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# THE PLACE AND PROSPECTS OF INDIGENOUS THEATRICAL PERFORMANCES IN PEACEBUILDING IN KENYA

**Kitche Magak, Susan Mbula Kilonzo, and Judith  
Miguda-Attyang**

**ABSTRACT:** *This article examines the role and future of indigenous theatrical performances (ITPs) in peacebuilding in Kenya. It focuses on the Kikuyu, Luhya, and Luo communities' traditions of ritual, storytelling, proverb, and song and dance as specific cases of ITPs in Kenya. While the main focus is on the current use of these art forms in peacebuilding initiatives, the article argues that ITPs can be a powerful tool in addressing structural and other forms of injustices that manifest themselves in conflicts. As such, ITPs can greatly contribute to peacebuilding efforts if a clear framework to support their application is developed.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Kenya, indigenous theatrical performances, ritual, storytelling, proverb*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Art is an important part of human life. It plays innumerable societal roles, one of which is peacebuilding. The arts are gaining more attention in the area of peacebuilding programming and scholarship. John

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Paul Lederach (2005) recognizes the place and prospects of the arts in his exhaustive framework for peacebuilding. Arts have also been used to communicate human experience (Shorter 1998). Depending on the intention of the communicator, the arts can be used to foster peace or foment war. Since artistic communication has the potential to influence people's thinking and actions, it can be useful in changing the dynamics in difficult and complex conflicts, be they interpersonal, intercommunal, national, or global. Despite their transformative potential, the arts have not received much attention in the field of peace studies.

It is a trite adage that many African cultures are highly theatrical. This theatrical nature of numerous cultures across the continent explains the existence of the many indigenous genres that are performed in various social settings (Eyoh 1987). Like in the rest of the continent, dramatic and theatrical performances in Kenya today are a fusion of indigenous oral art forms and Western theatre. Indigenous drama includes, but is not limited to, oral narratives, poetry, proverbs, riddles, music, dance, mime, costuming, and ritual, among others. This article, however, focuses on three major indigenous theatrical performances (ITPs)—rituals, proverbs, and song and dance—and the potential of the three as powerful tools in addressing structural and other forms of injustices that manifest themselves in conflicts. Song and dance are treated in this article as an integrated whole in the indigenous cultures under discussion, due to their symbiosis in performance. Indigenous theatrical performances encapsulate performances espoused by the local native people within their specific cultural contexts. The article proceeds from the premise that many African cultures remain highly performatory, where virtually every major event in life is celebrated by communal theatrical performances. In Kenya, the use of ITPs in peacebuilding preceded and has also survived after colonialism.

Indigenous theatrical forms absorbed elements of the colonizers' culture, including Western theatre, to enrich and adapt to the new multicultural environment. Kenya, with its ever-simmering ethnic-based rivalries, which culminated into a violent postelection violence in 2007/8, is part of the conflict-riddled Great Lakes region that includes Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), South Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia. The bulk of Kenya's population is the youth who suffer socioeconomic marginalization and political exclusion that make them vulnerable to the machinations of the social elites, especially politicians. This article contends that ITPs have a huge potential to "demobilize" the youth from their state of marginalization-

induced destructive militancy. Specifically the article examines: a) the evolution of ITPs to espouse changing times; b) the effectiveness of ITPs in peacebuilding; c) the rationale for the staying power of ITPs in peacebuilding; and d) the future prospects of ITPs in future peacebuilding initiatives and processes.

## II. CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

On December 27, 2007, Kenyans turned out in high numbers to vote in a hotly contested general election. After three days of waiting for results to be released, marked by accusations of vote counting anomalies, Mwai Kibaki of the Party of National Unity (PNU) claimed electoral victory and was hurriedly sworn in as the president in the night. The opposition, led by Raila Odinga of the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), rejected the results, and the country exploded into postelection violence that claimed the lives of over 1,000 people and displaced over 300,000 people.

This article is a qualitative study of the existing indigenous theatrical performances' peacebuilding strategies in Kenya in the wake of this postelection violence of 2007/8. It relies majorly on document reviews, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions with predominantly Kikuyu, Luhya, and Luo communities in the aftermath of the post-election violence.<sup>1</sup> While all the focus group discussions and most of the in-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face in Kanunga village in Kiambu (Kikuyu), Konyango village in Kendu Bay (Luo), and Ekamanji village in Luanda (Luhya), a few in-depth interviews were conducted over the telephone with persons from these areas. In total, 87 persons (40 males, 47 females) were interviewed.

## III. RITUAL PERFORMANCE AND PEACEBUILDING

Ritual plays one of the most important roles in the social organization of indigenous societies. The article looks at ritual as symbol-in-action, which may be with or without accompanying verbal symbols (Shorter 1998). Many scholars agree on the transformative power of ritual, which is inherent in its occurrence in special social settings away from everyday life, its transcendental symbolic communication, and its power to confirm and change worldviews, identities, and relationships (Schirch 2004). Aylward Shorter (1998: 61) further avers that "African

rituals possessed a theatrical character long before formal theatre was introduced to the continent by Europeans.” These symbols-in-action serve the purpose of deepening a people’s experience of events and reinforcing people’s ability to reconcile with these experiences. Used positively, ritual can be effective in symbolically communicating a commitment to nonviolence, healing trauma, and transforming relationships by enabling parties to transcend hatred and violence (Maiese n.d.).

Ritual is a performative art form that can be religious, pseudo-religious, or secular. Cynthia Cohen et al. (2011: 6) view “traditional rituals” as performances meant to create spaces for various forms of transformations. These ritualistic performances are planned and supervised by knowledgeable community leaders. Although ritual performances take place in real time, they are loaded with sacred meanings that draw in and bind the participants through expression of values that cannot be entirely communicated “normally.”

Ritual has been and continues to be central to conflict resolution and peacebuilding (Schirch 2004). In Kenya, ritual is perhaps the most ubiquitous theatrical art form in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. In fact, the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission (TJRC), which was established after Kenya’s postelection violence, recommends reparation measures that would include giving “enhanced weight to ritual and spiritual use of land by communities who are claiming restitution or ownership” (TJRC 2013: 110). The TJRC was set up to look into the gross violations of human rights inflicted on persons by the state, public institutions, and holders of public office, both serving and retired, between December 12, 1963, and February 28, 2008.

Historically, ritual-dominated peacebuilding existed among virtually all Kenyan communities and still continues to play a significant role today. The effectiveness of ritual in peacebuilding is rooted in the traditional religions of these communities. Although these ritual performances are a preserve of a select few medicine men and women,<sup>2</sup> they are collectively binding. Most members of these communities, past and present, believe that going against the dictates of these ritualistic performances bodes evil to the transgressor, as one medicine woman noted in an in-depth interview:

Among the Luo, nobody in his right mind would go against rituals. Once a ritual has been performed, members of the community have to obey in order to avoid misfortune befalling the

member or members of his family. Unfortunately, the misfortune that arises out of going against rituals cannot be reversed the same way witchcraft can be reversed. That is why if a ritual is performed binding members to war or against war, hardly anybody disobeys.<sup>3</sup>

The enactment of ritual is the epitome of theatrical performance, with oath administration at the height of it. In all three ethnic communities examined—Luo, Luhya, and Kikuyu—oath-taking is an important ritual practice. Oath-taking, however, is more widespread among the Kikuyu, than the Luo and Luhya. A typical ritual performance is marked with oath-taking, incantations, chants, and animal sacrifice. In a number of cases, the blood from the sacrificed animal is drunk and/or smeared on the participants. In all the three communities, an oath is treated as a solemn promise that invokes a divine witness that dictates the adherent's future action or behavior. It is widely believed that one who has taken an oath only deviates from it at his or her own peril, which could include death.

Among the Bukusu, a subgroup of the Luhya, cleansing rituals are a vital aspect of community life. Cleansing ritual ceremonies are organized in this community to reconcile an individual or group of individuals with themselves and the community in order to foster peaceful coexistence. Whenever something occurs in the community that is considered taboo, such as killings in war, a cleansing ritual ceremony is organized. A typical ritual cleansing would take place in the following manner:

After any incarceration the community would demand a cleansing ceremony. The community would then provide a *kimisango*, or sacrifice. Among youths, this involved staring the culprits in the face, and elder would then hold a chicken by the legs and twirl the chicken around the accused then smash its head on the ground at their feet. With adults, the community slaughtered a sheep and allowed the blood to wash over the culprits cleansing them in the process. (DICE n.d.)

Rituals performances have been at the forefront of mediating cross-border conflict between different ethnic communities in Kenya. A good example is the cross-border conflict between the Luo and the Maa-

sai, both Nilotic groups who share important rituals. As Earl Conteh-Morgan wrote:

In peacebuilding/reconciliation processes between the Luo and Maasai, the elders play a key role as conveners of a peace conference with women, youth, and children playing an active role. The two groups would then strengthen their blood brotherhood by performing a number of rituals, such as: 1) getting mothers to exchange babies with the “enemy” group and suckle them; 2) warriors exchanging spears; 3) prayers offered by the elders; and 4) a profound curse being pronounced on anyone who attempted any further cross border violence. These rituals among others would make it almost impossible for the two sides to fight again. (2004: 242)

These rituals have deep symbolic significance. For example, suckling the enemy’s baby makes the baby, family, and clan of the enemy one’s own baby, family, and clan member, respectively. After this ritual, anybody who does any harm to the enemy-turned-family and clan would suffer the same penalty that one would suffer if he or she transgressed against his or her own blood family.

Unfortunately, the current situation in Kenya is one in which sections of ethnic communities perform rituals to bind them to pursue divisive causes, such as ethnic political dominance. Across the country, warring communities perform divisive rituals that “other” and demonize communities that hold different political views. This has been the scenario in the last four general elections, with the 2007/8 postelection violence being the worst outcome of these indigenous ritual performances. One example is that of the Mungiki sect, a pseudo-religious gang of thugs that played a devastating role in the perpetration of violence during the 2007/8 postelection violence. The members of this gang are initiated into the organization through a systematic and violent oath-taking ritual that is conducted in semidark locations that make it hard to identify others involved. According to the Country of Origin Information Centre (COIC), the Mungiki oath-taking ritual includes, among others, shedding off of Western clothes and dressing in Kikuyu traditional regalia, death threats, beatings, eating of raw *mutura* (intestines stuffed with raw meat and blood), drinking of goat blood, and slaughtering of goats (COIC 2010). Some literature indicates that im-

mersion in a river (baptism), tobacco sniffing, chanting, and walking through smoke also form part of the initiation ritual (Kilonzo 2012).

#### IV. STORYTELLING AND PEACEBUILDING

Storytelling is often at the heart of oral cultures. It is the vehicle through which oral cultures perpetuate themselves. This art form has, however, transcended its oral culture origin to thrive in today's literacy culture. Thomas Arendshorst (2005) aptly observes that oral media such as storytelling contains and retains traditional idioms, myths, and values that bestow on them communicative powers that maintain a context of meaning and psychological protection for people, particularly in difficult circumstances such as violent conflict. Like ritual performance, storytelling plays a crucial role in peacebuilding worldwide. As Dan Bar-On and Fatma Kassem (2004: 289) describe it:

The storytelling method can be used to work through intractable conflicts. Working through enables people who have suffered traumatic social experiences to learn to live with these painful events while developing an ability to listen to the pain of the "other." The storytelling approach focuses on the way personal storytelling facilitates the working-through processes in intractable conflicts. The storytelling approach was used in To Reflect and Trust (TRT), a dialogue group that began in 1992 and involved descendants of Nazi perpetrators and Jewish descendants of Holocaust survivors. The storytelling method was applied to a year-long Jewish-Palestinian student workshop held at Ben Gurion University in 2000–2001.

Traditionally, storytelling was (and is still) used by many indigenous Kenyan communities to work through the conflicts across the whole social spectrum at interpersonal, family, clan, community, and intercommunity levels. Many folktales from these communities revolve around conflict resolution and peacebuilding. As noted by one clan elder in a focus group discussion, oral narratives are commonly performed in peacebuilding meetings in Kenya. The elder recalled: "In late February [2014], I attended a peace meeting between the Kipsigis [a Kalenjin subgroup] and Luo elders. The meeting was held to resolve the clashes that erupted out of cross-border cattle rustling. One of the Kipsigis



elders told of the story of Lwanda Magere. The story caused a lot of amusement, and the elders started competing with each other, in jest, to tell their version of the story.<sup>24</sup> The legend of Lwanda Magere is a classic “Samson and Delilah” story. Magere was an indestructible Luo warrior who wreaked havoc on the Kipsigis’ opponents, but was betrayed by a Kalenjin enchantress offered to him as a war bounty wife.

In Kenya today, this storytelling potential in peacebuilding has been taken a notch higher, especially by theatre artists and other peacebuilders. Indeed, the use of this approach has increased exponentially since the traumatic postelection violence. The popularity of this indigenous theatrical art form can be attributed to the fact that “storytelling traditions are an axis of drama for conflict transformation” (Arendshorst 2005: 1).

One theatre group that has perfected the storytelling model in peacebuilding is Amani People’s Theatre, whose stated mission is “to provide the space and skills for individuals and communities to respond to conflict, in all its forms and in all levels of society, in a creative and redemptive way that reaffirms the sanctity of human life” (Amani People’s Theatre 2013). The group uses storytelling, among other strategies, to promote nonviolent ways of responding to injustice and conflict in both urban and rural parts of Kenya. One reason for the effectiveness of the group lies in the fact that they work within a social-cultural context that they understand and appreciate. The people “hear” and respond to their message because it addresses the nuances that can easily be missed by “an outsider trying to change the societal mainstream” (Dudouet et al. 2008: 11). This is not to say that outsiders cannot use storytelling techniques to transform conflict—it is just harder because there are subtleties that they may miss.

Storytelling narratives can be loosely broken into two types: individual and collective. On the one hand, individual narratives allow the listener(s) to hear and see the narrator and consequently identify with the “otherness” of the storyteller. Individual narratives, especially those that contain stories of adversity, are easier to believe and empathize with as they tug at the basic strings of humanness. As demonstrated in the subsequent arguments, the believability of individual narratives makes them a very powerful strategy in determining the direction of interpersonal interactions, and whether such interactions lead to war or peace (Dudouet et al. 2008). Collective narratives, on the other hand, are less credible because invariably they are tinged with collective aspirations,

which usually inherently accuse other collectives. Collective narratives are also intrinsically jingoistic, a fact that provokes counterjingoism from the competing narrative.

The individual narrative strategy has been very powerful in containing Kenya's postelection violence. Virtually all conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts in Kenya involve harrowing or heartening individual narratives. The media has also been central to the popularization of the individual narratives. For example, most Kenyans are familiar with the story of Bernard Ndege, the man who miraculously survived an inferno during the postelection period where all eleven members of his nuclear family were locked in his house in the lakeside town of Naivasha and torched. Ndege's tragic personal story, which has been extensively covered by the media, is widely used in peacebuilding campaigns determined to ensure that his tragedy never happens again in Kenya. Indeed, Ndege's tragic individual story was part of the International Criminal Court's (ICC) prosecution evidence arsenal in the accusations against the current president, Uhuru Kenyatta, who faced crimes against humanity charges at the ICC for his role in Kenya's 2007/8 postelection violence. The ICC has since dropped the case due to lack of evidence and has accused the Kenyan authorities of intimidating witnesses to recant their statements against Kenyatta or to withdraw as witnesses altogether.

Sadly, but understandably, when Ndege's narrative is told from a collective perspective, it unearths deep-seated ethnic animosity between the Luo and the Kikuyu. As one primary school teacher in Kan-yadhiang', Kendu Bay, the home area of Ndege, lamented indignantly:

These Kikuyus are always killing us. It started with [Tom Mboya],<sup>5</sup> and it has never stopped. Look at what they did to the Luos in 2007. They butchered Ndege's entire family in Naivasha. Ndege's only crime was that he was a Luo working in a Kikuyu-dominated area. Ndege now lives in this village a traumatized and broken man, but his murderous Kikuyu attackers have not been brought to book. Even in Kisumu, we never killed their people during the post-election riots. It is time we got wise.<sup>6</sup>

Such collective narratives told by victims criminalize and antagonize the perceived perpetrators of injustice. The narrative does not pause to consider that as a collective, it is not possible for an entire

community to perpetrate injustice. There are numerous redeeming individual narratives of Kikuyus who protected members of the Luo community against the murderous marauding gangs and vice-versa. Two of the authors of this article, who are from the Luo community, had a personal experience of the positivity of individual narrative as opposed to collective narrative. The house of Professor Wambui,<sup>7</sup> a Kikuyu and senior faculty member of Maseno University, which is located in a Luo area of the country, was attacked, looted, and razed to the ground. Fortunately, she had traveled with her entire family to her rural home to vote. A group of friends, mainly from the Luo community, got together, raised funds, and sent a team to comfort and deliver the funds to her. The faculty member has since moved to another university, but the friendships she forged with her Luo colleagues have continued to date.

The immediate background to the tragedies of Ndege and Wambui is the 2007 general elections. The stories of Ndege, Wambui, and many others that were affected by the postelection chaos could be, and have been, used in peacebuilding forums. For example, in Kiambaa village, a group of Kikuyus seeking refuge in a church were burnt alive, and the powerful, tragic personal narratives of the survivors are recounted in peacebuilding meetings between the Kalenjin perpetrators and the Kikuyu victims. The “performance” of these tragic personal narratives evokes deep-seated human empathy in the audience and are normally characterized by ardent promises of future peaceful coexistence.

## V. PROVERBS AND PEACEBUILDING

As Chinua Achebe (1994: 5) observes, “Proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten.” In many African societies, proverbs are the preserve of the elders who use them to dispense wisdom. Indeed, in specific indigenous Kenyan communities like the Luo, proverbs were historically more than wise sayings of the old. The use of proverbs was a true theatrical performance, where the performer’s whole mien took on a sage hue. The voice, the eyes, the facial expressions, the hand movements and other gestures transformed from the usual and acquired a graveness that underscored the seriousness of the message and the medium.

The seriousness of the proverb as an indigenous theatrical art form made it very popular in both conflict transformation and peacebuilding in indigenous Kenyan societies. A group of elders engaged in peace-

building would sit down, normally under a sacred village tree, exchanging proverbs for hours on end. As one village elder from the Banyore subgroup of the Luhya community in western Kenya observed in an in-depth interview:

A proverb *sio mchezo* [is not a joke]! When elders [predominantly men] sit down to preside over a dispute, it is the one who has both a large stock of proverbs and the greatest command of appropriate usage who earns the most respect and who is eventually looked upon to lead in the resolution of the conflict in question. It was unthinkable to hold conflict resolution meetings without the proverb masters. In exceptional cases, women who were good with proverbs would be invited to such meetings.<sup>8</sup>

The gender dimension in the quote is noteworthy. In a highly patriarchal society, the mastery of the proverb as an indigenous theatrical art form transcended strict patriarchal hierarchical social order. Although older women were free to use proverbs, this was mainly limited to dispensing wisdom to children and fellow women. Their “performance” of the proverb was mainly limited to dealing with domestic and other “minor” family issues. For women, participation on the grand intracommunity or intercommunity peacebuilding stage was by special invitation.

As a historically revered art form in most communities in Kenya, the proverb in conflict resolution and peacebuilding is barely alive today. There is a distinct possibility that the hallowed place of the proverb in conflict resolution and peacebuilding will die with the older generation who are in their twilight years. The main reason for the rapid decline of the use of proverb, in general, has been the decline of indigenous oral tradition that has largely given way to Western education. As Jacob Mhando (2008: 10) points out in a report to UNESCO, titled *Safeguarding Endangered Oral Tradition in East Africa*:

Today in Kenya, most of the children’s education comes from books rather than from elders . . . . These changes mean that much important oral traditions and generally traditional knowledge is being lost . . . . The knowledge that is being lost can provide people with a sense of identity because by knowing who

you are can give you pride in your culture. Elders have knowledge that is needed for survival.

Granted, proverbs are still widely used in intracommunity and intercommunity peacebuilding efforts, but reverence and the performatory elements have waned drastically. What is left is a shell of familiar words that the younger people only half-listen to with contemptuous dismissive smiles.

What then is the future of the proverb in peacebuilding in Kenya? The ubiquity of the art form in modern Kenya attests to its enduring legacy. Proverb has reinvented itself in a myriad of ways to adapt to the dictates of modernity. It has become “literate” and entered oral literature texts, some of which are used as school texts at all levels of education in the country. It has surreptitiously sneaked into popular culture through films, cartoons, popular music, and the Internet, among others, and it is still being widely used in conflict resolution, transformation, and peacebuilding. For example, the music of Joseph Kamaru and Daniel Owino Misiani, the two most popular Benga<sup>9</sup> musicians in Kenya, is replete with the use of sociopolitical proverbs. In a song titled “Piny Ose Omer (The World is Drunk),” Misiani profusely uses proverbial imagery:

*Pinywa masani omer kaka indiki gi ruodhwa*

This modern world of ours is drunk as was written by our Lord

*To ng'ato kalawi to tem tang' ahinya ne dbano*

When somebody is after your downfall, try to be wary of human beings

*To ng'ato kapuonji to tem winjo wachne mowacho*

When somebody is teaching you, try to heed to their word

*River Yala munenoni ojok tieko ogandawa mamotho*

The River Yala,<sup>10</sup> you know, is determined to finish our people who are drinking its waters<sup>11</sup>

The title of this song is a play on a popular Luo proverb *piny omer* (the world is drunk), which laments the loss of good old times. The song points out various social evils, which the singer believes are manifestations of the “drunkenness” of the modern world. The pinnacle of his lamentation is captured in the line “The River Yala, you know, is determined to finish our people who are drinking its waters,” suggesting

that the modern world is so topsy-turvy that even the very familiar can be fatally dangerous.

This study finds that in the participating communities virtually all discussions at community-initiated reconciliation meetings after the postelection violence used the proverb heavily. It is, therefore, safe to assert that the proverb can still get its “groove” back, as Adrian Onyando, a Kenyan writer and literature scholar, avers in an in-depth interview:

As scholars, we owe it to the present generation the popularization and preservation of our oral tradition. The proverb is just a case in point that exemplifies our sad disregard for our heritage, even elements that are absolutely useful. I believe that it is never too late to restore a beautiful thing, and that is why I write a lot on Luo oral tradition.<sup>12</sup>

Scholars in general, as Onyando aptly points out, should work together to restore both the performatory nature and the deserved reverence of the proverb. In the field of peacebuilding, both researchers and practitioners should devise strategies to restore the effectiveness of the use of proverbs in peacebuilding efforts.

The Kikuyu, Luhya, and Luo communities boast numerous proverbs that are extremely useful in and relevant to peacebuilding. For example, all three communities have a proverb that encourages friendship. Among the Kikuyu, understanding friendship is encouraged in the proverb that says “That which has been mutually agreed upon does not bring about disputes.” The value of friendship is captured in the Luhya proverb “Only someone else can scratch your back,” and Luo proverb “A friend is like a water source for a long journey.” Enmity is at the heart of conflict. It can be argued that such proverbs that stress the value of friendship and coexistence are crucial to both short-term conflict resolution and long-term peacebuilding.

Some scholars have argued that the continuing gradual loss of folk knowledge and wisdom in Africa has aggravated conflicts on the continent (Hussein 2005; Malan 1997). Proverbs, however, are still used extensively in peacebuilding initiatives, especially those led by the elders. It is no wonder, therefore, that proverbs relating to the wisdom of old age are common among most Kenyan communities. It is common knowledge that elders command a lot of respect in all Kenyan communities and because the use of the proverb is a near-preserve of the elderly, this art form also commands a lot of respect. It can be argued

that the potential of the proverb in peacebuilding is mostly inherent in the awe that it inspires in the indigenous people.

## VI. SONG AND DANCE AND PEACEBUILDING

Song and dance are elemental to human existence. While it is true that some cultures incorporate them more than others, there is no human culture that is devoid of some form of song and dance. In popular imagination, African cultures are very musical. Although exaggerated to mythical levels, there is an element of truth to this popular image. The life of an indigenous African person is often culturally sung and danced from the cradle to the grave. In many societies, major life events such as birth, initiation into adulthood, marriage, and death are celebrated with song and dance. In *The Socio-Cultural Implication of African Music and Dance*, Agatha Onwuekwe stresses the importance of song and dance in African culture:

Music in Africa is a natural phenomenon. It is an essential expression of life beginning with gentle lullabies heard in infancy and continuing with the games of childhood and the songs and dances associated with adult responsibilities. Music accompanies and celebrates every rite of passage, birth, and christening, initiation into adulthood, and finally death and mourning. (2009: 171)

Singing and dancing are prevalent in virtually all indigenous Kenyan communities. In many instances, song and dance have competed with and complemented one another in addressing social issues, including conflict. Peacebuilding songs are composed and performed to address both general and specific social tensions. Although song and dance were used extensively in transforming conflict in Kenya historically, this activity intensified during and after colonization. During colonization, song and dance were primarily used as resistance tools, including the promotion of violence as a tool for liberation. For instance, the Mau Mau rebellion period from 1952 to 1960 was replete with war songs and dances aimed at passing insurrection messages. A classical example of a Mau Mau rebellion song is “Mukurwe wa Nyagathanga” by Wambui wa Wambugu. In the song, whose title refers to the original mythical ancestral home of the Kikuyu community, Wambugu sings:

The Mukurwe tree of Nyagathanga  
 The origin of black people  
 If you wish to know more, come nearer  
 I will inform you

*Chorus:*

Oh dear! suffering is bad  
 Oh dear! Suffering is very, very bad  
 I saw the face of my friend and I found it dull  
 I got a deep feeling for my sister  
 Who went into the forests<sup>13</sup>

This was a Mau Mau mobilization and recruitment song that was accompanied by dance to camouflage its true meaning. The song asked the oppressed Africans “who wish to know more” about the resistance to oppressive white colonialism to “come near” and join the Mau Mau rebellion. The “sister who went into the forests” is an oblique reference to the freedom fighters, men and women, who were viewed by the oppressed as “mothers” who were fighting to give birth to a newborn baby called freedom. Such insurrection songs and dances were special in the sense that they were highly coded and the full importance of the meaning would only be appreciated by the initiated. For example, a rebellion song would be performed to entertain the white colonizers and their collaborators, who would totally miss the coded message. In a subtle sense, resistance violence can be viewed as redemptive peacebuilding violence, which is aimed at challenging and transforming the brutality of colonizer and the collaborators. The Mau Mau rebellion was aimed at bringing an end to colonial injustices, including forced labor, torture, castration, rape, and even massacres.

The tradition of using song and dance to resist oppression and injustice continued in postcolonial Kenya running through all the successive governments to date. Resistance song and dance are useful tools in conflict resolution, conflict transformation, and peacebuilding. In Kenya, the musical resistance was spearheaded by different performing art groups, including theatre troupes and music bands.

Among the theatre groups, the most popular was Kamiriithu Community Theatre, which was led by Ngugi wa Thiong’o, a Kenyan writer who is popular both nationally and internationally. The theatrical productions of the group, either pure song and dance or dramatic pieces infused with song and dance, aggressively challenged the excesses of the Jomo Kenyatta government of the 1970s. One significant and endur-



ing achievement of the work of the Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Centre (KCECC), the center founded by the group, is the promotion of the use of indigenous languages in theatrical production and literature, in direct challenge to the dominant use of English. As Hansel Ndumbe Eyoh (1987: 57) points out:

Kamiriithu has been the most important and significant centre, whose example has been emulated by schools, progressive theatre groups and writers inside and outside Kenya . . . As part of their cultural activities, the community invited Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii to write a play which they would then perform. The two writers jointly prepared an initial script—*Ngahika Ndenda*—which was subsequently revised during discussions with members of the cultural committee.

The KCECC group had very turbulent relations with the Kenyatta government, which led to numerous bans of their productions. *Ngahika Ndenda* was banned and the group's 2,000-seat open air amphitheatre razed by the authorities. This play, like most other plays the group has staged over the years, is replete with song and dance. The excessive reaction of the Kenyatta government testifies to the power of performance. The government understood and feared the power of performance, especially a theatrical marriage between indigenous performance traditions and Western theatre represented by Kamiirithu Community Theatre and Western-educated Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii. The Kenyatta government arrested and incarcerated Ngugi wa Thiong'o for undermining the government through the play. The fear of theatre perhaps originated from the fact that the Kenyatta government itself was partly a product of indigenous theatrical performances, particularly song and dance, which were used by the Mau Mau to undermine the colonial government.

Another performing artist who was a thorn in the flesh of successive Kenyan governments was the late Owino Misiani who led a Benga outfit called the D. O. Shirati Jazz Band. Singing mainly in his Luo mother tongue, Misiani poetically challenged the state's injustices perpetrated against the people, especially his Luo people, who have been marginalized by successive governments because of their perceived perennial opposition to sitting governments. Like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Misiani was arrested and jailed numerous times for his hard-hitting politically charged music. As Adams Oloo (2007: 182) observes:

In 1983, President [Daniel Arap] Moi ordered the arrest and subsequent incarceration of the musician Aching' Kabaselleh after accusing him of giving public performances in rural centres with guns hidden in acoustic drums "meant for use to topple the government . . . . The same fate has befallen Owino Misiani in all the successive regimes on the basis that he sings songs that not only undermine but also ridicule the government of the day.

Kenya has not been spared hip hop activism, either, which originated in the United States (Shank and Schirch 2008). Hip hop fuses and builds on the song and dance heritage of Kenyan communities to create a popular and powerful generic tool for activism. Hip hop is particularly effective in mobilizing the youth who respond both to the aestheticism of the musicality and the message. Socially conscious hip hop in Kenya addresses social injustices such as corruption, nepotism, poverty, and HIV/AIDS. Two of the most popular hip hop songs are "Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo (A Nation of Something Small)" by Eric Wainaina and "Utawala (Governance)" by Juliani. Both songs roundly criticize corruption and bad governance in Kenya, two factors that are at the root of so much strife and conflict in the country. Wainaina's song apporitions blame to both the ruler and the ruled. He sings: "Nchi ya kitu kidogo, ni nchi ya watu wadogo (A nation of something small is a nation of small people)."<sup>14</sup> Juliani's "Utawala," which has become a sort of national anti-poor governance anthem, says:

*Policeman anapiga rungu mwalimu, daktari, Anamrushia teargas na mtoto wake anarudishwa nyumbani hana school fees analipwa peanuts*

The policeman clubs the teacher and throws teargas at the doctor, but his own child is sent back home for non-payment of school fees because he is paid peanuts.<sup>15</sup>

Interviews conducted with police officers indicated that this line in the song has the potential to open up a much-needed space for dialogue between the police and the citizenry, especially with the youth. One police officer captured this spirit in an in-depth interview:

When I first heard this line in the song, I became so emotional. I couldn't believe that a young Kenyan musician would understand and so beautifully articulate the suffering of the police.

I always thought that young Kenyans are only interested in throwing stones at us. I am very sure that if more young people can see the police as fellow citizens and human beings, then the many violent confrontations that happen in this country can be avoided.<sup>16</sup>

Interestingly, “Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo” adopts the familiar narrative of blaming the police for corruption without paying much attention to the root causes of this corruption. This is a police force that serves a corrupt system, which, as noted in “Utawala,” does not pay them well enough to even afford basic things like school fees:

*Hata nyumbani ukipatwa na majambazi*  
 Even at home when you are invaded by thugs  
*Kupiga 999 wasema, ‘Sisi hatuna gari*  
 And you call 999 the police say, “We don’t have a vehicle”  
*Lete elfu tano ya petroli, saidia utumishi’*  
 Bring five thousand shillings for petrol to help those who serve<sup>17</sup>

While corruption is a disturbing reality in the Kenya police force and condemning it is the duty of every well-meaning citizen, it is important to realize that this condemnation has been going on since Kenya’s independence and nothing seems to change. Perhaps that is why the new narrative of addressing the root causes of police corruption, such as low pay, may bear more positive results. Indeed, studies indicate that corruption creates the environment that fosters violence, as resources that are meant to provide social services are diverted into the pockets of a few individuals (Bah 2011; Fisman and Miguel 2010; Kloop 2000). They poor are left to fight over the limited public resources.

A country that has both a corrupt police service and judicial system faces a bleak future, indeed. This is the Kenya the song “Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo” paints: “Mahakamani hela ndio haki. Kwa elfu chache mshtakiwa ndiwe mshtaki (In the courts, money is justice. For a few thousands, the accuser becomes the accused).”<sup>18</sup> Although the corrupt image of the Kenya’s justice system has somewhat improved since the promulgation of the new constitution in 2010, it is still largely regarded by the citizenry as an elitist system that serves the bidding of the ruling class.

Evidently, through songs, artists can broach sensitive issues without the burden of proof as would be demanded normally. The use of song to

leaderhip is a common practice among all the three indigenous Kenya communities in this study. Singers in these communities had, and still have, the “poetic license” to castigate the ruling class without substantial fear of reprisals. These artists would normally get away with either scot-free or mere slap on the wrist for saying things against the ruling class that would land others into serious trouble. It is this indigenous respect of the role of the artist that, it can be argued, current Kenyan leaders still observe when they give musicians, more than the average person, more space to criticize them.

Like in many parts of the African continent, and indeed the rest of the world, the youth in Kenya, especially male youth, are the biggest perpetrators of conflicts (Oloo 2007). Young people are made particularly vulnerable by social frustrations mainly caused by joblessness. The social predicament of the youth makes hip hop especially important as a peacebuilding tool because it can reach the masses of the youth in a language that they understand and enjoy. It is the contention of this article that Kenyan hip hop, which is based on indigenous theatrical performances, presents one of the brightest hopes for conflict transformation and peacebuilding in Kenya today. Caution must be sounded here, though, that the power of hip hop to organize young people can also be abused to create and exacerbate conflict.

Song and dance are also widely used in Kenya to address other forms of social injustice, such as gender-based violence. Perhaps one of the most intractable forms of social conflict in Kenya today, like most parts of the world, is gender-based conflict. It is undeniable that a lot has been achieved in the struggle for gender equity, but Kenya is still far from a state of gender equilibrium. The entire country is full of reports of gender-based injustices—including rape, battering, emotional violence, economic marginalization and discrimination—in different spheres of life.

## VII. CONCLUSION

This article analyzes rituals, storytelling, proverb, and song and dance as indigenous art forms that can and are used for peacebuilding in the Kikuyu, Luhya, and Luo communities of Kenya. These art forms are time-tested tools in community and cross-community conflict resolution, conflict transformation, and ultimately peacebuilding. In general, indigenous theatrical performances have an in-built aesthetic capacity that can transform human thinking and actions for good or bad. In

the current era, these performances have evolved to play significant roles in peacebuilding in the wake of the 2007/8 postelection violence in Kenya, often fusing with modern performance practices such as hip hop and community theatre to give birth to artistic forces that are being used as tools for positive social transformation, including in the field of peacebuilding. There is need, therefore, to harness the inherent power of the ITPs to continue promoting cultures of peace in the still-fractured communities and country at large.

ITPs have a huge potential in peacebuilding in Kenya. At the moment, this potential is stymied by lack of a clear framework on how to exploit this potential. It is not surprising, therefore, that ITPs still operate, at best, at microlevels in peacebuilding initiatives, a level that cannot have the desired, and needed, large-scale impact. There is an urgent need for scholars, peacebuilding, performers, and community members to initiate and enhance efforts in ITP research, documentation and dissemination. These efforts are expected to assist in “mainstreaming” the use of these art forms in peacebuilding initiatives. This article has demonstrated that in Kenya these art forms are still active at differing magnitudes with differing impact. Of the four art forms examined, rituals and proverbs appear to have the most potential traction in peacebuilding due to their cultural relevance and contemporary resonance. Still, there is need to document and disseminate the successful use of these art forms for replication and up-scaling in peacebuilding programming.

## NOTES

1. The Kikuyu community is the largest ethnic group in Kenya. They mostly live in the fertile central highlands of Kenya. The Luhya are the second largest ethnic community after the Kikuyu, and are made up of eighteen subgroups. They are mostly found in the northwestern part of Kenya. The Luo community borders the Luhya community to the south in western Kenya, and they constitute the third largest ethnic group in Kenya. The Kenyan Luo is a subgroup of the larger Luo community found in Uganda, Tanzania, South Sudan, Congo and Ethiopia. The Kikuyu and Luo inherited most of the political power from the British colonialists, a factor that explains their continued political rivalry today.
2. The term medicine man or medicine woman is used in this context to refer to persons who perform divination and healing during rituals.

They are believed to possess special powers of good and evil and act as the intermediaries between the temporal and spiritual worlds. In the context of the Kenyan cultures under discussion, a medicine man or woman is a combination of an herbalist, traditional healer, and a magician.

3. Interview with a Luo medicine woman, Oriang' village, Kendu Bay, May 2014.
4. Interview with a clan elder, Konyango village, Kendu Bay, May 2014.
5. The late Tom Mboya was a Luo and a senior politician in the Jomo Kenyatta government, and was widely believed to be Kenyatta's heir-apparent. He was assassinated in 1969.
6. Interview with a primary school teacher, Kendu Bay, May 2014.
7. This name has been changed to protect the identity of the person mentioned.
8. Interview with a Banyore elder, Ekamanji village, Bunyore, May 2014.
9. Benga is a popular music style that is a fusion of indigenous Kenyan music and rhumba. The style was originated by the Luo of western Kenya, but has since spread to be popular across east and central Africa.
10. The River Yala is one of the biggest rivers in Kenya, and it empties its waters into Lake Victoria. It is the lifeline of numerous rural communities, who totally rely on its waters for all of their needs.
11. Daniel Owino Misiani, "Piny Ose Omer (The World is Drunk)," translated by Kitche Magak, 1989.
12. Interview with Adrian Onyando, Homa Bay, Kenya, May 2014.
13. Wambui wa Wambugu, "Mukurwe wa Nyagathanga," translated in *Gikuyu Oral Literature* (Kabira and Mutahi 1988), 1986.
14. Eric Wainaina, "Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo (A Nation of Something Small)," translated by Susan Kilonzo, 2013.
15. Juliani, "Utawala (Governance)," translated by Judith Attyang', 2013.
16. Interview with police officer, Luanda Town, May 2014.
17. Juliani, "Utawala (Governance)," translated by Judith Attyang', 2013.
18. Eric Wainaina, "Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo (A Nation of Something Small)," translated by Susan Kilonzo, 2013.

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