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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 Gĩkũyũ traditional songs.

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

In defining *gĩcaandĩ* 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 *gĩcaandĩ* is a kind of Gĩkũyũ 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 apocalyptical expressions. He disdains vulgar themes.

Whereas Ghilardi praises *gĩcaandĩ* as performed poetry, Routledge & Routledge (1910), in a patronizing and dismissive discussion of Gĩkũyũ poetry, consider *gĩcaandĩ* 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 *gĩcaandĩ* genre in Gĩkũyũ literature. He novelizes the genre by consciously and overtly utilizing it to define the narrative of the Gĩkũyũ novel *Caitaani Mũtharabainĩ*. In that novel, the narrator is depicted as a *gĩcaandĩ* performer unconstrained spatially and temporally. It is the *gĩcaandĩ* 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 *gĩcaandĩ*. These sharply divergent and oppositional views of the nature of the *gĩcaandĩ* 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 *gĩcaandĩ* genre is worth further exploration and appraisal, and his utilization of the genre in *Caitaani*

Mũtharabainĩ and *Matigari* is a clear manifestation of the utility he finds, as a novelist, in the cultural repertoire of the Gĩkũyũ people. Clearly Ngũgĩ sees the genre as dynamic and capable of speaking through other genres like the novel.

The term *gĩcaandĩ* refers both to the dialogue poetry and to the musical instrument that accompanies the performer. Mũtahi & Kabira (1988: 28) have claimed that the term is a nominalization of the verb gũcanda 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 *gĩcaandĩ* is poetry composed by at least two poets who enter into dialogue with each other.

The *gĩcaandĩ* 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 (ngũgũtũ) some of which are fixed to the gourd itself. These also feature as part of the narrative in many *gĩcaandĩ* performances. Other shells are strung to a glassbead string or to a copper wire chain. This chain is also referred to as njomoya in *gĩcaandĩ* performances, and it is believed to bring good luck to the performer. The inside of the *gĩcaandĩ* 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 *gĩcaandĩ* 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 *gĩcaandĩ* performance found in Pick (1973):

Poet A:

Ndathiire bũrũri wa Ũkabĩ	I went into Maasailand
Kũria kũrĩ mbũri na ng'ombe	Where there are cattle and goats
Gwa Thendeũ mũũndũ mũgo	To a medicine man Thendeu
Ngĩrutĩrwo iria na mbũũthũ	They offered me milk in a calabash
Rĩu ngĩkundĩrĩria ngeithi	I gave it to the greetings
ikagwa ikĩhũũna	Who drank their fill
	And fell down to the ground
	Sated as they are

Ciahũũna igaathamia kanua indĩe	They open their mouths to eat me
NĨ ũndũ irĩ gũkindanĩra ciothe	Because they are all unravelled together
Poet B:	
Gũkindanĩra nĩ mbura ĩrĩa nene mũno	The unravelling indicates pitch darkness
Noo angiuma arĩĩyo nĩ ngatia cia kũu weerũ	But if he comes out
Ndetire mĩrani ya Maitha	He may be devoured by the lions of the plains
Nĩyo yoaine nacio, ĩkĩndwara handũ ngakome	I called the Maasai warriors
	Who know the lion's ways
	And they took me to a place to spend the night
Poet A:	
Ndaathiĩ ndakoma nĩ ndoonire ũrirũ	I went and lay down
Amu karũũciinĩ ndakorire ngeithi	I saw an astounding thing in the morning
Irĩ kũguthũrwo ciothe	I found the greetings having been chased off
NĨ kĩgũthũri kĩrĩ cureinĩ	By a sudden assailant on the chase
Na cioka cureinĩ mwekaga atĩa na atĩa twĩke?	And when those on the chase come what do you do
	That we may do the same?
Poet B:	
Ngeithi nĩ andũ arĩa monanire rũgendo-inĩ	The greetings are the people he met on the way
Kĩguthũri nĩ ngoma ciathiire ũtukũ	The assailants are the evil spirits
Ikiũraga mũũndũ	Which came by night and killed a person
Rũciinĩ nĩ kĩimba moonire na ngoma hatiri	In the morning they found the corpse
	But not the spirits

(Pick 1973: 179-81)

Notice that poet A's narration is in the first person singular as marked by /nĩ/ 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 *gĩcaandĩ* 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 *gĩcaandĩ* performer says:

Poet A:

Maathĩra karimũ rĩa ingĩ	Find me another fool
Amu ndingĩina na karimũ imwe	Because I never perform with one fool only
Ũkũmĩruta kũ na ndiũĩ	Where will I find it and yet I know not?

Poet B:

Karimũ nĩ mũhũra wa njũkĩ	The fool is the bees' wax
Nĩ gĩcaandĩ mũthia	It is at the mouth of the *gĩcaandĩ*
Ũrutwo kwa mũthũi wa mwatũ	Let it be found at the honey gatherer's home

Poet A:

Nengerwo irata rĩa mwana	Let me have the child's covering skin
Amu ndiinaga itoĩ kana nĩ rĩrĩ	For I cannot perform unless I know it has it

Poet B:

Irata nĩ gacere	The skin is that piece
Karĩa gakunĩkaga mbũũthũ Ĩrĩa ya gĩcaandĩ	Which covers the *gĩcaandĩ* gourd

This oscillation between the metacommentary and the narrative discourse occurs in numerous *gĩcaandĩ* 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 *gĩcaandĩ*:

Poet A:

Kĩara kĩa mũhĩko kĩa ũrĩo	I divide the middle finger of my right hand
Ningwatũrania njarara inyanya	Into eight pieces
Kĩarĩra thakame njite	If it bleeds, I throw the blood away
Kĩoima maguta nyue	If it discharges fat, I drink it
Ũguo nĩ ũũĩ kana noo nĩĩ?	Do you know that
	Or am I the only one who knows it?

Poet B:

Mbaara ndekwenda	He does not want fighting
Kana ũndũ urĩruta thakame	Nor anything that sheds blood

Abataire mwago na weega	He wants joy and peace
Ni eoneire njĩra weega	He has found the right way
Poet A:	
Ciira ũrĩ wa mathĩgĩ ndikwenda	I do not want any dispute
Amu hatiri gitũĩku ngweenja	Because I am not striving for your ornament
Kana mũgathi	Or your bead necklace
Poet B:	
Ndekwenda gũtunyana	He does not want to snatch anything
Na ndarĩ kĩĩndũ abatiĩ	He needs nothing else
Tiga oo kũina gĩcaandĩ	Except to sing *gĩcaandĩ*

(Pick 1973: 259)

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 *gĩcaandĩ* 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.

Gĩcaandĩ 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 *gĩcaandĩ* 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 *gĩcaandĩ* 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 *gĩcaandĩ* narrative voice. He can thus speak on behalf of the audience and provide commentaries on performances. Yet, he is also a literary person. *Gĩcaandĩ* 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.

This professionalism and literariness results from the fact that the training of *gĩcaandĩ* 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 njoorua, 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 *gĩcaandĩ* performer in Kiambu district) who taught him *gĩcaandĩ*.

Kang'ethe:

Karanja wa Nduuta angĩigua	If Karanja wa Nduuta hears this
Ngero tũngĩgerwo ndĩũĩ	The damage we would receive I do not know
Mathiire ũgeni matagooka	They went on a journey
Nĩo maandutire ũndũ ũyũ	From which they cannot return
Na mĩratina ya njoohi	They are the ones who taught me this one
Nĩ geetha twanyua tũkohĩga	With sponges for making beer
Iii nĩĩ ndiarutirwo nĩ aka	So that when we drink we may become witty
Na mĩratina ya nyoondo	I was not taught by women
Na mĩratina ya nyoondo	With breasts like sponges
Nĩ geetha twanyua tũgakĩĩga	So that we may become foolish
Iii ndamuunda kũũra ngooria ũũ?	Whom shall I ask if I get lost?

(1992: field notes)

While acknowledging that Karanja wa Nduuta is the njoorua who taught him *gĩcaandĩ*, 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 mandutire, 'they taught me', and maathiire, 'they went'. Notice further that he refers to death euphemistically as ũgeni, 'visit'. This has the effect of creating the tension of the dead poet's presence in absence, further complicated in the statement ndamuunda kũũra ngoria ũũ?, 'when I get lost whom shall I ask?', because his tutor has gone on a permanent visit.

The constant claim on indebtedness to the njoorua by *gĩcaandĩ* performers should not however be construed as implying that what the *gĩcaandĩ* 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 *gĩcaandĩ* performers say: ciarugirwo na ĩmwe noo mũrugũrĩre ti ũmwe, 'they were cooked in one pot but their interpretations are different', and mũrathi ũria warathire kwanyu tiwe warathire gwiitũ, '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 *gĩcaandĩ* performers. In *gĩcaandĩ* performances, this register is juxtaposed with the dominant Gĩkũyũ 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 activites find treatment in *gĩcaandĩ* 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 kũrĩ ngoma cia kĩonje	At your home there are disabled spirits
mũtatĩragĩria rũĩga	Whom you never leave without food
Mũkamĩĩka atĩa kana atĩa?	What will you do with it?
Poet B:	
Ngoma ya kĩonje nĩ ndũrũme kana mwaki	The disabled spirit is the ram kept for fattening
Rũĩga nĩ mĩrĩyo kana ngu	Or it is fire
	Food is either sweet potato foliage
	Or wood
Poet A:	
Nĩ mũgeithagĩria thoome	Do you greet each other at the entrance of
Rĩrĩa ageendi aa ithe matũngaine	the homestead
	When your paternal uncles come?
Mũtageithagĩria, ũnjĩĩre	If you greet them, tell me
Nĩ mũgeithagĩria ũnjĩĩre	If you do not greet them, tell me
Poet B:	
Nĩ ciana hĩĩndĩ ya maambura	They are the children
Kana nĩ ciiganagĩra hau thoome	During the maambura festivities
	Do they dance at the homestead?
Ageendi aa ithe nĩ andũ aa kwa gukawe	Paternal uncles are his grandfather's sons
	They stand looking at the children dance
Marĩ ho kũrora ciana	They meet:
Matũnganagia: Nĩ ũndũ kũrĩ ndĩa nene	There is a great feast to bring up the children
Ya kũrera ciana maamburainĩ	

(Pick 1973: 233)

Poet A juxtaposes the non-corresponding plural and the singular forms when he calls the referent ngoma cia kɪonje, 'disabled spirits', and then asks mũkamɪɪka atia? 'what will you do with it?'. The particle of association /cia/ denotes a plural N-noun class referent in Gĩkũyũ but the object marker /mɪ/ 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 *gɪcaandɪ* 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 Gĩkũyũ 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 *gɪcaandɪ* 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 *gɪcaandɪ* 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 Gĩkũyũ 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 Gĩkũyũ. They are represented on the *gɪcaandɪ* 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

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 is itself symbolic being derived as it is from the word gũkenia, '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 & Rũthuku 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 Olonana. Olonana 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 Olonana. Sendeyo swore never to obey Olonana 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*

[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 & Rũthuku 1953: 92-3).

performer in the past roamed the ridges of Gĩkũyũland performing at diverse market places.

We have seen, then, that *gIcaandI* performers were subjected to rigorous training by the njoorua, 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. *GIcaandI*, though, was not all competition; it was also cooperative composition. As we have seen, *gIcaandI* as a genre represents cooperative competitiveness.

Furthermore, it is in performance that *gIcaandI* finds fulfilment. In dismissing *gIcaandI* 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 *gIcaandI*) 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 *gIcaandI* 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 *gIcaandI* 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 *gIcaandI* 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 Gĩchathi:

Mwangi:

Ndaringire njogu na nguundi	I struck an elephant with a clenched fist The lungs I pulled out and put aside
Mahũri ngIruta ngIiga thI	I ate eight pieces of raw and bitter bananas
NdarIire mIrarũ Inaana	I drenched them down with their milk
NgIikũrũkia na mwItha wayo	The scum remains in my stomach
Rũkwereri rũtũire nda.	

(1992: field notes)

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	I struck the elephant with a clenched fist
Mahũri ngĩruta ngĩiga thĩ	I pulled out the lungs
Ndathecire igũrũ na rwambo	I pierced the skies with peg
Mbura ya gĩthiri ĩkiura	Making heavy rains fall
Ndeto iria wĩrirĩirie njĩĩra	Tell me what you would like to say
Ndũraga Mathare Valley	I have been staying in Mathare Valley
Njaragia Hiti ya kũũndĩa	In search of a hyena that would eat me
Ona ũmũũthĩ ndirĩ ndamiona	But up until now I haven't seen any.
Waweru,[2]	Waweru,
Ndarekagio na ngũ	I was being dropped with a bundle of
Kana mĩtĩ ĩkĩgwa irĩĩti	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 (Kabĩra and Mũtahi 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 Gĩkũyũ 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 *gĩcaandĩ* performance by Mwangi:

Mwangi wa Gĩchathĩ:

Iii iii wuui yaiya iii hii!	*Iii wuui yiaya iii hii!*
Ngwĩita 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.

Ndige mũmero wa maaɪ	I'll leave the water-throat
Nɪguo ũrɪmeragia maaɪ	It's the one that will swallow water
Ndaringɪre njogu na ngundi	I hit an elephant with my fist
Mahũri ngɪruta ngɪiga thɪ	The lungs I removed and put aside
Mwangi wa Gɪchathi mũini	Mwangi wa Gĩchathĩ, the performer
Uuragia mbura na ɪkoira	He who makes the rains fall
Kanyaarɪ[3] iii hiii hiii!	Kanyaarĩ *iii hiii hiii*
Ngũcooka Mũrang'a gwitũ	I'll go back to my home in Mũrang'a
Nɪkuo ndeerutɪire ũndũ ũyũ	That is where I learnt this art
Wa cerecere wa igɪna	This art involving precious things
NdaarɪmũkanɪndateireI had a wife and I left her	
Ũcio ngɪtigɪra rika	I left her with my age-mates
NdaarɪciananɪndateireI had children and I left them	
Acio ngɪtigɪra nyũmba	I left them with my clansmen
Nɪgeetha ndɪrute ũndũ ũyũ	So that I may learn this thing
Ndanagia iguku ta ng'ombe	I even got a hump like a cow in the process
Nɪgũtindanagia na ɪno	For spending all my time with this one
Kɪrɪa ɪrɪire no nɪɪ njũũɪ	I am the one who knows what it has eaten
Kɪgagũro nɪ nɪɪ njũũɪ	I am the one who knows its breakfast
Ngoro ngũkũringa ngundi	Soul! I'll hit you with this fist
Ũgeni ũkwɪrɪrɪirie ũtɪre	Until you regret attempting that journey Which you are now longing for.

(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 *gɪcaandɪ* 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, Kanyaarĩ (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 Kanyaarĩ 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, Mwangi 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 Kanyaarĩ 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 gĩcaandĩ* (a *gĩcaandĩ* performance recorded in the studio on audiotape), Kamarũ claims that his is not really a *gĩcaandĩ* but fragments of the genre. Kamarũ 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 Kamarũ's assertion is a concession that other performers who are better than he may exist. It is also an acknowledgement that a certain *gĩcaandĩ* canon does exist.

Kamarũ:

Ũyũ ti gĩcaandĩ wooka	This is not *gĩcaandĩ* that has come
Ĩno nĩ njũũ mwanjanjo	This is the first njũũ locust bird
Yũkĩite ĩkĩrĩaga ndaahi	Which has come eating grasshoppers
Yetereire ngigĩ ciũke	As it waits for locusts to come
Ciũke na mace ya rũũngũ	To come with the gourd plant
Kamarũ wa Wangjirũ ngũũria:	I, Kamarũ wa Wanjirũ, I want to ask:
Ũtarĩ rũũngũ eeke atĩa?	What does one do if one has no gourd?
Gĩkĩ ti gĩcaandĩ ngũina	This is no *gĩcaandĩ* I am performing
Maya nĩ matemo maakĩo	These are its fragments
Gĩtũmi ndiarĩ mũũgĩ wa kũmenya	Because I wasn't clever enough to distinguish
Ngũgũtũ thata na ĩrĩa ĩ ihu	A sterile cowrie shell from a pregnant one
Ona ndiakũranĩĩte kũmenya	I had not even differentiated
Mwere, mũhĩa kana ũgĩmbĩ	The bulrush millet and sorghum,
Ona mũkombi na mweethia	Or the short millet
Ii mũrauga ngemi muonete kĩ?	The foxtail millet and mweethia seeds
Na ngũgeria ngwetherera ngaaga	What have you seen that makes you ululate? I am trying to look around without success
Na Kĩgotho baba ni akuĩte	Yet, Kĩgotho, my father, died
Akinyĩrĩte mũtuunda ũyũ	Searching for this plant
Ngũũria kana nĩ kũrĩ ũtũire	I ask: Does anyone still exist
Ungĩnyonereria kwara	Who could show me how to perform?
Riitho ũnyonere ĩĩ maitho	Eyes: see for me, yes, eyes
Nawe gũtũ ũnjiguĩre	And you ears: hear for me
Kagũrũ ũthiĩre Ikamba	Legs: take me to Kambaland
Ngacarie mace rĩa rũũngũ	That I may go in search of the gourd plant
Nĩĩ wa Wanjirũ ĩĩ ngerice	So that I, son of Wanjirũ, may succeed

(Kamarũ: 1990)

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

the genre (his teacher / father died as he struggled to learn *gĩcaandĩ*)[4] but that nothwithstanding 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.

Njũũ 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 njũũ birds; a narrative best summed up in the proverb: Aikaragia mbia ta njũũ ngigĩ, 'He protects his money just as njũũ birds look after locusts'. Kamarũ 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 *gĩcaandĩ* while on the other hand he indirectly claims that he could compete successfully with other performers.

In the final analysis, the *gĩcaandĩ* 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 metacommentary). 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 *gĩcaandĩ* shows itself as truly multivalent.

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[4] This death is not to be taken literally. It should be seen in relation with the utterance Ngũũria kana nĩ kũrĩ ũtũire / Ũngĩnyonereria kwara, 'I ask: Does anyone still exist / Who could show me how to perform'. Kamarũ's claim is that the artists of old are no more.

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