On the polyphonic nature of the gicaandi genre
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ON THE POLYPHONIC NATURE OF THE GĩCAANDĩ GENRE

Kimani Njogu

A central tenet of dialogic criticism is the heteroglossic and polyphonic nature of all utterances. Polyphony (many voices) and heteroglossia (linguistic varieties) are seen as pervading all utterances but more so in dialogic utterances. Heteroglossia refers to different languages in a given community and how they relate to each other. More significantly, however, it also refers to the various linguistic forms including gender, age group, regional, familial, professional registers and social class dialects in a language and how these interact with each other, depending on use and context.

On the other hand, polyphony makes reference not so much to the number of voices as such but to the plurality of an individual utterance, that is the ability of an utterance to encapsulate someone else's utterance, thus creating a dialogic relation between the voice of the self and the voice of that other. When we quote someone else's word we engage in dialogue with his or her perception. Further, by so quoting, we may be associating ourselves with their linguistic-ideologic purview or satirizing and dissociating ourselves from it. These tendencies are evident in the novel genre as Bakhtin (1981) has noted but are even more so in orally performed poetic genres that are structurally composed as dialogue. One such genre is the gĩcaandĩ composition.

The heteroglossic and polyphonic nature of a performed gĩcaandĩ genre may emerge if we re-examine:

(a) the stratification of the narrator's voice into two distinct voices such as, for example, the narrative voice and the metacommentary voice;
(b) the ability of the performers to make reference to each other and to anticipate each other's words;
(c) the incorporation of general ideological positions of the Gĩkũyũ community in the genre;
(d) the incorporation into the performance of other individual characters, relevant to the narrative.

Firstly though, what is gĩcaandĩ? The gĩcaandĩ is essentially a competitive, yet cooperative, riddle-like dialogue poem and poetic exchange. This dialogue poetry seems to epitomize a simultaneity of cooperative competitiveness, a test of wits, problem-posing and problem-solving (see Njogu 1993 for further details). In his introduction, Pick (1973), who had collected a version of gĩcaandĩ performed by John Kahora at Muguga in 1933, observes that both as a text and as a song gĩcaandĩ is very old and that the 'meaning of many words used in it has been lost' (Pick 1973: 149). He defines it as a poem of...
enigmas sung by poets in a duet and not by a soloist and chorus as is the case with many Gikuyu traditional songs.

Kabiru & Mutahi (1988) and Mutahi (1991) have noted that glcaandl is characterized by the predominance of coded messages involving all aspects of Gikuyu life. These messages are decoded by contesting poets, and the failure to decode a message may lead to a poet forfeiting his rattle, the glcaandl musical instrument. The defeated poet hands over his instrument as a sign of defeat. He would have to retrieve it in order to perform because without the instrument of his trade he cannot perform in public.

In defining glcaandl Ghilardi (1966) further asserts:

Il gicandi è una specie di poema universale gikuyu, di altissima poesia, nel quale il cantore spazia liberamente da un campo all’altro. Tocca più o meno diffusamente tutti i motivi. Passa dalla festosa letizia alla tristezza più cupa, dal comico al tragico, dal lirico al macabro persino all’apocalittico. Disdegna i temi volgari (Ghilardi 1966: 184).

The glcaandl is a kind of Gikuyu universal poem of the highest poetry in which the performer paces freely, passing from one field to another [my emphasis]. He touches on all leitmotifs more or less at length. He passes from feasting merriment to the darkest sadness, from the comical to the tragical and from lyrical to gruesome or even apocalyptic expressions. He disdains vulgar themes.

Whereas Ghilardi praises glcaandl as performed poetry, Routledge & Routledge (1910), in a patronizing and dismissive discussion of Gikuyu poetry, consider glcaandl as ‘gibberish’.

Occasionally a boy is to be seen going about by himself, dancing, singing, and accompanying the song by shaking a gourd which he holds in his hand and which has been formed into a rattle. This proceeding he continues for a month or six weeks, and it is termed ku-i'nya gi-shan '-di [sic]. The words of the song are traditional; they are apparently gibberish, and convey nothing even to the performer (Routledge & Routledge 1910: 109).

But Ngũgĩ (1982 and 1993) assertively claims a space for the glcaandl genre in Gikuyu literature. He novelizes the genre by consciously and overtly utilizing it to define the narrative of the Gikuyu novel Caitaani Motharabaini. In that novel, the narrator is depicted as a glcaandl performer unconstrained spatially and temporally. It is the glcaandl player who has the divine duty of telling the story of his people’s struggles in post-colonial Kenya. Moreover, the riddle-like nature of Matigari and its spirit of search for answers is a sideward glance at glcaandl. These sharply divergent and oppositional views of the nature of the glcaandl genre are manifestations of the ideological positions assumed by the Routledges on the one hand and Ngũgĩ on the other.

Ngũgĩ’s accommodative claim that the glcaandl genre is worth further exploration and appraisal, and his utilization of the genre in Caitaani
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Mutharabaini and Matigari is a clear manifestation of the utility he finds, as a novelist, in the cultural repertoire of the Gikuyu people. Clearly Ngũgĩ sees the genre as dynamic and capable of speaking through other genres like the novel.

The term gi ca andi refers both to the dialogue poetry and to the musical instrument that accompanies the performer. Mūthi & Kabira (1988:28) have claimed that the term is a nominalization of the verb gi ca nda which means ‘to dance’. While accepting this derivation, I believe that the term may further be onomatopoeic pointing to the sound made by seeds in the instrument as the poem is being performed. There is general consensus that gi ca ndi is poetry composed by at least two poets who enter into dialogue with each other.

The gĩca andi instrument that accompanies the poetry and marks the rhythm is a small oblong gourd adorned with engravings. As I have noted elsewhere (Njogu 1993 and 1994), the outside of the instrument is engraved with hierographic symbols and adorned with cowrie shells (ngũguntu) some of which are fixed to the gourd itself. These also feature as part of the narrative in many gi ca andi performances. Other shells are strung to a glass bead string or to a copper wire chain. This chain is also referred to as njomoya in gi ca andi performances, and it is believed to bring good luck to the performer. The inside of the gi ca andi instrument contains seeds of a plant referred to as mweethia which, on shaking the gourd, strike against thorns stuck through the sides resulting in a rhythmical sound. All these items on the instrument are consciously and consistently referred to in the performance so that there is an inalienable connection between the poem itself, the accompanying instrument and its engravings.

In gi ca andi performances, performers are engaged in dialogue with other competing and cooperating performers, each performer addressing the other directly. The performer does not, however, limit himself or herself only to engaging the other performer. Sometimes he or she breaks out of that relation and engages the broader audience in a direct address or commentary. Such postural inconsistency and oscillation is not only a shift and a balancing of the performer’s point of view, but is, more than anything else, a stratifying and a levelling of one voice into two voices. When this happens, a voice that acts as a metacommentary is embedded within the narrative voice. Consider for example, the gĩca andi performance found in Pick (1973):

Poet A:

Ndathiire bũrũri wa Ŭkabi
Kũria kũri mũbũri na ng’ombe
Gwa Thended mũndi mũgo
Ngũrũtrũwo irũa na mbũthũ
Ru ngũkũdũrũria ngeithi
I went into Maasailand
Where there are cattle and goats
To a medicine man Thendeu
They offered me milk in a calabash
I gave it to the greetings
Who drank their fill
And fell down to the ground
Sated as they are
Notice that poet A's narration is in the first person singular as marked by /nl/ so that the narrative is seen as revolving around him. Yet, in his response poet B uses the same first person singular marker in ndetire, 'I called', and the third person singular marker /a/ in angiuma, 'if he goes out'. In the response also the poet uses the third person plural marker /ma/ in moonire, 'they saw', instead of the expected singular form. Thus, the distinction between the persons in the narrative is blurred as is the distinction between the tenses. The mixture of tenses here is significant. Evidently, in giccaandI performances, the distinction between past and present is temporarily erased. Furthermore, Poet B’s words ‘The unravelling indicates pitch darkness / But if he comes out / He may be devoured by the lions of the plains’ and ‘The greetings are the people he met on the way’ etc. are clearly metacommentaries on the co-poet’s utterance which are directly addressed to the audience. In other words, the poet explains his understanding of the utterance to the larger audience before proceeding to compose his verse. Here the metacommentary and the narrative connect.

Or consider when the giccaandI performer says:

They open their mouths to eat me
Because they are all unravelled together

The unravelling indicates pitch darkness
But if he comes out
He may be devoured by the lions of the plains
I called the Maasai warriors
Who know the lion’s ways
And they took me to a place to spend the night

I went and lay down
I saw an astounding thing in the morning
I found the greetings having been chased off
By a sudden assailant on the chase
And when those on the chase come what do you do
That we may do the same?

The greetings are the people he met on the way
The assailants are the evil spirits
Which came by night and killed a person
In the morning they found the corpse
But not the spirits
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Poet A:
Maathira karimu Iria IngI
Amu ndingiina na karimu Imwe
Okumiruta ku na ndimi

Poet B:
Karimu ni muhura wa njuki
Ni gicaandi muthia
Oturwo kwa muthu wa mwato

Poet A:
Nengerwo irata ria mwana
Amu ndinaga itor kana ni riri

Poet B:
Irata ni gacere
Karla gakunkaga mb0otho
Iria ya gicaandi

This oscillation between the metacommentary and the narrative discourse occurs in numerous gicaandi performances. I would hasten to add that, naturally, I am not suggesting these discourse types are dichotomous. Instead, the distinction between them has to do with their relative degree of narrativity. The narrative recapitulates a past experience and projects towards a possible world. The metacommentary necessarily depends on another preceding utterance and by making reference to it projects a possible way of understanding that utterance. Generally, however, the narrative voice may tend towards detachment and 'objective' style of presentation. The audience may be able to witness a delinking between the narrator's voice and that of the characters in the narrative. In the metacommentary voice this delinking is obscured. The poet is simultaneously the critic and narrator, his or her voice finds existence between the commentary and observations directed at the audience and the voices of narrative characters as they interact.

Consider the narrator's voice as a metacommentary directed at the audience in Kahora's gicaandi:

Poet A:
Kiara kia mukiko kia 0rio
Ningwatorania njarara inanya
Kiarira thakame njite
Kiolma mguta nyue
Uguo ni 0iri kana noo nil?

Poet B:
Mbaara ndekwenda
Kana ondo uriruta thakame

I divide the middle finger of my right hand
Into eight pieces
If it bleeds, I throw the blood away
If it discharges fat, I drink it
Do you know that
Or am I the only one who knows it?

He does not want fighting
Nor anything that sheds blood
When Poet B says ndekwenda, 'he does not want', with reference to poet A, he is making a metacommentary addressed to the audience commenting on the co-poet’s performance. In other words, he is re-interpreting for the audience the limits around which the gicaandí performance revolves. It is to be performed cooperatively and peacefully. The reassurance that the performance will not be a brawl, but based on fair play, is shared by both poets insofar as Poet B’s response does not in any way negate Poet A’s statement. Silence in this case is read by the audience as acquiescence.

Gicaandí performances provide evidence of the flexibility of language and voice in dialogue poetry in general and dialogic poetry in particular. What, though, is the function of the vocal alterity? What is the function of this metacommentary which uses essentially non-figurative language or what Bakhtin refers to as ‘oral speech’? In his analysis of Dostoevsky, Bakhtin (1984) made a vast generalization that an oral narrator represents the common man, that is, oralness is seen as an icon of commonness. This claim is too strong.

A story teller [oral narrator] ... is not a literary person; he belongs in most cases to the lower social strata, to the common people ... and he brings with him oral speech (Bakhtin 1984: 192).

Unlike Bakhtin, I would argue that the gicaandí performer is both a common man and literary man. He is an organic intellectual, in Gramsci’s sense, to the extent that he emerges from the people and he performs for them. His exposure to skills associated with the gicaandí genre does not alienate him from his people. As a common person, the performer attains common identity with the audience and the experiences of the gicaandí narrative voice. He can thus speak on behalf of the audience and provide commentaries on performances. Yet, he is also a literary person. Gicaandí performers consider themselves (and are considered by the Gĩkũyũ people) as professionals because they have unique skills utilized in a distinct art form. In addition, they have their own register characterized by the use of archaisms and coded messages.
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This professionalism and literariness results from the fact that the training of *gicaandl* performers was, at least in the past, an institutionalized phenomenon. There was a physical detachment of apprentices from their homes so that they could be trained by a n'joorua, a master poet. It was only after this training that they could feel confident to perform in market places. Performers would show their indebtedness and acknowledgement of their tutor's knowledge by making reference to them in performances. For example, in his performance, Kang'ethe makes reference to Karanja wa Nduuta (a famous *gicaandl* performer in Kiambu district) who taught him *gicaandl*.

*Kang'ethe:*  
Karanja wa Nduuta ang'iguela  
Ngero t'ng'gerwo ndi Nduuta  
Matthiire t'geni matagooka  
Nio maandutire undi t'ng'ed  
Na miratina ya ng'ohi  
Ni geetha twanyua t'kohiga  
Ilili ndi miratirwo ni ake  
Na miratina ya nyondo  
Na miratina ya nyondo  
Nio geetha twanyua t'gakiga  
Ilili ndamuunda k'ura ng'orgia oo?  
If Karanja wa Nduuta hears this  
The damage we would receive I do not know  
They went on a journey  
From which they cannot return  
They are the ones who taught me this one  
With sponges for making beer  
So that when we drink we may become witty  
I was not taught by women  
With breasts like sponges  
So that we may become foolish  
Whom shall I ask if I get lost?

(1992: field notes)

While acknowledging that Karanja wa Nduuta is the n'joorua who taught him *gicaandl*, Kang'ethe blurs the singularity of the master poet by making reference to him in the plural through the third person plural pronominal marker /o/, 'them', in nio, 'they are the ones', and the plural subject marker /ma-/, 'they', in maathiire, 'they taught me', and maathiire, 'they went'. Notice further that he refers to death euphemistically as t'geni, 'visit'. This has the effect of creating the tension of the dead poet's presence in absence, further complicated in the statement ndamuunda k'ura ng'orgia oo?, 'when I get lost whom shall I ask?', because his tutor has gone on a permanent visit.

The constant claim on indebtedness to the n'joorua by *gicaandl* performers should not however be construed as implying that what the *gicaandl* poet learnt is what he performed. Naturally, the genre has unique characteristics which define it. But that does not necessarily constrain the performer because as *gicaandl* performers say: ciaurugirwo na mwe noo murugirire ti mwe, 'they were cooked in one pot but their interpretations are different', and murathi uria warathire kwanya tiwe warathire gwiltu, 'the seer who foretold the future in your place is not the one who foretold at our place'. Thus, the performer allows for a multiplicity of
versions and interpretations. The possibility of multiple versions and interpretations is a necessary feature for the dialogic.

The institutionalization inevitably produced a professional register among *gicaandI* performers. In *gicaandI* performances, this register is juxtaposed with the dominant Gikuyu dialect found within the context of performance. Through the detachment of literary discourse realized in a distanced perspective, metaphorical imagery, elevated language style, parallelism and so on, the narrator-cum-performer attains a measure of clarity to rearticulate his own experiences and those of the narrator. In addition, the performer is able to blur the distinction between the fictive world and the real world, between his own experiences and those of the narrator, and, in the process, is engaged in the inversion of the notion of a wholly objective and detached aesthetic that does not respond to social-cultural demands. This may be done through direct reference to the attending audience or through allusion to socio-cultural activities. Indeed, numerous comments on cultural activities find treatment in *gicaandI* performances. These comments constitute the grounding of a literary piece in the socio-cultural lives of the people.

Consider, for example, the following performance:

**Poet A:**
Kwanyu kūrĩ ngoma cia ktonje mūtatriagiria rūrīga
Mūkamīkā atia kana atia?

**Poet B:**
Ngoma ya ktonje ni ndūrume kana mwaki
Rūrīga ni mūrīyo kana ngu

**Poet A:**
NI mūgeithagiria thoome Rīria ageendi aa ithe matūngaine
Mūtageithagiria, Unjīfre NI mūgeithagiria Unjīfre

**Poet B:**
NI ciana hiIndi ya maambura Kana ni cilganagiria hau thoome
Ageendi aa ithe ni andu aa kwa gukawe
Marī ho kūrora ciana Matūnganagia: NI ūndū kūrī nūndia nene
Ya kūrora ciana maamburaini

(Pick 1973:233)
Poet A juxtaposes the non-corresponding plural and the singular forms when he calls the referent ngoma cia k'lonje, 'disabled spirits', and then asks m'kamìka ati'atia? 'what will you do with it?'. The particle of association /cia/ denotes a plural N-noun class referent in Gikuyu but the object marker /ml/ denotes a singular N-noun class referent. There is, therefore, a shift in object marking.

The self can be viewed as a shared entity as it is projected outward to an otherness so that through language, consciousness is shown as both individual and collective. The gic'aandlı performer above dissolves the distinction between the singular and the plural and makes the self inter-individual. This is a truly dialogic strategy.

Notice that the reference to 'the disabled spirit' is ambiguous: it may refer to the ram or fire. The possibility of dual reference, both of which are correct, is a pointer to the dialogicity of the utterance. The performer would have to pick out the two references. The Gikuyu keep fattened rams for slaughter during ceremonies or as part of dowry during marriages. The ram is referred to here as 'a spirit' because of its attachment to the people, just as the spirits of the departed are believed to be part of the community, so are the rams. The ram is disabled because it permanently stays in an enclosure to fatten until it can be made use of. On the other hand, the disabled spirit may refer to fire. Like the ram, fire is kept in an enclosure (between three fire stones) to be used when needed. Again, like the ram, it is indispensable to the lives of the people. While the ram eats sweet potato foliage, the fire thrives on wood.

There is always a tendency in gic'aandlı performances for performers to allude to socio-cultural events. In the above performance, the poet alludes to the cultural activity of irua, 'circumcision', which acts as a rite of passage symbolizing the transition from childhood to adulthood. The dances and songs performed during the irua season are called maambura, that is, rituals or divine services (see Kenyatta 1962:129). As no details are provided in the utterance, the audience is assumed to be capable of providing the details required for comprehending the implications of that allusion.

We have thus far seen that performers make reference to each other as an acknowledgement of each other's presence. They also make reference to other performers who may not be in the particular performing situation. They also use each other's words, albeit with slight modifications.

Three communities that are constantly mentioned in gic'aandlı performances are those of the mythical Guumba, the Maasai and the Kamba. The reader may be aware that the latter two communities have been the immediate neighbours and trading partners of the Gikuyu people. The Guumba, on the other hand, are the legendary dwarfs who are said to have lived on the slopes of Mt. Kenya prior to the Gikuyu. They are represented on the gic'aandlı gourd by a Guumba spear and two holes, one which speaks and the other which does not. The Guumba spear shows this was a community of
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hunters. Furthermore, according to Gĩkũyũ narratives the Guumba ‘live in holes’. The two holes on the gourd are representations of Guumba holes and that is why one of the holes speaks, because it has people inside.

A constantly recurring figure in gĩcaandĩ is Kĩmondio who is supposed to have been a Kamba medicine man. In gĩcaandĩ performances, Kĩmondio is said to have been an important medicine man who made some of his powers available to gĩcaandĩ performers. It is not clear yet whether Kĩmondio actually lived or whether he is a product of the performers’ imagination. Crucially, however, Kĩmondio is supposed to have been the one who provided the rũũngũ seeds from which the gĩcaandĩ instrument was made. This suggests the existence of an inter-ethnic cooperation between the Gĩkũyũ people and the Kamba at the level of art.

Other characters that feature in certain gĩcaandĩ performances include Gakenia and Thendeu (a phonological adaptation of the Maasai name Sendeyo). When used by performers the name Gakenia refers to a loving and understanding woman who has helped the performer in his struggles to master the art. The name itself is symbolic being derived as it is from the word gĩkenia, ‘make happy’. Sendeyo is supposed to have been a medicine man from Maasailand who was also sympathetic to gĩcaandĩ performers. Medicine men are considered to be in touch with enormous supernatural powers and that power is expressed in different forms in gĩcaandĩ narratives. In most cases they are presented as having the ability to help the individual resolve complex issues and dilemmas because they, like seers, are closer to the Otherworld.

The allusion to Sendeyo in gĩcaandĩ is significant in another sense. It is a sideward glance at Maasai oral narratives. According to certain Maasai narratives (see Williamson & Rūthuku 1953: 91-6), Sendeyo was a son of Laibon Mbatian, a powerful warrior and medicine man, who lost his sight in old age.1 Before he died, Mbatian wanted to bequeath his healing powers and leadership of the Maasai to his son Sendeyo and so he told the son to come and see him very early the following day so that he could receive the healing equipment and the powers. These instructions, however, were overheard by Sendeyo’s brother Oloana. Oloana turned up very early impersonating Sendeyo and thus received the equipment and was declared heir to Mbatian’s throne. Sendeyo therefore lost his inheritance to Oloana. Sendeyo swore never to obey Oloana and took off into the plains with his followers to wage war against his brother who had now assumed the leadership of the Maasai. That is why he is referred to as ‘Thendeu the medicine man’ and ‘Thendeu of the plains’ in gĩcaandĩ performances. Like Thendeu, the gĩcaandĩ

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1 Mbatian is supposed to have predicted the arrival of Europeans in Maasailand, the mass destruction of Maasai cattle by the tsetse fly and the cattle diseases of 1890 (Williamson & Rūthuku 1953: 92-3).
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performer in the past roamed the ridges of Gikuyuland performing at diverse market places.

We have seen, then, that g1caandI performers were subjected to rigorous training by the n joorua, master poets, in order to sharpen their performance. The initiated performers made their appearance in the various market places competing with each other in front of, often large, audiences. One performer would propose an enigma and the other would explain it and propose the next in turn; competition would continue until one of them failed to give the interpretation and so lost the game. The losing party would surrender his instrument over to the winner. G1caandI, though, was not all competition; it was also cooperative composition. As we have seen, g1caandI as a genre represents cooperative competitiveness.

Furthermore, it is in performance that g1caandI finds fulfillment. In dismissing g1caandI as ‘gibberish’, the Routledges may have assumed that texts are only supposed to transmit information from one source to another so that in an oral poetic rendition the poet ‘sends’ information to a ‘receiver’. But communication entails more than transmitting information. This is much more and obvious in poetry and more so in performed dialogue poetry as it involves the active participation of addressees. Griffin (1986) has shown that Parry’s claim that the generic epithets in the Iliad are meaningless (just like the Routledges’ claim regarding g1caandI) is untenable because Homeric language in the Iliad as an oral poem is more varied and more adaptable to the needs of each individual context. In addition, by claiming that g1caandI is a static and incomprehensible form, Ruo (1980) failed to recognize the genre’s flexibility and ambiguity as strengths. In the performance of an oral genre like g1caandI the performer and the audience are involved in a dynamic reactivation of socio-cultural experiences shared by the performer and the audience. As a result, the audience becomes involved in the construction of the performance.

In g1caandI performances, performers may boast and exaggerate their ability to compose. The boast and the exaggeration, however, need to be seen within the context of their occurrence. Generally, boasts are meant to influence ‘the boastee’ in diverse ways. Their effect, however, is dependent on that other’s perception of them as boasts. In many cases, performers allude to their conquest of other worlds such as the animal world. Consider these boasts by Mwangi wa Gichathi:

Mwangi:
Ndazingire njogu na
nguundI
Mahiri ngituruta ngtiga thi
Ndartire miraruri Inaana
Ngiiikirkia na mwitha wayo
Rukwereri ruttire nda.

I struck an elephant with a clenched fist
The lungs I pulled out and put aside
I ate eight pieces of raw and bitter bananas
I drenched them down with their milk
The scum remains in my stomach

(1992: field notes)
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The striking of the elephant with a clenched fist and the eating of raw and bitter bananas, of course, never took place. More than anything else, the performer is interested in challenging his co-poet and influencing his audience by depicting himself as a courageous and powerful poet capable of overcoming seemingly insurmountable challenges. In another performance, the performer says:

Mwangi:

Ndaringire njogu na nguundi
Mahuri ngirutu ngita thi
Ndathecire iguru na rwambo
Mbura ya gitirimiri rkiura
Ndetoriria wiritiwiriri njitra
Ndoraga Mathare Valley
Njaragia Hiti ya kundia
Ona amuthi ndiri ndamiona
Waweru,²
Ndarekagio na ngu
Kana miti ikigwa iriiiti
I struck the elephant with a clenched fist
I pulled out the lungs
I pierced the skies with peg
Making heavy rains fall
Tell me what you would like to say
I have been staying in Mathare Valley
In search of a hyena that would eat me
But up until now I haven’t seen any.
Waweru,
I was being dropped with a bundle of
firewood
Or trees falling in the forest

(1992: field notes)

The performer indicates that he has accomplished three major feats. He has overpowered an elephant, made the rains fall, survived after being dropped with bundles of firewood as a child, and he has not lost a single performance in Mathare Valley, a Nairobi neighbourhood known for its poverty and violence. In another performance (Kabira and Mutahi 1988: 167), Mwangi presents himself as the ‘Tana River which gathers all streams.’ This depiction of the self is clearly meant to alter the other performer’s perception of what Mwangi is capable of achieving. The streams that divide the ridges of the foothills of Mt. Kenya (the mythical origin of the Gikuyu people) gather in the Tana River. The statement is a challenge to the co-performer to weigh his abilities in relation to those of preceding performers who have lost and to determine his chances of winning the performance contests.

The narrator may also exaggerate the pains he or she went through in learning the art of performance or address and make reference to different members of the audience. The appropriate interpretation of the mood or the nature of the addressee (it could be the self or not) is left to the audience. Let us consider briefly the following performance by Mwangi:

Mwangi wa Gichath:

Iii iii wuui yaiya iii hi!
Ngwita iru ndige ngingo
I’ll strangle my knee and leave the neck

² Waweru was a member of the audience in this 1981 somewhat ad lib performance. This performance was recorded on videotape by the Kenya Institute of Education, Nairobi and I viewed, transcribed and translated it in 1992 during research. I am grateful to the KIE for making the tape available to me.
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<tr>
<th>Kinyarwanda</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ndige mũmero wa maa1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ndaringire njogu na ngundi</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mahũri ngũrutha ngĩrungũ thũ</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mwangũ wa Gĩchathũ mũnit</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uragũa mbura na ᵍkoiira</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kanyaaru³ iii hiii hiii!!</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ngũcooka Murang' a gwitu</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nĩkuo ndeアーutũre 0ndũ 0yũ</td>
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<tr>
<td>ᵍwa cerceere wa ignu</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ndaari mũka mũndateire</td>
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<tr>
<td>ᵍocio ngũtĩgũra rika</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ndaari ciano mũndateire</td>
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<tr>
<td>ᵍacio ngũtĩgũra ngũmba</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nĩgeetha ndũrutũ 0ndũ 0yũ</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ndaariqagũa tũngũ mũqũmũ</td>
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<td>ᵍndũntũndũntũna tũngũ mũqũmũ</td>
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<tr>
<td>ᵍirũra ᵍirũra no nib njũndi</td>
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(1992: field notes)

This verse is metaphoric (he says he 'hit an elephant' with his fist suggesting that he defeated a powerful person in a *gĩcaandi* 'competition) and intimidating in its allusiveness (he claims to make the rains fall suggesting extraordinary ability to perform). There are three shifts in focused addressees: the general audience, Kanyaaru³ (a particular member of the audience) and the self. The intonation would shift with the shift of addressees.

Occasionally, the performer may incorporate members of the audience such as Kanyaaru³ into his text. The effect of this incorporation is to make the audience 'involved' (see Tannen 1989) and in the process to narrow the sociolinguistic distance between himself and the audience. Furthermore, he warns his soul for aspiring to do something else. The soul is, in this case, shown as if it were an uncooperating other and is confronted as such. In addition, in this performance, Mwangũ shows the extent of the determination and sacrifices that have to be made by artists before they can master the art: the artist is removed from his immediate family. In addition, the genre has a physical effect on the performer: he once got a hump due to his commitment to the genre by struggling for it day in, day out. In other words, the genre has a life of its own and as such has the ability of asserting its power on the artist and at moments overpowers him. At such moments the performed genre and the artist are merged.

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³ Kanyaaru³ was a member of the audience in this 23 August 1980 performance at Banana, Kiambu.
What about the disclaimer of performance as the other side of boasting? In his *Matemo ma gicaandti* (a *gicaandti* performance recorded in the studio on audiotape), Kamarū claims that his is not really a *gicaandti* but fragments of the genre. Kamarū starts his performance through a surface denial of competence in the genre. This tendency to disclaim competence has been noted in kabary performances in Malagasy (Keenan 1974: 135) and it exists in Kiswahili poetry in situations where a poet may refer to himself or herself as mwanafunzi, [a mere] 'student'. In his disclaimer Kamarū’s assertion is a concession that other performers who are better than he may exist. It is also an acknowledgement that a certain *gicaandti* canon does exist.

**Kamarū:**

Oyũ ti gicaandti wooka  
"This is not *gicaandti* that has come"

İno ni njoo mwanjano  
"This is the first *njoo* locust bird"

Yukiite ikiriga ndaahi  
"Which has come eating grasshoppers"

Yeterere nglgi cilüke  
"As it waits for locusts to come"

Cilüke na mace ya rüngū  
"To come with the gourd plant"

Kamarū wa Wangjirū ngūria:  
"I, Kamarū wa Wanjirū, I want to ask:"

Útari rüngū eeke atia?  
"What does one do if one has no gourd?"

Giki ti gicaandti ngūina  
"This is no *gicaandti* I am performing"

Maya ni matemo maaklo  
"These are its fragments"

Gıtümı ndiari mūgi wa  
"Because I wasn’t clever enough to distinguish"

kūmenya  
"A sterile cowrie shell from a pregnant one"

Ngūkū tha na Irıa Ilıhu  
"I had not even differentiated"

Ona ndiakūranıte kūmenya  
"The bulrush millet and sorghum,"

Mwere, mūhìa kana ògímbi  
"Or the short millet"

Ona mukombi na mweethia  
"What have you seen that makes you ululate?"

Ii mıranga ngemi muone te ki?  
"I am trying to look around without success"

Na ngūgeria ngwetherera  
"Yet, Kırgotho, my father, died"

ngaaga  
"Searching for this plant"

Na Kırgotho baba ni akúte  
"I ask: Does anyone still exist"

Akinyırıte mırunda ūyũ  
"Who could show me how to perform?"

Ngūuria kana ni ërì ôdiíre  
"Eyes: see for me, yes, eyes"

Ungīnyonera kwaara  
"And you ears: hear for me"

Rítho Onyonere ël matıho  
"Legs: take me to Kambaland"

Nawe gũtũ ënjıgure  
"That I may go in search of the gourd plant"

Kagūrū Ôthìire Ikamba  
"So that I, son of Wanjirū, may succeed"

Ngacari mace ria rüngū  
(Kamarū: 1990)

NII wa Wanjirū II ngerice  

In this performance the narrator considers himself as an apprentice still searching and putting together fragments of a genre he has not yet fully mastered. The disclaimer, however, is a strategy, in that by ‘confessing’ his relative incompetence in the genre he disarms any potential critics. He also shows that he has personally experienced the sacrifices involved in engaging
On the polyphonic nature of the 

the genre (his teacher / father died as he struggled to learn glcaandlf but that notwithstanding the hardships he still wants to know it. It is in that light that he summons the various parts of his body by personifying them and asking them to cooperate in his endeavour. His rhetorical question as to whether there are performers who could teach him is indicative of his willingness to engage others in dialogue on the genre.

Njoo are birds that accompany migrating locusts, being attached to them because they feed on them. The allusion to this locust-eating bird is significant because it points to the performer’s understanding of the relationships between phenomena in his immediate environment. In addition, it is an encapsulation of the narrative involving the njoo birds; a narrative best summed up in the proverb: Akaragia mbia ta njoo ngigi, ‘He protects his money just as njoo birds look after locusts’. Kamaru is in essence saying that he can perform with less competent performers (grasshoppers) as he awaits more competent performers (locusts) whom he could still beat. Thus, on the one hand he denies that he is competent in glcaandlf while on the other hand he indirectly claims that he could compete successfully with other performers.

In the final analysis, the glcaandlf genre emerges as a polyphonic genre which utilizes its immediate context of production as well as allowing itself to be flexed so that it can contribute in the redefinition of other genres. Different voices inter-penetrate the genre and it allows the stratification of the narrator’s voice into plural voices (some narrative and others metacDmmentary). It also allows performers to make reference to each other and anticipate each other’s words. It incorporates certain general ideological positions and other individual characters, relevant to the narrative, into the performance. It may be said then that glcaandlf shows itself as truly multivalent.

REFERENCES


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4 This death is not to be taken literally. It should be seen in relation with the utterance Ngofira kana nt korf onfire / Unginyoneria kwara, ‘I ask: Does anyone still exist / Who could show me how to perform’. Kamaru’s claim is that the artists of old are no more.
Mũũũĩ, Karega 1991. Language of oral literature. (Paper read at the Kenya Oral Literature Association, Nairobi.)