



The Origins, Nature and Development of Gikuyu *Erithi* Poetry

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Abstract

The paper explores the roots of Gikuyu *Erithi* poetry. The Gikuyu language is one of the Bantus, Thagicu subgroup languages whose speakers have familial origin with the Embu, Mbeere, Tharaka, Meru and Kamba ethnic communities of Eastern Kenya among others. *Erithi* dance which hatched *Erithi* poetry propped up in the 1950s decade when the then British East Africa was engaged in Mau Mau armed struggle with mainly the Gikuyu, Embu and Meru people of Kenya. This dark age of the Kenyan-state was referred to as the State of Emergency and ran from the early 1950s to 1960. This *Hindi ya Mageneti*, as locals emotively and satirically called it was a turning point in the creation of the nation-state of Kenya. The historiography of *Erithi* shows that it emerged in Gikuyu Concentration Camps and/or Gikuyu Reserve Villages/Areas. The colonial administration introduced the guitar musical instrument after proscribing the singing and dancing of traditional art-forms. In recent times, *Erithi* lyrics have mutated to *Muugithi* art form. Like its precursors, *Muthirigu*, *Kamanu* and *Mwomboko*, performed with the accompaniment of the accordion, a foreign musical instrument, the power of allegory and other literary devices dominate *Erithi*. With love, marriage, traditions, cultural practices and politics being notable thematic concerns the emergent subgenre of Oral literature forms a fertile base for the integration of teaching linguistics and literature.

Keywords: Gikuyu, erithi, poetry



1.0 Introduction

African traditional poetry plays a vital role in the life of an African who prides in his or her cultural heritage. Poetry is the vehicle that used to connect societal members in their social, political, economic and religious wellbeing of the people. In orate societies, historical records were kept in poetry form and then it was disseminated from one generation through spontaneous or even planned performances. This paper attempts to explore the origins of the Gikuyu *Erithi* poetry a popular traditional cum modern poetic form that emerged in the colonial era in Kenya. Still, the paper looks into the nature and development of *Erithi* as a popular traditional cum modern oral form of African poetry. As it was rendered and is still rendered in the Gikuyu language it may be termed as an ethnopoetic oral form that applies folk-wisdom as well as emerging linguistic trends in New or Modern African folklore¹ manifest in the creative minds of composers. Language is a system of signs and symbols that help in the communicational process in the life of a human being. (Chomsky). While discussing *Speech, Idiolect, dialect, language* Rocha Chimera et al notes:

Language is the speech system that you learn from your parents (specifically your mother) and the environment at large. Your particular language is referred to as your mother tongue because it has been traditionally assumed that since your mother has a greater role in bringing you up than your father, the mother being always around her children, it is your mother, rather than your father, who has the greatest influence in passing the language on to you. (Chimera et al 2005:21)

There is no language or culture that is seen to be inferior or superior to any other. The beauty in a language evolves in the way it is different or similar to other languages in its family group or even subgroup. The Gikuyu language is one of the Bantu Family group of the Thagicu subgroup languages spoken in Eastern Africa. Others in the subgroup are Kikamba, Kimeru, Kiambu, Kidawida, Kitaveta, Kitaita, Kipare, etc. (Chimera et al 2005: 22-23). Histriography of *Erithi* poetry dates back to colonial Kenya in what the Gikuyu dubbed as *Hindi ya Manjeneti*², that is, State of Emergency that fell between early 1950s to late 1950s/early 1960s period. This is a painful period in the history of Kenya when the people

¹ The emergency of popular music in Africa has seen composers, singers and dancers indulge in innovation and experimentation in the cultural arts scene. There appears to be a kind of hybrid of styles of composing, singing, dance and performance that reveal a departure from the past ideologies to contemporary realities i in music and poetry ventures.

²This is derived and/or coined from the English word emergency that indicates the decade which colonial Kenya was put in a State of Emergency.

of central and parts of eastern Kenya were confined in concentration camps dubbed *lcagi*³ as means of controlling their activities and roles in supporting the Mau Mau armed struggle. The *Erithi* artistic innovation and motivation emerged after its precursors *Muthirigu*, *Kamanu*, *Kaiyaba* and *Kiriiri* forms of Gikuyu oral poetry were proscribed by the imperial colonial authorities. Why? They were viewed as ethnopoetic vehicles for fuelling trouble to King George's and later Queen Elizabeth II's empire that was not only mighty but also a Christian God-ordained political and economic establishment. *Erithi* poets used allegorical renditions hinging on love, sex and marriage yet the political nuances kept on featuring in the new traditional cum modern popular African poetry. The place of performance was in the Gikuyu Concentration Camps and Gikuyu Reserves locations. Then, Murang' District was subdivided into 20 colonial administrative locations to control the movement of people in today's Mount Kenya Region and the then Nairobi area.

2.0 Socio-political background of Art forms of the Agikuyu in colonial Kenya

The Agikuyu people of Kenya valued music as an important component of their everyday life. Before the coming of the visitors from Europe who later turned to be their masters and mistresses they used to compose, sing and dance traditional musical pieces in different seasons of the year. These art forms were christened various types of names that suited the nature, origins, age of performers and the history of the day. The emergency of art forms like *Mwomboko*, *Kamanu* and *Erithi* which were and are still performed using modern musical instruments depict the effects of the legacy of Europe in Africa. Their significance in Kenya's history lies in the fact that they propped up as social and political protest verbal popular forms of expression. The role of African Music which bears African poetry is best discussed by J.H.Kwabena Nketia in prolific work *The Music of Africa*. In clarifying the central roles of African music, he claims that it is "imbricated with everyday life in African societies. The issue of change is clear in that the discourse revolves around proponents of contemporary forms of expression and those who support traditional touches. Nketia in Aaron Louis Rosenberg (2011) notes:

Some recognize these new forms [of music], which have become identified with non-traditional subcultures and urban social life. But purists decry them as hybrids and vestiges of the past that must be discouraged; for whatever their merit in terms of satisfying a social a social need of the moment, the lack the stylistic diversity and vigour of traditional music. It seems, however, that

³ The singular form is *gicagi*, which means a sprawling enclosure where a sea of humanity lives fighting for space to breath and survive in unhygienic conditions.

nothing short of a cultural revolution can set the clock back, for this problem is not peculiar to the recent history of music in Africa. It is characteristic of the entire way of life of modern Africa, its institutions, and its creative arts—its literatures in English, French, and African languages, its modern paintings, sculpture, and drama—all of which reflect the African heritage as well as various aspects of the legacy of Europe. (Rosenburg 2011:1-2)

Curiously, the early missionary scholars ignored or poured scorn on the African Verbal art that emerged and thrived in the colonial era in the African continent. It appears like they were writing works on ethnology with a prescribed audience, that is, their home readers in the West. This made them to miss the real train that unravels the African philosophy, values, norms, beliefs, aspirations and ambitions as a colonized people who were seeking decolonization⁴ as Ngugi wa Thiong'o later observed in his critical works. Cagnolo, a missionary scholar who worked among the Agikuyu of Kenya postulates:

The Kikuyu tribe is a tribe of singers per excellence. It would be interesting to discover the origins of their songs and their authors, but as the Akikuyu have always been illiterate, without any records of the past, this is impossible. Music amongst civilized nations represents the soul of a people but with the Akikuyu it expresses merely their past feelings. (Cagnolo 1933: 161)

The environment and the times that Cagnolo as an ethnologist was writing have changed and apart from a few naysayers (among them African scholars) today who pour scorn on African orature, a significant number of scholars on many social science domains have brought enough evidence in their debates that assert the position of African verbal art as a representation of the life and soul of the African indigenous people. The Cagnolo school of thought has been challenged and should challenge as a negative force as the efforts of moving the centre has born fruits as is evident in most academic institutions in many African nation-states, Kenya being among those on the forefront. Historically speaking, the colonial political temperature in Kenya started simmering in the 1920s during the riots occasioned by the arrest of one Harry Thuku, a political activist-turned colonial apologist. The political protest was led by a Gikuyu heroine known as Mary Muthoni Nyanjiru who died in the cause of freedom of what was to be the Kenyan nation-state in 1963. At around 1920s there emerged a Gikuyu protest dance that was dubbed *Muthirigu*. The content and context of the Gikuyu *Muthirigu* poetry that drove the dancers was an allegorical reference

⁴ In *Decolonising the Mind* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the author discusses the power of language as a tool for fighting capitalism and other colonial forces in Africa and the rest of Third World in general.

to the struggle of independence of Kenya. Later *Kamanu* poetry emerged in 1930s and was followed hotly by *Mwomboko* poetry in the late 1930s and early 1940s. The latter was more vibrant than the former two colonial-oriented forms of music, dance and poetry.

The colonial authorities were bemused by the emergent forms which fueled trouble and advocated for mobilization and armed struggle against the British East Africa imperial regime. The political upheavals ensued and verbal art forms were banned mainly in central Kenya and Nairobi. It is the gap left by the proscribed forms of dance and musical poetry that so the birth of *Erithi* poetry in the 1950s. The name *Erithi* was coined by composers, singers and dancers of the day. This paper endeavours to explore what led to the naming of a Gikuyu traditional cum modern dance *Erithi*. Shakespeare from the land of Queen Elizabeth I and II in *Romeo and Juliet*⁵ queries: What is in a name? There is a coincidence in the term “Erithi poetry.” There is Erithi poetry⁶ from the Japanese culture that is discussed by an author G84 XYNWEN whose analysis is about Erithians of Japan. The Japanese term “Erithi” is a mere coincidence of *Erithi* poetry from the Agikuyu community of Kenya. The community has a saying which says: *Gutiri Ritwa ritangikuria mwana*, “There is no name that cannot make a child to grow.” This implies that the name is secondary to the value it is assigned to represent. This saying is complimented by another, *Ritwa ni mbukio*, A name is merely a form of utterance that may be even an innuendo or insinuation!

3.0 Socio-historical Orientations of *Erithi* Poetry

In 1952 Princess Elizabeth of the United Kingdom visited Kenya in a mission for sightseeing and celebration of her birthday. At this time, railway transport was the key means of connecting towns in British East Africa, as Kenya was referred to in the colonial times. On arrival in Nairobi, the beautiful princess toured the “city in the sun” and then focused her eyes on Mount Kenya. As she was facing Mount Kenya from a Nairobi viewpoint, she decided to travel to Nyeri Tree-Tops Hotel by railway line via various towns, for instance, Ruiru, Juja, Thika, Saba Saba, Kaharati, Maragua, Murang’a, Sagana, Karatina upto Nyeri and later Nanyuki. At around this time, tensions were high in Kenya especially in central Kenya and Nairobi area. The Mau Mau underground movement that started in mainly in late 1940s had gained ground and the main action took place in Nairobi, Mount Kenya

⁵“What is in a name? That which is a rose...” William Shakespeare a famous English playwright philosophizes on the meaning that emanates from a name due to its usage. Simply he argues that a name is given for identity but what counts is the essence and quality that spells its value to a given community. He uses the case of the warring factions of the Capulets and Montagues in his famous play, *Romeo and Juliet*.

⁶The purpose of Japanese “Erithi poetry” is to focus on “A social or political dialogue in a format that will not offend any listener. Key elements like symbolism, assonance, alliteration, imagery and consonance, rhyme schemes are unimportant. The author says: Poets never write down their own poetry. They speak it and others write down. It could almost be considered a code or a riddle.

and Aberdare Ranges regions. In due course, the colonial government laid a firm strategy of confining the Gikuyu, Embu and Meru communities of central and eastern Kenya in concentration camps. (Kaggia 1975). The State of Emergency was declared in earnest in 1952. The singing and dancing of *Muthirigu* and *Mwomboko* oral-poetic forms was banned forthwith. Anybody seen with the accordion musical instrument that accompanied the dance was severely punished and the instrument was destroyed. As well, the singing of other Gikuyu traditional dances, for example, circumcision songs were equally proscribed.

The colonizer introduced the guitar musical instrument in the Concentration Camps to appease the rebellious *Mwomboko* players fans, singers, dancers and the Gikuyu general populace. The colonizers proclaimed that the guitar was “elite” and decent a musical instrument as opposed to the accordion. The accordion which dominated *Kamanu* and *Mwomboko* which were performed by young and newly wedded couples was the engine of the traditional cum modern dance. The Gikuyu youthful musicians started strumming the guitar with vigour and satirically started to play in honour of “Erithi” a coinage of the word “Elite” and the Christian name “Eliza” a short form of “Elizabeth” the Queen of The United Kingdom. *Erithi* poetry filled the gap left by the proscribed musical and poetic performances. The colonizers ordered singers and dancers to sing and play “elite” songs and abandon the “uncouth” and “uncivilized” proscribed ones. The *Erithi* rhythm adopted traditional beats. The guitar being a foreign musical instrument linked the new *Erithi* melodies musically and intertwined well with the universal Rhumba beat that was then famous in Tanzania and the Congos (Kinshasha and Brazaville). The place of verbal art in contemporary times has drawn attention of scholars from across the world of diverse cultures who study ethnopoetics and generally cultural studies. This has created a forum for unfolding the social, political, economic and religious affairs that preoccupy different communities globally. As Dennis Tedlock in Bauman (1992) argues in the domain of “Ethnopoetics”:

Study of the verbal arts in a worldwide range of languages and cultures [sic]...Primary attention shape is given to the vocal-auditory channel of communication in which speaking, chanting, or singing voices give shape to proverbs, riddles, curses, laments, praises, prayers, prophecies, public announcements, and narratives...The aim is not only to analyze and interpret oral performances but also to make them directly accessible through transcriptions and translations that display their qualities as works of art. (Bauman 1992: 81)

The study of Gikuyu *Erithi* requires the collection of a variety of songs that would form a basis for discourse analysis one translation and transcription process is done systematically. The song-narratives that are evident in the verbal art form the foundation of the poetics that reveal the level of creativity of composers both the anonymous and the known ones.

4.0 The Nature of *Erithi* poetry: *Erithi wanyina na Dora*

Aaron Louis Rosenberg in discussing “Oral Art and Literary Criticism” claims that the position of the African popular art and creativity has played a second fiddle to the position held by authors and/or scholars from the Eurocentrism world who “pay insufficient attention to African Musical creativity and fail to understand the profound and far-reaching messages which it communicates.” (Rosenberg 2011:15) The attempt made by orature scholars to create an Africentrism force to counter the Eurocentrism force is yet to create an impact that raises African verbal art to the apex of dialogic realism that makes a global impact in cultural studies. As Rosenberg observes:

...[I]t is often the case that the musical practices and the musicians that we study are more sophisticated than the theories we apply to them, and further, that African popular music can itself be engaged as embodied theory, as illuminating thought-in-action, rather than mere empirical grist for the metropolitan mills of academia. (Rosenberg 2011: 15)

There is a need to explore theoretical orientations that point out on multiethnocultural nature of emergent African popular art as a means to discuss and unfold the phenomenon as exemplified in the *Erithi* poetry that emerged in the 1950s in colonial Kenya. When we look at the lyrics that were created right from the outset of *Erithi* poetical nuances the spontaneous outpouring of praises of lovebirds with new Western Christian names brought a new brand of poetics of the voice. On their part the composers, singers and dancers said: “Okey, from now on, we belong to *Erithi*, we shall sing the Song of *Erithi*-and because she is the mother of dollars-we are “elite”-*Haru wiitu*, Hello Our Own, what we have now is *Erithi wanyina na Dora*, that is, Eliza, a sister to Dora...” It displayed scriptible stylistic technique whereby members of the audience participated in completion of the narrative a given singer was performing.

An illustration of the nature and poetics as well as the first words to be uttered by anonymous singers and guitarists were something similar to the rendition indicated below:

I erithi I wanyina na Dora, Erithi I wanyina na Dora, Oh! Eliza a sister to Dora

Kairitu kanini, A young girl
Ndakuonire ngithie rugendo Nyairobi, I saw you on my way to Nairobi.
Warimagira Nduma cia Mami wanyu. You were cultivating your mother's
arrowroots
Ngithii ruguru kugura mieu, I went Westwards to buy arrowroot shoots.
Ngahande mutaro uri guitu, To plant in a canal at our home
Nanii ngikiuga nonginya nguhikie, I vowed that I would marry you
Erithi I we niwe Kura yakwa, You Eliza, you are my only vote
Erithi I we niwe kura ndona, Eliza, you are the vote I have discovered
Nyakairu-Ritho riaku rimurikiti Kirinyaga, The-black-one, the eye lights up at
noon
Nyondo ciaku ciihandite thathiita, Your breasts stands attention at noon
Cing'athitie ta iria ciari gwa Thiaka⁷ They are rude like the hyenas at Thiakas
Igakira cia Nyakeru wa Ruraya, They are beyond those ones of The-white-one
of Europe
Haru Wiitu, Erithi I wanyina na Dora, Hello our own, Eliza, a sister to Dora
 Words: *Cundu! Ni wega!_Ukaga-My Nguinuka Ku! So do! It's good! You follow*
me My-where-do-I-go!

[This song-text was performed by Boniface Karanja, a.k.a Thahabu, from Maragua Town in Murang'a County. It was on 09-09-1999]. The youth in the entire concentration camp went "ablaze" with the emergent *Erithi* poetry. [Boniface Karanja, a.k.a Thahabu, from Maragua Town-anEx-freedom fighter; Secretary of Maragua Ex,freedom fighters and also a choreographer of *Mwomboko* dance in Pre and Post-independent Kenya]. According to this informed respondent, the National Anthem of the youth during the State of Emergency days safe for Mau Mau Freedom songs was *Erithi* poetry. In this new dance, the colonial administrators hoped that it would not be politically-charged like its precursors: *Muthirigu*, *Kamanu* and *Mwomboko* that were ethnopoetic socio-political protest songs. Nevertheless, the poetics of *Erithi wanyina na Dora* shows that the idea of freedom was alive as love lyrics were laced with allegorical doses of struggle for freedom. In a way this echoed Mau Mau Freedom songs that were popular in the 1950s among freedom fighters and the Gikuyu, Embu and Meru populace living in concentration camps and Gikuyu Reserves. (Mahugu 1990)

⁷In Gikuyu folklore, the hyenas had gone as suitors in Thiaka's home who had daughters he wanted to marry of to sensible suitors. The condition he put for would-be suitors were not favourable to the hyenas. This made them to be angrily and rude to anyone who tried to appease them.

4.0 Post-independent *Erithi* performances: The early 1960s up to the early 1970s

The exodus of the confined communities in Concentration Camps started shortly before 1963, the year Kenya gained its independence. The return to *Maganjo*⁸ was an emotional experience as it marked the dawn of Kenya's political and economic independence. These *Maganjo* settlements were the indigenous lands where the homesteads symbolized by thatched and mud-walled houses, huts and *thingiras* were burnt, laced down and leveled to the ground as the victims were hurled into exile in concentration camps rendering them refugees in their own homes. (Milton Obote, in Common Man's Charter). The Gikuyu, Embu and Meru communities for a decade in the early 1950s and early 1960s were scattered in various forms of confinements. So on arrival, the returnees and their offsprings born in Concentration Camps put up new homes with the same mud walled and thatched roofs save for a few people who afforded simple iron sheets. The new shelters shone in pride as new beacons of hope for a new post-independent Kenya. In my own lived experience I remember those humble structures in my (researcher) local village called Irigu-ini, The Place of the Banana. On the eve of independence, various traditional dances and traditional cum modern dances were performed in different villages in post-independent Kenyan nation-state. In my village the people sang and danced Pre-independent and Post-independent national songs, Mau Mau songs, circumcision songs, *Muthirigu*, *Mwomboko*, *Kamanu*, *Machi*, *Kiriiri*, *Kaiyaba* and *Erithi* songs. (Mwangi 2002) These performances were conducted in open grounds, along river valleys as well as inside or outside homesteads. During the Independence Day the performances were conducted at divisional and locational levels playgrounds. In the evening as the elderly and children went home after Public celebrations, the youth congregated at Memorial Halls, then called *Momoria* to consummate their love for cultural heritage with their newfound love-post-independent *Erithi* poetry.

Over a couple of years in post-independent Kenya the *Erithi* performances emerged as forms of popular entertainments that brought a new breath of life to mainly the youth that had lived as "caged birds"* in Concentration Camps. Then, the yearning for acquiring the new and formal education gained root and the need to raise funds came into the fore. Then, a family that had a son or daughter who was to join secondary education had a daunting task in raising school fees. They arranged for fund raisers where *Erithi* singers and dancers entertained the patrons and well-wishers in a host's homestead. These fundraisers were dubbed "Chai," that is, tea-taking party as the people watched the youth

⁸ Gikuyu traditional homes that symbolized their indigenous history and identity before the commencement of the decade referred to as "State of Emergency"

perform *Erithi*. They praised the host and paid homage to General Karombo wa Erithi,⁹ and other departed freedom fighters from their village, Sub-location, Location, Division and District. From this nature of performances, some anonymous and also known performing oral artists propped up. One famous popular musician of post-independent era, Wanganangu, produced a famous *Erithi* song entitled: *Chai wa Kadogo*, that is, “The Young Girl’s Tea Party.” Wanyangira, a local *Erithi* poet composed, *Chai wa I8*, that is, Location I8’s Tea-Party. The emerging known popular secular music artists were mainly Wanganangu, Meciria, Mwangi wa Gacau, Peter Mwangi, Joseph Kamaru, Daniel Kamau, Joseph Kaisha, Francis Rugwiiti, S.K.Kimani among other least known popular Gikuyu composers. Towards the close of 1960s Joseph Kamaru, Daniel Kamau, and Francis Rugwiiti started to try to be above other popular Gikuyu *Erithi* music poetry. These composers produced *Erithi* song poetry like *Uthoni wa Mbathi-ini*, “Inlawship Inside a Bus,” *Githomo Nikio Bunguro*, “Education is the Key” and *Ndikarima Murime*, “I Will Never Cultivate a Garden Done by Another” respectively. On his part, Joseph Kaisha produced *Kunda Tukundane*, “Let Us Sip Together (from the same horn of *Muratina* local brew)” which was a narrative on the experiences of detainees in various detention camps across Kenya.

Performance is a crucial mode of spoken verbal poetic discourse that reveals the history and identity of an interest group poised on belting artistic renditions to a target audience with a set mission of not only entertaining but imparting education on the socio-political concerns of a community. Performance rendered without a target audience is tantamount to playing football in a ultra-modern stadium:

Fundamentally, performance as a mode of spoken verbal communication consists in the assumption of responsibility to an audience to a display of communicative competence. This competence rests on the knowledge and ability to speak in socially appropriate ways. Performance involves on the part of the performer an assumption of accountability to an audience for the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential content. From the point of view of the audience, the act of expression on the part of the performer is thus marked as subject as evaluation for the way it is done, for the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer’s display of competence. Additionally, it is marked as available for the enhancement of experience, through the present enjoyment of the intrinsic qualities of the act

⁹This was a famous Mau Mau general who hailed from Location 2 Kinyona. He is remembered for having travelled from Nairobi to Maiira sub-location in Murang’a District to execute a compromising colonial chief and his several henchmen who was selling out Mau Mau fighters and reducing them in numbers through summary executions.

of expression itself. Performance thus calls forth special attention to and heightened awareness of the act of expression, and gives license to the audience to regard the act of expression and the performer with special intensity. (Bauman 1975: 293)

The performers of *Erithi* poetry were humble but adventurous composers and singers who performed using dry guitars. Their audience was always alert on the poetic message expressed verbally. As they never expected their music and poetry to be aired in radio stations as of the present day's musician's experience their renditions were at times bawdy in nature.

5.0 *Erithi* Poetry of mid-1970s and the Early 1980s

The *Erithi* spirit thrived in the early 1970s and this was marked by the recording of a variety of commercial music especially by musician living in Nairobi. Historically, there is little or no demarcation between the composers and musicians of the late 1960s and those who emerged in the early 1970s as well as those of mid-1970s. These were mainly Wanganangu, Meciria, Mwangi wa Gacau, Peter Mwangi, Joseph Kamaru, Daniel Kamau, Joseph Kaisha, Francis Rugwiiti, S.K.Kimani among other least known popular Gikuyu artists. One of the most famous *Erithi* song poetry was *Baba Munyinyi*, "My Uncle" (My Father's Younger Brother) by one Joseph Kaisha. The lyrics flowed:

Rucini Koroko itethambite maitho, One early morning before washing my face

Ngiona athuri atatu a rika na guka, I saw three elders of my grandpa's age
Matumituo ni ithe wa muhiki wakwa, They had been sent by me father-in-law
narua na mituki mekwenda ruracio, In earnest they demanded dowry for my love

Ngikira ngithikira ngiaga uria ingimera, I pondered and thought and lacked an answer

Ndaririkana mwendwa akomete Kinyata, On recalling my wife was bedridden at Kenyatta Hospital

Ngithii kwa baba munyinyi ndimuhe uhoru ucio, I went to inform my uncle about the matter,

Tondu niwe twatigiiruo ni baba munjiari, As my late father left him as our guardian

Ati tuona thina tuthiage gwake, That once we encounter tribulations we be seeking his assistance

According to the lyrics of the *Erithi* song Baba Muniyini, the composer is spelling the tribulations of post-independent Kenya that young men faced in trying to put to terms the gaps of lack of formal education, unemployment, love and marriage as well as dictates of Gikuyu traditional practices as seen in payment of dowry to ones parents-in-law. The rhythms that kept on being aired had the same touch as the recording studios used electrified guitars. New composers like James Mungai Kangwana, Gideon Mwangi, Tom Mwangi, Lawrence Nduru and Joseph Gicheha joined the group of the late 1960s and their *Erithi* touch mutated and leaned more on Rhumba that tended to borrow a leaf from that of Tanzanian musicians and the Congolese musical fraternity. The musical mutations kept on eating *Erithi* poetry as *Twist* and *Chacha* dominated airwaves from mid-1960s to the early 1970s. The train of performers kept on swelling day in and day out with a great commercial motivation. Still, in the early 1970s a musical earthquake hit the Kenyan nation state music scene. The emergency of *Benga* and *Omotibo* beats from the Nyanza and Western Provinces respectively slowed down the Grand *Erithi* Maachi especially in Nairobi. *Erithi* composers had to change tact to meet the demands of the musical fans of the day. The powerful Luo composition Jane Ochieng by Kaudha Twins Band hit the music scene with a bang! It instantly became a blueprint of the Gikuyu beats that emerged as *Benga* songs in early 1970s. Around 1970, Daniel Kamau's composition, Z.K. Were changed the music scene for the rest of the years upto the new millennium as *Benga* songs dance and poetry were the in thing in the Kenyan nation state.

Consequently, *Erithi* poetry was eclipsed for a long time as *Benga* emerged as a universal Kenya nation-state undisputed dance of all times making *Erithi* poetry to play a second fiddle. Equally, the post-independent freelance troubadours were caught up by dynamic change of the production of vinyl records and compact cassette musical production with many people in a position to buy electronic gadgets that they could play musical poetry of their choice in their own homes at their own convenience. The aging stars also failed to match with emerging modern beats that were performed alongside *Benga*, for instance, *Kung-Fu*, *Liquid-Soul*, *Cavacha*, *Mwenyenyo* and *Muthungutho* among others.

6.0 *Erithi* Poetry in Musical Limbo-in 1980s and 1990s

The 1980s emerged as the years that *Benga* song and poetry stole the show in the Kenyan popular Music fraternity. During this period the government sponsored Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) was the sole broadcasting station that aired news and

music across the Kenyan nation-state. In terms of society, music and poetry dispensations, the *Benga* rhythms emerged as the universal popular musical poetry in the land of contrasts in Eastern Africa region mainly in Kenya and Tanzania. Since then *Erithi* popular music and poetry was consumed in a musical limbo of sorts. An exceptional *Erithi* song that was very popular in the 1980s was *Rugano Rwa Naivasha*, “A Story About Naivasha,” by S.K. Kimani of the *Kuraya na Guitu 18*, “Far Away From Home Location 18” song and poetry fame.¹⁰ The rest of Gikuyu popular music developed hit after hit of *Benga* song poetry. This period saw *Erithi* poetry remain unknown to the second and third generation that were born in post-independent Kenya. In a kind of historical and contemporary music allusion, to *Chai wa Kandogo*, “The Young Girl’s Tea-Party.” a famous popular musician, Simon Kihara, Musaimo composed a *Kaiyaba* cum *Erithi* song which he called *Chai wa 14*, Location 14’s Tea-Party which became a hit in the late 1980s. The renewal of the old *Kaiyaba* and *Erithi* touches blended well in the new musical rendition and this was an instant where the present is seen to have borrowed from the past with considerable success. The rest of Musaimo’s musical and poetry production at that time centered on *Benga* and *Reggae*-oriented beats.

The changes that occur in a community’s social, political, economic and religious experiences are driven by the dynamism in their traditions and cultural practices embraced by a people. In so doing history is reenacted and some events, practices and values are revealed in a different form. In artistry the birth of new art forms depicts a connection or continuity in genres that appear to have entered limbo and then are seen to have reincarnated in a new way of life that capture the imagination of the contemporary society. Ngugi wa Thiong’o postulates:

Culture, in its broadest sense, is a way of life fashioned by a people in their collective endeavour to live and come to terms with their total environment. It is the sum of their art, their science and all their social institutions, including their system of beliefs and rituals. In the course of their creative struggle and progress through history, there evolves a body of material and spiritual values which endow that society with a unique ethos. Such values are often expressed through the people’s songs, dances, folklore, drawing, sculpture, rites and ceremonies.

The people are responsible for their own destiny as regards the philosophy of life that guides their road to cultural change and emerging new folklore forms. Among the Agikuyu

¹⁰ *Kuraya na Guitu 18* was one of most popular lamentation *Machi* popular music in the mid-1960s.

of Kenya there are significant cultural changes that have been precipitated by their interaction with different people not only in nation-state but also in the rest of the world. In their struggle for political and economic independence their conflict with the former colonizers from Britain marked the beginning of a great shift from the past as evidenced in the continued Cultural Revolution that has been witnessed over the years as evident in origins and nature of *Erithi* poetry. As wa Thiongo further opines:

Over the years these varieties of artistic activity have come to symbolize the meaning of the word culture. Any discussion of culture inevitably centres around these activities, but we must bear in mind that they are derived from a peoples way of life and will change as that way is altered, modified, or developed through the ages. In our present situation we must in fact try to see hoe new aspects of life can be clarified or given expression through new art-forms or a renewal of the old.

The renewal of *Erithi* poetry in the Agikuyu contemporary society in art world is a phenomenon that marks the history, identity and dynamism in cultural practices in the East Africa region and the rest of the Great Lakes region of Africa.

6.1 The Emergency of Muugithi Poetry and the Revival of Erithi Poetry

In the Mid-1990s and the ushering in of the new millennium 2000, a genre of poetry that was dubbed *Mugiithi* emerged in the Nairobi music scene. This form of poetry took a different style in performance as it hinged on One-man-guitar rendition. This became popular in nightclubs, hotels, motels and pubs where the owners found it easier to manage financially as hiring an individual rather than a whole Jazz band appeared more tenable. The *Muugiithi* style propelled the Revival of *Erithi* style, dance, lyrics, performance, and poetics generally in a monumental way. In the late 1990s and the opening of 2000s, the Gikuyu *Benga* songs were modeled to pseudo-*Erithi* beats what music producers and performing artists call “mixing” of beats. This period saw *Erithi* poetry enter a Musical Revival that has remained stable to the present times. While discussing “Touch What You Don’t Have.” *Mugithi, One Man Guitar and Urban Identities*” Mwenda Ntarangwi observes:

The 1990s marked an emergence of a relatively new genre in the Kenyan entertainment industry. The Mugithi performance signaled a beginning of new directions largely in Kenyan Music and specifically Gikuyu music in terms of themes and style. (Ntarangwi 2009: 95)

In 2000s and 2010s a new wave of re-recording old music numbers of as early as 1960s and mainly 1970s and 1980s/1990s period has seen a new brand of *Erithi* poetry dominate airwaves in mainly FM Stations¹¹ based in Nairobi. The key copycats are Mike Ruua, Mike Murimi and Salim Junior. The setback in some of the tracks re-recorded by some copycats is that they inject some lewd and bawdy poetics of the voice to attract mainly drunkards who patronise nightclubs where they perform their kind of Muugithi. As Maina Mutonya notes “Ironically, lewd as *Mugithi* may seem, it was adopted from the Christian night vigils (keshas), the faithful link up to “join the train to heaven” with Jesus as the driver. In an article titled: “Mugithi scholar unravels popular music roots and lewd lyrics” Kiundu Waweru in *The Standard News Papers* complements wa Mutonya’s effort in his academic popular music pursuits, thus:

For more than two decades, the train has driven revelers in a crazed journey of musical fantasy in entertainment spots locally and beyond. Christened Mugithi and featuring one man guitarists strumming electric benga tunes, the genre has broken the barriers, cruising across ethnic divides, gender and even social class, so much that one scholar has researched on Gikuyu music for his PhD [sic] studies. (*The Standard News Paper*, March 11, 2011, page 1)

The nature of compositions crafted more than half a century before may have changed but the *Erithi* spirit lives on. Contemporary performing artistes still have room to develop the art form to a level of making it a national dance and nation-state poetry for motivating and inspiring the youth to not only respect the domain of African culture, traditions and folklore but also use it as a base for unity, history and identity as contemporary African people.

7.0 Conclusion

The paper has endeavoured on exploring the roots, nature, innovation and development of the *Erithi* dance that forms the background for creating song-texts that are vital for the analysis of poetry studies. As a form of African folklore, *Erithi* both as dance and poetry has stood the test of time. The paper has pointed out that the christening of the term *Erithi* has roots in Queen Elizabeth II of United Kingdom or the English word “elite.” The times that the *Erithi* poetry propped up was a volatile one as colonial Kenya was in a “State of Emergency” status. After a number of Gikuyu art forms were proscribed, the colonizer

¹¹ These are include Kameme FM, Coro FM and Inooro FM.

thought that the guitar musical instrument would appease the youth that formed the foundation of recruits who joined the Mau Mau guerilla War of Independence of Kenya. The birth of Erithi dance, song and poetry in the 1950s has seen the mutation of the art form gain popularity and develops from the “dry guitar” culture, that is, use of un-electrified guitar to today’s electrified and sophisticated guitar.musical instrument. From the christening of *Erithi* to that of *Muugithi*, this traditional cum popular modern dance, song and poetry has produced poetry material for not only entertainment circles but also for scholarly pursuits.

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