

The Oral Aesthetic in Barbara Kimenye's *Kalasanda*

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Abstract: Barbara Kimenye is recognized as one of East Africa's influential writers with her novels and novellas focusing on concerns and styles drawn from her immediate context: East Africa. Through her works, it is not only possible to bring out the flexibility and elasticity of oral traditions but also ways in which the European tradition of the novel and African modes of expression complement each other. Kimenye's *Kalasanda* fuses the two traditions to achieve a specific intended effect on and reaction from the reader that she targets. The present study, therefore, is not only an attempt to reveal the universal credentials of the oral traditions but also to show how specific oral tradition features may be determined by both context and the author's aesthetic aspirations.

Key words: Oral tradition, aesthetics, didacticism, context, European tradition, tricksterism, narration.

I. INTRODUCTION

Most scholarly and critical work touching on the fruitful appropriation of oral traditions in written African literature has disproportionately, owing perhaps to a desire to confirm cultural differences, drawn examples from the works of modern native African writers. Much as Africa has raised a number of famed non-native writers, such as Barbara Kimenye, Marjorie Oludhe, Dennis Brutus, Nadine Gordimer, and Doris Lessing, very little has been said about the capacity of such writers to incorporate oral trends in their works. The present paper seeks to fill that gap by examining how Barbara Kimenye (un)intentionally experiments with oral tradition methods to not only end up with a familiar aesthetic born of necessity, but also gain acceptance among native people with a long association with African oral aesthetic models.

A cursory look at works by the assumed "outsider" artists reveals an aesthetic strategy not far removed from that used to depict a rich array of worlds in the works of such 'home-grown' authors as Margaret Ogolla, Chinua Achebe, Elechi Amadi, Ngugi wa thiong'o, among other African writers whose artistic choices gravitate around the oral aesthetic. In fact, so understandable and recognisable are the aesthetics and worlds, respectively, conjured up by some non-native writers that a non-acquainted reader, literally, needs to be reminded that the said writers are of another pedigree. Roger Kurtz (2005), for instance, in his evaluation of Oludhe's works, describes her as a 'fascinating East African voice' (p. viii). Kurtz, however, observes that Macgoye's path to acceptance as an author from East Africa has been rather slow. He avers:

Always looming in the background, an awkward presence that non-Kenyan critics in particular have never known what to do with, are Macgoye's race and her British origins. Even after living in East Africa for

decades, taking Kenyan citizenship, marrying a Kenyan, and raising four children there, inevitable questions would surface about her status. How exactly does this white writer fit into African literature? (p. 46)

Macgoye's respite seems to come, Kurtz suggests, from her conscious and unrelenting affiliation with the people of her adopted home, Kenya (especially the Luo). "Her interest in the Luo women's history, her consistent moral vision and fidelity to Kenya's social history situate her "in the tradition of East African Literature," Kurtz avers (Ibid, p. 57). Such artistic elements, we concur, constitute a unique African aesthetic that is largely concomitant with African oral traditions. Barbara Kimenye's own writing style, with all its didacticism and a well formed sense of locale, resonates quite significantly with that of Macgoye. Kimenye's desire to experiment with the traditions, models and symbolic systems of the ordinary people of East Africa and Uganda, specifically, point to a writer that came to master and put to good use the aesthetic models of the natives.

Evan Mwangi (2012), in a newspaper article about Kimenye's influence as a writer from East Africa, applauds her as "a major literary success in every way" whose charming children's books and novellas for young adults "sold over a million copies in Africa alone". He further notes that Kimenye's "spirit will live on in Kenya and beyond because of the innovativeness with which she used language to capture weighty socio-economic issues in a witty and light-hearted tone" (DN Saturday September 22, 2012). We intend to demonstrate, through this paper, that Kimenye has, on many occasions, tempered her chosen subjects with a recognisable and localised idiom which rids the East African reader of any constraints of visualising the circumstances to which she invites them to react.

Barbara Kimenye was born of a mixed parentage in Yorkshire, England, on 19th December 1929. She was educated at a convent school in Yorkshire and later studied nursing at Hammersmith, London, where she met and married her Tanzanian husband with whom she moved to Uganda in the early 1950s. There she became a stay-at-home mother to her two sons before later serving as a private secretary for the Government of the Kabaka in the Buganda Kingdom. Kimenye is not only among the first Anglophone Ugandan women writers to be published in Central and East Africa but also the first woman journalist and women's feature editor for the Daily Nation of Kenya.

Kimenye published her first collection of short stories, *Kalasanda*, in 1965. According to Ombui (2016), her works

are “characterized by diverse representation of characters and their world and also humour, suggesting an awareness of contemporary Ugandan life” (p. 1). When asked about the European influence in her representation of Baganda village life, Ombui adds, she asserts that much of her works is based on “real events in both Namusera and Mengo” (p. 1). “She therefore, writes from the social reality of this postcolonial remote African setting and, therefore, brings out a rich representation of the African culture and entertains her readers by picking on seemingly unimportant issues like witchcraft and the conduct of school children but which can provide material for interesting fiction” (p. 2). Kimenyé is, however, most celebrated for her *Moses* series which became successful and developed into a whole series. Ombui points out that

[her] collection of works are still in demand today. In 1994 her story 'The Battle of the Sacred Tree' was made a feature film in Kenya. Kimenyé's focus has been on children's and young adult's literature. The major factor determining her decision was the absence of relevant stories for African children written in English from an African perspective.

In England, in the 1970s, Kimenyé had a period of inactivity as she found that she was uninspired to write while living away from Africa. Upon her return, she wrote *The Mating Game* (1992), *The Runaway Bride* (1994) and *Kayo's House* (1995), which deal with issues relating to marriage and education, and modern/traditional African women. *Prettyboy*, *Beware* (1997) and *Beauty Queen* (1997) deal with contemporary themes such as HIV and Aids. Thus, Kimenyé can be referred to as a pioneer and leading writer of children's and young adults' Literature in Uganda. (p. 2)

Accordingly, therefore, Kimenyé, as a representative of writers of her ilk, may be resourceful indeed in revealing traits in non-native writers' literature that endears them to the local readership. The main purpose of the present study is to examine how presentational features (hereafter referred to as oral tradition aesthetics) thought to be most patent in works written native African writers have, as a matter of necessity, found use in and embody the literariness of literary texts by non-African writers such as Barbara Kimenyé. Specifically, we seek answers to two main questions:

1. What oral tradition aesthetics has Barbara Kimenyé deployed in Kalasanda?
2. Of what effect are those aesthetics on both the literariness of the text and the readers?

II. ORAL AESTHETICS AND LITERARY AESTHETICS

According to Culler (1979), ‘aesthetics’ is historically the name of the theory of art and has evoked debates about whether beauty is an objective property of works of art or a subjective response of viewers, and about the relation of the beautiful to the true and the good (p. 32). For Immanuel Kant, Culler says, “Aesthetic objects have purposiveness without purpose. There is purposiveness to their construction: they are made so that their parts will work together towards some end.

But the end is the work of art itself, pleasure in the work or pleasure occasioned by the work, not some external purpose (P. 33). Culler adds that aesthetics form one of the many elements that constitute literariness. Others are the foregrounding and integration of language, fiction, intertextuality or self-reflexiveness, etc. (p. 34). To Culler then, it may be observed, the aesthetics of a work of art are the same as the language spoken by that text, and “to understand the language of a text is to understand the world to which it refers” (Kabayanda 1984, p. 1). In consequence the aesthetics in a work of art are, by and large, donated by the world envisioned by the author. If accurately done, then technique matches thought resulting in an immensely satisfying work of art.

Similarly, Janheinz Jahn (in Lorentzon 2007, 7) points out that unless there is an aesthetic element and a principle of form, there can be neither art nor literature. To him, the phenomena of aesthetic effect and literary form constitute a tradition; they are always affiliated and biased. He says: “If a text is recited according to a fixed tradition, this surely presupposes a literary basis.” In our understanding, stylized forms/language, which authors use to embellish their expression, form a repertoire from which authors and artists draw contingent to their own abilities and competencies as well as envisaged aesthetic effect. The possibilities within the stylistic continuum are then not only as limitless as the perceptions of the audience (reader) but also always within the purview of the artist. In this sense, then, it is possible to talk about regional aesthetic, race aesthetic or a period/movement's aesthetic, post-colonial aesthetic and the oral tradition aesthetic.

Smith (2007), talks of black aesthetics movement, which he considers descending from oral traditions, as containing important literary elements. Smith identifies the tendency to stand “contrary to the traditional aesthetic of the dominant culture with an aim to interpret the black experience” as one of the defining features of the black Aesthetics Movement because (p.7). Other literary elements that are expressly born of the black aesthetic include: “knowledge of the audience and their history,”... “Use of oral narrative devices such as tricksterism,” as well as the incorporation of “African images” (p. 8). Below, we examine how some of these elements are put to use in Kimenyé's Kalasanda and the effect they occasion.

Oral Tradition Aesthetics in Kalasanda

In this ensuing section, we discuss the key features that constitute the oral tradition in Kimenyé's *Kalasanda*. The features that we have given prominence in this paper include: didacticism, Humour and the narrative technique, and use of the trickster motif—hereafter referred to as tricksterism.

III. DIDACTICISM AS A STRATEGY

Kalasanda, published in 1965 by Kimenyé, is an anthology of eight short stories all set in a fictional village, Kalasanda. The anthology, which mainly targets young adult readers, is a

dramatization of life in the sleepy village of Kalasanda around independence time. Emerging from a past of colonialism and at the threshold of a transition, the depiction of life in the village bespeaks of, as was likely to happen, widespread confusion and social-cultural dilemma to a nearly traumatic level. There is a general sense of rootlessness displayed in childlike acts, such as selfishness and a broad absence of a collective sense of direction or self awareness. Yet all this is done in a light-hearted manner that is a source of comic relief, albeit without losing sight of those truths and values that people once held in common and which, despite having fallen into disuse, the author appears keen on reviving.

It is probably not lost to the reader, for instance, that despite the many things that have clearly gone wrong in the past, the last story in the anthology, "Royal Visit" re-ignites a sense of hope and optimism. While His Highness the Kabaka is hosted by the Musokes, women are literary outdoing each other in every sense with the intention of making a good impression before the king.

Mrs Lutaya, the president of the mother's union, had miraculously appeared as if from nowhere, clad in a pink plastic raincoat and hood over her busuti. There she was as usual in the thick of things. Bustling importantly, back and forth across the veranda, doing her best to convey the impression that she alone had the situation fully under control. A young lad had been sent to her home to collect her best china and glassware. It would be rather nice later to be able to say the Kabaka had dined off her plates. Miriamu thought this was going a bit too far. She swore that anything not belonging to the Musoke household would only reach the royal table over her dead body. (p. 121)

The above incident is not an isolated one. The Kalasanda church came into being 40 years after the Kalasandans had been holding the Sunday service in the "benign shade of the mango tree." The moment the bishop announced that he intended to build a church at Gumbi: "...They decided to build it quickly, so hoping to cock a snook at Gumbi. A church committee was hastily formed...." (p. 119) Elsewhere, Daudi, the half-demented village scholar wants to prove to everyone else that he is more knowledgeable than everyone else. Salongo, the guard of the Ssabalangira Tomb treated everyone else with "disdain, ridicule, and raving fury" and thought himself superior and honourable for being the only one who never stops expressing horror at the lack of veneration shown the dead these modern times. Clearly, everyone has devised his/her own standards and order leading to total chaos and each is pulling in their own direction. This is, however, checked by two odd occurrences. When Kabaka comes calling, men such as Yosefu display ingenuity and a presence of the mind not before witnessed:

He reached there in time to prevent what promised to be a major battle...sides were taken with the swiftness peculiar to the female species at moments like

this....to sort things out to the satisfaction of both parties called for utmost diplomacy.....He glared at the women with all the ferocity he could master, and thundered, we have the honour to be entertaining His Highness the Kabaka today.....I want to see the food in five minutes (p. 123)

This, it seemed, is all the women needed in order to get down to work—a call to order. Otherwise, they had quite impressively taken up their roles:

Maria arrived late, bringing with her as much bottled beer as she could carry, and all her children trailed behind with gourds of home brewed banana beer on their heads.....Maria laughed and shook her head. Don't you dare talk about paying, madam.....Hot after Maria came Nantondo, bearing a bag of beans and of Do-Do....Before long, most of the women had taken a hand in the work. (p. 122)

Events such as the above restore a sense of pride among the Kalasandans. However, it is Mrs. Lutaya, the distasteful one, who ultimately steals the show with a most memorable act:

Miriamu suddenly clapped her hand mouth and whispered, "What a dreadful thing! We forgot to give his highness a present." To the Kalasandans this was a horrible breach of etiquette...Buganda's supreme ruler, had been sent away empty handed. When the enormity of the lapse sank in, there was not a woman in the kitchen who didn't want to leap into eternal oblivion. Mrs Litaya was the only one who appeared unperturbed. At last, she quietly said, "stop worrying. His highness got a present after all. I told Yosefu to put my box of crockery into the car and to tell the Kabaka it was from all of us...In a way, I was a little sorry to see it go," she said at last. Yet, how nice to feel that whenever the Kabaka uses those dishes he will remember this day, and perhaps think of us- the people of Kalasanda. (p. 129)

It is through incidents such as above that the humanity of the people of Kalasanda is forever secured. The fact that together they can still pull through small triumphs bespeaks of their underlying resilience, enduring dignity and compassion. Much as they face challenges, they are not completely hopeless.

IV. HUMOUR AND NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

In Kalasanda, Kimenyé has made clear her intention to appeal to the young reader's sense of humour right from the first story in the anthology. Yet her humour clearly goes beyond mere comic relief or enjoyment. It seems that by highlighting the individual foibles of a few leading characters, the author succeeds in distracting the young reader from the looming suffering and hopeless of a community that faces the tragedy of socio-economic and political stagnation. It is a kind of humour that is clearly aimed at the preservation and survival of both the community and the young reader. Though relating

to the prevailing collective rootlessness, the antics of such characters as Daudi, Nantondo, Damieno occasion more delight than despondency.

To begin with, there is Nantondo who despite her advanced age and misery never ceases to amuse with her unhealthy appetite for attention and publicity. Her house is described thus: "A disused outhouse, for the plastered mud has crumbled away in huge patches, leaving the real framework clearly visible, and the roof is simply a patchwork of beaten-out paraffin can, pieces of cardboard and grass (p. 5). Nantondo is clearly an embodiment of stunted growth.

If ever there was a woman who loved to cause a sensation or better still be the centre of one, it was Nantondo the widow. Whose widow she actually was had long since been forgotten, for Nantondo was older than most of the villagers of Kalasanda, and although her years were to some extent revealed in the grizzled whiskers which bristled on her shaven head, and in the thousands of tiny, dry wrinkles flickering loosely along the skin of her arms....still her back looked straight and supple....it so happened that Nantondo's age was perhaps the only subject upon which she did not hold an unquestionable opinion. (p. 9)

It is reported that newspapers were not important in the village because she was ever present to witness and advise. When she witnesses Okidi bewitching Damieno, Nantondo causes a stir that escalates to reveal that the people of Kalasanda are not yet ready to break with certain primitive practices of the past. Damieno fears coming out of his home because of the spell that has been cast on him and the Kalasandan's side with him. Whenever the chief tried to get the man out the fearful villagers shouted: "Beware of the spell." No appeals by converted villagers was going to convince a majority of them who dreaded witchcraft. Damieno is finally carried out of his hut in a comma after being struck by an irate chief who had run out of patience.

In another vivid description, a picture of a half-demented village intellectual is humorously presented to the reader:

(Daudi) is regarded with some pride as the village intellectual. You can tell he is different merely by looking at his abnormally large forehead and noting the fiery gleam in his eyes. However, it is his nose, which usually holds one's attention, for besides being long and sharp, it never stops twitching and it takes some getting used to. Daudi is a man burning with ambition, and he has been trying for an overseas scholarship ever since the ending of the Second World War. No doubt, his chances are a trifle slim, since his years are in the region of forty-eight... (p. 8)

In "The Tale of the Bag," Daudi is said to keep a battered satchel of a bag that he carries everywhere. The bag contains his correspondence....all the letters he has ever received....no wonder the bag bulges at the seams (p. 35). The narrator fears

that Daudi will acquire a permanent, sideways curve as the bag gets heavier and bulkier. Daudi believed that "the secret of life is to be able to lay your hands on things" (p. 35).

While on a bus during one of his frequent trips to Mengo to try badgering the ministry of education into sponsoring a study tour he had applied for in Red China, there is an impression everyone on board is a lunatic. Daudi is a marked man wherever he goes: "Furthermore, the bus itself was terribly crowded and the only available seat was next to a weird old man who kept giggling to himself and digging Daudi slyly in the ribs (p. 38)

Daudi is almost killed by a mob when he mistakenly alights the bag of his neighbour on the bus: "I want my bag," wailed the old man....it's mine. Ask anybody in Kalasanda" (p. 41). The reader is thoroughly entertained by this. Daudi had actually, and for the first time, forgotten his bag back at home in Kalasanda in Maria's house.

It is also amazing how Kalasandans warm up to juvenile business ideas. In "the Kalasanda Hound," Saulo Bulega, upon his visit to a dog show in Kampala, returns home with the news that there was big money in dogs, especially obedient ones. In a joint venture, Bulega and Daudi agree to acquire a dog, which they would transform into an obedient one that could participate in and win races for money. They agree to call the dog, Kalasanda Hunting Hound. By the following morning, everybody in Kalasanda had overtaken the innovators in their own idea. As expected, though, the entire project is a sham, and the two not only lose their dog but the entire village is baying for their blood for misleading them.

V. TRICKSTERISM MOTIF

Tricksterism is a common motif that exists where one character or group of characters takes advantage of others through deception. In the anthology, the norm is disrupted by two stories that present characters that have devised ingenious ways of defrauding others. In "The Winner" all hell breaks loose when Pius Ndawula wins a lottery.

When Pius Ndawula won the football pools, he seemed to become the most popular man in Buganda overnight. Hosts of relatives converged upon him from the four corners of the kingdom: cousins and uncles, of whose existence he had never before been aware, turned up in Kalasanda by the busload, together with crowds of individuals who despite their down-trodden appearance, assured Pius that they, and they alone, were capable of seeing that his money was properly invested- preferably in their own business. (p. 45)

Within a short time Pius has become a celebrity and lots of people are already living off him.

One woman, she had introduced herself as cousin Sarah, discovered Pius's hidden store of banana beer, and dished it out to all and sundry as though it were her own. Pius had become very wary of Cousin Sarah.

He did not like the way she kept loudly remarking that he needed a woman about the place, and he was even more seriously alarmed when suddenly Salongo gave him a painful dig in the ribs and muttered, "You'll have to watch that one she's a sticker!" (p. 47)

Aware of how tricky his world has become, Pius is hardly perturbed when he learns that his prize money has to be shared among three hundred other people. Cousin Sarah is also determined to marry him, regardless, and not even Pius's best friend Salang'o can persuade him otherwise.

In "The Visitor", an opportunistic stranger makes away with Mr and Mrs Kajumba's household items. Luckily, the culprit is apprehended thanks to Nansubuga's stroke of genius. Clearly not all tricksters go scot-free. Uncle Kato fails where Cousin Sarah succeeded admirably. One gets an impression that not all tricksterism is evil, after all.

VI. CONCLUSION

From the foregoing discussion, it is indeed observed that, Kimenye, despite being of European extraction demonstrates an undeniable attentiveness to specific issues emanating from her writing locale. Kimenye exhibits an awareness of the tradition she writes in both in terms of her preoccupation and aesthetic strategy. She is not only committed to issues of immediate concern but also articulates them in a manner which local young readers can identify. In *Kalasanda*, language has been assigned special privileges to realise a special effect that resonates with the target audience. In the text, the author has employed contextualised images and cultural content to provide cultural education to young readers.

One would also conclude that such fidelity to the immediate cultural context prepares the young reader for a more serious and committed nature of African adult fiction. As is the tradition, tricksterism introduces the young reader to the relative nature of life situations, intent and outcomes. The use of humour both socialises the young reader into the language features of the universal category of literature and the many pleasures and possibilities it brings along even within the East African context. Evidently, oral tradition features are available for deployment to whoever wants to put them to good use, their cultural background notwithstanding. Aware of where she is writing from and for whom, Kimenye has to adorn her message with ornaments that are locally available.

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