

The Dramaturgy of Power and Politics in Post-colonial Kenya: A Comparative Re-reading of 'Forms', in Texts by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Francis Imbuga¹

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ABSTRACT

The main question pursued in this paper is how *power* is performed and manifested in some of the dramatic texts by post-colonial African writers, especially in the infamously dictatorial contexts such as Kenya. A corollary question raised is how the politically minded dramatist survives, and what indeed are the dramatic ingredients that have made for perishing, imprisonment, banishment and exile in those same circumstances. Lastly, and in passing, the question is posed: what is the role, if any, of the 'Kenyan subaltern', so to speak, in his historical predicament, in the presumed and foregoing relations of power?

These questions are answered by way of a comparative foray into the works of two Kenyan playwrights, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Francis Imbuga. An attempt is made to theorise the implications of one's 'lives and methods' as represented by the world famous and widely known, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, in fact better known as a major African novelist, and the intensely, even satirically dissident, Francis Imbuga. It is recognised that there is a need to subject the formal elements deployed by some post-colonial African playwrights to more comprehensive analyses, and to in fact, interrogate their own representations of history.

A major interest here is to re-read the aesthetic, and/or other formal parameters, especially those outside the political domain that seem to have made Francis Imbuga 'survive', including within the educational curriculum, in spite of his intensely and sometimes highly subversive body of plays. By comparison, Ngugi's methods are [re]considered in the play, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, in an attempt to indicate why the dramatist's methods and in-built artistic strategies are critical, not just to our understanding of the reaction of the political establishment, but equally so, to Ngugi's continued prominence in the readings and interpretations of colonial (and postcolonial) Kenyan political history.

Keywords: African drama, post-colonialism, Kenya

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1. INTRODUCTION: THE "*DRAMATURGY* OF POWER AND POLITICS"

The notion of dramaturgy is used in this paper to denote the entire range of artistic strategies that the playwright relies on, and especially so, in the communication of and dealing with, so-called "dissident" or subversive material. It is as it were; a concern not just with style in terms of the linguistic and other textually predetermined choices, but also a connotation of, and a concern with "dramaturgy" as method, and as inclusive of its extra-literary dimensions when it is being experienced as theatre.

I am interested in "the dramaturgy of power and politics" because of the strikingly interesting circumstance in which an ardent critic of a Post-colonial government with arguably, even more sharp and dissident insinuations, seems to 'survive', and has never been the subject of any well-known state harassment. On the other hand, Ngugi is/was ever viewed with disdain and grave suspicion. Many times, and long after Ngugi had left Kenya, the authorities continued to deny permission for the performances of his plays, and only reluctantly acceded to the performances of *Maitu Njugira, (Mother Sing for Me)*, because of the changed political dispensation in the nineties, which at least nominally allowed for the expression of alternative political views.

The point is that there are loads of speculations that can be made about such a state of affairs. These indeed range from such nefarious considerations as an author's tribal/ethnic background; his own status of relationship with the powers that be; his personal history, or, indeed to use Ngugi's own words, his prevailing stature as a "Writer in Politics", among many possible answers. Yet, a detailed consideration can also be given to a playwright's working methods, such that Ngugi for example, can be said to have gone beyond the confinement of merely being literary, to an attempt at realising his theatrical fullness in working with and influencing ordinary people in non formal environments. It was to many, some kind of a replication of the Freirean model, hence the notion of the Pablo Freire of Africa, (Gitau, 1982) but also to others, a revolutionary theatre engagement along the lines of famed Brazilian theatre practitioner, Augusto Boal, (See, Desai 1990:65-92).

My interest here nonetheless, is that, aside from these purely political; indeed highly extra literary engagements that anybody else has a perfect right to, there are indeed *constitutive* elements in the "dramaturgy"; the aesthetic and conceptual choices employed by playwrights, that can more meaningfully-or additionally explain- the different responses. The final section of this paper will expressly attempt to address this task.

2. THEORISING POWER IN A *RE-READING* OF POST-COLONIAL TEXTS

"It is one thing to articulate and take up a stance on the political struggles in the midst of which one finds oneself situated historically" so avers Foucault, "but it is quite another, "to seek an epistemic standpoint outside those ongoing conflicts from which that stance can be validated" (Foucault 1994:109). Thus, it would seem that what Foucault realised was that, "Power is not something possessed or wielded by powerful agents, because *it is constituted by those who support and resist it*. It is not a system of domination that imposes its rules upon all those it governs, because any such rule is always at issue in *on-going struggles*", [Foucault 1994:109]. Further to this, Foucault seemed to have formed the conclusive view:

Power is dispersed across complicated and heterogeneous social networks marked by ongoing struggle. Power is not something present at specific locations within those networks, but is instead always at issue in ongoing attempts to (re) produce effective social alignments, and conversely to avoid or erode their effects, often by producing various counter-alignments, (Foucault 1994: 109-110)

In this paper, I find these particular "Foucaulian" approaches to be of an informing relevance, first, because they provide what one would call a "multiplex" and indeed more sophisticated understanding of relations of power, in a way that challenges the binary paradigm already popularised, primarily in Ngugi's essays and creative works alike. In my analysis to follow, I draw from this multifaceted conception of power as an important theoretical framework that is apt in a [re] reading of the particular works in question; and implicitly looking at them as part of the political historiography of Kenya.

But further to this, other contemporary theorising of power in the Post-colony itself, and especially with regard to how best its mysteries can be unravelled, is perhaps best illustrated in Achille Mbembe's, (1992), "Provisional notes on the Post-colony." Mbembe writes that the Post-colony is actually characterised by a plurality of sorts; thus, "identities are multiplied, transformed and put into circulation," (Mbembe, 1992: 3). He puts it more succinctly when he writes thus:

...we need to go beyond the binary categories used in standard interpretations of domination, such as resistance v. passivity; autonomy v. subjection, state v. civil society, hegemony v. counter-hegemony ...these oppositions are not helpful, *rather, they cloud our understanding of post-colonial relations.*(Mbembe, 1992:3 , *with our emphasis*).

To be sure, Mbembe is not alone in these kinds of re-readings of power relations in Post-colonial Africa. Fabian has made important reference to the Congolese

idiom, that, "power is eaten whole" (Fabian, 1990), but it is a truism to be found in many parts of Africa. Francois Bayart's invokes "the goat eats where it is tethered," (Bayart, 1993: ix), in reference to Paul Biya's Cameroon; and "I chop you chop", [89] as happens in Nigeria. We see it in Francis Imbuga's drama, *Betrayal in the City* (1976) where one character strategically named Tumbo, (i.e., stomach) articulates this same mentality, as the "eat and let eat" philosophy, (*Betrayal in the City*, 47) which is better expressed in common Kenyan idiom, "a man eats where he works." For Bayart, it partly leads to the hilarious sub-title for his book, "Politics of the belly," itself a Yaounde (Cameroon) saying. It is an approach to the Post-colonial African State, writes Bayart, in which "any actor, worthy of the name tries to get a mouthful." (Bayart, 1993:89-90)

What all these theoretical approaches are underscoring here, is the fact that even amongst the subjugated-so to speak- there are dimensions of the performance of power, which often take the form of, "the grotesque and obscene" form (Veit-wild 1997) including the employment of pain, between and among all these classes of people. One other Post-colonial reader, Angelique Haugerud (1995) has for her part made reference to the equally hilarious "theatre" of recent Kenyan politics where *wanainchi*² (the people) do often go the absurd length of actually swearing before powerful politicians, about things they do not really believe in³. Mbembe refers to this as *Simulcran*, that is, the strategy of pretence perfected by the hitherto presumed subjects, as a way of negotiating their space. In the literary and dramatic works that I look at in this paper, there is perhaps no better illustration of this mentality than with one Bin-Bin in Imbuga's *Man of Kafira*. But the point at this juncture, is that it is once again about the management of multiple identities; transformations, co-options, and if necessary, "subjects" do not hesitate to engage in what Mbembe inimitably calls, "the act of mutual zombification of each other", (Mbembe, 1992:4).

A [re]-reading of such out rightly 'political works'⁴ as are to be found in Ngugi and Imbuga, entails, a theoretical premise that pays attention to such complexities as we have referred to, and only through this, can we come to what James Ogude has appropriately identified as, "the silences" and "the suppressed histories". Ogude actually premises his case on the fact that, the "privileging of one form of History, also entails the suppression of the other"(Ogude, 1997:86-

² *Wanainchi* is used here in it's acquired connotative meaning where it has since come to distinguish the political elite as a separate body/class from the other 'people', ordinarily referred in the political parlance as *wanainchi*, i.e. the common people.

³ Haugerud refers her to the one occasion the people of Embu had to swear before a presidential "*baraza*"(public meeting), that they will never again partake of the traditional brew that had been a hindrance to "development". Then as now, everybody knew this to be the whitest lie, told as part of the *simulcran*!

⁴ I repetitiously refer to works that are 'political' in a fairly general sense in this paper, but often in this context it is a reference to politics as officialdom; the practice and conduct of government affairs whose criticism is what normally threatens the rulers.

88), and implicitly, therefore, highlighting important relations of power in the Post-colony⁵.

3. THE CONTEXT OF POLITICS, AND THEATRE PRACTICE IN POST-COLONIAL KENYA

Kenya is one of the three East African countries, divided almost midway by the equator. The other East African countries are Uganda and Tanzania. Frequently, Kenya is mistaken in some Western European countries for Nigeria, probably owing to the political notoriety of dictatorship and the endemic corruption that the two countries have come to be associated with for so many years. From about 1890 Kenya was a British "protectorate" and later its colony from around 1920. It only managed to attain the 'freedom' now better referred to as "flag independence" in 1963. The colonial heritage for those 70 years or so is widely acknowledged as having had a lot to do with what subsequently entrenched itself as "the Literature" of the country (indeed, of continent of Africa as a whole, in broad general terms).

In as far as Drama and the Performing Arts are concerned, it should be noted therefore, that one is often talking about the formal, indeed post-colonial types of drama and theatre practice which as I have indicated elsewhere, tend to be formal, educational-institutions based; relying heavily on a written script, and the penchant for peculiarly formal performances in the special houses called theatres (Outa 1992). This is the tradition now widely described in the literature as "the literary type of drama/theatre"; that is, the drama of textbooks that are quite distinct and a part from the traditional and other indigenous forms of artistic expression. The hallmark of such indigenous artistic forms has been the fact that they are, and have remained "unpublished" even during the more technologically minded Post-colonial times in much of Africa, and as Karin Barber, has established they do in part constitute the "Popular Theatre" forms in much of Post-colonial Africa, (Barber 1997).

What all these means is that a discussion of drama and theatre practice in Kenya, as in several other African countries, is frequently too, a discussion of post-colonial forms of educational practice, including the whole notion of "passive" experiencing of drama through reading and analysis of play texts as already stated above. In fact, this for a long time seemed to have been the most widespread form in which Drama and Literature.

⁵ For more on the question of "deletions and "suppressions", see also, Ogude, J (1999).

4. FRANCIS IMBUGA AND NGUGI WA THIONG'O IN THE DRAMATIC PERSPECTIVE

Perhaps Kenya's most noted playwright today is Francis Imbuga, the author of among others: *Betrayal in the City*, (1976), *Game of Silence*, (1977) *The Successor*, (1979), *Man of Kafira*, (1984), *Aminata*, (1988) and *Burning of Rags* (1989). Some of Imbuga's pioneer plays include *The Fourth Trial*, (1972), and *The Married Bachelor*, (1973). Imbuga has also tried his hands at novel writing, resulting in *Shrine of Tears*, (1992). It would seem that in spite of this fairly remarkable artistic presence there is not much to say of sustained critical studies of the writer, other than for John Ruganda's pioneering doctoral dissertation, also published as *Telling the Truth Laughingly*, (Ruganda, 1992⁶).

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, is on the other hand a towering name in African Literature, known especially as a novelist of great reputation and success. Indeed, Bernth Lindfor's (Lindfors, 1995), "authors reputation test", did place Ngugi among the top four most popular authors in an international calibration of African writers.

Yet, this paper is concerned with both Imbuga and Ngugi's efforts at play writing, an area in which Ngugi has equally registered a well noted presence but perhaps not with as equal dexterity as one would say easily with his novels. Ngugi is the author of at least four plays: His "childhood" or pioneer effort, *The Black Hermit* (1962; 1993); and the later, and much more ideologically charged efforts of, *I will Marry When I Want*, (1982), (co-authored with Ngugi wa Mirii) and initially conceptualised in his own mother tongue, (*kikuyu*) as *Ngahiika Ndenda*. In addition, Ngugi also has, in the ideological tradition, *Mother Sing for Me*, (1985) which was also conceptualised in the *kikuyu* language, along with Ngugi wa Mirii as *Maitu Njugira*. It will be recalled that it was this latter play that formed a core part of Ngugi's famous Kamirithu, "people based theatre" which propounded his problems with the successive governments of Kenya, leading to the outlawing of, and actually razing to the ground, of the *Kamirithu* Educational and Cultural Centre where this whole project was based, not far from Ngugi's own rural home in Limuru, Kenya. Needless to say, the setting and locale for these ideological and extensively political dramas, and as it were, the vision to work with, and sensitise rural peasants on their political and economic realities, was good enough grounds for the well known discomfiture with the government. Indeed these "people based" theatre project, as well as the entirety of Ngugi's Marxist vision of society, can be singled out as having constituted the threat to a government founded and floundered on the most shameless capitalist, profiteering tendencies, and this discourse has perhaps been adequately explored in Ngugi's post *Kamirithu* essays, (Ngugi, 1981, 1993, 1997) and quite notably by Ingrid Bjorkman, (1989).

⁶ There are of course some Master's level dissertations at the Universities in Kenya that have tried to look at Imbuga's dramas: See especially, Gachugu, M, (1985).

From the point of view of this paper, it bears pointing out that part of the problem with the fleeting commentaries and other passing references on the *Kamirithu* project, has precisely been the fact that its serious critical evaluation has been shrouded in the harsh/unreasonable political context that we have elaborated on earlier. This is perhaps the biggest difficulty to be encountered in reading Bjorkman's work already mentioned above. It is precisely because Bjorkman's work tends to misrepresent some crucial aspects of the "Sociology of African theatre"; what Soyinka has aptly noted, *interalia*, as the "birth pangs of post-independence theatre...especially its survival strategies... the mundane aspects of scrounging for funds, feed and shelter; dodging the violence of politics and bigotry and somehow keeping a float or sinking..." (Soyinka, 1999:6). These are some of the complex variations within power relations that tend to be deleted, all in favour of a pre-occupation with the resistance track.

Bjorkman, (1989) like Desai later, (Desai, 1990) have indeed taken for granted some of the rather contentious pronouncements surrounding the *Kamirithu* project. Consider for instance the allegation, "that for most people in Kenya reading novels is not as in the West, a private occupation, but a collective experience influenced by a strong oral tradition...Everywhere, in market places, bars and outside factories during lunch breaks, and around the fire at home in the evenings; Kenyans enjoy being read to...(Bjorkman 1989: 3). There is the esoteric, even superficial attempt to link this to Bjorkman's other contentious assertion that the material for such dramas as *Ngahiika Ndenda* (I will Marry When I want), are drawn from some kind of common pool that is, "recognised and understood by the people, it explains to them facets of society that have become unintelligible," (Bjorkman 1989:viii). Note, too this portrait of the people as passive 'morons' who need explication even for things drawn from their own cultural backyard. It is an assumption that at the very least contradicts even the stated spirit and intent of the entire *Kamirithu* project.

Note too, the tendency to overwrite *the people* as some kind of homogeneous entity that reacts to things and processes in similar ways, and how this has perpetuated an unmitigable ignorance among those Post-colonialist/ "Africanist" scholars who only read and hear about Africa but have never set foot there in, and which in my latest experience has been exemplified by Julie Barak's (1999) astonishment, on realising that not all Kenyans could for instance, read and understand the *kikuyu* language, (Barak 1999)⁷. Not in the least is the question Desai raises, but somehow chooses to glib over: why drama that has been constructed from the collective effort of peasants should bear the stamp of only two authors, that is wa Thiong'o and wa Mirii-but perhaps this is a different trajectory that we reserve for other endeavours.

⁷ Julie Barak was visiting Kenya for the first time in 1998, and had so far only read Ngugi in America; even believed in the existence of "one Kenyan nation." I had the privilege to be part of the Fulbright team of instructors who every minute in Kenya confirmed this irony as well detailed in Barak's article.

The subject of this paper is still nevertheless, Ngugi's 1976 play, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, which was co-authored with colleague Micere Mugo while they still served together at the Department of Literature of the University of Nairobi. For Francis Imbuga, we will basically use the example of *Man of Kafira* to facilitate the comparative framework envisaged here, and to demonstrate the place of a conscious dramaturgical aesthetics in the political theatre that Ngugi tried and championed in Kenya.

5. POWER AND THE RESISTANCE DISCOURSE IN NGUGI'S *THE TRIAL OF DEDAN KIMATHI*

As indicated before, Ngugi's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* was jointly authored with colleague Micere Mugo, and published for the first time in 1976. It is essentially an historical play that tries to reconstruct a prominent historical figure, (Dedan Kimathi) in order to portray and comment on the present. In their own words, the two authors have surmised the mission in this play as follows:

We agreed that the most important thing was for us to construct imaginatively our History, envisioning the world of the *Mau-Mau* and Kimathi in terms of the peasants and workers struggle before and after independence... (Ngugi/Micere, 1976:viii)

The two authors continue to state that although the play is titled trial, it is not in any way "a reproduction of the farcical trial at Nyeri," but rather, "an imaginative recreation and interpretation of the collective will of the Kenyan peasants and workers, in their refusal to break over sixty years of colonial and ruthless oppression by the British ruling class." [viii].

Ngugi's Dedan Kimathi, in the *Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, is perhaps one of the most ideologically charged, even one of the most intellectually overplayed characters in the entire corpus of modern African drama. It is this that may explain what one Nairobi reader once called, a "barrage of negative criticism" (Waigwa Wacira, 1980) that the play has attracted from certain quarters in Kenya, since its publication in 1976. The Kimathi of the play, proffers and spews out-as John Ruganda-in a different context would say-sophisticated Marxist education which as it were, is meant to represent an articulate and enlightened comment on the problems and visitations of living in a jaundiced neo-colonial African country such as Kenya. For Kimathi, defiance is the stock in trade. The very opening of the play represents interesting contours to the power dimension that perhaps Kimathi's creators in this play were not even thinking about. It is the fact that for every conceivable show of power and might there is an equalising representation of the same; that is to say with Foucault, that power is not indeed just confined to one place. In that opening courtroom scene, the stage directions direct us to a "fat, important looking African clerk" [3], at once suggesting that even in this context of struggle, there are those

blacks who have for their own various reasons taken the side of the white man, and in fact working for him, helping in the persecution of Kimathi, and this could just be one way of looking at the facts. In that position, these 'home guard' natives as they have been called in some discourteous historical discourses, do in themselves represent power and do highlight the fact that the brute colonial power itself needs elements of native power to express itself. I have aptly contended with the fact raised by some historians, that this apparent act of collaboration with the colonial master is/was not necessarily, or always, an act of betrayal. On the contrary, it could also be read as one way of deflecting power or appropriating it in order to buttress one's own position.

A few lines later in *The Trial..*, we are also directed to "*two African KAR soldiers, heavily armed,*" [3]. Again the point that is not so obvious here is precisely that with the guns and with the assured protection of the colonial master, anyone can exude some power of control, a fact that has been vindicated in the real experience of the actual African history.

In the unfolding drama one of the most interesting exchanges is between the woman and the colonial white guard called Johnnie. In purely Mbembe-like terms, what she does is to "zombify" her tormentor; the man who is actually programmed to expect the "*Ndiyo afande*", [yes sir/officer) tag from all victims. It is further not lost on us that the woman's feminine power is invoked, thus, "her nice legs", and as Johnnie acknowledges, "women are their own passports, even unto heaven" [9]. Part of the sub-text that is easily lost in familiar tales of grandeur, is just how this "leg power" rules to a point where it actually enables the woman to smuggle a gun through to the desired destination. It entails acts of teasing and buffoonery, like even pretending to wonder, why indeed would a white *bwana* [boss], fear a 'mere' woman; the anti-thesis being that Black men never would fear women. Ordinarily, this simply means that even with his gun, the woman is enjoying a triumphant moment of power over this particular agent of oppression now reduced to some nervous simpleton. He is actually belittled and cut down to a point where he utters the revealing words: "...a white man also gets hungry, especially after a whole night without sleep or food." [10]

What I would like to stress here is that what we have seen is a relationship of power, manifesting itself in ways other than the preferred reading -so speak-of, if one likes, of oppressor vs. oppressed. Importantly, too, it shows indeed that people-especially the blacks-are not the perpetual victims we have always been made to believe they are; neither are they passive robots who stand in waiting for commands from their oppressor. It is as important to see that there is fluidity; ambivalence and widespread heterogeneity as a human reaction to the context of colonialism that is envisaged here, and one would agree with Bayart (1993) that these are 'figurations'; (after Nobeit Elias), that is "a set of actions upon other actions", (Bayart, 1993:ix, with debt to Foucault), which can easily be repressed in single binary readings.

In this same scene, Kimathi of course derives his only basis of power from the moral rectitude of what he believes to be a just cause. This in itself is the power that is responsible for the tension and urgency that the playwright's want

to define the atmosphere with, but unfortunately it is the one that the authorial point of view privileges most. Twice the Kimathi is brought to court, but to no avail, because he will not observe a law he had no part in making, and even worse, will not acknowledge a white judge. When he manages to speak in the second movement, it is merely to assert a defiant resistance that would send shock shivers anywhere: To quote, "By what right, " says he, "do you, a colonial judge sit in judgement over me?"[25].

To the threat of death that would normally go with the offence he has been accused of, he promptly re-acts in a tone and style reminiscent of sir Thomas Moore, before Norfolk and Cromwell in Bolt's (1963:110-111), *A Man for all Seasons*: Death! To a criminal judge in a criminal court, set up by a criminal law, the law of oppression. I have no words! [25].

It is concepts, labels and the thinly disguised Marxist paraphrases that actually defines Kimathi's Linguistic norms: Peasants, home-guards, sell-outs, opportunists, traitors, chauvinists are the reserve vocabulary used to describe the judge and the repressive social, capitalist class that he represents [26].

The point to be demonstrated here is not so much the correlation, or even the admirable defiance that this sometimes-mystified Kenyan political hero represents. Rather, it is that the playwrights', in the totality of their conception, and in the dramatic portrait of the protagonist, have actually adapted a confrontational and direct diatribe without an iota of effort at disguising their impatience with the entire social and political set-up. There is no hiding that Kimathi then becomes the undisguised mouthpiece of Ngugi and Micere, who use him to articulate their Marxist vision of society much to the chagrin and discomfort of the powers that be. This in my view is at once a problem of dramaturgy, raising relevant aesthetic and structural questions even as it becomes an approach that is populist rather than critical. Such relevant questions as may be asked include the following: Is there a way in which Kimathi's concerns or even his patriotic determination, can be represented without making those in political power, and with little education, uncomfortable? Are there other ways of attacking post-colonial Kenya's political excesses and getting away with it? Hopefully, some of these questions can be answered upon my discussion of the other playwright, Imbuga, shortly.

In *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* too, one cannot differentiate Kimathi (an alleged school drop out, as some Kenyan Historians have suggested), from the school and University training that his creators have gone through. It suggests that without sophisticated University Marxism, peasants in their realistic social contexts can hardly define the problems of their existence (See for example Historian Atieno-Odhiambo 1977: 385-88). From the point of view of this paper, it is this particular Ngugi/Micere approach that amounts or amounted to a call to arms, posing a threat to a backward regime that believes that the power of drama lies in its capacity to incite an immediate culture of political resistance. In other words the play is read as an attempt to re-invent a popular folk (tribal) hero since marginalized by government, and using this as an excuse to discredit

the reigning rulers. Sooner or later, the inventor of such a drama must face the wrath of exile that is if he is lucky enough to escape local imprisonment.

The Trial of Dedan Kimathi as a theatre play equally poses, in my experience with the teaching and production of it-grave problems of coherence, design and a disturbing theatrical structure which a producer has to contend with if he is to get anywhere. A part from an inordinately large cast which leads to the under-development, even casual attention to; if not out rightly contrived scenes, (consider for example the roles of boy and girl; woman, not to mention such people as priest, business executive etc., who only make fleeting appearances to "tempt" Kimathi when in his cell, much of "movement" one,⁸ is equally replete with didactic/prose as stage directions rather than drama. There is clearly an apparent and acute desperation to portray the "interpreted" version of history. The 'Black Man's History' to be enacted in "four faces" [5] is of course left, in the authors' own words, to the interpretation of a director. There are indeed what reads like "afterthoughts" as part of the stage direction, when at the end of a description, one finds: " note that the peasants singing should enact the flashback of black peoples' history...[4] or...note that a bush is just visible [6] and, "...the people stop, looking confused but *still defiant*"[7], as words and procedures in themselves rather than as drama.

In other words the play seems to me to suffer in terms of its design, and is left as a literature that can be read anyhow, (especially as a prose form), and not as an organically woven whole. The significance of this is that the play's prowess then begins to rely on its non-aesthetic qualities which all depend on every directors interpretation. The apparently revolutionary notions of "movements", and not acts or scenes, and the attempt to nationalise the vision of the play are indeed ambitious problematic, which in my opinion extract from a workable and theatrically fulfilling design. The result is that this play acquires all its value, fame and political appeal for precisely non-theatrical achievements.

The big fact though, is that the Kenyatta regime did not seem to have been much ruffled by that particular play. In fact, his detention, by dint of his own accounts, had nothing whatsoever to do with *The Trials*...⁹ It is indeed interesting that Ngugi's predicament with the government over his alleged crimes as a literary/theatre practitioner had to wait for another two years with the full outlawing itself having to wait till the Moi years, and did specifically affect the 'theatre' activities that Ngugi was spearheading at Kamirithu in his own home village. To the extent that the Kenyatta regime did not attempt to proscribe *The Trials*... can then partly be explained by the view raised in other

⁸ For Ngugi, the conventional use of acts and scenes is dispensed with in this play in favour of movements. Many readers agree that this is part of the author's many attempts to, as it were "decolonise " their form away from sheepish imitation of western cannons. Use of movement and phases inject a sense of revolution and in this instance, a historical unfolding of the Kenyan problem.

⁹ See for instance Ngugi's account of reasons for his detention in *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* (London: Heinemann, 1981)

discourses on Kenya, and specifically, the fact of the personality and general character of the regime at that point in time. It is deniable, in other words, that the Kamirithu plays (*Mother Sing for Me* and *I will Marry...*) were any more subversive than the earlier play. Whereas a detailed attention to this question is well beyond the scope of the present analysis, two observations can be made here.

First, if it be admitted that the author's of *The Trial...* actually knew only too well that they were trying to re-invent an important political figure in and among the *Agikuyu* of Kenya, then there can be no denying that they were performing and engaging with an important question of power. It is in fact immaterial that sometimes artistes in these kinds of situations plead innocence of motive. Moreover, it is very clear that the acts of censorship and banning have never been ideologically determined, but rather in nearly all instances, arbitrary and eclectic. But further to this, it is also clear, that at the time of *The Trials...* Ngugi had not extended his artistic experiments outside the academy, and the fact therefore, of his relative survival was only one buttressed by the eclectic perceptions of the political regime.

In the rest of this paper, I want to show how an equally sensitive, nay, inciting political writing can employ indirect, humorous, satirical techniques and above all, a sense of the theatre, to propound its message forth. In this way, Francis Imbuga is enabled to survive, ironically not only as a University teacher in the same Kenya, but also to have his works allowed in the official school curriculum in spite of their stinging criticism of the political system. Put differently, Imbuga's approach seems to be based on the higher aesthetic realm, that in fact, theatre is not just mirror like reality, but rather as is often said a "re-enactment" or even an illusion of reality. With this in mind, a writer is then liberated from the artificial confines of politics while at the same time engaging that reality into criticism and scrutiny.

5.1 FRANCIS IMBUGA: THE "LAUGHTER AND DEATH" STRATEGIES

John Ruganda has aptly summarised the dramaturgical strategy of Francis Imbuga, as one embedded in the aesthetics of "Telling the Truth Laughingly," or as he puts it in different terms, 'the dialectics of transparent concealment' (Ruganda 1992:1). These strategies entail *interalia* the fact that the playwright exploits veritable strategies of "distancing of setting/context, and of the *dramatis personae*"; thus *Kafira*, "Imbuga's pet setting in two of his most famous plays, *Betrayal* and *Kafira*, is not any one country, but easily suggests Africa, and so is "Masero" in *Successor*. Similarly, as Ruganda writes, "the superficial reading of the plays' by the authorities is further enhanced by the names the author gives to major *dramatis personae*..." (Ruganda 1992:6-8). The point even at this early stage would be that where Ngugi makes no pretence that he is squarely talking

about Kenya, Imbuga thinly disguises it and is therefore able to generalise, or even say recognisable things, but after only successfully "suspending your disbelief", as it were.

There is also Imbuga's extensive reliance on what Ruganda distinguishes as the comic characters and "serio-comic actions", in practically all his plays, (Ruganda 1992:9-15) They include Mulili in *Betrayal in the City* as probably the most outstanding in his illiterate man's English as well as the striking role of Jusper who waivers between comic seriousness to actual madness in order to state basic "home truths". The others are Agege in *Aminata*, Segasega in *Successor*, and to a certain degree, Bin-Bin in *Man of Kafira*. Of course, in Imbuga's plays there is an occasional serious man, the concerned intellectual who wants to speak plainly, like Osman does in *Man of Kafira* when the play option of "educating " Boss fails. But such men quickly dissipate because as with Osman, their "consciences" virtually kill them [MOK, 18] while Bin's wisdom of "alienating yourself from the miseries of your profession" and suspending your feelings in situations such as this one [MOK, 16], becomes the pragmatic and sensible option. The point here, to emphasise, is that Imbuga in this respect practices some kind of avoidance art, which enables him to preserve his art. He is the general who would like to live and fight again, rather than be killed at war!

To fully comprehend this discussion, a brisk synopsis of *Man of Kafira* is perhaps necessary at this juncture. This play is sometimes seen as a sequel to Imbuga's earlier, *Betrayal in the City* (1976) that as already intimated, is set in the imaginary country called Kafira. The idea is that in the former play, "Boss" regime is brought to an abrupt end by the progressive forces coup, led by Jusper, Mosese and Jere. Consequently, in a kind of typical African style, this former president escapes into exile. The drama of *Kafira* therefore opens with "Boss," (read president), overthrown and living in exile in the home of president Gaffi (read Gadafi?), in "Abiara", from whence he is planning a return to his motherland. In one of the most clever theatrical scoops in Kenya, what the audience watches /reads, for a good one hour or so, is "a play within a play", for there in "Abiara", (read Arabia?) deposed boss has ordered for a play to entertain him. Osman is the professional director of the troupe preparing the play. What happens is that after many gruelling hours of rehearsal, boss decides he is no longer interested in the play, and the play-even in actual performance-is abruptly stopped, to the near rumpus in the theatre. Instead, Boss now wants a traditional wrestling match between two men "...who have eaten well. He wants to use them to prove a point, that in this world, only the fittest survive,"[MOK, 15]. In a brisk combination of humour, satire and biting criticism, Boss, (a perfect disguise for former dictator Idi Amin, yet not limited to him!) is portrayed as a raving Lunatic who has actually lost touch with reality, and is therefore causing serious embarrassment to his host. Thus the reward in his typical dictators' mania will be "a Kafiran woman for a week", [MOK, 16] for the man who will sadistically win and bring the lifeless body of his victim to boot. Such then is the man we are dealing with, to an extent that at the level of

technique it can easily be seen that it circumvents the local Kenyan reality and hopefully then, critique it from the safe distance.

But in discussing Francis Imbuga, it is imperative to see that his works equally demonstrate the ubiquitous nature of power; the fact that it is spread in all manner of places, and not just in the entity nicknamed "Boss" in this particular drama. Through the various interactions, one of the most interesting performances of power is the one of 'agency' or proximity, best conveyed as we have stated, through Bin-Bin, but captured in the early part of the play by Grabio and Taget. In the world of the play, Grabio and Taget have the responsibility of punishing Desi and Helna because the two refused to "entertain state guests" [MOK, 2], at least this is the drama being rehearsed for Boss before he suddenly changes his mind. Imbuga is of course alluding here to a form of female exploitation almost taken for granted in the Post-colony: Their role as a source of easy sex to those of the political elite who have the power and the money; and it does not matter that the girls "had no feelings of love for the guests", [MOK, 2]. It is a plea that in fact is received with wonderment by the tormentors; the idea that the pleasures of the state guests-equated to life itself- is reduced or compared to a fleeting feeling like "love". Again here, it reminds one of Mbembe (1992) and Bayart (1993); precisely this sort of use of young girls in Cameroon, Togo and elsewhere, as one important way in which the political elite perform their power. This is how Mbembe puts it:

"Pride in possessing an active penis has to be dramatised, with sexual rights over subordinates, the keeping of concubines, etc. The unconditional subordination of women to the principle of male pleasure remains one of the pillars upholding the reproduction of the phallocratic system" (Mbembe, 1992:9).

From my own analysis however, both Helna and Desi show that even under these despicable circumstances, they are not perpetual victims. The most memorable line in the whole play is therefore probably the idea that "our men don't die", [MOK, 6], sang at the moment of the symbolic rebirth of their husbands, already eliminated by these agents of the regime. To be sure, this framework of analysis can be usefully extended to all the other women in the Imbuga play under consideration here. Amina as president Gafi's wife is memorable for her reminder that he must be her husband, and not her president, [MOK, 23]. Even Regina, who has been abducted from Kafira, apparently just to settle old scores rather on the basis of love, is the only one who can face Boss for what he really is and bring him back to sanity. She is indeed the heroine in whose hands the dictator-husband actually falls. The same can be said of mama Rama, President Jere's wife who is for all intent and purposes, the *defacto* ruler of Kafira: The husband we are made to believe is actually an indecisive weakling...*adfinitum*.

Yet, the most memorable mad man in Imbuga's entire strategy remains Boss himself, conceptualised to ludicrous insanity, which contextually hides all the satire that simultaneously, resonates from his very presentation. In the play

Kafira, one is confronted with one of the most outstanding, hilarious, and arguably also, the most powerful portrait of the menace and practice of dictatorship. There is a most profound sense in which Imbuga's "Boss," surpasses every picture of the surreal, the macabre and monstrous that our Literature has seen in such remembered figures as Soyinka's Kongi, (*Kongi's Harvest*, 1967), or even Sembene Ousmane's "the venerable one" King Leon Mignane in *The Last of the Empire*, (Ousmane, 1983). Witness this for a brisk illustration of the lunatic like exchange between "boss" and one of his wives also sarcastically named Mercedes:

BOSS: I am president still. Am I not, Mercedes? I mean legally.

MERCEDES: What my lord?

BOSS: Where were your ears when I asked that question? Where is your mind?

MERCEDES: I am sorry

BOSS: The sorrows of an absent minded woman means nothing to me. You swore to stay by me till the gun does us part. The gun? No, not by the gun. (*He notices and stares at one of the guns on the wall for a while. Now he picks it and kisses it.*). A nine millimetre automatic browning. This is the one they prophesied would kill me. (*He laughs*). No, no, my dear gun. I am beyond your reach. How dare you a toy among guns; a female gun, draw blood from me? No! It will have to be a grenade, a powerful bomb that will draw blood from boss! Go try your power elsewhere. (*He replaces it.*) Try Gafi, he might oblige. (*He bursts out laughing*)

Notice, even in this little exchange, Boss' preponderant fondness for suggestive sexual allusions. The gun in this case is played on, more or less as a phallic symbol, incorporating that same post-colonial world-view in which sexuality and politics are merged. It is indeed tempting to look at Boss' notion here, of the powerful grenade that will draw blood from him, as nothing more than a subtle innuendo to the experience of orgasmic in sexual consummation, which obviously looms large in his mind.

Elsewhere, the full effect of Boss' mental status is to be found when he finally goes back to *Kafira* completely oblivious of the reality that his return is a matter of great national consternation. The present rulers desperate to give him a "comradely" protection still have an uphill task convincing the man that he is actually not the "boss":

JERE: Bring in the prisoners. (*the guard opens an obscure door in the back wall and returns with boss and his three wives*). Well here you are lades and gentlemen, Boss and his wives in flesh and blood. Not dead, not a scratch.

BOSS: Dead? Why would I be dead? Did you gentlemen imagine that I, Boss would die, just like that, like chicken? No, no you are greatly mistaken! When I decide to die, I shall do so in a big way, an honourable way.

JOURNALIST: What are your immediate plans your Excellency?

JERE: I said there were to be no questions.

BOSS: Oh there is no harm in that. My future plans are no secret. As soon as I have settled down, I want to meet the people. I want to tell them what a big heart my friend and brother here has. Few people in his position would dare welcome me back home... [MOK, 68-69]

Quite clearly, this is an exchange that can only be underpinned by the surreal. It is in fact essentially inconceivable how anyone of Boss' kind of record would in the first place be welcomed back by no less a personage than the head of state who he also seeks to take over from. Are we once more into that essential interplay between reality and fantasy that ever seem to play themselves out in the domain of our politics? Again, I must stress here this essential difference between Imbuga and Ngugi, namely that, in presenting us with a hyperbolic and most bizarre portrait of the mad "boss", he actually subtly distances him from familiar names; presumably the more sane ones. Yet, it cannot escape our attention, that although Boss is for all intent and purposes mad here, the point is that he is supposedly normal; pitted as I have observed earlier, against the really mad characters such as Juser Wendo. Indeed, It will be remembered that it is in this same *Man of Kafira* that Juser reminds us: "normal people are mad, " and that, "the world of normal people is a world of mad men." [MOK, 63]. So too in *Betrayal in the City*, Jere realises that "when the madness of an entire nation disturbs a solitary mind, then it is not enough to say that the man is mad", (*Betrayal*, 35). Thus quite clearly, madness as a disease conflated by power, conforms to the well-established notion in Imbuga (and quite a few other African playwrights), that it is indeed a discourse on 'higher truth'. It is a madness that seeks to explain itself to others (unlike the usual madness!), and in Mbembe's apt analysis, provokes a kind of astonishment and incredulity, if only because it has exhausted itself.

As I have stated earlier, Boss in the two Imbuga plays relevant here, is a study in the dictatorial prototype, or what Northrop Fryre (1986) would have described as an archetype upon which all the other forms are emerged or subsumed. In then first part, the prolonged absence from stage also enables the playwright to establish the character. We thus only experience him through the fortunes and misfortunes of the people of Abiara who must play host to him and endure his near imbecile wishes. We have christened this strategy as "off stage action"; which in the practice of drama sometimes constitutes an even more profound symbolism than that which is being experienced in the immediate. It must be noticed that this is a strategy that served very well in the earlier play, especially the idea that a dictator is a colossus; an evil force whose hold on any one African country is so awesome and so complete that people hardly ever see him in person, but present, he indeed is. In other words, this is how "the commandment" according to Mbembe, performs its authority and eventually turning itself into a fetish, (Mbembe 1992).

From a dramaturgical point of view, this *modus operandi* for a playwright seems to be extremely important, particularly in enhancing the myth and power of the feared man. Indeed it confronts the playwright with a special task: How to exactly clothe and present a dictator-a megalomaniac as it were-in a manner that satisfies and equals his notoriety in the human universe. Confronted with this situation, Imbuga attempts a most ludicrously amazing arrangement. Armed with the background and offstage sensation that we already have, Part two of the play is therefore also an exercise in one of the most bizarre realities, which strangely, define such men's worlds. There is the "golden bed and Golden sheets" to begin with, on which several types of guns are displayed, complete with an array of wondrous animal carvings, as well as portraits of former presidential engagements. The idea is to show that such types will not accept the reality of having been deposed and do therefore cling ominously to their status symbols of a long gone past. Boss is at once the picture of a man who though fallen and in exile, has completely refused to face it. He is brought in the company of a retinue of wives who have been trying to "sing him to sleep," for the last many hours, but to no avail, [MOK 24; 28]. There is a well orchestrated self delusion that he indulges in, for example, that he is a latter-day Shaka, an Hitler and even a Napoleon of sorts, titles that not too strangely, have been embraced by practically all this type in Africa and of course the compounding belief they hold, even when overthrown, that there will be an "imminent return to my motherland," [MOK, 34]. Later, when we hear of Boss' diet, "...the breast of a brown guerrilla..." [MOK, 26] and what reads like a catalogue of human parts; "...mashed kidneys boiled in bile soup and delicately fried in animal fat..." [MOK, 35] we are satisfied that before us is a cannibal. It is a picture closely resembling all that was ever said about dictator Idi Amin Dada of Uganda, who one may want to argue, did actually qualify as a dictatorial archetype.

The point about this picture really is that, in my opinion, it is a great attempt to tame, even to bring to life, a man almost impossible to imagine. Actually this is an exaggerated hyperbole of a human possibility; the tendency to have everything out of proportion as Mbembe noted with Cameroon, and its greatest merit is that it keeps everybody so thoroughly amused that they have no time to think about its extensively critical relevance to the local ruler. It can be speculated here, that, because the "Boss" pictures that Imbuga relishes in, are somehow and somewhat strategically external to Kenya, they have and do not attract much political interest amongst the power wielders. Thus *Kafira* is superficially speaking, a play set only very briefly in neighbouring Uganda or some other remote and unknown country such as Arabia. For this reason it must have been tempting for the powers that be, to *delude* themselves that the critical focus is on a different country and this alone may explain the unprecedented survival of the play in the years in Kenya when the performance of many less "dangerous" titles were promptly outlawed. I should stress here that it is not so much because the rulers in that instance were that stupid, or naïve. Rather, it would seem that part of the game in these kinds of situation is to engage in

momentous acts of precisely such self-delusion; to pretend certain realities away and just believe in the Tomfoolery that Boss is indeed someone else.

One of the most outstanding differences between Ngugi and Imbuga must also be seen in the context of the fact that Imbuga has never tried to work with local villagers as objects, or even subjects of his theatrical enterprise. As it were he strikes a different image, safe and definitely, "not dangerous/dissident " from his ivory tower precincts at the Kenyatta University. The answer of course also lies in the fact that the political leadership obviously subscribes to the contentious notion that plays are a threat only under some political imaginary and in especially constructed political sites or contexts such as *Kamirithu* became. Thus, if Imbuga's activities are only confined to the city and more specifically to his students he remains anonymous to the interests of the political establishment. Well, his tribe, somebody suggested at the Exeter conference, may also have something to do with it! But that is just perhaps as far as we can go with the myth of tribal stereotyping.

6. A CONCLUDING WORD: THE IMPORTANCE OF 'MULTIPLE' CONCEPTIONS OF POWER

If there is any conclusion to be drawn from the preceding discussion, it is simply this: That there are more than a dozen ways of understanding representations of power and politics in Africa, particularly if they are presented through drama. Whereas, the temptation to be confrontational and undisguisedly direct, (the resistance plot), is always there, in spite of its perils and dangers, it bears repeating that it belongs to what I have discussed as the single binary notion of power, which only tends to privilege one form of relationship. In doing so it ends up suppressing or deleting other narratives that are equally at play in the postcolonial/post independence society.

I have hopefully demonstrated that in a careful reading of Ngugi's own works, there are many sub-texts or meta-narratives of ordinary articulations of power, which are either not developed or merely stunted because of the narrational inclination to "great refusal" or better still "grand resistance," (Fredrick Cooper, 1994).

In as specific terms, I am convinced that Francis Imbuga's drama does offer an alternative toolkit within which theatre practitioners can operate; thoroughly critique and at the same time stay, [safely] in the home domain. Or, (to paraphrase the U.S based Sierra Leone scholar Lemuel Johnson), Imbuga offers the tool kit on or about, "How to Breathe Dead Hippo Meat, and Live!"¹⁰

¹⁰ Johnson (1995), in "the Sierra Leone Trilogy ": *Carnival of the Gold Coast; Highlife for Caliban; Hand on the Navel*, are implicitly and in part poking fingers at both the burden of exile, and the tribulations of home, especially in the African Post-colony, and this title metaphor is apt and rich; See in particular, the poem, "How to breathe Dead Hippo Meat and Live".

My close analysis of sections of Ngugi's text shows that the person hitherto presumed to be victim actually struggles a lot, and negotiates vital space within which he survives. To do this he is often called upon to change identities and to play bafoon if necessary. It is as important to see in the Ngugi case, the facts that 'multiplex' readings of power help in giving voice to other previously marginalized contributions. There is the obvious case of "Boy" and "Girl" who are in fact contrived to undergo a revolutionary self-transformation, but more importantly, is the historical role of women in the struggle for liberation in Kenya as represented by the "woman" in the same play. It is in my view as useful, to expand our understanding of the historiography of "loyalism", to use Atieno-Odhiambo's phrase,¹¹ as well as throw light on the role of ordinary settlers who saw themselves as ordinary working class caught up in the collective guilt of colonialism, (see *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, pp 28-29).

The two playwrights' explicit differences show rather clearly, the subtle superiority of satire over the plain pedagogy of tragedy. But I hasten to add; there are equally important lessons that impinge on the historiography of Kenya. In the analysis, I have hopefully illustrated the fact that the 'subaltern'; the Kenyan peasant in this respect, is not always a victim even in the colonial and postcolonial contexts that we have referred to. I have also demonstrated that he is in fact not even one homogeneous entity at all, as does tend to appear from single binary paradigms. Needless to say, African playwrights in here have food for thought regarding their methods and techniques, but above all, this whole new prism of the history of those previously marginalized, or drowned in the grand resistance narratives of the centre.

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¹¹ See, Atieno-Odhiambo, "Kenya: The formative years" in Ogot, B. A and Ochien'g, W. R (1995).

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