

Some transculturalist aspects in David Maillu's *Broken Drum*

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Introduction

"Everyone in Kenya reads Maillu!" I was told by a Kenyan friend in the 1990s. Maillu has "almost fifty titles over twenty-five years" (Kurtz & Kurtz 1988: 64) since the start of his writing career in the early 1970s to 1998, he has written mainly in English, but also KiSwahili, KiKamba, and even in a mixture of languages,¹ ranging from short romances to historical novels, detective stories, epic poems, epistolary works, theatre plays, and didactic and historical non-fiction. David Gian Maillu, was born in 1939 among the Akamba people of Eastern Kenya. According to E. O. Apronti (1981:162), Maillu "is by far the most popular writer in East Africa, even though Ngugi wa Thiong'o is the Kenyan writer best known to the outside world. These two Kenyan writers address two largely disparate audiences...."

Although "everyone in Kenya reads Maillu" and popular Kenyan literature, they only generated academic interest mostly in the 1980s and early 1990s. Thereafter this scholarly interest waned. Maillu's work has often been dismissed by critics as too trivial and too racy. Chris Wanjala (1978: 135) called his fiction a "trashy and scabrous imitation of brothel and low life, especially yarned for the low-brow reader in this country." And Bernth Lindfors (1991: 58) characterized it as a "harvest of weeds." In Maillu's own market research about his readership, he discovered "that readers were interested in half a dozen rather fundamental topics: sex, politics, human relations, religion, death and money." Maillu (in Lindfors 1994:78) credits the popularity of his books to a variety of factors:

People say that I hit the nail on the head, whatever that means. People say that they see themselves when they are reading the books; they can identify with situations and characters. Basically, I think there are three things that tend to make the books popular. Humour is one, frankness may be

another, and some people say the books contain wisdom, but I don't know what kind of wisdom that is.

Part of Maillu's success is due to his marketing strategies through his own publishing house, Comb Books, established in the early 1970s. Maillu's "frankness" led to a ban of his books in Tanzania in 1976, and political unrest in Uganda and Ethiopia narrowed his market leading to the close-down of Comb Books in 1979. However, his subsequently established Maillu Publishing House is equally successful as Comb Books was with new publications, and re-publications from Comb Books.

Maillu's literary development and his position in East African literature

In order to understand Maillu's position as a writer, I will provide a brief overview of the development of Kenyan/East African literature as observed by Lindfors. He states, "Twenty-five years ago, at the beginning of the era of independence, East Africa was considered a literary desert . . . there was virtually nothing being written by East African authors in English, the colonial tongue that had become the national language of Uganda, Kenya and Tanyanyika (now Tanzania)" (Lindfors 1991: 47). This situation changed with the arrival of Ngugi's *Weep Not, Child* in 1964, followed by *The River Between* in 1965 and *A Grain of Wheat* in 1967. In 1966 Grace Ogot from Kenya had her historical novel *The Promised Land* published. From Uganda came Okot p'Bitek's long poem, *Song of Lawino* in 1966, "an attack of the Westernization of Africa."² *Song of Lawino* was followed by *Song of Ocol* in 1970, the husband's answer to *Lawino*, and other songs. Charles Mangua from Kenya emerged as the third major writer in East Africa. His 1971 novel *Son of Woman* is described as "racy" and as "a picaresque tale of the adventures of the protagonist, Dodge Kiunyu," who applies all kinds of means to survive on his own.³ According to Lindfors, he is "an overreacher with a phallic flaw."⁴ The development from Ngugi's and Okot's literature in a serious tone, concerned with the suffering of East African peoples under colonial rule and its direct and indirect impacts on the life and mind-sets of the missionized/colonized peoples moved to a genre that more explicitly echoes the oral tradition, the long poem or song, with a more humorous tone, to Mangua's racy writing. Lindfors speaks of schools, the Ngugi school of serious historical novels, and the p'Bitek school of satirical song.⁵ Lindfors calls Mangua's work of the early 1970s "frivolous proletarian potboilers."⁶ Thus one could coin the term "Mangua school of trivialization." Lindfors maintains that Maillu's frankness, or sexual explicitness, "even outstripped Mangua in sheer volume of salacious detail."⁷ He comes up with an interesting way of

summarizing the changes in East African literature from Ngugi to Maillu. I will boil down his point of decline to the two extremes, Ngugi and Maillu, leaving out p'Bitek from Uganda, Liyong from the Sudan, and Mangua from Kenya. Lindfors describes Ngugi's primary interest as historical and political, Maillu's as commercial, Ngugi's primary intention as instruction, Maillu's as sales, Ngugi's anatomical analogy as the head, and Maillu's as the groin.⁸ Lindfors assures us, however, that there is no reason to despair or mistake this development as all literature going to the gutter. This is obvious when one realizes that one school does not die out with the emergence of a new one, but that they can exist side by side and be flexible, and influence writers in different ways.

Not only schools or writers such as Maillu can be flexible, but also critics. Kurtz and Kurtz (1988:64) point out that Maillu's bad reputation as a popular writer has slowly changed, including in Lindfors' assessment, for three reasons. Firstly, the sheer volume of his writing and "his willingness to innovate have earned him the grudging respect of his erstwhile detractors as well as a significant place in Kenyan literary history." Secondly, popular literature as part of popular culture has become an "acceptable object of study in addition to elite culture and folk culture." Thirdly, much of what Maillu has written since the 1970s surpasses popular themes. George Odera Outa identifies the turning point in Maillu's *Mbatha and Rabaka* (1980) and *Broken Drum* (1991). According to Outa (2003: 310), starting with these two titles, Maillu "has tried to extricate his works from the notorious 'bedroom scenes' of his early works as he seeks to be taken seriously as a novelist of contemporary Kenyan society."

The 1121-page-long *Broken Drum* (1991), "the longest East African novel yet,"⁹ and "an epic with the scope of a James Michener novel!"¹⁰ covering Akamba life from 1781 to 1981 can be read as popular or historical fiction. It can also be re-read today under the new paradigm of transculturalism in African literatures. While there are many different aspects to, and definitions of, transculturalism, I will focus in this essay on some effects Western culture has on the lives of the main characters in the novel, and how they "transculturalize" them.

Structure of *Broken Drum*

The novel itself may be called a transcultural product, as it combines a variety of elements that prohibit putting it in either the drawer of African or Western. It is both the griot's long and detailed account of a family lineage and history and an author's epic family saga. It is both a work that involves elements of the oral tra-

dition in so far as it inserts some poems, which invoke a flavor of orality. It also involves more than just reading from page one to 1126 through the insertion of many illustrations. The illustrations are done by the author himself who has worked for ten years as a graphic artist (Apronti 1981: 163) and thus do not just function only as decorations but are part of the body of the text, visual rest stops, some of which require a careful eye to yield access to their meaning, but all of which are a commentary on the story itself. The very first drawing within the text shows a person, most likely the male protagonist, Bonifas Ngewa. Text comes out of his mouth that is part of the first chapter and continues in the conventional way on page two. The content of the writing as well as the lying position of the person indicate that the reader is dealing with a dream. But the point of exit of this dream, the mouth rather than the head, indicate the actual telling of the narrative. As for the "Western" part of the form, the novel has 34 chapters, each of which has subdivisions. Chapters 1 to 34 contain a linear narrative, namely the story of the unhappily married couple Vikirose and Bonifas Ngewa in Nairobi, shown during the eight months between July 18, 1981, and March 14, 1982.

Broken Drum contains sex and threatened crime, deceit and a happy ending, as important ingredients of popular literature. And yet it moves into the direction of the "Ngugi school" by toning down the sexual explicitness and by being also a historical novel, covering 200 years of Bonifas' male lineage in relation to encounters with "explorers"/colonialists up to the postcolonial situation of Ngewa's present in modern Nairobi.

The drum as trope

The title itself, *Broken Drum*, invokes the music instrument as traditional method of communication that can tell or support the story. The drum is broken by the Western influence, but it has not disappeared. It may sound distorted but still produces sounds. The text of the book then may count as an attempt to mend the drum and to invite the ancestors into the present, to learn from their history. The drum is mentioned several times in the narrative. The first time it is mentioned, it is an actual, intact drum for dancing music, " a big *mbalya* music drum, Nzima's dancing drum."¹¹

The intact drum appears again as an instrument of communication that keeps people linked to each other:

"Where is the soul of your power?"

"In the people themselves."

"When you want to put an urgent matter across to the public, how do you do it?"

"Take a drum and beat it. They'll come."

"Everybody?"

"No. But everybody is a communication cord of the community, you see? Kasina, there is no village that is not linked to another, and there is no person who has neither relatives nor neighbours. If you strike me, the ripples will travel to the extreme end of Akambaland."¹²

Over 600 pages and three generations later, the drum is broken and represents the empty, hollow, lonely and disconnected feeling of the young man, Bonifas Ngewa, bidding farewell to his parents, friends and promised wife in 1961 to enter "the new world" to become a student in Texas:

Then, for the first time in the life of the father and the son, Solomon Ngomo thrust his son towards him and the two men flew into each other's arms as if they had just discovered each other's strength. Solomon Ngomo's hat was knocked off his head and the shiny top of his head glared in the light. Someone caught the hat in mid air and Makatalene Mengele returned it to him.

The last person his eyes saw was Makatalene Mengele, then he walked steadfastly ahead, without looking behind afraid of seeing tears on their faces. Until he disappeared behind the customs walls He did not need anyone to remind him of his failures. Aiming to be the accomplished man he had always wanted to be; but now the songs were haunting him, somehow defying his integrity ... this was another instance when he felt like a broken drum . . . ¹³

The next time the broken drum stands for Ngewa's broken character is:

While in America, Ngewa had thought seriously about his shortcomings, and he had made a resolution on how to mend his broken drum. I cannot ignore my family responsibility and yet walk with dignity, he had thought, a mature man must face his responsibilities squarely.

Now he was back home and he wanted to be that man his own conscience and family challenged him to be. He had spoken to Kavata and touched on her problem then promised to sit down with her and try to find a solution. "How can I afford to ignore the problems of my brother's wife," he had thought. "I've come home to and for my people."¹⁴

This quote on its own is deceiving, since it appears to put Ngewa in a more positive light than he deserves. Mending his ways does not take much of an effort for Ngewa, indeed, tradition is used as an excuse for having sex with his brother's

widow. Ngewa, who is very much attracted to Kavata, is deceiving himself that he is performing a selfless act out of responsibility towards his community. His decision grows out of his sexual need and not Kavata's or the community's needs. There is no further use of the broken drum metaphor. It remains broken. Only the telling of the story itself can be seen as an attempt of undoing the damage. The attempt is somewhat unsuccessful, but for different reasons than the author implies. A brief overview of the characters shall serve as demonstration of this point.

Ngewa's male lineage

The novel follows four generations of Ngewa's male lineage; the precolonial times of his great-grandfather Ngie, the colonial period of his grandfather, Nzima, the liberation struggle of his father, Ngomo, and the postcolonial time of Ngewa himself, and these periods' respective relationships to Whites and their impact on the interactions among Blacks. The great-grandfather, Ngie, represents the intact drum, the unspoiled, traditional African society. His son, Nzima, was born in 1861, experienced the Scramble for Africa, and died before independence. He "adjusted" to colonialism by being the first person in his family to speak English and serve as a translator and cultural go-between. Nzima's son, Ngomo, becomes a freedom fighter in the Mau Mau uprising. He does not trust Whites, yet lets his son, Ngewa, go to the USA for his college education. Ngewa himself is torn between the culture of his grandfather as evoked in his stories of peaceful relationships with Whites told to Ngewa as a child, the political resistance of his father, and his own Westernization. The story of these men are complemented by the stories of White individuals. James Hemmings, an explorer, becomes Nzima's friend. On his second trip to Africa, Hemmings is accompanied by John Keith. Both of them marry African women. Hillman Mallet, who is an anthropologist and of the same generation as Ngomo, is enchanted by Kenya's natural environment and adopts the country as his new home. Jafeth Maanza, Ngewa's older brother, works for a White family, the Knights. It is the Knights' daughter, Sheila, with whom Ngewa will fall in love and have an affair. Maillu's technique of interspersing the life stories of Kenyan characters with those of Whites serves to show that Whites do not remain entirely unaffected in their attitudes towards Blacks. Their engagement in the country and its people to the extent of intermarriage changes them, indicating that transculturalism can be a two-way street. However, one has to point out that the lives of Whites in the novel become enriched through their new cultural experiences whereas, based on the general power imbalance, the effect on Blacks of interaction with Whites is more diverse and complicated, from

friendship to political antagonism to cultural corruption.

The main female characters

The most prominent Black women are Ngewa's promised bride, Kavata, and Victoria Rose, his wife. The two women are a study in contrast. While Kavata is the traditional woman who patiently waits for Ngewa's return from the USA, Vikirose, the Westernized woman gets her man by actively persuading him through intrigue. She later leaves her husband and children, takes on lovers, and threatens to kill her rival, Sheila. Sheila is first very frightened and willing to give up Ngewa for her own safety. In the end, with her luggage already on the plane to England, she decides to follow her heart and remain in Kenya because "Only one person would give her back her energy. Bonifas Ngewa."¹⁵

Having lived in Kenya as a child, Sheila, the stereotype of a quiet and submissive White woman, easier to "handle" for Black men than "tough" Black women, longs to come back to the paradise of her imagination. Vikirose, on the other hand, is, from the perspective of her husband, a crazy, selfish, evil person. She is portrayed as being corrupted in the worst way by Western individualistic and capitalistic ideas. A conversation with a Ugandan who had studied in the USA like Ngewa, supports this point:

"Are you a political scientist too?" wondered Mukasa.

"Not actually."

"You are?"

"I'm a communicationist."

"What's that-Mass Communication?"

"Something like that."

"Where did you study?"

"Kenya and the States."

"Another American!"

They laughed in unison.

"How did you like the Yankees?" asked Mukasa.

"America is great-I liked it very much."

"I didn't."

"Why?"

"I used to have grave financial problems. I also got involved in some dubious deals that nearly killed me." He paused. "Then I made another big blunder: I brought home a silly American wife."

"A wife is a wife, it can't be a mistake," said Ngewa after pondering over the statement.

"These people are different from us, brother." Then he appeared to have woken up to his senses. His voice became weak as he said, "I hope you didn't make the same mistake . . . They are people like us all right, but wolves are not dogs."

"Assuming it is a mistake to enter into that kind of marriage, then I did not make the mistake. However, I equally made a local blunder. My wife is an indigenous African, with short hair and a short nose and from my own ethnic group, black like me, but if you want, whiter than your American wife if she is not a black American."

"You got it quite right, she's very white."

The two men took to silence in a communion of self-pity for having married the wrong wives.¹⁶

Vikirose does not have a chance to be accepted by Ngewa since she is not submissive. If she had negative character traits before the couple got married, the double yoke of being expected to be a modern independent African wife and submissive simultaneously, combined with the daily disapproval by her husband, do not encourage her to take advantage of the best aspects of both her indigenous and Western culture. And Ngewa, instead of recognizing his part in her downslide to becoming another broken drum, pushes her further into unreasonable behavior while feeling sorry for himself. He, on the other hand, profits from the opportunities the West offers him, and takes liberties regarding the interpretation of Akamba social rules. In his self-delusion of his own motives, he puts "the African Woman" on a pedestal, while putting a real African woman, his wife, down on a regular basis. Thus Ngewa's attitudes toward African and Western cultures remain contradictory.

Conclusion

With *Broken Drum*, David Maillu moves from his strong focus on sexually explicit scenes and other ingredients of popular novels which gained him a vast readership in Kenya to a more academically respected genre, the historical novel, spanning two hundred years and incorporating black and white, male and female characters. The interactions of these characters during their respective lifetimes and

political backgrounds changes and "transculturalizes" most of them to a certain degree. Lindfors has pointed to the importance of the selling factor in Maillu's earlier novels. Yet he also acknowledges that Maillu cannot be dismissed as an unimportant writer any longer because of his "willingness to experiment with new forms and new ideas" with which he pushed back "the boundaries of decorum," and because of his "tenacity and recoursefulness" (Lindfors 1982:142). Further, he admires "his courage both as a publisher and as an author." One can argue that with the insertion of Kenyan pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial history and the voices of his ancestors, Maillu creates a new drum to replace the broken one. However, one can also argue that Maillu as the creator of his characters, particularly those of the youngest generation such as Ngewa, Kavata, Vikirose and Sheila, remains opportunistic since he continues to operate with sex, intrigue and crime, though in a scaled-down tone, as characteristics of popular literature-this time in disguise. Furthermore, applying a range of stereotypes which render the characters flat denies the writer the full exploration of potentially positive aspects of transcultural influences, such as a deeper cultural understanding between the Kenyan-English couple, Ngewa and Sheila. Therefore, the new drum remains out of tune to the challenges, problems, and opportunities transcultural realities pose and offer to the fictional characters-and to Maillu as a contemporary African writer.

Notes

1. *Hit of Love*, a one-hundred-page poem in Kikamba and English, 1980, and *My Dear Mariana/Kumya Ivu*, a didactic epistolary work in English and KiKamba side by side, 1989; *Without Kiinua Mgongo*, a novella in a mixture of Kiswahili and English, 1989.
2. Lindfors (1999), p49
3. Lindfors (1991), p50
4. Lindfors (1991), p50
5. Lindfors (1991), pp50-51
6. Lindfors (1991), p51
7. Lindfors (1994)
8. Lindfors (1994)
9. Kurtz and Kurtz, p65
10. Kurtz and Kurtz, p65

11. *Broken Drum*, p93 & p94
12. *Broken Drum*, p185
13. *Broken Drum*, pp 794-795.
14. *Broken Drum*, p900.
15. *Broken Drum*, p1121.
16. *Broken Drum*, pp 207-208.

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