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What Does it Mean to be a Man? The Aesthetics of Telling Crisis' and Conflicts in *Ngebe Gaa* and *Detox*

Abstract: This paper is a reading of two films, namely, *Ngebe Gaa* (2019) and *Detox* (2016), in an attempt to discuss a supposed crisis of manhood in Eldoret, and the larger part of the North Rift Valley area of Kenya. The paper employs perspectives from canonical African works such as Okot P'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* and Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*, as well as Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *I Will Marry When I Want* to uncover examples of the meanings of "man" in patriarchal settings but also in situations where shifts in economic, social and political life have taken place. In *Ngebe Gaa*, for instance, Mzee Maina, the main character, is set in his ways. His father-to-daughter relationship with his biological daughter, Chemesunde, is very much defined by reliable conceptions of being a man in his society. But this is thrown into confusion once matters get out of hand for him financially. This paper is thus interested in this troubled in-between identity that redefines "man" within such rural and peri-urban spaces, where the economy is not diverse, and there is a seeming non-changing culture on the surface but rapid reformulations of ideas at individual levels. Eldoret and its environs, where these two films are set, occupy such spaces. They can never escape the dominant suggestion that is specifically Kalenjin on what a "man" is, especially because the majority of the people around Eldoret and its outskirts are predominantly of the Kalenjin ethnic communities. Through cross-references from texts that explore the Kalenjin world view(s) such as in Kiprotich Arap Sambu's *The Misiiri Legend Explored* and Bill Ruto and Kipng'etich Maritim's *Kipsigis Heritage*, this paper digs into the meanings of "man" and how often times they have been undermined in the worlds presented in *Ngebe Gaa* and *Detox*.

Keywords: perception of man; contemporary Kenyan film; performance; Kalenjin world view; Rift Valley; Kenya.

Introduction

Ngebe Gaa (2019) and *Detox* (2016) are two short films directed by Cosmas Bii and Joan Rispa Kiragu, respectively. Both films run for only 29 minutes but their stories have spurred extensive social media conversations since their screenings at the Eldoret Film Festival in 2019. *Ngebe Gaa* which literally means "let us go back home"

is performed in Kalenjin and a smattering of Kiswahili, and has English subtitles, hence its popularity in that larger Kalenjin nation (North Rift Valley area of Kenya). In the case of *Detox*, it won a Kalasha Award of 2017 in the Student Film category as organized by Kenya Film Commission. It has also been screened at the 2017 Zanzibar Film Festival and at a New York Film Festival, in 2018.

Unlike other films screened at the Eldoret Film Festival in the period between 2018 and 2019, *Ngebe Gaa* and *Detox* deliberately tell stories that are identifiable to a majority of the festival audience. The uniqueness of this festival is its traveling caravan that stops at various shopping centers on the outskirts of Eldoret town. These include the Kesses, Cheptiret, Annex, Kapsoya, Illula, and Langas shopping centers. Essentially, these are peri-urban or rural spaces where economic activities are not as diverse as in a bigger town like Eldoret. Populaces in these places will be small scale farmers of maize or vegetables, some of them run grocery stores, some are watchmen for schools and other installations like dams. Others still are teachers in neighborhood schools and, in some rare cases, some of them commute to the bigger town of Eldoret for jobs in sectors like banking, insurance, real estate, and cleaning. Unlike in other films screened at the festival, such as *First Date* (2017) or *The Morning After* (2018), *Ngebe Gaa*'s main character, Mzee Maina, and his antagonist, John, seem to be lifelike in their resemblance to everyday people within such shopping centers. On the other hand, *Detox*, although set within a University campus, speaks of the troubling world of alcohol addiction, a topic quite close to the heart of the people within these peri-urban centers where unemployment, poverty, and disillusionment are an everyday problem. The closure of many industries, such as Elgeyo Sawmills, East African Tanning and Extraction Company, and Rivatex, among many others, and the emigration of people as a result of post-electoral violence, and the idea of Eldoret as the bedrock of North Rift politics, have created an inconstant, shifty economy that refuses to provide adequate or dependable sources of incomes.

It is in the wake of this that we can ask what it means to be a man. Whether, in fact, being a man is being redefined in these economic realities. Or whether new realities such as education, which needs to be paid for or the mechanization of agriculture, which affects how many can be employed in agriculture or the change in land use, where pastoralism's prowess is checked and men who would have been pastoralists become unemployed, are challenging long-held notions of what it means to be a man. Indeed, can a woman have such attributes that could qualify her to be a man in these relatively new economic situations?

The stories

Ngebe Gaa's main storyline is centered on Mzee Maina. He is a watchman whose long working hours, sometimes during the day and sometimes the night, making him a recluse. In spite of these many hours of work, he does not earn enough

money to provide for his family's needs. First, his wife is admitted to a hospital, and he does not have the money to go see her, neither can he afford to pay her hospital bill when it is due. Secondly, he has accumulated so many debts over time that he seems to want to disappear into his workplace, and away from anyone seeking him out. When his daughter arrives from the city, where she has been a student of law at a university, Mzee Maina asks, "Why have you come here? There is nothing for you in this place." Indeed, on that first night, there is no food for her in the house. She does eventually scrounge around for vegetables at the shamba, garden, the following day. Yet, to keep this sustainable, she decides to take up a job in a quarry as a stone crusher. But this is seen as a man's job; when she first asks to work at the site, the men laugh at her. When her father hears of her newfound job, he reacts angrily, saying, "You are not my daughter." Word spreads in the village that she has come from the city to take up a man's job. Of what use then is the education she has, people wonder. She nevertheless thrives, as best as the circumstances allow, getting some money for food, shocking her father by being the provider of the daily bread, and beginning to plan to get her mother out of the hospital. Her father is so devastated by this that he announces to her one morning that he wants her gone by the time he comes back home from work. He makes it clear that she has ceased being his daughter, as she has defied him. At this juncture, we can see that he is ashamed that his daughter will out-earn him, and in any case, she has taken up a man's job and seems capable now of being the provider in his place.

There is a problem too with John, the shopkeeper, who has constantly claimed that Mzee Maina owes him. His complaint is that Mzee Maina sold him a cow as part of debt payment, but the cow is dead now. His only method of compensation, he tragically reasons, is forcefully having his way with Mzee Maina's daughter. This last tragic act, the rape of Chemesunde, is to some extent seen as the reassertion of manhood – an act that shows who is "the" man. Indeed, John in the final scene, where he is physically attacked by Mzee Maina, manages to tackle him and spit at him with the words, "your daughter is more of a man than you are."

Detox's storyline is similarly constructed around a man who can't provide for his daughter, and essentially what should be his family – for he has a girlfriend who has given birth to his daughter out of wedlock. Only this time, the main character, Jimmy, is a university student. To some extent, one may argue that Jimmy can only know how to be a man by looking at the examples set in the society beyond the university, where the likes of Mzee Maina (as shown in *Ngebe Gaa*) live. When his girlfriend comes to him and hands him their daughter saying, "stay with her, I want to go to a class for an hour", Jimmy is clueless. He gives the excuse that he must go for a meeting with the dean of students. He pleads that he will make amends and spend time with the baby, but later. He has promised his friends that he will stay off alcohol, he is a recovering addict. But he goes back to alcohol for consolation, only this time, he tries to mask his drinking by using a water bottle and plying his mouth with chewing gum to keep his breath fresh. In the film, we are told that he is into betting, he has many debts, and when assigned to make a portrait of a "guest of honor" by the

university's vice-chancellor, he simply can't get his act together. Instead, partly due to his clumsy nature, he forgets his water bottle at his girlfriend's place. But his girlfriend, in her mistaken belief, that the bottle only contains water, feeds some to the child. The film ends with the hospitalization of the child. Jimmy, not so much unlike Mzee Maina in *Ngebe Gaa*, is confronted by the reality of having to pay hospital bills for his daughter, but he has no money. He can only scrounge about through betting, borrowing, and conning people of their money. This is how the film ends. There is no resolution to the crisis faced by Jimmy.

The unstable idea of 'man'

In the essay, "Postcolonial Identities and The Performance of Gender", Kruger argues that the idea of being masculine is a performance which is not tied to biology. In the safe old world of hunters and gatherers, a man was a protector of the family. He went out to hunt and came with the consumable food, while the wife waited on him. This was simply the unquestioned way. It is more in line with a patriarchal ideology that ascribes "man" to his "being" (biology) rather than his "doing".¹ Kruger's idea follows in the pattern argued in Judith Butler's theory of performativity, where man is not a noun but rather a verb. Gender is performed. This theory suggests that gender roles are blurred, that there exists a thin line between "men" and "women" and that these are socially constructed sometimes depending on contexts.²

Yet, this theory goes against what Kruger argues are "cultural narratives that anchor identity." These narratives, as are advanced in hunter and gatherer situations, and which foster the idea of "man" as the one who biologically exhibits aggression, and who therefore possesses masculinity, have been disrupted by new realities. Indeed, accordingly:

Masculine performance of qualities like strength and assertiveness has ceased to be the prerogative of men while lack of knowledge and resources has ceased to identify biological female though these traits are still associated with undesired femininity. Cultural standards of masculinity and femininity have increasingly been open to performance and hence have lost their clear correlation with biological fe/maleness.³

It is this play on "performance" that is of interest in this paper, especially as it becomes a site for aesthetic indulgence. In *Ngebe Gaa*, for instance, it is presumed that there is

¹ Marie Kruger, "Just a Brilliant Disguise: Postcolonial Identities and the Performance of Gender," *The Nairobi Journal of Literature* 1 (2003): 23–33.

² Cf. Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40 (1988): 519–31; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

³ Kruger, "Just a Brilliant Disguise," 29.

a “cultural narrative” that informs us that Mzee Maina is a man and that as a man, he should provide for his family. Similarly, in *Detox*, Jimmy feels guilty that he is unable to provide for his “family” and eventually, that he can’t pay for the hospital bills accruing from the daughter’s hospitalization as a result of her ingesting his alcohol-laced water. He feels that as a man, he should provide for his family, yet in reality, he is not in a position to do so – he must resort to borrowing, begging, conning, and reliance on his luck in betting for that to work.

Both Mzee Maina and Jimmy are trapped between expectations created by cultural narratives about what it means to be a man, and changing ideas about masculinity or, as Kruger argues, “undesired femininity”. This is simply that there used to be a reliable idea about who or what a man was, which was backed by cultural expressions, ritual practices, and also based on the distribution of roles within society. But society has since changed, so that means of production, for instance, are no longer the agrarian ones which quite determine who does what based on their biological disposition.

This paper argues that *Ngebe Gaa* and *Detox* are texts that are in constant dialogue with other texts. This means that, while they are uniquely set in and celebrated by those who live in Eldoret and its environs (or such peri-urban or campus-based communities), they echo, converse with, or add to the body of works that depict a crisis in the idea of being a man.

The paper proposes three strands through which this crisis is being reflected upon:

1. Through a reading of Wole Soyinka’s *The Lion and The Jewel*, there is a juxtaposition of the man who has recently acquired formal knowledge, in the form of Lakunle, a teacher, and another man, Baroka, whose power lies in inherited chieftainship, and wealth, and who does not have formal knowledge but is very wise in the ways of his people (tradition) – so, for instance, he is a “successful” polygamist, who still gets respected for his virility within his community.⁴
2. Through inspection of the dilemma faced by Ocol, a man, within two forces as represented through his lover Lawino, on the one hand, and Clementine, on the other, as gleaned in Okot P’Bitek’s *Song of Lawino*.⁵
3. Through a reading of Ngugi wa Thiong’o’ and Ngugi wa Mirii’s *I will Marry When I Want*, where we find Kiguunda, a man whose idea of being a man is hewn out of the conflation of tradition, and the ever-present threat that capitalism, and its greedy players, present to ordinary hoi polloi.⁶

⁴ Wole Soyinka, *The Lion and The Jewel* (Ibadan, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963).

⁵ Okot p’Bitek, *Song of Lawino* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 2013).

⁶ Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Ngugi wa Mirii, *I Will Marry When I Want* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1977).

What distinguishes *Ngebe Gaa* is its predominant use of Kalenjin language. Every character, except John, the shopkeeper, speaks a dialect of Kalenjin. This suggests that there is a predominant Kalenjin undertone or worldview, at least. Yet, obviously, this world view is not necessarily constant as it keeps being redefined and changed. Such a worldview is sustained in practice by speech – especially in proverbs, and myths, sayings, stories of origin, and everyday tongue twisters, jokes, and turns of phrases. Oral literature explorations become sites that act as containers of people’s ideas. Even where these ideas become contested, these contests are played out in the songs, sayings, and oral narratives of a people – oral art becomes the space where ideas are negotiated and thus can inform a people’s ethos and world views, as mooted in Wilfred Lajul’s *African Philosophy*.⁷

The typical Kalenjin man, according to a description by Kiprotich Arap Sambu in his *The Misiri Legend Explored*, an attempt at finding the roots of a people, is: “[...] quiet, reserved, non-assuming, and almost self-effacing [...]”⁸ This seems more like a description of the body movement of Mzee Maina in *Ngebe Gaa*. He does not look at his daughter when speaking to her. He does not raise his voice when angry, or when telling his daughter off. His ‘reclusiveness’ gives him the necessary manly quietness. When he comes home, he disappears into his room and does not come out. It falls upon Chemesunde, the daughter, to find ways of surviving without him. He is almost soldier-like, minding only what is necessary – like in the act of polishing his shoes, ever so meticulously, without speaking, and without distractions.

His body movement, when in front of his daughter, establishes him as the authority – not fussy, reserved, and in need of going *now!* He can never sit with the daughter for a conversation. The few exchanges are only engaged when necessary. He only becomes “aggressive” when he attacks John. This is because he learns, even if a little late that John is the rapist of his daughter. And even in this fight, in the face of loss, he will not shout or scream. He will simply engage in roughing up John before he is brought down, and before his daughter can pull him away from the loud John.

Mzee Maina’s and his daughter’s conversation, where no one looks into the other’s eyes, is inscribed in the cultural body language expression. A man’s authority is measured in how he is “looked” at, so that as Rutto and Maritim show, “kiywei-kong” (He whose eyes are feared) is a saying, or nickname of a man, in reference to his power and how it rests in his eyes.⁹ Similarly, Mzee Maina’s quietness can be related to the saying “Kipsise kot ilen momi go; kigosen kito karasan” which translates to “the quiet one who you might think he is not in the house; you only learn of his presence by his grunts.”¹⁰ This is the outer performance of “man”. These traits all fulfill the outlook

⁷ Wilfred Lajul, *African Philosophy: Critical Dimensions* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2013).

⁸ Kipkoech Araap Sambu, *The Misiri Legend Explored: A Linguistic Inquiry into the Kalenjin Peoples Oral Traditions of Ancient Egyptian Origin* (Nairobi: University of Nairobi Press, 2011), xv.

⁹ Bill Rutto and Kipng’etich Maritim. *Kipsigis Heritage and Origin of Clans* (Nairobi: Spotlight Publishers, 2016), 48.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 50.

of “quiet, reserved, non-assuming, and self-effacing...” as discussed by Araap Sambu above.¹¹

It is interesting that on the one hand, Mzee Maina, is depicted in the fashion described above so that outwardly, he is the man. He fits Kruger’s idea of the cultural narrative’s notion of maleness. When compared to John, who in the film does not speak any Kalenjin, and who is in constant run-ins with Chemesunde, where the dialogue captures him as “loud”, and “argumentative” and “not measured”, Mzee Maina comes off as “The” man. Yes, inwardly, he has his problems on debt, poverty, and the incapacity to provide for his family, but outwardly he keeps his dignity. In depicting John as Kiswahili speaking, and the lone non-Kalenjin speaking individual, there is the implication that he is “foreign”. There is a suggestion that he behaves the way he does as a man from outside Kalenjin land, an outsider without the dignified air that Mzee Maina seems to possess in his physical bearing. This is part of the conflict in storytelling that creates a contrast that is a necessary part of the aesthetics of the film. There is a meaning to speaking Kiswahili where everyone else is speaking Kalenjin. It marks you out as a *mjanja* (clever, shrewd) urbanite, whom we should be wary of. This is developed from the character of Mgongo Mture in the longest-running Kenya Broadcasting Corporation’s situational comedy *Vioja Mahakamani*. Mgongo Mture is marked out as a fluent speaker of Kiswahili, who has mastered the language of the urban space, making him shrewd in his dealings, so he is constantly guilty of taking advantage of the “rural”, or those people newly coming into the urban spaces. He is at once a conman, a shrewd businessman, a sweet-talking salesman of bogus products, and also a criminal. John, in *Ngebe Gaa*, is depicted as shrewd, and conniving and very much likely to take advantage of Mzee Maina and his likes – so that when an act like rape has to take place, it will be John the “outsider” who will be the guilty one, just as it follows in *Vioja Mahakamani* that Mgongo Mture will be guilty of swindling others who are less fluent in Kiswahili.

Detox, on the other hand, is a film about youth, coming of age, and an attempt at being a man as defined by the dominant cultural narratives in a patriarchal setting whose economic realities are constantly disrupting the known. Jimmy, the main character, wants to come back to the known idea of being a man, which is he must provide for his girlfriend, Janet, and their daughter. But this is all happening in a university setting. There are no realistic examples within the setting for him to follow. In a sense, he has to rely on the people outside the university, in terms of their lifestyle, to see what it means to be a man. But such people, this paper argues, are the likes of Mzee Maina. They are financially crippled, with incomes that can only help them go so far in terms of providing for their families, and so are into constant borrowing, which makes them look like never-do-wells in society. How can Jimmy know how to be a man in these circumstances? The film seems to gesture towards this absence of role model when Jimmy falls prey only to that which he knows can be an escape: alcohol. Hence his need to *Detox*, if only he can have a place from which he can negotiate for better prospects.

¹¹ Araap Sambu, *The Misiri Legend Explored*.

Jimmy's troubles might appear simple; that he is only addicted to alcohol, which he should learn to manage. Yet, alcoholism is a result of his predicament as a father who finds that he cannot provide materially for his daughter and his girlfriend. He begins to view them as a family he cannot cater for. He is just a student, so ideally, he cannot afford to provide for this "family". Yet, in the film, there is a hint that his art could bring him some money. Indeed, his portrait of the university's vice-chancellor has led him to be commissioned to make a portrait of an important guest to the university. But his alcoholism makes him lose focus to the extent that his friends wonder: "what sort of man are you who lets opportunities get past you? Are you mad?" The crisis is continuous, from addiction to poor craftsmanship, to his inability to face his girlfriend, as the hospital bills of his daughter pile up. He can only become like John, the character in *Ngebe Gaa* – so he appears conniving, a liar, and might take refuge in criminal acts for survival. This is already affecting his studies as he misses continuous assessment tests and classes.

Baroka and Lankule

By looking at the conflict between Wole Soyinka's characters, Baroka and Lankule, in *The Lion and The Jewel*, this paper argues that both Mzee Maina and Jimmy exhibit certain problems affecting men in an unpredictable world. Baroka is a polygamist, he occupies a position of respect in his community, he is wealthy, can provide for his wives because he has land, accruing from his position as the bale of the community. He is the epitome of what a man should be, for in the play he wrestles physically and wins, his wives discuss his virility, and he is portrayed as wise in the ways of his people. On the other hand, Lankule, the school teacher, seems to have acquired anti-social attitudes, insisting he wants to get married without paying the bride price, for example. He thinks himself well educated, and the kind of person the future needs, and looks down on Baroka as an "uneducated fool". Yet, when he is asked to do as a man should by giving bride price if he wants to take Sidi away with him as a wife, he has no property. He is a poor man, really, with only an income for subsistence from his teaching. His attitude is that bride price is unnecessary since it only enriches one side, and is only kept there for the likes of old fashioned men like Baroka. When he proclaims to Sadiku, Baroka's first wife, that "I will have you know that I am a man," he is scoffed at, "You a man? Is Baroka not more of a man than you? And if he is no longer a man, then what are you?"

To be a man in Soyinka's play is to be within the cultural narrative's idea of a man. In the world of the play, men are people like Baroka, who have fully embraced tradition. No one knows how to handle the likes of Lankule – they are the newly [western] educated people who are often Christians, and who frown upon traditional practices such as wrestling, bride price, polygamy – and aren't too keen on circumcision. Baroka, however, represents a group that existed before the coming of urbanization,

mass industry, government, and telecommunication. He is one step within the traditional setup, while Lankule can only hope that a road will pass through that village because then, there shall be shops and factories and schools for him to thrive. In a sense, he feels underemployed in the village, hence he cannot exercise his manliness in the same way Baroka does. But Baroka is a dying breed of men since the traditional order is fading away fast.

In Baroka, we see echoes of Mzee Maina; in the dignity of being a man, and in the suggested movements and titles like “bale” and “Mzee”. Mzee Maina’s knowledge of traditions, of ways of behaving, and body language can be likened to Baroka’s – they are communally acceptable. Mzee Maina’s problem is that, for him, the traditions he reveres seem to have been overlapped by new modes of earning incomes, land use, which have no reverence for age. This means that Mzee Maina is living in a state of confusion, perhaps looking back at his upbringing and remembering how his fathers lived, undisturbed by problems such as land use, as this was communal, or a clear demarcation of authority, as everybody grew within customs of respecting elders – and he clearly is in his late fifties or early sixties, an age that should be as respected as Baroka’s sixty-two years. Instead, because things have changed, and the economy now is a monetary one, he has been forced to find employment as a watchman, in order to buy food. No longer can mere land use, for subsistence in food, be enough as he needs to pay his wife’s hospital bills, whereas in the old days the wife would have been seen by traditional healers demanding only some “reasonable” pay. He wouldn’t have bothered with his daughter, who now wants to work at a quarry with, and like men, thereby challenging his authority as he becomes a laughing stock in the village.

Jimmy’s situation in *Detox* is not so much unlike Lankule’s in Soyinka’s play. Jimmy finds refuge in drink, but that somehow is not good enough a solution to his problems. He is really confused and does not know whom to emulate. He has no male figures he can look up to in the university so that he can chart a path for himself that makes sense. To some extent, one could say that he rushed into fatherhood so that he really does not know what to do with the new responsibility. In Soyinka’s *The Lion and The Jewel* Lankule does come off as confused because he is given to rejecting traditions, not because he necessarily doesn’t know them but because situations are changing. He is living a different life than his father’s. He has acquired western education and has become a teacher of children, a profession which makes him a pioneer in the village. The education he is teaching the children is western, it necessarily comes with attitudes like his idea of bride price as unnecessary. Like Jimmy, he has no one to look up to as a role model, who has done what he is doing – he is a victim of brutal changing times. Although he does not escape into alcoholism, he runs into wild imagination, claiming that he is unfit for village life. His obsession with his job is also a kind of escape from the rigors of real-life that need a man to take responsibility in Baroka’s fashion. But Lankule cannot be Baroka because the bale comes from a different age, where traditions are revered. These traditions involve the paying of bride price before marriage, which is something Lankule has vowed not to do. How can he know how to be a man? How can Jimmy know?

The competition for Ocol

In Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino*, Ocol's manhood is made the subject of concern by Lawino, his first wife. Lawino pits herself against Ocol's new lover, Clementine. Clementine is the urban, "modern" woman whose mannerisms imply that she loves everything that is not "traditional". She wears lipstick, she walks on high heels, she takes part in "European" dances, and won't participate in the all-night dances of the village. Lawino, on the other hand, carries herself with the decorum of a first wife. Her tastes are traditional, her worldview based on a knowledge that is wholesomely non-western, and so her conception of what a man is will necessarily be Lang'o-specific.

Chemesunde, Mzee Maina's daughter in *Ngebe Gaa* is like Clementine in terms of embracing a worldview that is Western. This world view appears pragmatic; in Clementine's situation, for instance, the lifestyle, including make-up, makes her appear strange to the likes of Lawino, who feels that she is trying to be like a white woman. But she needs to look like this so that she can attract the likes of Ocol who, with the passage of time, have switched their idea of beauty in a woman from that which Lawino laments is being decimated by the culture of whiteness to one that is "modern", urban, chic, and that is "acceptable" to those men who adore "ballroom dancing".

In Chemesunde's case, she practically needs money to buy food, and her father, who should be her provider, has none. This makes her take up a job at a quarry, cutting stones. It does not matter that, in the eyes of her community, it is a man's job she is taking up. Indeed, John will laugh at her for her choice, asking, "which man will want to look at you as a woman if you don't stop going to the quarry?" Her father wants to disown her because she is embarrassing him by keeping the stone-cutting job at the quarry.

In *Song of Lawino*, Clementine's sense of dress blurs the line between what should be African, as approved by the traditionalists represented by Lawino, and what should be European, as explored in the laments in the text. She seems, in the eyes of Lawino, to embrace European ways, in order to attract an African man, of the ilk or class of Ocol. In *Ngebe Gaa*, Chemesunde blurs gender lines by taking up a man's job, thereby going against cultural narratives as established by the community in this peri-urban society.

In the end, when Chemesunde is raped by John in *Ngebe Gaa*, there are several ways of reading the tragedy from Kruger's cultural narrative perspective; it is because John is taking revenge on Mzee Maina who sold him a cow which immediately died, or it is because John wants to prove himself more of a man than Mzee Maina, again in revenge, for the dead cow, or simply that John wants to "correct" Chemesunde's behavior? He wants to remind Chemesunde that she is not a man. That she should only engage in activity that the peri-urban populace agrees with.

This plays within the title of the film *Ngebe Gaa*, "let us go back home". In some ways home becomes the "way of doing things" in the community, the cultural narrative. That, therefore, Chemesunde must get back to the ways of her people in the community – be a woman, and avoid trying to compete with men, or trying to be a man!

Yet, *Ngebe Gaa*, the words, are the last ones that Chemesunde utters in the film. She uses them for her father. She is urging him on, while pulling him from the ground where he has fallen into a heap following John's tackle. Mzee Maina is defeated by John in the competition of what a man is. John confirms this when he states: "Flora hata ni mwanaume kukushinda" ["Your daughter, Flora (Chemesunde), is more of a man than you"]. Ironically, this last proclamation seems to confirm the lines blurred by Chemesunde in her pursuit of a livelihood. She has become a man, but only in the eyes of an "outsider", John.

Still, as Chemesunde and her father hobble away, presumably towards their home, the film ends with a subtitle in Kalenjin, not supported by any voice-over where: "Ngo samis muryan kobogot nebo" ["no matter how despicable a rat may be, it has a hole or home, it belongs to"]. Mzee Maina and his daughter have been brutalized by John and shown who runs the peri-urban space. They are defeated, like beaten men, like rats. They too have a home. They could rest and reenergize, or come back a new. In a sense, the shame of loss, of being "lesser" men, whether as Mzee Maina, or Chemesunde, reduces them to rats, poor little beings, but with the hope of finding a home, both literally and figuratively to reflect, and possibly come back stronger.

Kiguunda in the eyes of Mzee Maina

Kiguunda in Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii's play *I will Marry When I Want*, finds himself in an interesting problem. Should he sell his plot of land and, with that money, set up a modest business, and give his wife a "modern" church wedding? Many of his neighbors have been bought out by Ahab Kioi wa Kanoru, so much so that the temptation to sell is high. After all, there are Christians walking around the location, preaching about the virtues of a church wedding, and claiming that people are living in sin if their marriage is not blessed by a church minister. Kiguunda is a farm laborer, essentially a peasant, a career that only earns him enough for subsistence. From the play's stage descriptions, at the beginning of Act One, Kiguunda is a poor man, as he lives in:

A square mud-walled, white-ochred, one-roomed house. The white ochre is fading. In one corner can be seen Kigunda and Wangeci's bed. In another can be seen as a pile of rags on the floor. The floor is Gathoni's bed and the rags her bedding [...].¹²

This description of Kiguunda's house is an almost perfect description of Mzee Maina's in *Ngebe Gaa*. There is a sense in which the two men suffer the same problem: poverty. In Kiguunda's case, his daughter who works in the same land, will get involved with the son of Ahab Kioi wa Kanoru, the rich man who wants to buy him off his one and

¹² wa Thiong'o and wa Mirii, *I Will Marry When I Want*, p 3.

a half-acre plot of land. Ahab Kioi wa Kanoru, his enemy, is a man who, because of his immense wealth, becomes a thorn in the flesh for community members since he can buy them off. Kiguunda is incensed. He feels challenged. He finds that he constantly has to reaffirm himself. When questioned by his wife about why he is mumbling while staring at his title deed, “as if it was a title for a thousand acres?” He avers: “This one and a half acres? These are worth more to me than all the thousands that belong to Ahab Kioi son of Kanoru. These are my own, not borrowed robes said to tire the wearer. A man brags about his own penis, however small.”¹³

The contest that Kiguunda is in, in the play *I will Marry When I Want*, is with Ahab Kioi, the rich man. He seems to suggest that the size of one’s property should not make him a greater or lesser man. But the sentence seems defeatist in a contest in which the richer man is easily buying off everyone. The reality of capitalism seems to affect what it means to be a man. Poverty threatens the claim to manhood.

This obtains as well in *Ngebe Gaa*. Mzee Maina will only be considered a man for as long as he can provide for his daughter, Chemesunde. Otherwise, John, his enemy, will always interfere.

Ngebe Gaa and *Detox* have a narrative that seems to follow in the line of *I will Marry When I Want*. The main male characters have daughters they seem incapable of convincingly catering for. In *Detox*, the father, Jimmy, can’t pay hospital bills for Nate, the daughter. Even in the days when Nate is well, Jimmy is still not there for his daughter – he has to be away, mostly dealing with his frustrations brought by alcoholism. In Mzee Maina’s case, Chemesunde exposes him so that we can see his poverty, his incapacity to cater to the basic needs of his family. John, his enemy, will offer the greater insult, questioning his manhood. There seems then to be an idea that if you can’t take care of the most vulnerable of members of your family, then your manhood can be brought to question.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to discuss how the films *Ngebe Gaa* and *Detox*, have attempted a portrayal of a supposed crisis of manhood in the peri-urban centers surrounding Eldoret town, and the larger North Rift Region of Kenya.

With a borrowing of ideas from Judith Butler on performance and how one can conceptualize “being a man”, the paper problematizes the idea of manhood. It is on this account then that the paper reads both films using works within the dramatic arts that are considered canonical in Africa – the argument being that the male characters presented in these literary works are located within contexts that the characters in *Ngebe Gaa* and *Detox* find themselves in.

Through the competition pitting Baroka and Lankule in Wole Soyinka’s *The Lion and The Jewel*, for the love of Sidi, we review the exchanges between Mzee Maina

¹³ Ibid., 3, 4.

and John in *Ngebe Gaa*, and can see why, for instance, Chemesunde, Mzee Maina's, daughter can be said to be "more of a man" than her father. For her "sins" of taking up a man's job at the quarry, because her father is incapable of adequately providing for her and her mother, she has to suffer "correction". Yet, whether this makes John, the supposed winner, more of a man than the beaten Mzee Maina, becomes a problem.

Similarly, in the competition between Lawino, the 'traditional' and obedient wife of Ocol, who seems to be losing out to the modern/Western/Europeanised Clementina, in Okot P'Bitek's *Song of Lawino*, we see a problem in the idea of cultural narratives, which are contradicted by individual tastes. Chemesunde, Mzee Maina's daughter has come back to the village with a view of the world that is 'western', where the line between a man's job, and a woman's, is blurred. This will put her in trouble. It will also make her father's conscience be painfully pricked, for how can he explain to those who believe in his Kalenjin world view what he has done to show he is a man?

A question of class permeates the films' understanding of 'manhood'. In *Ngebe Gaa* it seems Mzee Maina cannot have a claim to being man, at least in public. But John, who runs a shop, and seems to be a successful wheeler-dealer, can decide, or can 'afford' to be a man. He, too, is the one who can put a stop to anyone wanting the title man – so he can engage in the corrective act towards Chemesunde, and can insult the lesser man in Mzee Maina. This is very much as explored in *I will Marry When I Want*, where Ahab Kioi wa Kanoru, who is buying off everyone, thinks himself the ultimate man. In the end, he is defeated in a Marxist peasants-take-over kind of scene. In *Ngebe Gaa* however, the tragedy is that the victor will always be the one with money. Unfortunately, in *Detox* too, Jimmy, who can't provide for his child, has to keep being conniving, duplicitous, and a fraudster *par excellence* if he is to survive. The crisis is seemingly unsolvable, it can only be managed. The friction it provides gives us pleasure for our aesthetic purposes.

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