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Echoes of Foucauldian 'Discourse, Knowledge and Power' in Political Kalenjin Music

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ABSTRACT

In his 1979 exhortation titled On Governmentality, Michel Foucault asserts that everything is political. Deuber-Mankowsky (2008) slightly shifts from Foucault's position by stating that although nothing is political, everything can be politicized. Treating these two scholars' assertions as the point of departure, this paper posits that all art; all cultural productions, ranging from paintings, sculptures and music, to literature, can be, and are in fact, political. This political nature can either be latent (nuanced), or manifest (overt). This paper interrogates how the question of power – the struggle for it, the retention of it and its agency – has been discoursed upon by various Kalenjin political singers. The paper purposively sampled Kalenjin songs from the independence days, and contemporary artists with each of the songs authored by a different artist. The study brought together four songs that illustrate how musicians of Kalenjin linguistic and/or ethnic orientation have interpreted and spoken about the dynamics of political power. Two of the songs, which emerged shortly after independence, were studied to interrogate how music was used at the time to inform the discourse that attended to the transfer of power from the colonizer to the first generation of African leaders. On the other hand, two songs, characterizing contemporary Kalenjin music, were studied to give insights into how power and contemporary politics have shaped the discourse in the music. The songs were transcribed with the help of native speakers of the various Kalenjin dialects, and subjected to close reading and analysis. Theoretically, the paper adopted Foucault's theory of discourse and postcolonial literary theory.

Keywords: Politics, Discourse, Knowledge, Kalenjin, Power, Music

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INTRODUCTION

This paper, like Miller (1990), contends that the concept 'discourse' although originally relating to non-literary disciplines – especially linguistics, was invited into literary scholarship to help interrogate the communicative and meaning aspects of art and human interaction. Art, literature specifically, is one such communicative space that also dramatizes various human interactions. In a very general sense, discourse refers to written and spoken communications. In a more specialised sense, Foucault (1969) defines discourse as a system of thoughts which is composed of ideas, courses of action, attitudes, beliefs and practices that systematically shape subjects, and the worlds for which they speak or represent. Therefore, by use of discourse, subjects (individuals in a society) not only make or shape meaning, but also shape themselves and their environment. Art, including music, is therefore discourse that individuals use to shape meaning, as they shape themselves and their world. Besides, it is an agent that they use to negotiate with, and for power.

The concept of power may be broad, but this paper will restrict itself to the distinctive meaning with which the argument here will be constructed. In his reading of Foucault, Weedon (1987) interprets Foucault's meaning of power to be:

... a dynamic of control and lack of control between discourses and the subjects, constituted by discourses, who are their agents. Power is exercised within discourses in the ways in which they constitute and govern individual subjects (p. 113).

This paper, hence, seeks to discuss the role of Kalenjin music, past and contemporary, in making sense of knowledge, power, and in shaping the person and the world of the artists. The artists whose music is under study being subjects, it is interesting to see how they understand, and relate to power – whether this power be their own, or that which they are subjected to.

Negotiating the Politics and Power of the Post-colony

The Kalenjin musician at independence, like any African artist of the time, was faced with a new challenge. At the time, the role of the artist in newly independent African countries could no longer remain that of blaming the colonist, and romanticizing, or even sympathizing with the natives (the formerly colonized). New African leaders were now coming to power, and the citizenry, was starting to exercise its voice with regard to choosing how, and by whom they were to be led. This new-found role of the postcolonial artist is in congruence with Wanjala (1978) and Ngugi (1981) who posit that an artist must remain alive to the condition of his/her people. As such, it behoved the artist to first understand their role, and power that they wielded, vis-à-vis the power that the electorate, and the leadership wielded. The African artist, in this case the Kalenjin musician, therefore used the privileged position they stood at to speak to power. That was not just it – the artist also needed to remind the electorate of the power that they possessed in respect of determining who led them, and how that power could be used to grant them a better existence.

In the song, ‘Ondochin Kenya neleel komie’ (Lead the new Kenya properly), the artist negotiates the slippery political terrain by delicately balancing different standpoints. He starts by calling attention to both the electorate and the leaders. The artist, by so doing, demonstrates that he is aware of the power that various entities hold. First, he recognizes the power he holds as an artist, the power that the electorate hold, and the power which the leaders possess. As the song opens, starting with the title, he revels in his power by commanding the leaders, to “lead the country properly. The first stanza of the song below shall illustrate this.

Ondochin Kenya neleel komie	Lead the new Kenya properly
Oeb iit lewenik ak kondoik	Listen you electorate and elected leaders
Aso okas ngaleek che mwoe tyeni	Listen to what this song says
Oriib emeet komie ak kondoikyok oo	Take good care of our nation together with leaders

The first stanza of the song carries on in the same vein as the title, by issuing a veiled command to leaders and electorate alike, to pay attention to the message of the song. It ends with an exhortation to both voters, and the elected to take good care of the nation. It might even appear that the artist, at least in this part of the song, is aware of the danger of resorting fully to self-censorship, at the expense of expression of an important message. In his paper on self-censorship, (Wright 2012) posits that the choice of a communicator to self-censor can be either conscious or unconscious. In the case of the artist of this song, it would appear that he makes a deliberate choice not to constrict his message for fear of political retribution.

In the next stanza of the song, the singer directs his message to the elected leaders who, though aware of the power they have acquired after being elected into various positions, are using it to enhance their own selfish interests instead of using the authority granted to them to benefit the electorate. In a bare-knuckle attack, he does not hesitate to point out to such leaders that they what they are doing is at odds with the reason they were elected. At this point, it is apparent that the artist has abandoned the safety of self-censorship, as would be advised by Wright (2012). In this part of the song, the artist takes cognizance of the pride and power that the vote hands to a leader.

Kikilewenook ondochi biik	You were elected to lead the people
Mokilewenook asi omenie	You were not elected to be proud
Netogote tieniik en barabara	You risk being stared at and ignored on the road

The power that music, song and dance have in negotiating political power is also clear. Unfortunately, in the lines above, the artist complains that music can sometimes be misused to encourage cultism. Rather than work to make the society better as this particular song does, music can be used for hero-worship and encouraging hubris among the class of leaders – for that is precisely what music does when it is used to entertain leaders who do little, except pride themselves in the face of the misery of the very people that voted for them.

Echeek biikap raia cheleweni	We the citizens are the ones to decide
Kiisto chito ne ya en ngecheret	To vote out a bad leader
Asi kondo chito ne kiiluu kou asis	To get a leader who shines like the sun to lead us

In the final verse of the song, he descends from his hard-line (even powerful) position as an artist, and adopts a more conciliatory tone. After hitting hard at both the electorate and the leadership for not using their power properly, he ends on a pacific tone, probably in recognition of the power that the electorate and the elected leaders wield, which he fears can be used to the disadvantage of his place as an artist. Thus, it becomes necessary for him to befriend the voters/common citizens and the leaders. This possibility can be interrogated in the lines below, which mark the last stanza.

Onkekosinen ak kondoik	Let us cooperate with leaders
Ketoretkei tugul en bandaptai	Let us help each other in development
Asi kwo tai emenyon en chokyinet	So that our country develops faster

History, Memory and Discourse

Sikes, Mark-Thiesen and Mihatsch (2021), in a study of the post-apartheid protests over white memorialization in South Africa in 2020, contend that revisiting history and memory provides society with an opportunity of righting wrongs committed. In this section of the paper, we are bound to see proof of the role of music in retelling history with a view to leveraging on it for the better of society.

In the song ‘Kararan Uhuru/Independence is good’, the artist lends his voice to the issues of memory, history and discourse. It is one of the songs – which like any other postcolonial art – occasions the conclusion that without history and memory, then it is difficult negotiate and shape the present. While celebrating the arrival of independence, this singer reminisces on the days of colonialism and the problems that attended to it. In the lines below, this artist seems to suggest that without understanding the past, the power that has been transferred to the natives upon independence will be meaningless. The key to appreciating the beauty of independence, therefore, lies in using memory to teach the younger generation what calamity the Whiteman visited upon the colonized subjects.

Kararan uhuru yon kikeboigei	It is good to be independent
Chi nekimoker koboiwech chumbeek	Whoever didn’t see white man’s rule
Komoingen kole kiunee sobeet	Doesn’t know how life was

The significance of keeping memory and history alive is enhanced in the latter parts of the song where we have the artist’s narration. Here, the artist impresses that children need to be taught history; so that they appreciate where their people have come from. See the lines below:

Ak amwochini sigiik tugul	And I appeal to all parents
Oneet lagok en obo kora	Always teach children
Kokuiyo kiit	To understand what
Ne kiiaiyeuch chumbeek	The white man did to us

These lines signify the power of the artist in negotiating for political power to work for the people. The artist opines that if memory is ignored, and the younger generation doesn’t know the import of using the newfound freedom and power, then the fact that they are independent shall remain only in the word, not deed.

Most of the song is a rendition of the subhuman treatment that Africans were subjected to during the colonial days. Economically, politically and socially, the African was treated as second grade, and therefore, not deserving of the things that made the Whiteman's life comfortable and human. For instance, they were not allowed to keep grade/exotic livestock because the colonizer did not want Africans to be economically empowered. Africans were also not allowed to own radios because that would mean they become politically awake. Besides, they were not permitted to wear a wristwatch because they were perceived to be of low social standing compared to the Whiteman. These denials, though seemingly petty, signify largescale denigration of the African in all spheres of life.

Kiin kokerech chumbek	When white men saw us
Kou yon mokii biik	As if we were not human beings
Kiimaa komoche	They didn't want to see us with
Tanyiep kireet	This grade cow
Ko kiit ne kiuu	And so was
Kechiryoni bo Ulaya	This exotic sheep
Kiin kokeercheech radio	When they saw us with a radio
Koyoome asaan	Was enough to be disciplined
Kora ko kimakemakwech mutukaa	Didn't allow us own motorcar as well
Ako sait ko kiibo	And the watch was for
Kirwogik kityo	Chiefs only

The last line in this excerpt points to the question of betrayal and the concept of 'divide and rule' that attended to it. The Whiteman was aware that he could oppress the Africans better if he did it through fellow Africans. Colonial chiefs were hence elevated to a more privileged position so that they could facilitate the betrayal of their own kinsmen and tribesmen. They were hence permitted to own land, and enjoy the trappings of western materialism and comfort. By allowing colonial chiefs to own land, bicycles, cars, watches, radios and jewellery, the colonist easily advanced the false narrative that it benefitted the colonized people if they agreed to the ways of the colonizer – in the same way as the chiefs had done.

Appropriating Metaphor to Circumvent the Censor: Addressing the controversial using 'transparent concealment'.

Since its introduction into literary scholarship by Plato, the concept of censorship has evolved significantly. Whereas Plato (1955) in his *The Republic* advocated for state sponsored censorship to root out what he termed bad art from Athens, the growth of art, its acquisition of a new dynamism, and increased access to art by the readers/audience, has seen censorship evolve. Besides, state executed censorship; we now talk about other forms such as social censorship, and self-censorship. Ruganda (1992) speaks about the role the artist in this scheme of things, with regard to transparently concealing the message in order to evade censorship. Whereas the desire to avoid state censorship may be latent in the music under study, the striving to ensure self-censorship that is inherent in the use of symbolism in point of fact, point to the fear of state and social censorship.

In the song, Machamegei Senge, the artist dwells in metaphor to address a sensitive topic, in which he pits one politician

against another. The main theme is betrayal, with Kipchirchir thought to have been betrayed by his onetime political confidant and ally. By choosing to use Kipchirchir, a childhood name of William Ruto (Deputy President of Kenya, 2013 – 2022), the artist is appealing to the politician to realize that the people in his backyard adore him, and are willing to stand with him in the political contest that they urge him to embark on. It is for this reason that the artist urges him to "tighten his shoe laces", and brace himself to fight and redeem his immediate community, and country.

Kermen suet Kipchirchir, Kipchirchir,	Tighten your waist
ak irat kweiyot kweiyot,	And tie the shoe laces ,
maama,	Uncle,
Machamegei senge.	Aunt is not well.

The Nandi, the community from which the subject of the song, Kipchirchir, hails from interpret 'Kipchirchir' to represent Kenya's Deputy President of the time. To them, he has not only been stabbed in the back by his co-candidate, the president of Kenya at the time, Uhuru Kenyatta. The artist believes that the country and the immediate community have also been betrayed, for aunt, (the community/country) is ill as a result of betrayal and bad leadership. The first stanza is repeated as a refrain/chorus that is aimed at rendering emphasis to the artist's metaphoric exhortation. The use of metaphor allows the artist to circumvent possible censorship, and remain apparently pacific, while in the real sense he is being radical and antagonistic.

Like all the other songs under study, this song was originally written and produced in Kalenjin. Already, that is one way by which the artist can avoid social censorship by part of the society or nation which the artist supposes is likely to be at variance with the content of their music due to linguistic differences. However, it is not the fear of social censorship which must most scare the artist, according to Sturges (2008). While explaining "Why we Self-Censor", Sturges (2008) contends that:

"Fear might seem to be the essential reason why we self-censor, and in some sense it is. However, there are different types of fear involved, covering a wide spectrum from outright terror to a mere delicateness about causing an angry response." p. 3.

This fear, is most basically the fear of state censorship, which can turn violent, or social censorship, which can come in the form of uproar or angry responses from a section or whole of a community.

In the lines below, found in the second stanza, the artist confirms that the aunt is in bad health, and has been complaining about it. This signifies to the possibility that the people of Rift Valley region of Kenya feel betrayed, and are looking up to their son (Kipchirchir) to restore their original good health and hope.

Kong'alale oin,	She (aunt) spoke recently,
Kogatanan putyot we,	Something was amiss with her health,
Maama,	Uncle,
Mache sagitiek.	She needs medication.

The metaphor of the herbalist in the next stanza reiterates that the choice they made of a leader of the nation and immediate community did not turn out as they had hoped. For like a bad herbalist whose medicine fails to heal their aunt (community/country) the prescription by the president (herbalist) has failed to inspire health in their immediate and larger nation.

Kingoleen kecheng'ji chepkerichot,	We wished to find her a herbalist,
Kotuiyo ak age,	But she met a different one
Manamgei ak busarek we,	Whose concoction didn't work,
Kipchirchir.	Kipchirchir.

In the foregoing, the artist seeks to portray the suffering, and attendant feeling of his people, as a malady that Kipchirchir's former ally should have cured, but failed. This is meant to impress upon him to find remedy to the malady.

The politics of 'The Handshake' which made entry into Kenya's political landscape and lingo in 2018 is also alluded to. The artist uses the metaphor of the hunt to talk about this. Here, he presents the common belief that the Rift Valley region, the political stronghold of the subject, sacrificed a lot to win power for the regime, but has now been betrayed. It was expected that the "gazelle/power" that they won at the ballot would benefit them greatly. This does not come to be because Raila Odinga, the opponent in the electoral battle (in 2013 and 2017) in which they wrested power, has now been invited by president Uhuru in a truce that increases the number of hands or mouths, vying for the juicy meet from the hunted gazelle: the Kenyan nation.

The other day's gazelle,
That we hunted down,
As it seems isn't enough for us,
For there are more visitors.

This part of the song introduces another dimension to the debate on the purpose of winning power in Africa generally, and Kenya in particular. It is rarely about service to the entire nation, but securing the national cake so that it benefits those who are perceived to be pro-establishment. In this sense therefore, the people in Kipchirchir's backyard believe they should benefit more from government appointments, and the trappings of power, because they voted overwhelmingly for the regime. The entry of a man who was the political nemesis, hence, upsets this arrangement. As a result of 'The Handshake', Raila and his people become the visitors, the other, that have come in to reap where they did not sow; to feed of the gazelle whose hunting and killing they did not participate in. Wrong (2009) alludes to this syndrome in her discourse on the story of one John Githongo who blew the whistle about underhand dealings in the administration of Mwai Kibaki in the early 2000s.

In the song 'Patrick Labu Kamalingin' by Mwalimu Kendagor, we witness that the celebration of the power that the Kalenjin people have, and recognition of the heroes of the community, extends beyond the Kenyan borders to include the diaspora. The song is a celebration of a Kalenjin who vies to become

Member of Parliament in a Ugandan county. Though born and raised in Uganda, the Kalenjin still recognize him as a true son of the soil. The artist is aware that there are other Kalenjin people across the border who can vote for their son against other candidates.

Yeeh woh, Patrick Labu,	Yeeh woh, Patrick Labu,
Patrick Labu, Kamalingin,	Patrick Labu, Kamalingin,
for T'oo county MP,	for T'oo county MP,
Kasom kurayat,	He requests for the vote,
Ogochi murenoni,	Give it to this man,
Mureneta Sabiny,	Sabiny man,
NRM, Uganda.	NRM, Uganda.

In the lines that follow (which form the song's refrain/chorus), the artist uses imagery to portray the politician as a visionary man, and a true son of the county for which he is vying, T'oo. He refers to him as the 'son' of T'oo, who is also the 'sun'. This raises the question of hybridity and multiple identities: even though he is a Kalenjin, and despite the fact that the Kalenjins of Kenya claim him as their own, he can still serve the people of Uganda. After all, the border between Uganda – like many borders in the rest of the colonized world – is an artificial demarcation created by the colonist; such that it cuts into two, and attempts to separate the same Kalenjin nation. See the lines below:

Patrick Labu kiptoyot komas kasit,	Patrick Labu the young man to smash the job,
Kamalingin asistab T'oo,	Kamalingin the sun of T'oo,
Weritab Sabiny ooh,	The son of Sabiny ooh,
Weritab T'oo, County.	The son of T'oo, County.

The power that politicians or leaders possess, is not inherent in them. The song asserts that Patrick will need the power of the people in order to ascend to power as the MP for T'oo. This is why the artist goes on to mention the places and regions whose people are looking up to him to become their leader.

Riwomoi kotyeni Kamalingin,	Riwomoi sings Kamalingin,
Chebinyiby kotyeni Kamalingin,	Chebinyiby sings Kamalingin,
Aryower kotyeni Kamalingin,	Aryower sings Kamalingin,
Kongda kotyeni Kamalingin,	Kongda sings Kamalingin,
Kapsama kotyeni Kamalingin,	Kapsama sings Kamalingin,

This is meant to drum up support in his strongholds in Uganda, which are also populated by other Kalenjin people. The artist also mentions the hills which make up the slopes of Mt. Elgon, a feature that separates the Kenyan from Ugandan Kalenjins. The use of his surname in this part of the song is also important, for in a surname, is one's roots and identity. As such, 'Kamalingin' is a better choice of a name, which is meant to enhance the connection between the politician and his community, be it in Kenya or Uganda.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, the centrality of the Kalenjin political musician in offering commentary to, and negotiating the slippery ground that political engagement can become, is evident. In the process of offering such commentary, and negotiating the contested matter that politics is, the balance of power between the led, the leaders, and the artist is veritable. The contemporaneous nature of the music has also been observed above, as artists' quest to comment on and depict the most current political events can be attested to. This chapter, therefore, concurs with Wanjala (1986) and Ngugi (1981) in affirming that these artists are proof of the assertion that an African artist has no option of choosing to ignore the dilemmas, aspirations, and issues of their society.

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