
**Re-imagining and Restaging Ageing and (Dis)ability in Kenyan Theatre: A
Reading of Francis Imbuga's *The Return of Mgofu***

Jennifer Muchiri

Email: jennifer.muchiri@uonbi.ac.ke

Tom Odhiambo

Email: tom.odhiambo@uonbi.ac.ke

University of Nairobi

Abstract

This paper interrogates literary portrayal of ageing and disability in Francis Imbuga's play, *The Return of Mgofu*. The paper argues that the playwright uses language deliberately to represent the concepts of ageing, old age, and (dis)ability. This essay seeks to analyze the writer's use of covert and overt images, dramatic techniques, and characterisation to address questions of ageing, old age and (dis)ability. We examine and discuss Imbuga's choice of different strategies of language such as allusion, proverbs, sayings, metaphors, dreams and imagery and how he uses them to reimagine notions of ageing, old age and disability in drama and its performance. In addition we explore the presentation of ideas of memory, remembrance, wisdom and responsibility as symbols related to ageing. Moreover, we analyze the construction of characters as a representation of social and cultural constructs of disability. This paper reads *The Return of Mgofu* from a postcolonial perspective as a representative text on the discourse on ageing and (dis)ability in African drama and theatre.

Key words: *Mgofu, age, ageing, disability, society, wisdom, governance, politics, Africa*

Introduction

The Return of Mgofu is a three-act play in which the playwright presents a dramatic allegory of human relations and existence in contemporary society. The play is about the people in two fictional nations, Mndika and Nderema. The people of Mndika engage in interethnic conflict which causes mayhem in their country and forces some of its people into exile in Nderema. Among the people on the run to Nderema is a respected blind seer called Mgofu whose wife dies in childbirth as they flee Mndika. The blind seer's son, also called Mgofu, grows up in exile and also becomes a revered seer. Meanwhile, the leadership in Mndika has changed and the new leader desires nothing but peace and healing for his country. He therefore initiates a process of bringing the second Mgofu back to Mndika, arguing that it is only by returning Mgofu that Mndika can make amends for her violent past and begin the journey to restoration. This play can be read as a metaphoric representation of the state of affairs in many African nations today. George Outa argues that although it is evident that Imbuga is talking about

Kenya, he “thinly disguises it and is therefore able to generalise, or even say recognisable things, but only after successfully ‘suspending disbelief’ (8). This paper thus reads Imbuga’s work as an artistic portrayal of contemporary Kenyan society and the understanding of the concepts of age and ageing.

Of Ageing, Old Age and (Dis)ability in *The Return of Mgofu*

The Return of Mgofu is set against a backdrop of a wheelchair, with the playwright’s opening words being “it cannot be that this communal wheelchair we now ride in was part of the original plan.” The wheelchair is a running motif in the play and serves to amplify the subject matter and themes of the play. The concept and symbol of a [communal] wheelchair is significant for the arguments we make in this paper because a wheelchair is directly associated with ageing, old age and disability. A wheelchair would be described as communal to demonstrate that ageing is natural in humans, who may experience some disability in their lives. The play is set in two imaginary countries – Nderema and Mndika.

The opening scene is set at an open air market with the audience of sellers and buyers. A market is a significant setting because it signifies human interaction and presence of people from all walks of life. The characters in this scene are unique at different levels. First, Thori and his wife Thoriwa are an old man and an old woman, respectively, making them a special category of people in an African society that prides itself in respecting and revering old age.

Second, the two characters are dead and they, therefore, speak from the world of ancestors, with the playwright referring to them as “messengers from beyond” (1). The foregrounding of dead speakers is significant because their status as having already lived and therefore encountered certain experiences makes them credible voices in addressing the issues that they return to speak about. In addition, the African society places a high premium on the belief in life after death and the role of the departed or ancestors in guiding the living. Despite being voices from another world, the two are critical to the development of the plot and the playwright’s message. They can easily be compared to Old Man and Old Woman in Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Anowa* who, as Pepetual Chaingong argues, “border the events that unfold in the play and do not engage in any dialogical interaction with other characters that are mentioned in the main plot” (43).

Third, Thori and Thoriwa represent men and women, underscoring the role that both men and women play in guiding society. Fourth, the two make a dramatic entry onto the stage with Thori pushing Thoriwa in a wheelchair. In keeping with the characterisation of Thori and Thoriwa as elderly people, representatives of ancestors, the playwright assigns the language that senior citizens are expected to use. In their speech they make reference to folklore and use metaphors, images, and sayings to deliver their message. For instance, they remind the listener of their age and the physical limitations they suffer through reference to a folktale saying, “The rabbit saved her life by resting under the pawpaw tree” (2). A pawpaw tree is not strong and cannot withstand strong winds or storms, but it still offers a place of respite for the rabbit, meaning that in times of trouble, even the weakest of persons or places can offer help.

When referring to the interethnic violence that the people of Mndika engaged in in the past and which has caused much trouble and underdevelopment, Thori says that “they farted without parting their buttocks”(5), suggesting that a people who had always co-existed turned against one another without shame. The two metaphors above capture the senselessness of the violence.

Further, the playwright refers to the people of Mndika as “shaking hands with madness [and] soon they began to warm themselves with the fire of their neighbours’ burning skeletons [yet] good people did nothing!” (5). In these words, the two characters appear to be suggesting that only mentally deranged persons or people bereft of all humanity can engage in such violence. The image of people warming themselves with the fire that is consuming their neighbours refers not only to a loss of humanity, but also the complete destruction of trust.

Thori and Thorowa serve as a kind of archive or memory for this society. Old age comes with experience and the aged, thus, become a vital source and record of a society’s history. Through these characters, the people of Mndika are made to remember their past, in order for them to appreciate the present and contemplate the future. Through these two, Imbuga demonstrates the place of the aged in society as custodians of social, historical, and cultural memory. Imbuga creates them to demonstrate the importance of memory and remembering in the development of a nation. The two also come back as carriers of memories of victims of social injustice, ethnic violence, and betrayal. They bring with them remembrances of the beginning of the disintegration of the present-day Mndika. Through accounts of their experiences in the past, the audience is made aware of what happened before the period represented in the play.

Thoriwa remembers that she and her husband “served in the local shrine then. We had no children of our own. We were good keepers of others people’s children at the shrine though. Oh! How the children loved the stories we told them” (5). That they took care of other people’s children suggests their selflessness. That they served in the shrine reveals that they were revered members of the society. Ironically, Imbuga’s play demonstrates, when the fire of interethnic violence began, the people of Mndika conveniently forgot how well Thori and Thoriwa had served them, taking care not only of their spiritual needs at the shrine but also of the future of their community, represented by their children. Imbuga suggests that a society must remember if it is to move forward collectively because it is through remembering that humans learn, take advice, and therefore forge a desirable future. Thoriwa’s memory of what happened in Mndika is the narrative canvas on which Imbuga scripts the grave matter of ethnic violence. She says,

We lived happily in the three ridges until **that night**. A deranged man or woman set a neighbour’s house on fire. No one bothered to know who had done it and why. No one.... Many houses were burnt to ashes **that night**. Children, mothers, fathers... Everyone **ran northwards**... **Others eastwards**, while the majority simply **ran around in circles**. Where were they to run to? (emphasis added, 6)

Thoriwa remembers that the people of Mndika had lived happily before violence erupted. According to her, it took “a deranged man or woman” to begin a literal and metaphorical fire. By attributing the instigation of violence to a mentally unstable person, Imbuga suggests that no human being in their right mind would attack fellow humans on account of their being ethnically, racially or culturally different.

Furthermore, by making reference to mental disability, Imbuga demonstrates that a person in such a state should be treated with care because they are indisposed and therefore not responsible for their actions. Notably, the playwright ascribes culpability to both men and women to demonstrate that violence and hate are not gender specific. The effects of interethnic violence include, as suggested in Thoriwa’s words, disruption of family life, displacement, homelessness, disability, and death. Violence does not choose victims, and Thoriwa paints the image of fathers, mothers and children fleeing their homes in panic, not knowing what to do or where to seek refuge.

In an allusion to the reality of interethnic violence such as that witnessed in Kenya in 2007/2008 and in Rwanda in 1994, the playwright captures the irony of victims seeking refuge in places of worship but ending up suffering gory violence in such “sacred” spaces. Thoriwa remembers that those who sought safety in the sacred shrine, thinking that it was safe, were lured out by the attackers with the promise of protection, only to be killed while “those who chose to stay in the cave were burnt to death” (8). Thori and Thoriwa were among the first to be killed. That they have “failed to forget” (9) the experience of violence, is significant because it serves to warn society about the dangers of interethnic hatred and it points to the fact that the victims are yet to get justice. Notably, very few perpetrators of interethnic violence in, say, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan or any other country have been punished.

The introduction of Mgofu Ngoda as a victim of ethnic violence enables the playwright to engage with the subjects of age and disability. Thoriwa remembers that the first family that they recognised at the sacred cave when they ran there for safety was that of Mgofu. Mgofu is described as an “Old, half blind seer” (6). This description places him on three very noteworthy planes. First, he is advanced in age, a quality that is associated with experience and wisdom and is accorded respect in most societies. Second, he is half blind, meaning that he is living with visual disability and, therefore, requires to be protected and treated with empathy by those around him. Third, Mgofu is a seer, thus making him a symbol of good and power in society. Thus, Imbuga presents the audience with the paradox of a character who is visually handicapped but, by being a seer, is metaphorically far-sighted.

The experiences of Thori, Thoriwa, and Mgofu demonstrate how destructive interethnic hatred is. When the attackers in Mndika begin their violence, not age, disability or social status of Mgofu and the others can stop them. Despite his old age and disability, Mgofu is portrayed as a responsible husband and father who tries to protect his expectant wife from the attackers but he dies in the process. Thori demonstrates Mgofu’s responsibility, wisdom, and

far-sightedness by recalling the latter's response when he was asked to remain in the sacred cave. Mgofu had retorted:

The strongest oak of the forest is not the one that is protected from the storm and hidden from the sun. It's the one that stands in the open where it is compelled to struggle for existence against the winds and rains and the scorching sun. (7)

The metaphor of the oak is a deliberate one which indicates Mgofu's strength and ability in spite of his age and visual handicap. In addition, his decision to lead his expectant wife away from Mndika to seek refuge in Nderema could be read as a part of Mgofu's abilities as a seer because Nora's safe arrival in Nderema is what leads to the present occurrences in the play, and the return of Mgofu.

One of most notable characters in Nderema, where exiles from Mndika seek refuge after the ethnic violence, is Kadesa. Kadesa is a refugee in Nderema, having been a victim of the first wave of interethnic violence in Mndika. The character of Kadesa is significant in the play for various reasons. First, she and other exiles from Mndika are allowed by the authorities in Nderema to settle in a 'foreign land.' Through them, Imbuga highlights the importance of human kindness, warmth and co-existence. When Kadesa and others seek a home in Nderema, the people of Nderema not only welcome the refugees, people from a different country, but also allocate them the land on which to settle. The irony here is that the exiles are in this situation because they have been brutally attacked by their compatriots.

Second, Kadesa is aged. Thoriwa describes Kadesa as "old but still strong-willed" (10). The reference to Kadesa's age is significant because it allows Imbuga to address the issue of the experience and wisdom that come with age. Thoriwa captures this advantage of age through a saying: "it's not the age of the dog in the fight, it's the age of the fight in the dog" (10). Kadesa's age grants her a long and rich experience in dealing with different matters in her life and society. Third, Kadesa is the channel through which the past violent experiences of Mndika are bridged with the present. In this sense, she is also an agent who connects the Mndika exiles in Nderema to their relations in Mndika. This is so because she is the one who receives and delivers Mgofu Ngoda's young wife, thus ensuring the safety of baby Mgofu and enabling the present events in the play, particularly the return of Mgofu to Mndika.

Fourth, Kadesa is a priestess and has established a popular shrine for exiles in Nderema. Imbuga assigns Kadesa the role of a priestess and qualities associated with power, influence, respect, and veneration. In this role Kadesa serves to demonstrate how human beings ought to live together regardless of their origins or background. The people of Nderema look up to Kadesa for social, moral, spiritual, and political guidance despite her having come to Nderema as a refugee. Her age and uprightness are what qualify her to be a priestess and a seer. Her shrine is known as "farewell to the ogres" (11), a reminder of the evil violence that exiles from Mndika fled. Kadesa, being elderly, speaks in metaphors, referring to the perpetrators of violence as ogres, symbols of evil and inhumanity. Kadesa is so respected and

valued in Nderema that the locals call her “Priestess, mother of many” (12). The two respectful titles point to her elevated position in this society as a spiritual leader and a nurturer.

The people of Nderema value Kadesa so much that when a second wave of interethnic violence breaks out in Mndika, the leader of Nderema, Mwami Rocho, assigns one of his most trusted soldiers, Mude, the task of protecting her. Rocho’s actions demonstrate how the aged should be treated – with care and protection as opposed to violence as seen in the case of the old Mgofu Ngoda. Yet, Imbuga is not suggesting that the aged should be protected because they are disabled. On the contrary, he ascribes power and ability to foresee to Kadesa who ‘sees’ the violence in Mndika in a dream in spite or because of her old age. As old characters, Kadesa, Thori, Thoriwa, and Mgofu are significant in the discourse on ageing and disability in this play because not only do they serve as what Hannah S. Schild refers to as “living memories” but because they also “act as mediators between past and present... as heads of family or chief priests, who fulfil the spiritual needs of the community through their intermediary link with the ancestors” (59).

Furthermore Imbuga present us with Adonija, a mentally handicapped character, who aids in delivering Nora to the safety of Kadesa’s shrine and in whose arms Mgofu Ngoda dies. Adonija is a person living with disability, a mental handicap, yet he is able to act in a manner that is least expected of mentally abled persons. In an aside, Adonija addresses the audience, “they all say that I don’t know what I am talking about. People, surely, do I look like I have got a leaking bucket for a head? Gone bananas?” (18). Adonija may be mentally disturbed yet it is him who attends to Nora and Mgofu, who have been brutally attacked by sane people. Indeed, in his (dis)ability, Adonija calls out the culprits of violence for what they are – “ogres and thieves” (18). He leads Nora to safety, identifies the “ogres” capably, and has the aptitude not only to speak about Mgofu’s death euphemistically by saying “the calabash broke in my own arms” (18) but also to call on the people to attend to Mgofu’s body before wild animals feed on and therefore desecrate it. Despite his mental disability, Adonija serves as a foil to perpetrators of violence in Mndika. As Clare Barker and Stuart Murray observe, “Disability... can illuminate the truths of human complexities because of the manner in which its difference revises expectations of behaviour” (1). Adonija refers to himself as a witness, a strategy of the playwright to highlight the irony of a supposedly mentally disabled person exposing the evil doing of those presumed to be mentally sound.

The camera that he carries around his neck, which he claims to contain evidence, is a symbol of recording and archiving to aid remembering. Through the camera Imbuga elevates Adonija to the position of a witness to demonstrate the often ignored abilities of persons living with disability. Adonija, with his camera, becomes Imbuga’s voice on interethnic violence when Adonija says:

I have evidence here. I secretly recorded some of their meetings. There were preachers, priests and a chief. They were all there, plotting to shed the blood of their brothers and sisters... everything starts with a name and then you are either a friend or foe.... They hunted one another like mad dogs. (22)

Adonija, who would not ordinarily be taken seriously by society, becomes some kind of a detective with the ability to notice injustices that had happened to the people of Mndika and record it secretly. Through this act, Imbuga castigates members of the society who pretend not to be aware that ethnic violence is not usually spontaneous but premeditated. He uses Adonija's perceived 'innocence,' due to his mental handicap, to reveal the truth. Through this character, we see the irony of persons who hold positions of responsibility in society, duty bearers, organising the violence – preachers, priests, and a chief. People who should offer moral guidance and serve as custodians of social and moral order are exposed to be the very source of the collapse of that order.

Adonija is discerning enough to point out some of the triggers of ethnic violence such as land and identity. Imbuga sarcastically castigates the conflict over land by reducing it to mere soil – “I saw them kill one another because of soil” (22). He condemns people who attack others on account of ethnic difference, noting that a name, the basic marker of identity should never be a basis for violence. He employs animal imagery to show how human beings have lost their human quality and descended to the level of animals, and not just animals but “mad dogs” (22). The reference to the dogs as mad is a strategy of questioning the mental soundness of the perpetrators of violence and an indication that their actions reveal attributes and capacities that are way lower than those of animals. That these observations are made by Adonija is significant because in spite of his mental handicap, Imbuga makes him the lenses through which the audience engages with a matter as grave as violence. He may be considered mentally unstable, but he has the presence of mind to know when to do the right thing, to serve humanity. That is how he declares himself “Mgofu Ngoda's eyes” (22).

His wisdom and ability are further seen in his use of proverbs and when he foretells the birth of Mgofu Ngoda's son. Through Adonija's soliloquy, (25) Imbuga captures the words and thoughts of the merchants of violence in Mndika. The playwright assigns the task of candidly reporting how the violence was planned, funded, and publicised to a supposedly handicapped person not only to demonstrate the need for inclusion and justice for all, regardless of (dis)ability, but also to show the irony of violence by persons who would be considered mentally healthy. Imbuga creates Adonija as a strategy for combating the stigma associated with mental disability and to question status quo. Indeed, Imbuga contrasts Adonija with Mude, an abled soldier who constantly makes impolite remarks about Adonija, suggesting that the latter should not be accorded any serious consideration because, “better a fool than a knave, they say” (26).

Imbuga's Vision for the Future

Imbuga appears interested in forging a new society; a society that “knows good leadership” (28). To this end, he creates the character of Mwami Mhando, the leader of Mndika whose greatest desire is to write a new narrative for the people of Mndika by seeking to correct the ills of the past. He is the one who initiates the project of returning Mgofu to Mndika. Through Mhando, the playwright suggests that even though the aged have the wisdom required of leaders, even young people are capable of wise leadership. As Chiangong argues, “Old age is socially and culturally constructed, and chronological age should not be the sole determinant of one’s age and consequently of one’s maturity and wisdom” (3). Indeed, wisdom and leadership capabilities in Mhando are declared and vouched for by an aged person, Thori, who advises the people of Mndika to listen to their leaders.

The Mgofu Ngoda who lives in Nderema is presented as an example of what a society loses when it engages in unnecessary violence – when it turns against itself. Mhando has realised that the land of Mndika can only begin to heal from the effects of the past interethnic violence by seeking a relationship with Mgofu Ngoda, who is exiled in Nderema. He describes Mgofu as “a dignified old man” (31) to portray the latter’s personality and demeanor but it is also the playwright’s way of highlighting Mgofu’s advanced age. Mndika rejected the first Mgofu, murdered him on account of his ethnic identity, but Nderema saved Mgofu’s son and “looked after him well” (32).

The second Mgofu, just like his father before him, is associated with power and reverence, only that while Mndika rejected these qualities, Nderema has embraced them and thus benefited immensely. Mgofu is an old man, but as Mhando’s scouts report:

Mgofu Ngoda is revered in the whole of Nderema. He’s not only a seer like the ones before him but also a healer as well. His shrine is always filled with people wishing to be treated of one ailment or another... It is even said that when he calls rain, the rain comes...[He] uses words to heal the sick.(32)

The play captures the irony of a society that rejects its own people only for them to prosper elsewhere, alluding to the old adage of prophets not being accepted in their own land. In addition, Imbuga ascribes power and ability to the aged by presenting Mgofu as a seer and a healer. The playwright metaphorically refers to one of the main triggers and vehicles of interethnic violence – words – as medicine. Where words caused pain and destruction in Mndika, the same words are what Mgofu uses to heal the sick in Nderema, referring to the power of words to heal just as much as they hurt, in the first place. Mgofu fits into what Schild says about the elderly in society, that “they are perceived as being pure, endowed with morality and wisdom. In consequence of being deemed particularly religious, they are accredited spiritual ability and skill. Their overall behaviour is regarded as exemplary for their societies” (63).

Mgofu's children are also presented as symbols of progress, just like their father, and are allowed to prosper in exile. Ethnic identity neither hinders Mgofu's son from becoming a trusted assistant to the Prime Minister of Nderema nor limits the achievements of Mgofu's daughter. Indeed, the people of Nderema describe her as "intelligent, humble and motherly" (33). Imbuga demonstrates that even though the aged may possess great leadership qualities, there is need to appreciate and use young people who possess such qualities too. Mhando is convinced that it is because of Mgofu's positive attributes, and the power that comes with them, that it rains more in Nderema than in Mndika. The rain is a metaphoric reference to the better resources, environment, and quality of life that a country enjoys when its people live in peace in spite of their diversity.

Mhando plans to invite the old Mgofu and his daughter to Mndika for the Remembrance Day celebrations. Their presence in Mndika would serve as a fresh beginning for a society that does not wish to repeat its past mistakes. It would serve to remind the people of the need to embrace one another; to remember what caused divisions in the past in order to avoid a re-occurrence.

Mhando is a symbol of change and progress. He wishes to run the affairs of Mndika differently. He suggests that for a society to change, it must begin by rethinking some of its traditions. He proposes, for instance, that the term "elder" by which leaders in African communities are often referred, be reserved for only those who deserve it. The term, he suggests, should be earned and dictacted by "age, experience and wisdom" (38). Through satire, he castigates people who present themselves as leaders, using the title "elder" but are a disgrace to the term because they steal from the state. His wisdom is evident when he declares that "we are servants of the people, not their leaders or elders. We'll need to think about the change of titles.... How about Suja for servant of the people?" (39). The proposed change of titles symbolises a change in attitudes.

Despite his young age Mhando is discerning enough to recognise the effects of the interethnic violence of the past. He ascribes current problems in Mndika – floods, drought, trivial debates – to the blood that was shed by their forefathers. He equates violence to a curse, noting that people must learn from their mistakes. His capability as a leader is seen through his willingness to take responsibility for his people's affairs. He says, "I'm your leader. Therefore Mndika's problems will always be my problems" (44). He is aware of the mistakes that Mndika made in the past, including forcing their symbol of well being, the blind Mgofu Ngoda, into exile; and he has experienced the consequences of those mistakes. In a bid to correct the mistakes, and make a clean start, Mhando calls for good neighbourliness and declares that no violence shall be witnessed in Mndika while he is the leader (51). He believes that the return of Mgofu to Mndika would serve to remind the people of their dark past and deter them from repeating such mistakes. He alludes to metaphorical "scars" of poor governance such as interethnic violence and displacement. In his view, the return of Mgofu to Mndika, his motherland, will mark the return of Mndika to wholeness. Mgofu's old age,

supernatural powers, respectability and wisdom, Mhando believes, would be the healing balm that Mndika needs.

Where Mhando is tactful and wise, one of the members of his council, Mdanya, is portrayed as tactless and a symbol of unwise leadership. Mdanya is an elder yet he is quick to use words that could sow hate between communities. For instance, he mocks Mhando when the latter shares his dream about the return of Mgofu by saying that it is “too little too late” [because] Mgofu is “very old” (51) and wonders “how Mndika will benefit from the return of an old man”(51). He goes on to add that old people can be very stubborn (52) and therefore Mhando will not succeed in convincing Mgofu to return to Mndika. Mdanya’s selfish nature is further seen when he offers to marry a second wife in “solidarity” with the leader instead of empathising with Mhando, whose wife is ailing. Through Mdanya, Imbuga highlights the irony of a supposed young leader who is misguided enough to discriminate on account of age against a person who possesses great abilities. Mdanya’s words reveal what Mforbe discusses as elements of the stereotypes and ambivalence with which the elderly in Africa are treated; that while on the one hand they are “revered for their wisdom and knowledge... [they are] often assaulted through prejudicial discourses” (3). It takes the sobriety of another elder, Mtange, to expose Mdanya’s ill manners and demonstrate that youth alone is not enough to make a good leader. Indeed, when Mhando decides to send emissaries to Mgofu in Nderema, he carefully selects Mtange and Mnavi and avoids Mdanya.

To demonstrate his respect for age, Imbuga in the stage directions for Act 3 scene 2 describes Mgofu as “frail and walks unsteadily, but is dignified” (55). Through this description, the playwright highlights the physical handicap that arise in old age, such as difficulties in walking, but presents such in a positive manner by placing premium on the character’s dignity which remains intact, and which should be respected and protected. He creates elderly characters who “disprove of and deconstruct ageist stereotypes [and whose] cognitive abilities are portrayed as far from declining” (Schild 69).

Mgofu Ngoda is the leader of a shrine, just like his father and Kadesa before him. He is presented as a strong foundation on which the next generation of leaders can be founded. His age is presented as a source of wisdom and insight. It is through his character that Imbuga engages with the question of women in the government in Mndika, noting that Nderema took this step a while back and it has brought about noticeable change and progress: “if your youthful leader is thinking of bringing women closer to the seat of rule, you should support him. That is surely the future. Nderema took that path several years ago. Now see where they are” (57). Imbuga addresses this matter to highlight the need for change in society, regardless of the refusal by some people in the society to accept such change. He suggests that society be tolerant and willing to embrace change – political, cultural, social – for it to progress. Mgofu Ngoda sums up his vision when he says, “one who battles willingly with cold water doesn’t feel the cold” (58).

Mgofu Ngoda is pleased to learn that the people of Mndika, led by the youthful Mhando, are ready to make their country better. As Mtange reports, Mhando does not intend to hold on to power after he has completed his term in office, and he will follow the rules that the people of Mndika have written down regarding succession, (60). Mgofu Ngoda praises Mhando's character and leadership, describing him as "strong, intelligent and passionate" (60), attributes that are necessary in a leader.

'The Return of Mgofu'

The denouement in this play appears in Act Three Scene Two, "Enigma of Remembrance Day" (62). The scene is significant because it presents the celebration of 'Remembrance Day' in Mndika, with Mgofu Ngoda as the Chief Guest. The initial old blind seer Mgofu, who was forced out of this home by senseless ethnic violence, returns to Mndika in the form of his son, also old and a seer, giving the play its title, *The Return of Mgofu*. It is notable that Imbuga brings the audience a full circle from one old and visually handicapped but respected man to yet another old and equally respected man. Through the two Mgofus, father and son who have never met, Imbuga presents his vision of a society that respects old age and treats disability with dignity. Through the two, Imbuga contextualises the significance of the name Mgofu, which is derived from term '*Mkofu*,' meaning 'aged' in the language of the Maragoli people of Western Kenya.

One of the highlights of the last scene is a mime which is presented in the stage directions. The mime captures the playwright's thoughts about a society that has lost its humanity. The characters in the mime are said to be "creatures with human features except for the horns on their heads" (63) meaning that these are humans who have lost their essential characters. The rope that joins those creatures is a metaphor for the yoke of hatred and disunity that afflict many African nations today. Just like the creatures in the play, who cannot reach their target because they are pulling in different directions, some African nations cannot progress because their people are not united and waste time and resources fighting one another. The creatures have to make a deliberate decision to remove the horns from their heads and the rope from around their necks. To remove the horns and undo the rope is to undo hatred and reclaim humanity. Such an act would be akin to listening to and following Okolo's advice that people need to "realize that *ultimately* they are the protectors of their own rights" (143). It is only after undoing the rope that they reach their target totem and even then they realise that there are enough totems for both of them. Thus, the people of Mndika and the victims of the interethnic hatred of the past, the exiles in Nderema, who are represented by Mgofu and his daughter, Nora, come together.

It is significant that Ngoda and Nora return to Mndika on Remembrance Day to witness, as Mhando says the people of Mndika saying "NEVER AGAIN" (67). Mhando is aware, as Godwin Oboh, says, that "ethnic conflict is a sensitive issue [and] the way and manner a government handles this conflict determines the peace and development of the country concerned" (469). The purpose of remembering is to learn, make changes, move forward and

become better. When Mgofu is asked to speak, he recommends that Nora speaks first. This decision is notable on two levels: first, it indicates the playwright's conviction about the need to have women leaders and second, it points to a new generation of people who will lead the new society that is free of hatred, a generation that will "break clean from the past" (68).

The presence of Mgofu and Nora in Mndika symbolises the possibility of healing for previously divided nations such as Mndika. Nora's words demonstrate Imbuga's conviction that if people are willing to shed hate and prejudice, the society would "return to oneness and to wholeness" (68). Mgofu uses the metaphor of a seed to show the importance of words. Words can be used to destroy as seen when people speak ill of others and spread ethnic hate and propaganda. However Ngoda's words are seeds in the form of advice: "my best seed for you is a request for all of you to respect human blood. Respect it will all your sensibilities" (69). His advanced age and experience lend credibility to his position as an advisor. His last words are a declaration of his happiness that he is home (70). His speech is interrupted by a bout of coughing, which leaves the audience in suspense about the state of Mgofu at the end, but symbolically points to the possibility of restoration. Mgofu's return to Mndika demonstrates Imbuga's conviction about the role of elders in society. Unlike in his earlier plays where he creates elderly characters who demonstrate "alienated figures of authority," (Ruganda 46) in *The Return of Mgofu*, the elders are portrayed as symbols of authority, respect, progress, and stability.

Conclusion

The Return of Mgofu is about rebirth, symbolised by the return of Mgofu. The play ends with the return of Thori and Thoriwa to the stage, bringing the play back to the very beginning, but with parting advice, "...those with ears let them hear" (70). The idea of return is portrayed in three ways: the rebirth of the old blind seer through his son; the physical return of Mgofu to Mndika; and the presence of [dead] ancestors among the living. Thori and Thoriwa are no longer riding a wheelchair, and they intentionally point this out in their final speech indicating that their ability to walk has been restored. The different aspects of the return of Mgofu therefore mean that all societies, just like Mndika, have a chance to return or be restored to a state of healing, wholesomeness, and sanity. In addition, Thori and Thoriwa's abandonment of the wheel chair point to the restoration of human dignity which has often been denied to persons living with disability.

The play is both a cautionary and celebratory tale. By suggesting that life is not merely about living and dying, the play provokes a reexamination of how the society treats the aged and ageing today. Considering how individuals in the society today think of ageing, yet it is inevitable, the playwright is more or less suggesting that old age/ageing is not really a disability or a sign of the end of life; but that these are inevitable stages in the cycle of life. Consequently, the old [should] remind the young that life is not necessarily extinguished at death, but is renewed every time memory of the past is replayed among the living. What *the Return of Mgofu* stages is a reminder that societies or nation-states, such as Kenya, also need

to understand this imperative of life and seek constant renewal, not just as political entities but as a collective living organism.

Works Cited

- Barker, C. and Stuart M. 17 Nov 2019 "On Reading Disability in Literature."
<https://www.cambridge.org/core>. University of Rochester. pp. 1-13.
- Chiangong, P.M. 2021. "Ageism is still 'Another form of Bigotry': The Elderly body in *Anowa* and *The God's are not to Blame*." *Old Age in African Literary and Cultural Contexts*. Cambridge Scholars, pp.35-53.
- Imbuga, F. 2011. *The Return of Mgofu*. Longhorn.
- Oboh, G. E. 2020. "Ethnocentrism in African Politics: The Nigerian Experience." *African Studies*, Vol. 79, No. 4, pp.463-477.
- Okolo, MSC. 2007. *African Literature as Political Philosophy*. CODESRIA.
- Outa, G. 2009. *Performing Power: Ethnic Citizenship, Popular Theater and the Contest of Nationhood in Modern Kenya*. Book Surge.
- Nkealah, N. 2021. "Destereotyping Older men in Reneilwe Malatji's *Love Interrupted*: Responding with feminist empathy." *Old Age in African Literary and Cultural Contexts*, edited by Perpetual Mforbe Chiangong, Cambridge Scholars, pp.17-33.
- Ruganda, J. 1992. *Telling the Truth Laughingly: The Politics of Francis Imbuga's Drama*. East African Educational Publishers.
- Schild, H. 2021. "The Depiction of Old Age in Maaza Mengiste's *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*." *Old Age in African Literary and Cultural Contexts*, edited by Perpetual Mforbe Chiangong, Cambridge Scholars, pp.57-72.