

Michael Wainaina

## Empire Speaks Back: Authenticity, Folk Voices and Re-Presentation of Across in Gikuyu Radio Narratives

### Introduction

Cognizant of the dominant stereotypical image of Africa in Western writing; in appreciation of the fact that stereotyping of difference works both ways; being critical of the capacity of canonised African literature to capture authentic voices of the folk as they speak back to the West; recognising the power of radio in its reinforcement of oracy and representation of a folk-centred world view; I proceed to analyse radio narratives from *Kameme Kayũ Ka Mũingĩ* (The Voice of the People Radio) an independent community-oriented radio station in Nairobi Kenya that broadcasts in Gĩkũyũ to answer the question: “What are the contemporary representations of across, going across and engaging with those from across<sup>1</sup> in relation to transgression of geographical and cultural borders by Gĩkũyũ folk?” The analysis shows that the folk create their own image of across and the crossing of borders in characterising the relationship between themselves and the West. They not only speak back to the stereotypes of the West about Africa, but they also create their own stereotypes in return. They characterise those from across as odd and gullible. They freely suspend the moral rules of engagement that they use with their own, evaluate their relationship with the West on largely economic terms and take no moral responsibility in engaging with those from across in extortionist and depraved terms. The dominant stereotypical image of Africa in Western thought and the equally stereotypical responses by the folk in engaging with Westerners indicates that there does not seem to be a mutually affirming discourse between the two cultures.

---

<sup>1</sup> The word for “abroad” or “overseas” especially in relation to Europe and America in Gĩkũyũ language is *Mũrĩmo* meaning “across.”

## The Imperials Write Africa

In Western writing and thought Africa has remained the strange other, the resource and now, the market and experimental laboratory of Western technology (Abubakar). Africa has been a representational narrative subject or “object-being” since antiquity.

This stereotypical approach to writing Africa characterised the demarcations of Africa versus the West through the medieval context – where the relationship was represented by Pagan versus Christian dichotomies; to the renaissance – where the relationship was represented by malformation versus perfection dichotomies; to the enlightenment and post-enlightenment periods – where the relationship was characterised by the racial inferiority versus superiority dichotomies; to the post colonial era where Africa is not only the ancestral home of humankind but also the centre of today’s tensions, civil wars, dislocations, and genocides. It is instructive to note that the rhetorics and discourses of “African otherness” have survived African decolonisation. But the Empire is writing back!

## The Empire Writes Back

A body of post-colonial studies of literary responses to the writing of Africa by the West has gained currency over the last few decades. My concern in this paper emanates from a discomfiture with the fact of “writing” in relation to the problem of representation and the language of African literature.

The crucial function of language as a medium of power demands that post-colonial writing defines itself by seizing the language of the centre and re-placing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place. (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 37; emphasis added).

My contention is that this emphasis on writing is overstated because African communities are largely oral and are fairly still attached to their vernaculars. Therefore “post colonial writing” represents only a part of the body of cultural production of African cultures. Given the relatively low literacy rates in Africa, this writing circulates within a minority who can read and write and those who are comfortable with foreign languages. Unfortunately, postcolonial theorising in and about Africa especially on literary forms has tended to privilege this canonised written literature and place it at the centre of the so called African literatures. This form has a big dilemma arising from its definitional crisis in trying to “(seize) the language of the centre and replacing it in a discourse [supposedly] fully adapted to the colonized place.”