The Challenge of Provenance: myth, histories, and the negotiation of socio-political space

Betty Wambui

Not all stories begin with "once upon a time," or even with "in 1885…" Some stories begin with "tene, tene muno ri…", that is; "long, long ago…" This latter formula, one that is popular amongst the Agikuyu of Central Kenya, is not the only way the narrative experience is engaged amongst them. Sometimes, the preferred start is offered as a challenge or an invitation, "uga itha" - say itha. In this latter mode, the request made is itself a type of a warning, an indication that the narrator and the audience are about to shift their experiential planes. By asking one to say "itha," the narrative artist requests one to engage in a reciprocal exchange, to be a participant in an experience that is imaginative, yet not wholly so. In this, in the narrator's call, is an invitation to participate in a fictional journey. One's response - "itha" – is an indication of one's willingness to embark on and participate in a journey, a commitment to an endeavor's success. At the end of this duet which may well turn out to be a duel, (the challenge here is for the storyteller to convince the audience to come along) – there is the request to join the narrator. If the narrator can convince the audience to be carried along by the experience of the story and its performance, to be guided on an imaginary plane that contains the possibility of discovery, at the end of this dual performance, the narrator indicates closure, by stating that "the story ends here," to which the audience assents.

There is in oral performance – as presented above, a play with power, traces of which are seen in the relationship that is established in the telling of stories. Let me explain what I mean. One may, if looking intently, see in the sharing of the stories an instance of a contract that is jointly entered, one by which the narrator as an artist is granted the power to transport the audience to a different plane, a power that is relinquished just as much as the world they had entered is exited[1] - at least in some ways, with the vocalization of closure.[2] The "itha" device in Kikuyu oral performance works very much like the pausetic motions that Plato implied Socrates liked to use or maybe that he himself enjoyed using. Look for example in a dialogue such as the *Republic* where Plato asks us to pause for a moment and imagine the nature and character of an ideal city. We encounter a device similar to the itha device not only in Plato but also at other points in Western Literature. For example, one might see a similar invitation in the 'hypothetical moment' seen in Hobbes' *Leviathan.* With its invocation Hobbes asks us to enter with him, for a brief moment, the "state of nature." Whether in the textual contexts of the western texts that I cite, or in oral performance amongst the Agikuyu, a double movement is engaged by performative devices; we see this when we think both of the invitation that each work offers as a whole, as well as the offer of the story in the story that is in each of these works.

This invitation is particularly well captured by orature. As literary artists and scholars[3] have pointed out, oral performance, the art in living practice that is common amongst the oral communities that occupy much of Africa, manages to do something unique. It creates a space within which direct contact between artist and audience is established in a communal activity, the result of which is the cultural product that has been dubbed oral performance. While it is the case that in its performance, an artist may utilize many additional resources, circumstance, culture and preference dictate their use. The primary and most necessary components of oral performance are twofold: the artist – his/her voice, competence in language, memory, imagination, ability to lead, and the audience – their presence, attention, imagination, and willingness to participate. It is the magic of this activity that I will try to capture and share with you here: the significance of a particular story that I will invite you to contemplate with me as I think it an interesting exercise to attempt to talk and listen at the margins of text and orature as I attempt to simulate one form of African Art, so as to stimulate conversation, not only about it, but also about the transmission and transformation of culture and tradition, about the capacity and limits of words written and unwritten.

I invite you then, to share a story with me, to listen to a myth[4] that is popular amongst my people. It is our myth of origin – *Rugano rwa Mumbi na Gikuyu*, the story of Mumbi and Gikuyu. I will not ask you, reader, to say "itha" as I am not taking you on a fictional journey – or maybe I am. Still, before we begin, I would like to point out that the manner of articulation of myths such as this one, differs slightly from that engaged in the sharing of stories that take other forms. For example, as compared to that used with *Ngano cia Marimu* – stories of ogres and/or giants which take the more common form of presentation described above. Unlike this latter form, when sharing with an audience a story such as that of Mumbi and Gikuyu, there is no overt indication of entry into another world, no invitation to the audience to enter a portal into a fictional world. At the same time, there is also the absence of an overt or formal indication that the story to be recited is, in fact, modified: that it is or is not a historical, legendary or mythical rendition of experience. A myth such as the one I will share with you is instead prefaced with an acknowledgement that it is, and is itself accepted merely as, a type of "ngano", one in a category different from the other more common kind and so it is prefaced with the claim that "this is THE story of" - 'Ruru ni rugano rwa'. What prevails in this lack of participation in more common forms of presentation, is a subtle indication that this other story is a story experience of a different and special kind. In the gap that is left by the method of presentation I find an interesting subtext. I find a subtle yet deliberate attempt to scramble experiential planes in the very absence of ritual. In the understatement that precedes the story I see a deliberate attempt to signify value, to emphasize and highlight significance and function by the absence of performance adornment.

This then is the story of Mumbi and Gikuyu. (I use and adhere closely to Jomo Kenyatta's version in *Facing Mount Kenya,* even as I, in the spirit of oral performance, adopt and adapt the story, modify it and make it my own and in sharing it with you, make it our story).

"… in the beginning of things, when mankind started to populate the earth, the man Gikuyu, the founder of the tribe, was called by the Mogai (the divider of the universe), and was given as his share the land with ravines, the rivers, the forests, the game and all the gifts that the lord of nature (Mogai) bestowed on mankind. At the same time Mogai made a big mountain which he called Kere-Nyaga (Mt. Kenya), as his resting place when on inspection tour, and as a sign of his wonders. [*Note that this is not a creation story but an encounter story, Gikuyu is not made by God, they happen to share one space with one more powerful than the other.*] He (Mogai) then took the man Gikuyu to the top of the mountain of mystery, and showed him the beauty of the country that Mogai had given him. While still at the top of the mountain, the Mogai pointed out to Gikuyu a spot full of fig trees (*mikoyo*), right in the centre of the country. After Mogai had shown Gikuyu the panorama of the wonderful land he had been given, he commanded him to descend and establish his homestead on the selected place which he named Mokorwe wa Gathanga. Before they parted, Mogai told Gikuyu that, whenever he was in need, he should make a sacrifice and raise his hands towards Kere-Nyaga, and the Lord of Nature would come to his assistance."

Gikuyu did as commanded by the Mogai, and when he reached the spot, he found that the Mogai had provided him with a beautiful wife whom Gikuyu named Moombi (creator or moulder). Both lived happily, and had nine daughters and no sons. Gikuyu was very disturbed at not having a male heir. In his despair, he called upon Mogai and told him to advise him on the situation. He [Mogai] responded quickly and told Gikuyu not to be perturbed, but to have patience and everything would be done according to his wish. He then commanded him saying: "'Go and take one lamb and one kid from your flock. Kill them under the big fig tree near your homestead. Pour the blood and the fat of the two animals on the trunk of the tree. Then you and your family make a big fire under the tree and burn the meat as a sacrifice to me, your benefactor. When you have done this, take home your wife and daughters. After that go back to the sacred tree, and there you will find nine handsome young men who are willing to marry your daughters under any condition that will please you and your family.'

Gikuyu did as he was directed by the Mogai or Ngai, and it happened that when Gikuyu returned to the sacred tree, there he found the promised nine young men who greeted him warmly…."

The strangers were entertained and hospitably treated according to social custom. A ram was killed and millet gruel prepared for their food. While this was being made ready, the youths were taken to a stream nearby to wash their tired limbs. Early the next morning Gikuyu rose and woke the young men to

have their morning meal with him. When they finished eating, the question of marriage was discussed. Gikuyu told the young men that if they wished to marry his daughters he would give his consent only if they agreed to live in his homestead under a matriarchal system. The young men agreed to this condition, for they could not resist the beauty of the Gikuyu daughters, nor the kindness which the family had showed them. They joined together, each with their partner and together under the name of Mbari ya Moombi, in honour of their mother. The nine families continued to live together, with their parents acting as the heads of the Mbari….When Gikuyu and Moombi died, their daughters inherited their movable and immovable property which they shared equally amongst themselves.

During the time of mourning for the death of their parents they continued to live as one family group as before. But as the number of members of each individual family group multiplied, it was found impossible to live together and to follow the system of classificatory nomenclature without forming more family sets and clans.

It was then decided that each of the nine daughters should call together all her descendants and form one clan under her own name. Thus the nine principal Gikuyu meherega were founded. The names of the main clans are: – Acheera, Agaciko, Airimo, Amboi, Angare, Anjiro, Angoi, Ethaga, Aitherando. Based on this system of kinship Mbari ya Moombi or Rorere rwa Mbari ya Moombi, that is, the children or people of Moombi increased. But somehow the system changed from matriarchal to patriarchal.

While holding a superior position in the community, the women became domineering and ruthless fighters who instituted a system that was almost monarchial, but certainly tyrannical (and so the story of Wangu wa Makeri). The women also practiced polyandry. Because of the sexual competition and jealousy that accompanied their social practices many men were put to death for committing adultery or other minor offences. [*Note how sexuality is problematized here for women, how sex and women are painted as unruly and disruptive*] Besides regular and extensive use of capital punishment (punishment often not equivalent to the crime), men were subject to all kinds of humiliation and injustice.

Men were indignant at the way women treated them and so they planned a revolt against the women's administration of justice. Since women were, at the time, physically stronger than men and also better fighters, it was decided that the best time for a successful revolt would be when the majority of women, especially their leaders were pregnant. Hence the men entered a campaign of seduction and sexual activity so as to incapacitate women and ensure the success of their plan. After six moons had elapsed the men saw that they were successful, most of the women were pregnant which incapacitated them. [*Observe how the narrative paints the female body and women's emotions not only as the location of exposure and vulnerability but also as a source of betrayal*

of the self and of society. It is feminine passions and the attempt to satisfy these that lead to practices of injustice and also these that offer an opportunity for challenging the status quo and changing it]. The men engaged in revolt, took over the community's leadership, abolished the system of polyandry and established the system of polygamy. They also changed the name of the social group which had until this time been known as Nyumba ya Mumbi to Mbari ya Gikuyu and wished to similarly change the names of the clans to reflect the new power structure. The women reacted strongly to this. They promised to act in concert and to deny all men any further sexual relations if this happened and also to kill all children conceived during the treacherous campaign that removed them from power. This was a substantial enough threat that the men decided to keep and not change the original clan names.[5]

It is worth noting that though overpowered and subdued, the women when united retained some bargaining power; interestingly, it was power connected to their own, and men's sexuality. While losing political power, they still were, still are *oombi, creators, ones who have* power over life – to start or to end it, power that is often invoked in the very name "the house or home of Mumbi", that is, the home of the creator among the Gikuyu. In losing political power then, women seemed to rediscover this important potential within them even as they engaged in that last resort of political community - rebellion.

At this point of the story the challenge women pose seems to be at the very elemental level, one that as much as the story leaves us with a potent sense of possibility that this story is not quite finished, that the women though temporarily curbed could rise again. Indeed, to warn about the looming danger of this threat and the vigilance that must be maintained by "men", the story tells us that the age group that had slept on their watch, that had allowed tyranny and injustice to reign amongst the Gikuyu, paid and continue to pay a penalty for their negligence, the heaviest one that can be imposed amongst the Agikuyu – their erasure from communal memory.

After the men's coup d'état, a decree was passed to forget the name of the age group that ought to have been in political session during the rule of women and that turned into a period of tyrannical rule. It is a decree that we, telling, listening, living the story, issue and enact. We forget the name of the incompetent age group, and in doing so, continue shaming its members as individuals and as a group. Furthermore, we as actors in this social drama are ourselves checked by the threat of erasure of this age group from social and communal memory. The act of communal amnesia that this story relates is for the Agikuyu, amongst whom naming is extremely important, a drastic yet necessary response to the tragedy that the story relays. In forgetting the name of the age group and making sure that it is never used again, we announce individual and group failure; we also reprimand all who allow or would allow social, moral, and political dysfunction. Socially we talk to those who do not work to protect or secure the dignity and equal treatment of all members, those who

consequently fail to nurture community and ensure justice for all. Politically, we direct our attention to those who failed to curb the excessive growth of power, given the danger that accompanies such lack of containment. Morally, we express concern for those who by act or omission promote acts of subjugation rather than those of agency. This warning of erasure that the story gives, is to all who may allow these possibilities that the story codes.

Furthermore, in telling and listening to the story, we engage in the erasure of the very persons and deeds of this forgotten age group and its members. As we participate in the negation of their very existence in society by deliberately forgetting their age group's name and failing to give them any other, we participate in an act that symbolizes a denial of their relationship to all others in society—past, present, and future. We make them persons without a home, without a place to belong. This is a terrible punishment since in traditional Kikuyu society the age group and its location in community play an integral role in identity construction. In listening to this story then, we participate in this act of group amnesia, we participate in depersonalizing and penalizing the sleeping watchmen, we participate in their banishment even as we learn from their acts and at that, only as we would learn from non-humans. We are warned of the possible harm that may occur to us if we are, in our turn, negligent. In listening to this story we participate in this event, much as our lives in and out of Kikuyu society add a new chapter to the story of Mumbi and Gikuyu. This, then, is the story of the Agikuyu.

Let us open further, some of the possibilities that this narrative elicits. One way of listening to or reading the story, a way that that gives us an opportunity to lay bare, to unravel the Agikuyu's myth of origin, is that of posing questions: does this story (*ngano*) – and others like it — articulate historical facts as these are treated in the West? That is, is it a report and/or recording of an actual event that occurred on a certain date within the Kikuyu calendar, at a real and particular place? Maybe, maybe not. Does the uncertainty surrounding this *ngano* make this and others like it useless, irrelevant or untrustworthy? Certainly not, at least, not in my estimation nor that of other scholars such as Mukabi Kabira, Karegi Mutahi, Ruth Finnegan, Joanne H. Wright, Inge Brinkman, Isidore Okphewho or Jomo Kenyatta. In my opinion and in the opinion of these and many other scholars, these stories offer us interesting and valuable insight into the past – historical or not. In their telling, they offer us a window into the past of the communities that gave birth to them, sometimes a glimpse into the present. In this case of the Agikuyu I think this *ngano* suggests an interesting location from which to explore and investigate the operation of power. In this site, one in which justification for a particular social order is housed and banked, where explanation that is considered sufficient for the perpetuation of the relations signified and discussed lies, is a rich opportunity for conversation. For me then, *ngano* such as this one offer a point from which to engage, analyze, critique, and criticize the operation of power in my community.

In mining this site we discover that there is an understanding of the concept of and practice of power amongst the Agikuyu. There seems amongst them, to be an understanding that power displays itself variously and is deployed in real and tangible ways. Power in its various guises is, as our story seems to say, desirable, valuable, and evanescent. Its operation, it warns is a sacred trust easily abused. Such abuse, particularly in the socio-political sphere has far reaching consequences as discussed above.

This story signifies possibility in multiple forms – the possibility that it is fact, the possibility that it is fiction, the possibility that we (you and I, the artist and their audience, our community – living and yet to be born) can change the "ending" of the story, the slant of the story, the accent of the story, the main characters in the story, it indicates that we can add our own contribution to its development and interpretation, can use it for various purposes - to teach or to reprimand, to rationalize or to challenge and so on. This story then functions as a lacuna that can be filled by one who dares to take ownership of it, by one who in claiming the story, makes it their own. This paper is in part, engaged with this possibility of claiming and adopting this story. It joins other narratives that in the telling of stories, participates in conversations that interrogate power and social order and disorder, that interrupt stories so as to use them to do more than they might have set out to do – shape them so that they might not only explain historical relations, but also disrupt these and their contemporary manifestations. In its performance it participates in ways--new and old –- of thinking about, talking about, engaging in, continuing and, ordering our associations and discourses. It is as this expression of possibility that this story becomes our story, in as much as it is my story. Me, a story teller, a *mugikuyu*, a woman residing in a world that is mainly a man's world who is offered multiple excuses for injustice and seeks to question such excuses. Me, a narrator who uses my story and location to transform received stories making them tools of power for all who question structures of power and the assumptions that underlie power. In this form then, this narrative and others like it herald the possibility of challenging social, political and economic structures as in their very telling they raise questions of the teller, the listener and their location. In particular even as this story justifies current socio-political and economic order, it informs us that the current order was not always in place, that current order is the consequence of human maneuver and negotiation. Given its origin and function, its source and limits, power is open to censure and challenge. Furthermore, it tells us if we do not know and it reminds us if we have forgotten - that socio-political institutions have been known to corrupt and to be corrupt. That when such corruption occurs, we have a right, nigh a duty, to challenge and convert them into better ones.

In investigating the socio-political and narrative possibilities that the story opens up, I think one is also led to view the function of *nganos*. In the course of doing so we may recognize that *nganos* are not only mere reports or

rationalizations of current order. They are also powerful interpretations of events and reinforcements of perspectives. We may upon reflection be led to acknowledge that like the storyteller, they have a life of their own and as part of this guise are repositories of communal memory. As such, I think they beg us to recognize that like an individual's memory, the perspective they present to us is malleable and flexible, biased and prejudiced by their location in space and time. This trait need not be conceived as a flaw that negates their value, indeed, it may instead be taken as an opportunity that offers us an interesting space from which to think of and about our experiences. In this explosure of the subjective role ngano's serve, as they promote a community and individual storyteller's agenda, that they may also, as many people agree, act as a tool of and the focus of social critique. Unraveling the discourses they promote as social and personal mirrors, then provide an opportunity to investigate one's experiences and to examine one's self as an individual, as well as a member of community. In this process one may come to know the community better as one discovers that they are participants in the performance, construction, and sustenance of historical and current relations.

Beyond this general function of stories that take this form, what is offered to us by this particular *ngano* is also the possibility to interrogate the relationship between persons (*gikuyu)* and creators (*mumbi*), an opportunity to ask what it is that creators create. In this quest, if undertaken, is a chance to deconstruct the hierarchy and rigid boundary that often accompanies understandings of relations between the divine and mortals, especially as these conjoin to create society. Here too, we have an opportunity also to observe and experience the tensions that accompany human relations. In the story there is a chance to see human beings' impatience and dissatisfaction with established traditions, to participate in the plan to rewrite the coded relations of power that such traditions mask, and to share in the partial victory of the human being: to consider especially the complexity of the challenge to women and the resulting limited victory of both men and women, mortals and immortals.[6] In this common myth of origin is a challenge to our common understandings of relations between deities and non-deities and the conclusion that such relations must be negotiated, and then fair compromises obtained for all - human and non-human.

There is a sense - similar to that expressed in relations between deity and non-deity -- that relations between men and women are in the making. There is a latent danger that accompanies our socio-political relations, one coded in the very fact of women whom if given a free hand in socio-political organization are potentially destructive to men (lost age group) and to society (tyranny). There is, therefore, a need – if one accepts such a telling, to carefully curb and regulate female power. It is here, in this fear of what women have "done", of what women could do, that explanation for the socio-political location of women in Kikuyu society is found. In the space exposed by the story we find a claim, well understood by all who listen carefully, that women in this originally matrilineal

society are not inferior to men, but are at the very least first amongst equals. Sexual inequality is artificial not natural the story tells us. Moreover, here too in the very same story is an unveiling of another possibility in our socio- political relations, the claim that there are other ways of ordering relations besides the more common patrilineal and patriarchal ones. Here is "proof" of an alternative to the current order, and an indication that current order is a consequence of a moment, or a series of moments in group history.

Challenging the status quo, amplifying the voice of women in a story such as this, in Kikuyu society and elsewhere, is a way of continuing the practice of negotiating socio-political and legal space that is at the core of this story. Telling and retelling stories such as these is a way of extending and expanding communal memory in and out of the story. Accepting the challenge these stories pose requires that one understands the dynamics that stories seek to capture and express. If taken, the challenge they offer transforms into an attempt to recover memory and to negotiate one's current location and future direction. Interestingly, one discovers in this endeavor that *nganos,* like all language and the women depicted in this story, are unruly. One discovers that the spaces, discourses, conversations, dialogues and practices they seek, open or sometimes capture, are difficult to regulate. One finds that power – whose presence imbues this space — is fickle and transitory for many. Similar to other elements in this space, *nganos;* tools of power, its critique and that which it critiques – power, are captured only momentarily as they are living repositories that articulate experiences and relations that even in the course of narration and negotiation continue to shift space and form, to change and alter themselves. They slip away from our words and sight even as they uncover the same. Given this understanding of the subversive nature of language and experience, of our words and stories, we must always prepare to begin the story afresh, to rewrite it and say: "long, long ago, - 'uga itha, ruru in rugano rwa' – this is the story of …"

As I listen and tell, write and read the stories of my childhood, the stories of my community in its infancy and evolution, I continue to find beginnings, and all they symbolize, deeply informative and fascinating. As a western trained philosopher I continue to be struck again and again by the possibilities that are left open by the beginnings of stories, by stories about beginnings, by the possibilities that are opened by stories told to me in my childhood, by the fascinating spaces that are opened by my continuing evaluation of narratives, and by the possibilities contained in story.

End Notes

1. Not exited in so far as we continue to live the story of being, of origin, of belonging, of the construction of identities in motion.
2. Exited in so far as the a particular narrator's version of events is concluded.
3. Consult for example: Inge Brinkman, *Kikuyu Gender Norms and Narratives,* Research School CNWS, Leiden University, The Netherlands. 1998, or Ruth Finnegan, *The Oral and Beyond – Doing things with words in Africa,* The university of Chicago Press, Chicago, USA. 2007, 0r Isidore

Okpewho, *Myth in Africa – A study of its aesthetic and cultural relevance,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK. 1983.

4. I use this term in the sense that Isidore Okpewho uses it in *Myth in Africa – A study of its aesthetic and cultural relevance,* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983). Here Okpewho claims that "Myth is not really a particular type of tale as against another; it is neither the spoken counterpart of an antecedent ritual, nor is it a tale determined exclusively by a binary scheme of abstract ideas or a sequential order of elements. It is simply that quality of fancy which informs the creative or configurative powers of human mind in varying degrees of intensity. In that sense we are free to call any narrative of the oral tradition a myth, as long as it gives due emphasis to fanciful play. It is this quality of fanciful play that provides one solid structural link between several generations of the concept of myth, first as oral narrative and now as fanciful idea (even a dominating one). – p.69

5. Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya – The Traditional Life of the Gikuyu.* Martin Secker & Warburg Ltd., 1938, C. Heinemann Kenya Ltd., Nairobi, Kenya. 1988. Pp. 3-8. Note that I have modified the story slightly.

6. Note that on some level the battle between women and men is really one between the divine and mortal – *oombi na agikuyu,* creators and the strangers who share space and history however told.

Works Cited

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