



It's our Turn to Lead: Generational Succession in Hawa Essuman's *Soul Boy* (2009)

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Abstract

This article examines the contribution of Kenyan films to everyday life and public policy debates. Using Hawa Essuman's *Soul Boy* as a case study, it examines how the film critically engages with the gerontocratic texture of the Kenyan political landscape. Reading the film through an allegorical lens, it shows how the film strategically contributes to initiatives that advocate for a more inclusive political processes and also how the film advances the cause of imagining processes of change in leadership by creatively drawing on the rich repertoire of African cultural forms. The article argues for a re-composition of roles and responsibilities in leadership that includes the youth.

Keywords: Allegory, *Soul Boy*, Youth, Leadership, Gerontocratic

Résumé

Cet article porte sur la contribution du cinéma kenyan à la vie quotidienne et aux débats de politique publique. En utilisant *Soul Boy* de Hawa Essuman, il examine l'implication critique du film dans la texture gérontocratique du paysage politique kenyan. En lisant le film à travers une lentille allégorique, il montre comment le film contribue de manière stratégique aux initiatives qui défendent un processus politique plus inclusive et comment le film avance la cause d'imaginer des processus de changement de leadership en puisant de manière créative dans les riches référentiels culturels africains. L'article plaide pour une recombinaison des rôles et des responsabilités dans le leadership associant les jeunes.

Mots-clés : Allégorie, *Soul Boy*, jeunesse, leadership, gérontocratique, réinvention des corps

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Introduction

The first generation of African leaders has, to a very large extent, failed to respond effectively and positively to the challenges of change. For various reasons, the first generation of African leaders lacked the capacity to fully comprehend the long-term implications of the domestic and global changes, the problems facing their people and the competence to provide sustainable solutions. More importantly, they failed to create an environment that would enable the continuous evolution of succeeding generations of young African leaders with competence, integrity, vision and commitment (Mohiddin 1998:2).

These words by political scientist Ahmed Mohiddin, written close to two decades ago, still hold true given the political landscape in many African countries. Questions of generational succession continue to puzzle the minds of many, as the older generation of African leaders do whatever it takes to stay in power. Before being ousted, Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe had been in power for 30 years and was the world's oldest sitting president at 93; Uganda's Museveni has been president for 30 years. Before them was Gabon's Omar Bongo, now deceased, who served for 42 years. As in many other African countries, the youth in Kenya have, for a long time, been politically marginalised as persuasively suggested by the works of Mshai Mwangola (2007), Grace Musila (2010), Forti and Maina (2012) among others. This has resulted in the rise of movements such as 'vijana tugutuke' (youth, arise), whose aim was to encourage young people to be active participants in the political sphere of the nation. Organisations such as the Youth Agenda have also focused on youth matters including pushing for good governance and offering programmes that support the development of Kenyan youth's leadership capacity.

This article focuses on how the youth as a politically marginalised constituency in Kenya, have begun to challenge the status quo by voicing their desire to be included in the political leadership of the country. Grace Musila's work focused on the comedic performance of the Redykulass trio that aired on national television and the written work of Binyanvanga Wainaina and Parseleo Kantai. She explored how the younger generation questioned the 'gerento-masculine texture of power in Kenyan public life' (Musila 2010:280). Her work demonstrated the use of various platforms including comedy, to condemn gerontocratic tendencies on the Kenyan political landscape. This article seeks to show how Hawa Essuman's feature film *Soul Boy* (2009), read under an allegorical lens, joins the emerging voices seeking the inclusion of youth in political leadership in Kenya.

Soul Boy (2009) is an extraordinary film for a number of reasons. It draws its aesthetic authenticity from orature by invoking the Nyawawa myth and adapting some of the tenets of coming-of-age folktales from some Kenyan

communities. *Soul Boy's Nyawawa* is drawn from the nyawawa myth of Western Kenya. The myth commonly exists in oral form and has many variants. The most common version is that the nyawawa are inhabitants of Lake Victoria, evil spirits imprisoned in the dark waters. Occasionally, when too much water evaporates in the heat, they escape on warm clouds of air drifting away from the lake and make their way through the surrounding foothills. The spirits are said to be harmful if allowed entry into a home. Their presence is identified by howling sounds that cannot be attributed to any living being. To drive the spirits away, the locals bang pots and pans. The version adopted by the film's script is the one that had been picked up by the residents of Kibera, to explain the bodies of dead men found in the Nairobi Dam which is close to the slum.

The film draws a Kenyan viewer to identify with its content while constantly encouraging them to participate in making meaning of the narrative. *Soul Boy* predominantly uses Kiswahili and Sheng with English subtitles. The film tells the story of 14-year-old Abila who sets out on a quest to save his father's soul which was allegedly taken by the mythical creature, Nyawawa. Though there seems to be a question on the 'Africanness' of *Soul Boy* due to German Tom Tykwer's involvement, I view it as a Kenyan film for its involvement in the Kenyan national issues, its choice of language and cast and by extension, it adds to the larger body of African cinema. The Kibera residents where the film was shot and eventually screened, embrace the project as their own (Africa journal, n.d.). *Soul Boy* was born from a project supported by Tykwer to train local artists in film production. Eighty per cent of the crew that participated in making the film was Kenyan. Essuman, its director, asserts that it is a 'Kenyan film with international polish'.

The film opens with Abila waking up from a disturbing nightmare in which he is almost run over by a train. He wakes up to the noise of angry customers outside his father's kiosk. They are angry because the shop is closed, and this draws Abila's attention to the fact that his father is not well. On Abila's enquiry, his father tells him that he no longer exists and that Nyawawa has taken his soul. The idea of a soul being taken/lost signals the reader to attend to the metaphysical in the film. In a humorous yet provocative way, Abila tells his father 'you are not lost, I can see your hands, your legs, your nose', Abila does not understand what losing a soul means. Troubled by this, Abila runs to alert his mother, who is apathetic towards her husband's condition. She seems to have lost hope in the possibility of her husband changing. Afraid of losing his father, Abila realises that only he can bear the burden of saving his father's soul. His girlfriend Shiku guides him to Nyawawa's shack. Portrayed as assertive and bold, Shiku is Abila's voice of reason, often helping him to make the right choices as he tackles his tasks. On reaching Nyawawa's house,

he pleads with her to restore his father's soul. Nyawawa agrees to his request, on condition that Abila accomplishes the seven tasks she assigns him.

Abila successfully executes his tasks, and the film ends on a happy note, with his father opening his kiosk and saying it was just a hangover. His response demonstrates the film's two levels; Abila's father does not realize he is an allegorical figure and as he returns to his usual self the message of the film is that though the film hopes for a better nation, the realities of slum life and poor leadership still exist. In the last scene, the happy family is singing in church. The employment of magical realism invites us to decode the meaning of, for example, the seven tasks assigned to Abila, the symbols employed, the types of characters and what their roles are. The structure of *Soul Boy* 'lends itself to a secondary reading, or rather, one that becomes stronger when given a secondary meaning as well as a primary meaning' (Fletcher 1965:7). This essay thus seeks to engage with *Soul Boy* from this level to unpack how it performs political and social functions. I read *Soul Boy* as a national allegory due to its concern with the national issues and their use of ordinary people's life experiences to reflect on the state of the nation. The phrase 'national allegory', initially proposed by Jameson (1986) in relation to third world literature, has been taken up in film studies. Jameson stated that:

Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic – necessarily project a political dimension in the form of a national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society (Jameson 1986:69).

His formulation of allegory as being a third world mode of representation, and his claim that all third world texts are allegories of the nation provoked controversy and his concept has been criticised most eloquently by Aijaz Ahmad among others. Some of the contentious issues arising from Jameson's conceptualisation of 'third world literature' as raised by Ahmad are: the limitation of third world texts by identifying them in relation to oppressive systems unlike those of the first and second world (Ahmad 1987:6); the 'national allegory' as the primary form of narration in the third world (Ahmad 1987:8); the homogenisation of the third world category by submerging it within a singular experience; and the description of third world texts as 'non-canonical'(15). Despite these criticisms, Jameson's approach of the 'national allegory' could be used to interpret texts that suggest a leaning toward the nation within the framework of their compositions. Jameson's term is closely aligned to Third Cinema culture, which concerns itself with 'the cultural and political needs of the society it represents' (Gabriel 1979:2). Although the term national allegory was not used in the earlier years, film critic and theoretician

Ismail Xavier observed that in Latin America, Brazilian Cinema Novo, 'Third Cinema' from the 1960s took national destiny as a key focus. (Xavier 1999:355). Xavier's observation suggests that the idea had been appropriated in films way before Jameson's essay. *A Dictionary of Critical Theory* stated that, since the life of a nation, large or small, cannot be contained in one novel, allegory becomes a useful vehicle through which narrative fiction can express broader aspects of the lives of its individual characters (Buchanan 2010). Notwithstanding that the definition refers to the novel, it presents the potential of national allegory as a means of packaging aspects of national concerns.

Re-imagining National Leadership

I begin this analysis by exploring the family nation metaphor; following McClintock, who has argued that '[n]ations are frequently figured through the iconography of familial and domestic space' (McClintock 1993:63). She considers the family as a metaphor for the nation and explains that the family trope offers a natural figure for sanctioning social *hierarchy* within a putative organic unity of *interests*' (McClintock 1993:63, italics in original). The family, which is believed to consist of a father, mother and children, becomes an apt figure to use to define the nation due to its shared socio-cultural, political and economic borders. It is not surprising, then, that writers and filmmakers engage this metaphor in writing about the nation, and there has been no shortage in the use of this metaphor on the Kenyan political scene either. During former President Daniel Arap Moi's tenure in the 90s, songs that referred to Kenya as mother and father played on the airwaves, especially around national celebrations. President Uhuru Kenyatta and Moi were addressed as the fathers of the nation; the first ladies of Kenya are usually referred to as mothers of the nation. Filmmakers find this metaphor useful as the idea of a nation-family already exists in the minds of Kenyan audiences. Therefore, for a national audience, it becomes easy to connect the private family to the public family, thus making meaning of the films. Here, I analyse and interpret the symbols and codes used to develop the filmmakers' thematic concerns.

The anthropologist, Bronislaw Malinowski argued that a family 'is the group constituted by husband, wife, and their children'. He further contended that a family is a 'tribal unit' (Malinowski 1963:132, 136) which determines the general structure and organisation of the society. The family lineage continues as the older members of the family pass the mantle to the younger generation who then pass it on to the next generation and so forth. Using the family as a metaphor for the nation, this essay concerns itself with the representation of the youth who feature predominately in Kenyan feature

films. Abila, the protagonist of *Soul Boy* and other key characters in the film, fall in the youth category. I focus on the youth because they are relatively understudied when examining the nation under the lens of the family nation metaphor. The mother trope has been studied extensively in African literature to various ends. Nuruddin Farah's (1970) *From a Crooked Rib*, Mongo Beti's (1974) *Perpetua and the Habit of Unhappiness*, and Wole Soyinka's (1973) *Season of Anomy*, for example, employ the mother figure to reflect the state of the nation. The father of the nation trope has been used to interrogate state paternity in nations where presidents are regarded as fathers of the nation. My approach takes a different turn by examining generational succession. Specifically, the article investigates the role of the youth in the nation family as depicted in the film *Soul Boy*.

The narrative focuses on youth struggles such as identity, ethnicity, crime and unemployment. Youth, as a social category, takes on symbolic meanings such as 'hope of the nation', and 'leaders of tomorrow'. This article examines how Essuman illustrates the youth as the hope of the nation and how they function as metaphors for broader social and national issues. *Soul Boy* centralises characters associated with hope for a better nation and, through these characters, demonstrates what such hope may be.

The article shows how this hope is represented by examining *Soul Boy*'s adoption of a coming of age oral narrative as an allegorical tool. As Teshome Gabriel indicated '[t]he stories of African tradition are built of layers upon layers, of figures, of metaphors and analogies, of sly references to political and social events and institutions' (Gabriel 2002:x). In light of Gabriel's ideas, I argue that by drawing on the coming of age story model, *Soul Boy* facilitates its allegorical import and thus becomes a commentary on the past and present Kenyan leadership situation. It also imagines a hopeful future for the nation by presenting the model as a potential solution. *Soul Boy*, which was produced for international distribution, works on two levels. Whereas for an international audience *Soul Boy* may offer the exciting adventure its tagline promises 'A lost Father. A dedicated Son. A magical journey.' (*Soul Boy*), for the national audience, it acquires allegorical significance by borrowing the style of a local oral narrative and incorporating a known mythical figure. These stylistic devices invite viewers to peel off the layers to get the deeper meaning. Similarly, Xavier observed that '[a] variety of films from different countries provide interesting examples of the use of myth or traditional story lines to give shape to an experience lived in the present or even the future' (Xavier 1999:353). The filmmaker, in this case, employs the mythical figure of Nyawawa to re-imagine a better-governed nation. Essuman adopts this strategy in the narrative to situate the film within an African context and offer the Kenyan audience a model of a process of generational succession that is familiar to them.

This process is eloquently presented in Mwangola's analysis which traces the evolution of a youth discourse that demands a reconfiguring of roles and responsibilities in the Kenyan political sphere. Mwangola contends that in traditional societies the youth had to prove themselves as being ready to take up leadership positions. She goes on to delineate the plot of oral narratives that were directed to youth:

An analysis of many oral narratives specifically directed to the youth revolves around a test where the hero, whether female or male, is faced with a choice of some kind. The protagonists in such cases find themselves in a situation where the security of the society or their family is threatened by some outside force, for example, some natural disaster or enemy, who could be supernatural or human. In many cases, these heroines/heroes have to challenge some illegitimate authority, such as those imposed by brute strength, in their successful pursuit of their objectives. (Mwangola 2007: 139)

Abila's story exhibits many of the characteristics of the coming of age tale explicated by Mwangola. As the hero of the film, he is faced with the difficult choice of either helplessly watching his father lose his soul or face Nyawawa whose wrath is well known in Kibera, the largest slum in Nairobi, Kenya. His family is threatened by Nyawawa having taken his father's soul. Nyawawa is said to take the souls of the men who are drawn to her; she strangles and then drags them into the dam. If Abila's father's fate ends up being like that of the other men whose dead bodies were found in the dam, his family is at risk of losing their home and the father's small business, which is in rent arrears. Abila sets off on a journey to complete the seven tasks given to him in order to regain his father's soul. This journey develops the coming of age theme while simultaneously serving as a structuring device for the film. I read Abila's successful accomplishment of the tasks as figurative of the potential role of the youth in taking up leadership of the nation.

At the time of *Soul Boy's* release in 2009, Kenya's third president, Mwai Kibaki was still in power serving his second term after a flawed general election. Before this, Kibaki held ministerial positions in both Kenyatta and Moi's governments. Kenya's youth were and still are a marginalised constituency within the political arena. Forti and Maina (2016) observed that there had been intergenerational tensions between the youth and elders. They write, '[t]he relationship between these generations has often been marked by one generation using the next to further their stay in politics – as politically eligible youth widely touted as 'Young Turks' were rendered powerless and kept in the service of their respective elders' (58). Kenya's political history may be characterised as largely gerontocratic with a slight shift starting in 2008 onwards. *Soul Boy*, thus, furthers the discussion on the political involvement of the youth, a discourse that is ongoing.

Kenyan political leaders often employ the trite phrase; 'the youth are the leaders of tomorrow'. Usually, the aim is to be politically correct and appeal to the youth public. The question has always been 'when will tomorrow come?' (Mwangola 2007: 129; Forti and Maina 2016: 77). This issue refers to concern around when the youth will be given the space to take up political positions. The scholars mentioned above observed that there seemed to be a desire from the older generation to hold on to power, resulting in few positions being available for the youth.

Mwangola (2007) disavowed this domination of political parties and other instruments of power by the elders. She argued that this tradition was in part created by the colonial rule in Kenya. She wrote that [t]he imposition of colonial rule in Kenya resulted in the systematic erosion of all forms of democracy (141). Mwangola further showed how pre-colonial systems of government embraced generational politics in which youth were groomed for the responsibilities of leadership so that as adults they take on leadership, and eventually they become elders who oversee the smooth running of the nation (Mwangola 2007: 133) Unfortunately, due to lack of proper structures within political parties, the youth are not offered room to develop their leadership skills. The country requires leaders who are willing to attain the ultimate level of elderhood and social authority. Thus, generational succession is impeded by leaders who reach the leadership status and then hold on to it. This crisis has resulted in an outcry from both the youth and non-governmental organisations such as The Youth Agenda Kenya.

The Youth Agenda is formulated around the youth's drive to have direct involvement in national matters. There have been campaigns in Kenya beginning in the 1990s onward, aimed at empowering youth to take up political leadership positions. For example, President Moi rallied behind Uhuru Kenyatta as his successor in the 2000 general elections. Uhuru lost to Mwai Kibaki in that election and, in a sense, the youth lost again. Kenyatta's loss was understood to be a loss to the youth because he was seen as a representative of the youth. This loss further revealed that the electorate was not ready to support a younger candidate, nor were the gerontocrats willing to share power. Mwangola (2007) observed that '[t]he period 1990-2005 has brought to the fore an aggressive youth discourse that has rejected prevailing perceptions of youth and demanded a reconfiguring of the social roles and responsibilities of this category' (130). Mwangola's observations are important because they help contextualise the *Soul Boy's* focus on Abila and his father's soul.

The youth's desire to be involved in national matters stems from their perception that the older generation has failed them. In my reading of the film, I contend that Abila's father is a metaphor for the older generation of leaders. Nyawawa in *Soul Boy* says she has seen Abila's father's 'darkness, failings, fears and weaknesses.' These weaknesses as depicted in the film are, for example,

poor governance portrayed by Abila's father's alcoholism which eventually leads him to Nyawawa, who takes his soul. Furthermore, the choice of the slum as a setting highlights a dystopian space of impoverishment. The fears are portrayed through some of the tasks assigned to Abila such as 'fighting a new world order', this may be indicative of some of the challenges that the older generation of leaders has failed to confront. From the film, a key concern is the widening class divide as exemplified by the disparity between the slum and the Karen suburb. The film suggests that this has become normal and highlighted it as an issue of concern. In assigning Abila, the task of saving his father's soul Essuman is suggesting that perhaps the youth may be the hope of the nation because of their ability to bring new vigour and fresh insights in the political and economic spheres of the nation.

In the film, Abila is an embodiment of the realisation of this hope and serves as a model of who good leaders may be. After losing his soul, Abila's father resigns to his fate. He is depicted as being overwhelmed by the loss of his soul and unable to help himself. Nyawawa views him as a coward as the following statement shows.

Nyawawa: Baba ni mwoga sana, lakini kijana wake ni shujaa.

(The father is very fearful; but his son is brave.)

Nyawawa makes this statement when Abila insists that he is ready to take on the challenge of saving his father's soul. Nyawawa tries to dissuade him by telling him that only another adult male would be able to redeem his father's soul, but Abila insistently pleads for a chance. The camera focuses on Abila's eyes, almost teary, as he gazes at Nyawawa, who, moved by his gaze gives in. Abila, Shiku and their friends are symbols of the youth in the nation. The youth are portrayed as being capable of saving the lost soul of the nation.

Abila's father who represents the leaders of the country is responsible for taking care of the nation-family. He fails the nation by not guarding his soul, therefore, placing the nation in a precarious state. The soul-less father is representative of soul-less leaders (father figures) who threaten to let the integrity of the nation family disintegrate. This idea of looking after the 'soul of the community' is also seen in some African societies like the Yoruba of Nigeria, where priests are entrusted with the responsibility of looking after the community's soul (Mbiti 1993:188). In such societies, the chief priests or priestesses were also regarded as mother/father, as such 'the people saw them as symbols of their country's existence, prosperity and continuity' (189).

Early in the film, Abila struggles to understand his father's irrational answers:

Abila: Are you ill?

Father: I am not here, this isn't me.

Abila: What happened?

Father: They took my soul.

The use of the child protagonist enables us to question things we would otherwise take for granted. His naïve questions about his father's lost soul serve to reinforce the two worlds of the film hinting at the need for an allegorical interpretation. When his father says, 'they have taken me,' he begins to ask questions that point us to look beyond the ordinary. Who has taken the father? Why? And if he has been taken why do we see him? Through Abila's eyes, we see the anguish of a child about to lose his father; his terror is juxtaposed to his mother's apathy. His panic drives him to urgently take on the task of saving his father's soul. Abila's mother, I contend, responds to issue of her husband's lost soul by inaction. Her indifference is an indicator of the hopelessness she sees in her husband's weaknesses. Abila's mother takes her husband's despondency to be the norm and is not compelled to take any action. She says, 'he lost his soul a long time ago' meaning that he had made it a habit to live a reckless life. Rather than take no action like Abila's mother the filmmaker suggests that the body politic needs to concern itself with matters of the nation's state of affairs.

Abila's father's transgressions are revealed through flashbacks playing in Abila's mind. The flashbacks show that the father used to be a responsible referee and spent time with Abila. Eventually, he became a drunk. Just as Abila's father, through his irresponsibility, nearly costs his family the loss of their home due to rent arrears, the national fathers mismanage the country evidenced by the corruption, social injustices and social segregation seen in the film. The film starkly juxtaposes the son and the father. The father is shown to be fearful while the son is brave. The older generation of leaders is depicted as being afraid of confronting the issues at hand, for example, bad governance and corruption. The son is portrayed as willing and courageous enough to take on the challenge to save the nation and, indeed, he completes the seven tasks given to him. These tasks represent the concerns that need to be addressed so that the nation is restored to a more positive state, characterised by good governance.

This change is envisioned through the tasks laid out for the new crop of new leaders. The seven herculean tasks Abila has to complete are verbalised by Nyawawa as follows: 'slip into someone else's skin and inhabit it in the presence of others, pay someone else's debt without stealing, help a sinner in trouble without judging them, fight against a new world order, use your wits to save someone else, discover an unknown place and know the difference and finally confront the monstrous snake you fear' (*Soul Boy*). The bulk of the film revolves around Abila performing these tasks within a day, and the pace of the movie is intense as Abila moves from task to task. The tasks recall mythological tropes (shapeshifting and snakes), religious and moral tasks (paying someone else's debt and saving a sinner), tasks that shape ideology (fighting a new world

order) the use of wit rather than force to win battles and even whimsical and childlike feats such as adventuring to find the unknown and the keenness of spirit to know the difference. In as much as some of the tasks do not readily lend themselves to an allegorical reading, they illustrate the moral, intellectual and ideological hurdles that the new crop of Kenya's leaders need to deal with for the good of the nation. Abila is directed to each task by a sign (a symbol of the sun) which also serves as a marker of some the central themes of the film.

The first sign leads Abila to a community education project. The project's focus is on HIV awareness and seeks to educate the youth about HIV. HIV/AIDS has been considered a threat to youth in Kenya and one of the strategies taken by both government and non-government actors has been to engage the public in education on the causes, risks and prevention of HIV. The training session in the film is carried out through an improvised performance on an elevated podium in the slum. As Abila and Shiku approach the crowd, the camera focuses on the stage, where a man is arguing about whose responsibility it is to educate his children about HIV/AIDS. The facilitator calls Abila and Shiku to perform a role-play on the responsibilities of mothers and fathers. Abila, ironically, acts as a father who does not want to take responsibility for his family. In this scenario, the father is blamed for not taking an active role in raising his children. Shiku, on the other hand, represents women and argues against the patriarchal views held by men, suggesting that the burden of raising children should not be left to women only. By accepting to participate in the role play, Abila takes on his first challenge, 'slip into someone else's skin and inhabit it in front of others'. As he does this, he takes on the allegorical role of his father, thus, the representation of the nation's failed leaders and negative masculinity. Ironically, this may be connected to the larger private story of Abila's father's irresponsibility on the one hand. Abila thus embodies his father on the stage for the task of slipping into the skin of another, and therefore, he now becomes the representation of the failed leader.

On the other hand, it may signify taking on the mantle from the older generation. Yet, when he leaves the stage, he leaves the skin and what it represents (poor governance by the fathers of the nation). However, he still symbolically takes the mantle as he goes on to demonstrate better leadership. In this performance, Abila replays a male attitude of dominance over women which reflects the effect of socialisation on the youth. Shiku challenges his line of thinking, leaving him speechless and the crowd bursts out in laughter. After this act on a public platform, Abila accuses Shiku of making him a laughing stock. Shiku replies that the crowd was laughing because of his father's private lifestyle. The laughter of the crowd is used to expose and critique the irresponsibility of the leadership depicted by Abila's arguments as he enacts his father's position.

The second and third tasks relate to moral integrity. Drawing from a coming of age tale these two tasks focus on Abila's psychological and moral growth. His third challenge requires him to 'save a sinner without judging him'. In an action-packed moment in the film, Abila and Shiku encounter a phone thief being chased by an angry crowd. The two assist him to hide and point his assailants to the opposite direction, thus saving the man from mob justice. Afraid of being found with the phone the thief gives it to Abila, who sees this as a solution to his family's rent arrears and plans to sell the phone. Shiku strongly dissuades him from doing so (a woman, in this case, represents the moral centre of the film). Shiku's insistence enables him to pass the integrity test linked to his second task – 'pay your debts without stealing from another'. As an embodiment of future leadership, he is expected to be a man of integrity and to use wisdom in matters of justice.

The fourth task is for Abila to fight a new world order. To achieve this task Abila secretly follows his aunt to Karen (an upmarket suburb in Nairobi), where she earns wages as a domestic worker in a white family's home. Later in the day, his aunt asks him to help her set the table, Abila figures out how to do it without ever having done it before. The new world order appears to be a fight against the still continuous process of gendered labour division and class divisions. Abila thus helps his aunt, a woman close to him, to fulfil her paid domestic roles and thus ideologically challenge the gendered division of labour. In the new world order, there are racial, class and gender divides which Abila confronts when he fits into that order without prior knowledge of how things work there. Abila also takes on the fifth task of saving someone using his wits. When Emmy chokes on her food and her parents are at a loss on what to do, Abila steps in and saves her life. This deed earns him the money to pay his father's rent without stealing from someone, as instructed by Nyawawa. The troubling racial and class divides illustrated above is not explored by the filmmaker in this instance, the racial and class divides are explored through the portrayal of the slum against the suburbs in the film.

In addition to the youth being depicted as the hope of the nation in matters of leadership, they are portrayed as being less inclined to ethnic intolerance. Essuman reflects on the ethnic tensions in Kenya often depicting them negatively. *Soul Boy* exhibits hints of ethnic tensions. The nameless man who used to work for Abila's father asks Abila if he was not stopped from speaking to him, suggesting that Abila should not have anything to do with him because he comes from Mt. Kenya a region that is home to the Kikuyu community. Abila and his family are from the lake region that is home to the Luo community. Abila's friends ask what the 'Kikuyu girl' is doing with him.

The fact that Abila's friends refer to her this way, rather than by her name shows the level of entrenchment into ethnic divisions that exist in Kenya. The women who work with Abila's mother invite him to eat a piece of arrowroot which they say tastes like fish. Another lady speaks in Luo saying that the Luo have now become like the Kikuyu, where food choice is concerned. The Luo tribe of Kenya resides around Lake Victoria, where fish is a staple item in their meals. Alternatively, the Kikuyu tribe resides in the highlands and, until recently, were said not to eat fish. The women thus use the cultural aspect of food to poke fun at different ethnic groups. The fact that both the older generation and younger generations in the film are preoccupied with ethnic identities shows how steeped Kenyans are in this culture.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis has demonstrated how *Soul Boy* contributes to the conversation on and around youth involvement in leadership in Africa. By way of allegorical reading of *Soul Boy*, the article demonstrated the potential of youth, represented by Abila, as capable leaders who can restore the lost souls of their nation's leaders (Abila's father). Examined through the family as nation metaphor, the film brings to the fore the impact of poor leadership on the nation. The family as nation trope, coming of age tale structure, the nyawawa myth and the idea of a lost soul fuse together to support the allegorical structure of the film. Accordingly, the film suggests that the youth have potential to be better leaders of the nation. The film achieves this through a stark juxtaposition of a brave son and a cowardly father. As illustrated, the older generation of leaders is depicted as unable to confront issues such as bad governance and corruption whereas the son is portrayed as willing and courageous enough to take on the challenge to save the nation. This is partly because of a degree of selflessness on the part of the son and the fear of a volatile future characterised by fatherlessness. Through Abila's characterization, the film suggests that good leaders are men/women of integrity, intolerant of ethnic divisions and see women as equal partners in the pursuit of good governance. It joins the emerging voices crying out for a change in leadership not only because of the age of the leaders but because of the poor governance and the attendant issues such as poverty, corruption and weak political and economic structures.

Notes

1. *Soul Boy's* Nyawawa is a character with mostly human features except for her hooved feet. The nyawawa, on the other hand, refers to the collective spirits that roam around Lake Victoria. I use 'Nyawawa' with capital N to refer to the character in the film and 'the nyawawa' to refer to the spirits.

2. Sheng is a social dialect that works by hybridization; words from various languages are combined with Kiswahili words. For example, English and Kiswahili. In other cases, words are reversed.
3. See Dorothee Wenner's 'Post-colonial Film Collaboration and Festival Politics' in *Gaze Regimes: Films and Feminisms in Africa* (189-190)
4. Africa Journal interview and review of *Soul Boy* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_Gs6tpAP_E
5. See Daniel Forti and Grace Maina (2016) 'The Danger of Marginalisation: An analysis of Kenyan youth and their integration into political socio-economic life'. They detail the challenges of youth and explain gerontocracy as one of them.

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