justify infidelity, it effectively presents the main message through the cloak of comedy and figurative Gĩkũyũ language. References to the woman in the city as *tũirio twega* enables one to draw connections between food and morality. Food, in this case, can be viewed as an image with a moral significance, besides fulfilling the physiological need of hunger. In the play, the man’s wife is not really at fault, rather it is the sense of adventure and sexual desire that drives the man to seek for a mistress in the city. The mistress, on the other hand, is willing to fulfil the man’s expectations, but at a cost—he must provide support. Although his main intention in the city is to find a job so that he can provide for his family back in the village, he ends up being consumed by his bodily desires as well as by the same woman he refers to as sweet food. Undoubtedly, *Tũirio Twega* is an ironic dramatization of the vagaries of life in the city where the man who thinks that he is “eating” is himself “eaten”, in a fashion where the hunter becomes the hunted. Since he must provide materially, he is being eaten even though he claims to eat the nice food the mistress provides. When the play ends, the man has abandoned his first wife and proposes to marry the city girl, who is already pregnant with his child.²⁷ Just like in *Nyoori Momori*, men seem to engage in

25 Closely related to intertextuality, Intermediality is useful in drawing connections between two forms of media, the audio and visual, the written and photographic images. As such, it is a way of understanding how different genres transgress boundaries between them.

26 The director Lawrence Mũrage confirmed that there was no written script for the play *Tũirio Twega*. (Interview on 27 December 2019).

27 <https://twitter.com/hashtag/T%C3%BBirioTwega?src=hash> (Accessed 16 April 2020).

relationships for the sake of their convenience, yet it is quite clear case that the man must shoulder the responsibility of his new family. Although it would be speculative to wonder whether the man will remain faithful, it is obvious that the second wife has left a gap for a mistress. So will the man become trapped in a vicious cycle of trying to fulfil his hedonistic desires in the city?

The same moral thematic in the play *Tũirio Twega* can be found in Gatutura's song, although there are fundamental differences in the way the two handle the subject. In the song it is the woman who is unfaithful; unlike in the play where the unfaithful partner is the man. The woman in the song is portrayed as a modern girl attracted to handsome men in the city. Physical strength exhibited in the muscular male body goes hand in hand with material wealth, whose symbols are money and sleek cars. Thus, it is the trappings of wealth, a guarantee to financial security, as well as the physical attributes that draw the village girl to the city man. In the song, the woman is eating the man for material gain, whereas the man is cheating and eating the woman in pursuit of fulfilling pleasure. Both the play and the song are similar in that there is betrayal in both instances; both admit reasons for betrayal; the man in the play claims that he has gone astray because of "food"; the girl in the song claims she is lured by the man because of being endeared as "sweet food".

Composed by musician Joseph Kanyi Kĩgio, popularly known as Jose Gatutura or Mashete, *Tũirio Twega* is one of his best songs to hit the market. So popular was this song going by the number of views on YouTube. The official video which was published on 11 December 2017 had reached 3,581,855 views as at 25 February 2020.²⁸ *Tũirio Twega* is a tale of betrayed love. This is told through a well-choreographed duet by Jose and Karey. In *Tũirio Twega* the man laments how his betrothed woman disappointed him after waiting for ten years. This is after the woman migrates from the village to Nairobi in search of a better life. She finds a lucrative job as a supervisor and soon her fortunes change, becoming a beauty queen. The city is a land of greener pastures, that is why she vows she cannot go back to get married in the village, "the land of beans". She wonders, "*ingĩhika mboco-inĩ atĩa?* How can I get married in the land of beans; *ingĩhika gĩchagi atĩa?* How can I get married in the village?"²⁹ In this stanza, the farm of beans connotes a pastoral setting, a sharp contrast between the city and the village. To the woman, farming is not a prestigious profession. Instead, the city presents her with greener pastures since it is a land where she can survive

28 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZwrvsKgOsU> (accessed 25 February 2020).

29 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZwrvsKgOsU> (accessed 25 February 2020).

without any moral constraints. In this sense, the city provides opportunities for people to reconfigure exigencies of their survival. This is how the woman describes her new experience in the city:

<i>Ndathĩ Nairobi</i>	When I went to Nairobi
<i>Mũtũrĩre ũgĩcenjia</i>	My life took a new turn
<i>Ngĩona wĩra</i>	I found a job
<i>Ngĩtuo supervisor</i>	I was soon made a supervisor
<i>Ngĩthakara</i>	I became so beautiful
<i>Na ngĩgĩa tũ-madiamba</i>	My body became voluptuous
<i>Ngĩgacũka</i>	I acquired new radiance
<i>Ngĩhana tũirio twega</i>	I became like sweet food

In this stanza, the city is portrayed as a space with new transformative power. This is a point of convergence in the song and the play, where we can see a connection established between material and economic success on one hand and sexual pleasures on the other. Nonetheless, the Machiavellian mentality of the city makes people eschew moral principles for survival's sake.³⁰ The repetition of first-person, "I" emphasizes the idea of individualism and self-centeredness prevalent in the city. This grotesque image of the body and city as sites of exploitation and neo-colonial capitalism is effectively portrayed in Ngũgĩ's novel *Devil on the Cross*.³¹ This is in stark contrast with the village which is presented as a place where morals are preserved. It is a place of mutual trust. That is why the man is lamenting that he did not know her departure to the city would make her betray her love for him. This is similar to what we have already seen in the play where the man in the play betrays his wife and gets married to another woman in the city.

The chorus of *Tũirio Twega* sums up the magnitude of betrayal the man feels, yet at the same time, the woman tries to justify herself by giving reasons why she decided to go for another man:

30 John Roger Kurtz, *Urban Obsessions, Urban Fears: The Postcolonial Kenyan Novel* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1998) is particularly relevant to our understanding of the changing ways in which the city is portrayed in popular literature of the city, like in the urban novels of Meja Mwangi as well as the depiction of women in the city.

31 The individualism as well as the exploitative relationships in the city are well dramatized in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Devil on the Cross* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1980). In this novel, however, Wariĩnga the protagonist, is seen as a victim of capitalistic forces and male chauvinism.

Jose:	<i>Njokeria mbete</i>	Please return my engagement ring
	<i>Īyo ndakūgūrīre</i>	The one I bought for you
	<i>Tondũ mbica</i>	Because our photos
	<i>Nĩwagũkirie kīoro</i>	You flushed down the toilet
Karey:	<i>Ndarīkia kuona</i>	When I finally found
	<i>Mũthuri Nairobi</i>	A husband in Nairobi
Jose:	<i>Nangamenya</i>	And I know for sure
	<i>Agwĩtaga tũirio twega</i>	He calls you “my sweet food”
Karey:	<i>Nangakena</i>	And I am very happy
	<i>Akĩnjĩta tũirio twega</i>	When he calls me “my sweet food”

The man is saying he intends to part ways with his betrothed, but before she goes, he demands that she returns two items: the engagement ring he had given her as well as the photos they had taken together. But the woman is unapologetic and arrogant in her response, saying that she finally found a strong, handsome man in the city who won her heart with the endearment *tũirio twega*, “my sweet food”. In both the play and the song *Tũirio Twega*, the imagery of food produces multi-layered meanings. At a superficial level, food is associated with the physiological need of satisfying hunger. But in this man-eat-man³² city context, it is possible to look at food and eating in a broader political sense, as Michela Wrong does in *It’s Our Turn to Eat*.³³ Like in many post-colonial nation-states, getting into power in Kenya is considered an opportunity to eat, to amass wealth at the expense of public good. In Wrong’s text, eating is a metaphor of opportunism and corruption. Food, as seen in the song, presents female agency in nuanced ways. From one perspective, the woman exploits the male obsession with her body to obtain capitalist gain. That is why she is happy when her new lover endears her as “my sweet food.” This happiness is based on materialism in that the city has taught her that relationships with men can enable her to gain access to commodities. In this regard, the man calling her “my sweet food” becomes her food as well; she is also “eating” the man in return. She adopts a trickster mentality to navigate her way around the city. As such, the social encounters and practices of everyday life compel the city dwellers to develop a sense of agency. In both the play and the song the city can be viewed

32 Man-eat-man society: This phrase was used in the late 1970s by the former president of Tanzania Mwalimu Julius Kabarage Nyerere as a metaphor and critique of Kenya embracement of capitalism. Tanzania was at that time leaning towards socialism, experimented through Ujamaa ideology.

33 See Michela Wrong, *It’s Our Turn to Eat: The Story of a Whistle-Blower* (London: Harper Collins, 2009).

as what Lefebvre³⁴ calls a site of victimization of capitalism. Besides, the city is a space full of deprivation and oppression. The characters we encounter in *Tūrio Twega* adopt what De Certeau³⁵ calls tactics and strategies of survival. Both the man and the woman justify their actions based on their encounters in the city. For these characters, merging with the environment becomes a way of surviving and aligning themselves with urbanity. It should also be noted that *Tūrio Twega*, just like other monthly bawdy shows by Fanaka Arts is inspired by and responds to current social-political issues. That is why the play can be considered as an allusion to another popular concept that is associated with eating: the “*minji minji*”³⁶ phenomenon, a term that has gained national notoriety with multiple meanings. In Kenyan parlance, the concept is used to refer not just to young petit women but also to sophisticated and shrewd women of the city.

4 Matatu Men and Menace in *ITINA SACCO*

The last play that I discuss here is *ITINA SACCO*. Through artistic subversion, the play functions as a critique of contemporary sociocultural issues, while at the same time providing entertainment to the audience. Using caricature, exaggeration and wordplay, *ITINA SACCO* subjects certain government policies to laughter. This demonstrates how Gikūyū drama employs artistic means to ridicule the functions of government. *ITINA SACCO* is a Gikūyū play that is based on a government’s attempt to regulate the *Matatu*³⁷ sector in

34 See Stuart Elden, Elizabeth Lebas & Elenore Kofman, *Henri Lefebvre: Key Writings* (New York & London, 2003).

35 Michel de Certeau, trans. Steven Rendall, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

36 The Gikūyū word *minji* means a pea, a type of a bean, used as a delicacy for various menus in Kenya. But this word has acquired more meaning beyond food as demonstrated in the popular song *Minji Minji* in the YouTube link, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vpYLqC-gReU> *Minji Minji* by Ng’ang’a wa Kabari (Accessed 10 March 2020). In this song, Ng’ang’a cautions men not to fall into the trap of these city beauties, noting that even though these women appear beautiful, they are wicked and their motive is to simply exploit men for financial and material gain.

37 *Matatu* refers to privately owned minibuses and vans that serve as means of public transportation in Kenya. Lack of regulation has been blamed for the chaos and cartels in this industry. In an attempt to regulate this sector, the government came up with a policy that required operators to form associations to regulate the sector. These rules are commonly referred to as “Michuki rules”. See <https://roggkenya.org/michuki-rules-enforcement-may-be-unlawful-according-to-constitution/> (accessed 20 February 2020).

Kenya. The Matatu sector, which has been in existence since independence, has evolved from being merely a mode of public transportation into a sub-culture in Nairobi and other parts of the country. On several occasions, the government has attempted to regulate this sector. Nonetheless, some of these policies have provoked stiff opposition from the owners and operators in this male-dominated sector.³⁸ Mbũgwa wa Mũngai's *Nairobi's "Matatu" Men* examines, among other things masculinity and the language used by the matatu men in Nairobi. For instance, in February 2004 the government through the Ministry of Transport announced the introduction of seat belts and speed governors, operating in clearly defined routes, carrying a specified number of passengers and their drivers and conductors to be disciplined and to have a clean security record. *Matatu* owners went to court to contest this decision, pleading to be given more time to comply with these new regulations, popularly known as the Michuki Rules, named after the then Minister for Transport John Michuki.

The play *ITINA SACCO* presents an encounter between two families who are prospective in-laws. The purpose of the visit is to get to know each other so that marriage negotiations can commence. To start with the prospective bride's family would like to know more about the prospective groom. The in-laws want to find out where he works—his career—a very common question during these talks. In his response as to what he does for a living, the young man says he works as a manager in a SACCO, meaning Savings and Credit Cooperative Organisation. A SACCO is owned and run by its members who have a common agenda/business. The young man proudly announces that he works for *JUTHI* (translated as "penis"). The in-laws are appalled and thoroughly embarrassed. But the prospective bridegroom is quick to clarify that he means *JUTHI SACCO*. *JUTHI*, he explains, is an acronym that stands for *JUJA-THIKA SACCO*. But since the name is too long, the legend has to be shortened to be easily captured and painted on the body of the *Matatu* as per the new regulations. At this juncture the spokesman, the elder-cum-spokesman from the bride's side tries to intervene, explaining to the guests and everyone in the house the agony *Matatu* SACCOs go through as they try to coin names for their newly formed associations. He cites one example of *ITINA SACCO*, to further embarrassment of all present. Everyone gets uncomfortable at the mention of the word *ITINA* especially in this situation where in-laws are supposed to observe the highest

38 For a detailed discussion on the Matatu industry in Kenya see Mbũgwa wa Mũngai, *Nairobi's 'matatu' Men: Portrait of a Subculture* (Nairobi: Twaweza Communications: Goethe-Institut Kenya: Native Intelligence: Jomo Kenyatta Foundation, 2013).

level of decorum and respect. That is why he quickly explains that *ITINA* is an acronym that refers to *Matatus* plying the route between IKINU-TING'ANG'A-NAIROBI.

Several issues emerge in this play. The play invites us to a reading of power relations and power practices. On one hand, we have a bureaucratic, patronising government introducing a set of rules and regulations, while on the other hand, we have a private informal sector. *Matatus* have been described as moving discos, moving museums, earning the sector the name, the *Matatu* menace. These privately owned minibuses form the bulk of public transportation used also by the masses. The exhibition of colourful artwork on their exterior and interior, announcing their presence with thunderous music as they hustle their way through traffic in Nairobi can be viewed as an attempt to react to the hegemony of state authorities. Emblazoning graffiti on the colourful bodywork of the *matatu* can also be seen as a form of subtle transgression. What we see in this play is a dramatization of an attempt to bring order in an otherwise “chaotic”, but important transport industry in Kenya. The practitioners of this sector, represented by the young man and the elderly spokesman to the in-laws, try to subvert the rules. Branding their *Matatu* SACCOS with names that can be considered offensive or explicit is a way of speaking to power. As such, *Matatus* become a form of counter-culture resisting state order and control. In this regard, *ITINA SACCO* presents an example of the transgressive potential of the Gikũyũ plays. This is in line with Achille Mbembe who examines what he terms banality of power in the postcolony. By this he does not simply mean the way bureaucratic formalities or arbitrary rules are multiplied. Rather, by banality, he implies predictability precisely because it is made up of repeated daily actions and gestures.³⁹ Following Mbembe and wa Mũngai, one can say that the *Matatu* men, in this case, are engaging in acts of subversion when they brand the bodies of their vehicles with suggestive names such as *JUTHI SACCO* or *ITINA SACCO*.

5 On Sponsorship, Patronage and Audience

Before winding up this analysis, it is important to consider another important question. Who, if any, sponsors these performances? Like many other artistic productions, these monthly theatre performances require funding to facilitate in various logistics. Besides the entrance fees or sale of tickets for the shows several institutions as well as individuals come in to support these produc-

39 For a detailed discussion see Achille Mbembe, “The Banality of Power and the Aesthetics of Vulgarity in the Postcolony,” *Public Culture* 4.2 (1992).

tions. An example of such a corporate institution is the Nation Media group. As part of Community Social Responsibility (CSR), the Nation Media Group has committed to promoting the arts in Kenya. It is for this reason that they help Fanaka Arts by advertising their monthly shows in their print media as well as other platforms. As a sponsor, how do the Nation benefit from this initiative? The philosophy behind this support is that people will attend these shows because they like the arts. As such, they are likely to support the products of the media house that helps to disseminate information about these performances. In other words, this relationship is symbiotic in that promoting Fanaka Arts Productions becomes a platform to advertise Nation Media Group. The performances are therefore an opportunity to market the various products offered by the Nation Media.⁴⁰ Other media companies that support these productions include Gikūyū radio stations such as *Inooro FM* and *Kameme FM*. Just like the Nation Media, these radio stations support the theatre productions for the same reasons as the Nation Media—advertising their brand names. However, they have an added advantage since they use the same vernacular language as the medium of broadcasting, hence reaching a wider audience more effectively. Coincidentally, some of these performers work as either radio or TV presenters. This gives the monthly theatre shows some advantage in terms of publicity. Additionally, some of the actors play other roles outside theatre such as Emceeing in corporate and private occasions like weddings, where they are paid a fee for these services.

One way through which these performances raise funds is through the sale of tickets or entrance fees. The cost varies from KES. 500 to KES. 1000, depending on when one purchases the ticket. The earlier one buys, the cheaper the ticket is. This marketing strategy is a form of giving incentives to the audience. But it is worth noting that tickets for other plays (performed in English language) at the same venue (*Alliance Française*) cost between KES. 1200 and KES. 1500. According to Fred Mbogo, a regular patron of these shows, this gesture can be viewed as a way of assuring the audience that the producers of the show are giving them a deal because they speak the same language. Mbogo adds that it the discounted price is a way of showing solidarity in the name of “*andū a nyūmba*”,⁴¹ meaning the Gikūyū people who belong to the same house.⁴² The

40 Interview with Ng’ang’a Mbugua, Managing Editor, *Daily Nation* (Interview on 08 March 2020).

41 The singular reference of this is “*mūndū wa nyūmba*”, meaning a kinsman. This form of address is meant to create a sense of brotherhood and common ethnic identity among the Gikūyū community.

42 Interview with Dr. Fred Mbogo, a senior lecturer in theatre at the Technical University of Kenya, Nairobi (Interview on 10 March 2020).

venue where these performances take place have a symbiotic relationship with these theatrical productions. Alliance Française serves as the French Cultural Centre in Kenya. As such, these Gikũyũ productions bring people to a space where they can get interest in other activities that the Centre promotes, among them learning the French language.

6 Conclusion

From the foregoing, one can argue that artistic representation, as seen in the three Gikũyũ adult plays discussed here, serves both moral as well as entertainment functions. In so doing, this aesthetic mode has a subversive potential, providing a social, cultural and political critique to various contemporary issues. To be sure, this kind of drama can be described as a fast-paced farce that employs laughter to subject mundane issues to ridicule. Moreover, the main message in these plays is framed in a highly metaphoric idiom, thereby addressing different issues that can be considered “adults only.” As such, sexuality is used as a troping device to comment not only on the body but to illuminate how the urban space affects human relationships. The monthly performances by Fanaka Arts, therefore, appeal to audiences because of their sly depiction of the everyday experiences. The audiences are attracted to them not only because they are hilarious, but also because Gikũyũ language becomes a means of connecting with their cultural heritage. The plays *Nyoori Momori*, *Tũirio Twega* and *ITINA SACCO*, dramatize how the weak can deconstruct dominant order through guile and wit. Their deconstructive use of language becomes a subversive form of dismantling order and assembling new nuances. Moreover, they satirize rot and wickedness in society, something that the audience who patronise these shows do not mind being reminded.

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