Kenyan Autobiographical Writings and the Use of Orature: An Analysis of Writings by Benjamin Kipkorir and Wangari Maathai

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Abstract

Kenyan autobiography is a cultural production that embraces orature. Although the flexibility of orature gives the individual greater leeway and enhances the 'literariness' of the autobiographical text, its use contravenes conventions and contests boundaries of autobiographical writing as signalled by the West. Orature in an autobiographical text is mediated by the individual sense of style, by the available cultural models of identity and the oral discourses evident. This paper analyses selected texts and how they borrow imagery from their cultural backgrounds and embed forms of oral literature such as myths, legends, oral narrative, songs and oral poetry into their writing. The present is the point of departure which organizes the autobiography. Autobiographical writers from Kenya have consistently returned to childhood, looking back at a childhood rich in orature and passed on knowledge, to find their personal as well as the historical roots, to expose the colonial past and to comment on present day issues. This paper engages theory of autobiography, African feminism, and Autobiographics to show that the choice of particular narrative strategies like orature is influenced by the relationship between context, gender and genre. It also interrogates how the chosen authors collectively articulate the nation albeit differently. The study falls within the context of trends in autobiographical studies that privilege location and positioning of autobiographical writings over conventions.

Key Words: *autobiography, diary, Kenyan autobiography, memoir, orature*

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Introduction

This paper analyses historian Benjamin Kipkorir's *Descent from Cherengani Hills* (2009), and scientist, Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed: A Memoir* (2006), whose writing style mimics orality. It highlights how inclusion of orature in an autobiographical text favours a dialogic relationship with the reader. This paper deliberates on the form of Kenyan autobiography. It explores the question, what exactly constitutes the form of autobiographical writing from Kenya. The problem is whether these two texts, whose formal choices employ orature and whose form manifest as either, literary, historical and scientific conform to conventions of autobiography.

The theory of autobiography is concerned with conventions and general principles that act as a guide to autobiographical writing. The theory mainly responds to the question: What is autobiography? Thus, how the writer treats the content of life as lived and how they write this life is the main concern. The theory addresses how the interplay of these two inquiries into autobiographical writing shapes the author's identity. Consequently, the theory of autobiography also addresses fictionalization of self which inevitably comes with the writing about self in a text. The study demonstrates how the writers negotiate the tensions between fact and fiction, the relationship between the self, the text, and the reader while examining how these influence form.

To fully understand the theory of autobiography, foundational critical works provide important insights. For instance, Anna Burr (1909) and Roy Pascal (1960), a student of Georges Gusdorf (1954), examine the nature of autobiographical writing as they deal with coherence, authorial reference, representation, linearity of narrative, chronology of events, unity and positioning. These elements of autobiography guided the focus of our study. The proponents of this theory who include Georges Gusdorf (1954), Roy Pascal (1960), and Philippe Lejeune (1974) among other critics make several observations which, taken together, make up the theory of autobiography. They examine works that follow a tradition that dates back to Rousseau (1982) and Augustine (397 and 400CE). Gusdorf's emphasis is on the need for a coherent, continuous image of the author's life and identity, this he describes as "the unity of life across time" (6). This study explored how writers select events to bring out the autobiographical whole. The theory also makes distinctions on genres of autobiographical writing. For example, Ann Burr's (1909) proposition on authorial intention, memory and sincerity, identifies how autobiography differs from diaries, letters and the personal journal. She points out that there are ways in which we can estimate the sincerity of these subjective records. This study explores narrative strategies used to make a work believable. Her insight helped us to interrogate how construction of subjectivities affected form. Another theorist, Wayne Shumaker (1954) explores the idea of authorial intention. His exploration of the expository and narrative autobiographical mode shows how form echoes memory. Similarly, Roy Pascal's (1960) study establishes how a writer retrospectively composes his or her life in view of past to present and on what

he/she needs to disclose. Thus, the theory of autobiography helped discuss coherence, selection, subjectivities and retrospect as contributing to the form of autobiography. African Feminism theory differs from other strands of feminism in that it advocates men and women working together to end the subjugation of women. It is closely related to Social feminism which believes that capitalism has to do with women's marginalization and, thus, embraces one's ability to change the environment in order to meet women's needs which are gender and class dictated. Social feminism is more pronounced in Obioma Nnaemeka's work Politics of (M)othering (1997) which examines ways in which wives can use the domestic space to assert their freedom and bond with other women by reaching out and working with men in order to achieve desired goals of mutual coexistence. Similarly, Ife Amadiume (2015) privileges the space motherhood provides and views maternity as sacred in the traditions of all African societies (191). However, African feminism seems more appropriate in dealing with issues affecting African women that are not entirely class related. Moreover, the stories these writers tell also unfold transformations that each individual goes through for their survival within different classes of inequalities precipitated by race, class, gender and religion. They narrate the difficult decisions that they make that alter and impact the course of their lives. Therefore, women's narratives under study signal common challenges through women's diverse experiences. This necessitates the use of African feminism as a vital analytical tool.

Although the use of orature in autobiographical writings seems to contravene autobiographical conventions, if we consider what Leigh Gilmore (1994) calls "Autobiographics." elements which are not bound by a philosophical definition of self as derived from St. Augustine, who is considered father of autobiography, mark a location in a text where self-invention, self-discovery, and self-representation emerge. Gilmore sees these elements as legitimate constituents of autobiography within the technologies of autobiography as all of them are supposed to contribute to the goal of self-realization. The elements include "those legalistic, literary, social and ecclesiastical discourses of truth and identity through which the subject of autobiography is produced" (42). Autobiographics puts emphasis on the autobiographical "I". As Gilmore states, Autobiographics puts emphasis on the following elements:

> Writing self as constitutive of autobiographical identity, discursive contradictions (rather than unity) in the representation of identity, the name as a potential site of experimentation rather than a contractual sign of identity, and the effects of the gendered connection of word and body. (93)

Thus, Autobiographics describes self-representation that affirms at the same time contradicts representation of identity. It also poses the questions: "Where is the autobiographical? What constitutes its representation? (186)." Exploring these key questions helped in this study's engagement with autobiographical content, especially that which did not fit into the traditional

definition of autobiography. The use of orature as a formal choice in the autobiographical writings of Kipkorir, Maathai, and Ngugi seems to confirm Leigh's argument. Kipkorir uses orality in exploring who he is. Kipkorir locates himself in the community and embeds the oral tradition of his community in accounting for community consciousness. This also compares and contrasts with how Maathai deploys the same techniques.

To start with, Kipkorir who comes from the Marakwet community narrates that each clan of the Marakwet would have its unique account passed down the generations in the form of oral traditions, stories, even sayings and riddles of how it came into being. He embeds one such story in his narrative: Marakwet oral traditions and those of other Kalenjin communities are replete with tales of catastrophic droughts passed down the generations in an anecdote he titles "A meal of Rats", Kipkorir tells the story of a destitute poor man, "(ootwogin- a destitute living with a family as a dependant)" (387). The man is of an unknown lineage but had two adolescent daughters who he tricked into eating a meal of rats and made both of them pregnant (387). In this story, Kipkorir brings out issues of gender and class that also existed in the Marakwet community. His argument is that oral traditions like these are the stuff out of which history is crafted. Kipkorir includes this story in ways that show deliberate choice to achieve artistry. His selection reveals subjectivity especially in his portrayal of women. While Maathai cites the story of *Konyeki na ithe* "Konyeki and His Father." (51) Kipkorir includes a story titled; *A meal of rats* (391) present oral tradition narratives whose striking similarities and differences in both content and approach offer an understanding on how multiplicity of identities converge to bring out different effects on form. In Kipkorir's story two sister are made pregnant by a poor man (*ootwogin*- a destitute living with a family as a dependent) at the home of a rich man he would hunt rats and soon his master's daughters began to visit him. Curiosity leads the girls to ask for some of the meat. The poor man tells her to she give "something precious to her" in exchange of rat meat and she became pregnant. (387) Maathai's strategy in including Konyeki's story is to use the motif of orality to problematize the textuality of her autobiography especially in addressing gender issues. Whereas in Kipkorir's narrative as valuable to the understanding of the history of the formation of the clans ignores the gender angle where the girls are possibly lured into acts that makes them pregnant. However, they both point out that, within the confines of family, their community knowledge was passed down generations through oral traditions like stories. This is a similar way Maathai integrates the story into her life experiences while Kipkorir separates it as part of the Marakwet history (387). Including this narrative Kipkorir suggests that oral traditions like this one are the stuff out of which history is crafted. By shedding light on the mindset and cultural framework of individuals and societies to which they belonged, Kipkorir defends the inclusion of these into the autobiographical narrative as a way of understanding the individual. The lack of chronological sequencing that Kipkorir suggest affects

oral traditions and legends as a document of history seems to also affect the form of the autobiography. The writer has to deal with how to seamlessly integrate it into the personal narrative. Kipkorir separates it from the main narrative by using italics and Maathai takes it to the appendix secondly both analyze the importance of the oral narrative. They justify why it is included obviously being sensitive to the autobiographical form that resists narration of others. Nevertheless maathai says it reminds her of people she has seen and that she has also had moments when she has been blinded. She also suggests it is important that different people tell stories. Stressing the different meaning to individuals that these stories presented. The difference is that Maathai is able to reassert her distinctive experience as a woman. While Kipkorir presents a narrative where man is master capable of starting a clan. Maathai story of *Konyeki na ithe* "Konyeki and His Father." Presents differing viewpoints that reveal a gendered ideology.

To account for colonial invasion, Kipkorir resorts to oral traditions in narrating the history of his people because little is recorded. According to folklore, the first Colonial HQ was at Kokwap Chuina in Maina, Sambirir Location. Giving the particulars Kipkorir writes:

> The story goes that when the people saw government forces approaching the women were instructed to dowse and pour water on all house hold fires to prevent the invaders from burning their huts. Everybody was to run away, while the men, armed with bows and arrows, hid behind the myriads of rocks and boulders that abounded their homeland, ready to fend off the attack. Unknown to them the invaders had matches with which they soon reduced the homesteads to ashes. (401)

It is this inclusion of oral discourse in autobiographical writing that contravenes elements of autobiography which privilege the story of the individual over that of others. However, Kipkorir is driven by the desire to chronicle the history of the people. It is not just the oral discourse that Kipkorir includes to further write about colonialists. Within his autobiographical writing Kipkorir also includes the anti-colonialist songs that people sung. A similar inclusion is seen in Ngugi's autobiographical writing. The inclusion of oral discourse and the writer articulate his community's sentiments against colonialism. For instance, Kipkorir writes of the dispute over the white highlands which was to cause a lot of resentment and led educationist Charles Murgur to compose the song:" *Kipkunur siim tariif*:

Tulwenyo Kapsilootne tatun ke-grere Oyaoyae

(Our land of Kapsilioot will one day revert to us (405)

The above song shows that a people's consciousness is captured using songs. It affects and interrupts the conventional chronological telling of autobiography.

To account for the furrows that were found in his community, Kipkorir includes the legend of the traditional furrows which, according to him, are part and parcel of the clan history. He gives the first account of an ancestress of Pokot who found refuge for herself and her

infant son (the clan founder) at a home across the river somewhere in present day Marakwet he says: the woman arrived at a river crossing at the end of her long quest for succor from whatever cataclysmic convulsion had visited the settlement where she was last married." (412).

The next key legend that Kipkorir uses introduces irrigation furrows and how they were made. For example, in tracing where he comes from he writes;

> According to oral tradition, the people who had fallen away (or killed) Kibiko from his first furrow were given the name "Chemenengir", they took possession of the first furrow and the fields surrounding it. But because they had wronged the original owner of the water-works, they always carried a sense of guilt and would not approach the site and fields directly through Kapsogom fields but take a long circuitous route that hugs the Kerio River instead. This enmity persisted up to the early years of colonial rule. (413)

In the above, Kipkorir tells of the origin of furrows in ways that blur boundaries between fact and fiction. Jan Vansina (1973) views the relationship between communal memory and documentary history as complex and contentious. In practice, a historian has to be faithful to the evidence available on a subject as they seek out multiple sources of evidence, including personal narratives. Vansina points out the need for historians to corroborate information by archeological finds and linguistic evidence to ensure reliability. Discussing the use of oral traditions as sources of history in the same text, Vansina writes: "oral tradition can be of real value, but doubts must be entertained about it unless it can be substantiated by other historical sources.'' (8) This is in line with Hayden White's (1980) position that characters view events "subjectively and fashion themselves and one another in contestatory terms" (52). In this instance, to define and talk about oneself means to bring other political, social, and cultural factors into consideration

Wangari Maathai also uses oral tropes as part of her narration in her autobiographical writing. Although this may seem unconventional especially when used in the genre of autobiography, critics like Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2010), Leigh Gilmore (1994) and Samuel Ndogo (2016) in their various investigations show that the genre of the autobiography is part and parcel of the cultural imagination in the postcolonial discourses. Samuel Ndogo explores the various ways through which Maathai and Ngugi utilize memory not only in remembering the past, but also as a trope in narrating the story of the self as well as that of the postcolonial Kenyan nation. Drawing from Ngugi's concept of memory as advanced in re-tempering Africa (2009), Ndogo shows the influence of folklore in texts by comparing how Ngugi and Maathai variously appropriate the oral history in telling their personal as well as communal experiences. Ndogo discusses specific aspects of the oral tradition such as myths, legends, songs, the epic, characterisation, and how they

are integrated as modes of narration in the respective memoirs. This charts our entry point as here we explore how inclusion of oral narratives in autobiographical writings as a formal choice affects expectations of form. Muchiri (2010) also observes how Maathai writes in the style of the epic which is common to tales of legends and successful people. Evan Mwangi (2009) notes that: the narrative's appropriation of the properties of the epic is not to primarily advance nationalistic military endeavors associated with the traditional epic, but to celebrate the heroic achievements of the characters in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial patriarchal conditions (42). Muchiri also points to the chronological or step - by - step arrangement of events and the fact that Maathai uses oral traditions in her narrative to explore herself as a woman and discover her identity as a member of her Gikuyu community. Oral traditions provide her with a sense of identity and aid in her journey to self-discovery. (96) It is these traditions that she invokes when she writes about environmental conservation. Muchiri suggests that Maathai intertwines her story with the history of Mau Mau struggle and demonstrates the effects of the state emergency on Kenyan families, while discussing the story of Kenya during Mau Mau insurgency, she focuses on her as she narrates her story alongside that of the nation such as she explores her own growth, she explores that of the nation too. The autobiography is important because it reflects the historical period in which the writer lives or writes. Therefore, through the autobiographical voice, Maathai's personal story becomes part of national history. (98) Other conventions that Maathai uses include inclusion of history in narrating events and adopting a retrospective stance (103). On this aspect of looking back, Muchiri says the autobiographical voice normally narrates events in the past tense because the autobiography is a product of writer's recollection of their past. Muchiri, suggests that Maathai, uses the autobiographical voice is used to expose the vanity of the leaders (101) a deliberate narrative process which allows her to look back and take stock of the hurdles she has had to overcome to become who she is today (102) Thus the inclusion of the history of her people inn autobiographical writing is an enactment of an oral tradition.

One of the issues of autobiographical conventions is where one should begin when telling their life story. Maathai in *Unbowed* starts her autobiography with the oral literature of her people. The Kikuyu myth of origin. The significance of her inclusion of this story in which it is said that God created Gikuyu and Mumbi, the founders of the community. They gave birth to ten daughters, but had no sons. Later, when time came for them to get married, Gikuyu prayed to God to send him sons-in-law. It is worth noting that after they married they gave rise to ten clans to which all the members of the Gikuyu community belong, and each is named after the women. In setting up this myth Maathai tries to position the place of women and perceptions about it within cultural knowledge she says: "The daughters made the clans matrilineal, but many privileges, such as inheritance and ownership of land, livestock, and perennial crops, were gradually

transferred to men. It is not explained how women lost their rights and privileges" (5) Here, Maathai uses digressions and authorial intrusions to show how originally the women controlled the resources. Maathai in the myth includes a daughter number ten unlike other versions of the story which have nine daughters. This daughter was not married. Maathai seems to include her in this myth so as to deemphasize the narrative that defined how people interacted with her in the political and social space. Maathai's inclusion of this version shows that one should not be discriminated against by virtue of not being married. It is this kind of rereading of African orature integrated into texts that Evan Mwangi (2009) highlights when he points to the fact that some of these writings is used to enhance male dominance. Mwangi shows that in their various collections of oral literature Chesaina, Kabira, Mugo, and Tamale demonstrate that indigenous folklore can be, and usually is, misogynistic (112) and demonstrates that there are contemporary writers who have exploited the dynamic nature of oral literature and reworked folk materials to present the politics of gender. Naming is also another aspect of oral tradition that Maathai integrates into her memoir. For instance, she explains the meaning of her name Wangari, actually means 'Leopard' in Gikuyu. She employs the indigenous knowledge and oral traditions of her Gikuyu community in her memoir to illustrate how certain values were passed down from generation to generation. Although she never met her paternal grandmother, after whom she was named, there is a deliberate attempt in the narrative to compare the two. "My mother always told me that I looked and behaved like my paternal grandmother, Wangari, after whom I am named. She was known to be industrious and very organized" (49)

The art of storytelling around a fire as the children waited for dinner often cooked over an open fire and three stones was a defining element of many African societies. Stories were a way to keep children entertained and awake. The stories served to entertain, educate, and encourage creativity in children. It was an effective form of informal education. According to Maathai (2007), the Gikuyu had a form of writing transmitted through the gikandi made from a gourd which was filled with stones and seeds, to make music when shaken. This gikandi becomes a symbol of the tradition. This music relayed teachings through riddles, proverbs, and wisdom. Further, its outer surface was inscribed with writings that conveyed information. An exploration of their oral histories regarding the Mau Mau and land, would add new insights and understanding of Kenya's conservation and political landscapes. Storytelling plays a big role on Maathai as an individual and is also portrayed as helping to raise communities' consciousness in the Kikuyu culture. Maathai asserts that it is these experiences of childhood that molded her "where you cultivated the soil and the imagination in equal measure." (52) The art of storytelling around the fire as an essential dimension of life in the countryside (49) helps create the rural setting. Maathai says that many evenings at the end of a day in the fields children would gather and listen to stories their mothers would tell as they waited for the meal to cook

over an open fire and three stones. She takes this opportunity to tell about *irimu* a grotesque character in one of the stories told to children as part of tradition. I an autobiographical writing this inclusion distances the narrator by drawing focus to the collective memory and activity in ways that contravene Lejeune's autobiographical pact, whose emphasis is on the individual.

One particular story that Maathai identifies with is the story of "Konyeki and his Father". (appendix) In this story, four women are held captive by an *irimu*, a dragon. Three manage to escape, but one who is love-struck remains and marries the dragon. She later gives birth to a son who is also a dragon. Although the story has elements of the universal struggle between good and evil, Maathai points out that she identifies with the women, especially those who were clever enough to escape. As such, there are two categories of women – those who stand up to oppose oppression and those who remain subservient. The story, she says, "reflects character traits that I easily identify with and encounter in other people. There is the women's naïveté – or is it deliberate refusal to face the obvious...But once you make a decision, you must be prepared to live with the consequences" (51). Those who decided to leave were wise enough not to confront the dragon's power directly because they would have been eliminated. This story has several layers of meanings. For instance, it reminds one of the significant role women have played in the struggle for liberation. This is because of the oral narratives power to transform himself into a tree, a giant guard, or a plant (50) applied this irimu could at a personal level represent the husband and in a wider context the government and ruling class that was now degrading the environment.

Maathai, the narrator, positions herself as child influenced by these stories which she believes impressed her mind that whenever she passed the waterfall she imagined that an irimu would leap at me through the wall of water (50). So from an early age Maathai understands the role that stories play as they reflect the environment and the values of her people and sees stories as preparing her for a life in her community which in contrast to European stories like "Cinderella," Little Red Riding Hood" Sleeping " beauty" which had a completely different dimension. (51) And therefore offered no meaning. Here we agree with Eileen Julien (1992), who sees orality as a mode of speech, suggests its importance lies in the fact that "voice has been and continues to be the more available medium of expression."(24) Maathai adopts a voice that privileges orality.

Maathai write about how a section in Uhuru Park came to be known as the freedom corner. The corner enacted orality over the three days many people who had been victims of torture came to freedom corner to tell their stories "what you do not know, " they said pointing to Nyayo house is that underneath that house are torture chambers. Men have been maimed there some have died after what they have gone through. It also gave them courage to speak. "Let me tell you a story" "I have never spoken this before. I have been out of prison now for ten years, and this is the first time I have told anyone that I was tortured" some related that they had been abused and beaten to

the point where they would never be able to father children." (219) This oral performance of victims of oppressive regime according to Maathai, helps liberate them. However, it defaces the self from the autobiographical narration.

Maathai in a nostalgic retrospective stance inscribes the use of traditional values which seemed to be lacking in the handling of the freedom corner protestors at Uhuru Park. The narrator warns that those who do not respect them may face curses. Everywoman old enough to be your mother is considered like your own mother and expects to be treated with considerable respect.as hey bared their breasts. What the mothers were saying to the policemen in their anger and frustration as they were being beaten was "by showing you my nakedness, I curse you as I would my son the way you are abusing me. (221) This is a instance where Maathai's narrative strategy includes selection of an incident where oral tradition intertwines with modernity and the female body is used as a form of protest. Indeed, the story of the freedom corner becomes symbolic of the women's struggle. The title *Unbowed* is derived from this incident.

One cannot talk about orality without highlighting the presence of Western influence that provides the contrast. Maathai contrasts the kind of stories she heard a home which reflected her environment and the values of her people and which prepared her for a life in her community. She writes: "I had read "Cinderella," "Little Red Riding Hood" "Sleeping Beauty"– stories that Westerners told their children for their moral development but which did not mean as much to me as the stories I was told around the fire." (50) Here, Maathai highlights the contrast of African orality to the western. Maathai here attempts to show how despite western education she relates to a more African setting. It is clear that Maathai, would like to be associated with oral tradition despite being a highly assimilated and westernized woman. Maathai's allocates space in her text to describe Kikuyu traditions and customs, and she speaks favorably about polygamy, especially the fact that her father was polygamous. This is the same say that Kipkorir does it by describing the culture of his people but he offers a different perspective from that of Maathai, as his father was a Christian convert who remained single when his mother took off and took her back in later life. In both texts the writers express their nostalgia for the past and regret at the gradual loss of local cultures. What this does to autobiographical writing is to privilege the oral over the written. The culture and practices of the people become written when previously they were passed from one person to another and one generation to another and imprinted in the people's consciousness now they were written in a genre that privileges the collective rather than the individual. What is lost but what happens.

Conclusion

We can conclude therefore, that the inclusion of orature in the autobiographical writing contravenes conventions of autobiography such as chronology, retrospect and individuality. Although both Kipkorir and Maathai use orature in their autobiographical writing, it is evident that it is premised on the grounds of sharing their experiences, their

history and ideology. However, this use the two privileged the society over the individual whose story is dimmed.

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