

CHAPTER SIX

Popular Culture and Politics: *Whispers* and the ‘dramaturgy of power’ in Kenya

This chapter discusses *Whispers* as a ‘political site’, and specifically how the column intervened in the political process in Kenya. The chapter looks at how the column opened for Mutahi a space within which to discuss a number of political issues hitherto forbidden in the public sphere. The intention however is to broadly look at the relationship between popular culture and politics. I begin with a general reflection on the relationship between popular culture and politics, discussing the legitimacy or otherwise of popular culture as a site of political resistance. I then briefly map out some of the historical developments in Kenya in the 1990s focusing especially on the ‘politics’ of political pluralism and how Mutahi uses this era to discuss various political issues in Kenya. The latter part of this discussion focuses on how Mutahi mediates the ‘ethnic’, using it to generate discussions on ethnicity in the country. My discussion also provides some insights into the province of the ‘popular’ in Kenya.

As an entry point to this discussion, I want to once again refer to Street’s (1997) thesis, which I noted in my introduction, about the relationship between politics and popular culture and particularly his argument that this relationship is not just about popular culture ‘reflecting’ or ‘causing’ political thoughts. Street contends that popular culture does not make people think and act in particular ways. Yet, this is not to deny popular culture political agency. Street merely cautions that posing the debate in a manner that “looks for cause and effect” may not be particularly useful. He argues that popular culture “neither manipulates nor mirrors us... [w]e are not compelled to imitate it, any more than it has to imitate us. Instead, we live through and with it” (4).

A number of scholars of popular culture typically characterize the relationship between politics and popular culture in terms of “cause and effect”. Mbembe’s ambivalence towards certain forms of popular culture such as the use of laughter as a means of ridiculing power being necessarily fatalistic is a case in point. This chapter does not examine what *Whispers* “caused”. Instead, I want to try and tease out how the political, more appropriately, how the ‘dramaturgy of power’ is enacted in the column. I argue that the public face of power in Kenya is ‘a performance’, ‘a drama’ hence my use of the term the ‘dramaturgy of power’. My idea of this ‘performance’ is perhaps best captured by Mbembe’s (1992) description of the postcolony as a ‘*simulacrum*’, which, as I noted in my Introduction, Mbembe defines as a regime of “unreality” (8). Within this performance, I am particularly interested in how *Whispers*, to paraphrase Street (1997), sheds its pleasures and becomes—through the uses to which it is put and through judgments made of it—a form of political practice (12). I want to examine how certain cultural forms can encode certain forms of political social consciousness. Scott (1990) reminds us that popular culture makes public “hidden transcripts” in which are written, “the anger and reciprocal aggression denied by the presence of domination” (19). Scott notes that the “hidden transcripts” can be found in rumour, gossip, folktales, songs, rituals, codes, and euphemism—a good part of the folk culture of subordinate groups (ibid.). According to Street (1997), such a culture “becomes part of a political struggle to establish a particular view of the world, one which challenges the conventions of the dominant common sense” (12). But it is to be noted that the “hidden transcripts” are not just statements of suppressed emotions; they are a kind of action. Indeed, as Scott reminds us, it is important to think of the ‘hidden transcripts’ as a “condition of practical resistance rather than a substitute for it” (191). Similarly, through popular fiction, one is also able to see how “public transcripts” are also used by subject populations to question and critique power.

This chapter however concedes that not all popular culture can be treated as a form of political resistance. This is an argument I made in my introduction citing among others Street (1997) and McGuigan (1992). Although I am interested in oppositional practices within popular fiction, I am also aware of this site as necessarily a multiplex of contradictory voices, at once oppositional at another phoney and complicit in the domination of those whose voices it apparently represents.

In Chapter One, I argued that in the late 1980s *Whispers* gravitated towards the political evolving as it were into a column with a reputation for discussing the subversive. *Whispers'* predilection towards the political cannot be overstated. As stated earlier, this 'political' bent can be explained on a number of factors among them the fact that the period within which Mutahi was writing was highly politicised. The late 1980s through the 1990s witnessed the re-introduction of political pluralism in Kenya. This ensured the shattering of what Haugerud (1995) has described as "previously held silences" as a "lively opposition culture stormed the public domain" (15). There was an increased visibility of the political, and particularly the diffusion into the country's public culture of oppositional political discourses a number of which can be associated with pluralist societies. These discourses increasingly began to frame popular debates. Thus for instance, there was a notable integration of local and international discourses on political and social freedom which were then used to legitimate calls for reform. The fall of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War, and the collapse of Communist governments in Eastern Europe had a massive political influence in Africa. These changes in the East helped legitimate calls for reform in Africa. Their visibility in the media ensured politics became part of the everyday in Kenya, inescapably becoming the stuff of Kenyan popular fiction. A number of 'cultural workers' became involved in the political reform agenda then sweeping across Africa. As I noted in my introductory chapters, Wahome

Mutahi was one such 'worker'. An avowed political activist, his artistic works sometimes unapologetically reflected his political interests. In an interview with Inter Press Services (IPS) after the banning of his play *Ngoma cia Aka* (The Whirlwind), Mutahi explicitly stated the political context within which he writes, a position which no doubt authorises a (particular) political reading of the column.

I sincerely feel, as an author, I have a social and political role to play. My satires have a political agenda and what I have done has had an effect on the minds of the people (IPS Feature, April 13, 2002).

One notes Mutahi's explicit intentions to intervene in the discussion of Kenya's political polity. However, the writer's claim about his work having had an effect in the minds of his people betrays the populist streak I have just noted above. What *Whispers* perhaps confirms is how cultural production intensifies at moments of political turmoil and the fact that conditions of turmoil invariably engender the production of the popular (Smith, 1992).

It is difficult, perhaps even impractical to want to give a complete inventory of what *Whispers* discusses at the political level. This is typical of most popular writings in Africa. They often discuss numerous issues, most times (apparently) unrelated. But Fabian argues that these deceptively unrelated, sometimes even contradictory discussions can be a form of resistance. Fabian points out that incoherence is an old cultural tactic that ensures the producer is not caught.¹ My discussion mainly focuses on Kenya's transitional politics in the 1990s, a period whose representation in *Whispers* vividly captures what I have called the 'public face' of power in Kenya.

¹ This was at an informal seminar at the University of the Witwatersrand, March, 2004

The year 1992 is especially apical in the reading of Kenya's transitional politics in the early 1990s. It is in 1992 that Kenya held its first multi-party elections following the re-introduction of political pluralism. This pluralism led to some nominal freedom for dissent. *Whispers* captures how an oppositional cultural and political aesthetic flourished even amid the various constraints on not only the 'expressible' but also the 'thinkable'. Among the most salient issues that emerge are instances that reveal the tyranny of the state, political betrayal, the political culture of accumulation, tribalism... It is a catalogue of all that has gone wrong with post-independence Kenya. As one of the templates for discussing Kenya as a failed political state, Mutahi focuses on the 'politics' of pluralism. The following sample articles will shed some light on this: "SOS, Madd defect: the greener the grass the better" (*Sunday Standard*, January 5, 1992), "SoS multi-party mouth pays off" (undated), "Trouble over Kislopes", "Scared mouth goes on strike" (*Sunday Standard*, March 29, 1992), "Ethnic clashes in Whis' neighbourhood" (*Sunday Standard*, April 26, 1992), "SOS thinking of defecting from the shilling economy" (*Sunday Standard*, June 28, 1992), "Whispers offers hire services", (*Sunday Standard*, August 2, 1992), "Total man's house divided: Agip House raring to go to war" (*Sunday Standard*, September 13, 1992) "Ambushed by mean warriors" (*Sunday Standard*, October 4, 1992), "Operation Whispers Out", (*Sunday Standard*, November 15, 1992) "Secret weapon exposed" (*Sunday Standard*, November 22, 1992), "The *msheshimiwa* culture and eating" (*Sunday Standard*, December 6, 1992), "Meet the rigging master: when it's hard to play fair game" (*Sunday Standard*, December 20, 1992) (Emphasis mine). These titles quite literally hint at discourses revolving around political pluralism in Kenya in the 1990s. They paint images of violence, of betrayal, corruption and poverty in Kenya. In "SoS, Madd defect: the greener the grass the better", Mutahi narrates as well as comments on political defections and the formation of political alliances which were particularly in vogue in the country in the early 1990s. The defections and political alliances are narrated as demonstrative of political betrayal of the

masses by the country's leaders. The alliances are narrated as mutual dealings of the political class. Between 1992-1995, *Whispers* especially examines the centrality of class in Kenya's transitional politics as it became evident that class-based political dealings had replaced genuine political reform. This period witnessed numerous discussions on the legitimacy of political coalitions in the country, often pejoratively called the 'politics of co-operation', a term coined following the decision by two political parties, the ruling party Kanu and the National Development Party (NDP) to 'co-operate'. The column narrates this 'co-operation' as an alliance of convenience among the elite. Such coalitions in Kenya have been what Throup (1997) calls "ephemeral accommodations" often short-lived because they lack a firm ideological base (37). Mutahi interprets the coalitions as a political strategy by the ruling political class to safeguard the status quo. Other stories that enact this problem include: "Thatcher's unity pact flops: *co-operation* with Son of the Soil comes unstuck" (*Sunday Nation*, October 24, 1993), "Tricky task of retrieving "*defecting*" husbands (*Sunday Nation*, August 29, 1993), "Trouble for outdated elder. SOS finds the going tough as *sheng'* rocks delicate *negotiations*" (*Sunday Nation*, October 30, 1994), "Thatcher, SOS, breaks links: *co-operation* resumes as rhino horn brings the promise of a bright future to the family" (undated). (Emphasis mine). The emphasised words *co-operation*, *defecting*, *negotiations* were popularly used by the mainstream press hence are words that were familiar with readers. When used in the column, they come loaded with particular histories and quite often with negative political connotations. Mutahi exposes these terms as euphemisms used to hide more specific class interests. Scott (1990) reminds us that such euphemisms on the "public transcript" mask the many nasty facts of domination, giving it a harmless or sanitised face (53). In the stories, Mutahi revises and recasts these euphemisms/words within the family space to critique the political class. Alliances are thus struck between man and wife at the expense of their children or between daughter and mother at the expense of the father. The stories are

narrated as normal domestic feuds but they mirror betrayal at the national level. Being able to solidly muster an ethnic constituency (the Luo), Raila Odinga then leader of the NDP was an important player in the schemes by Kanu to maintain its grip on power. Similarly, for the NDP, “co-operation” with Kanu would provide it access to power and state resources. Mutahi’s emphasises a political reality in postcolonial Kenya. He echoes Lonsdale’s (1981) argument that politicians see the state itself as a resource and that “ready access to state institutions is literally what makes classes dominant” (162). Sklar (1979) has equally argued that “shrewd rulers will seek to ally the class interests of potential ethnic mobilizers to their own by granting them access to the state, thus decapitating and demobilizing potential ethnic trouble spots” (cited in Schatzberg, 1988: 23). Markakis (1974) also points out that ethnicity can very ably be used to bulwark class and factional privilege rather than comprehensive ethnic goals (cited in Schatzberg, 1988: 23). The column thus exposes these political alliances for what they are; acts of political betrayal of the masses.

In the story of the “Rigging master: When its hard to play fair game”, Mutahi once again criticises the political polity through a deceptively simplistic story. The story enacts how the incumbent government maintains its grip on power through fraudulent elections. The story is a recreation of a fable that describes the possibility of Kanu and Moi orchestrating a sham election. In the story, *Whispers* draws on a hilarious youthful experience about the way they rigged football matches in their favour by over-feeding their opponents. Part of the article reads:

They cleared it as fast as locusts eating through a field of wheat and soon they were asking for water... Pretty soon the members of the visiting team would have given the meals for the next two days just to get a drop of water (*Standard on Sunday*, December 20, 1992).

Through this story, Mutahi enacts the 'politics of consumption' in Kenya. The story is not so much about football games and locusts as it is about voters and opposition politicians giving in to the allure of the belly. The writer dramatises the legacy of primitive consumption in Kenya, echoing Bayart's (1993) arguments about the "politics of the belly", that in fact, "contrary to the popular image of the innocent masses, corruption and predatoriness are not found exclusively among the powerful. Rather, they are modes of social and political behaviour shared by a plurality of actors on more or less a great scale" (238). But the story also demonstrates the 'patron-client' political relationships in Kenya, where the centre monopolises the largesse of the state. This in turn perpetuates a culture of political patronage. The "*Mheshimiwa* culture and eating" which is not merely a title but a summation of a political practice in Kenya, further emphasises this point. It hints at the predatory tendencies of the Kenyan politician, and how the state, and elective politics open up the doors to 'eating'. But it is also a reminder of how loyalty is commoditised, advertised and bought in what has become the political marketplace. In one of the columns, the writer enacts in his hilarious style this culture of 'eating', but also how political patronage operates in the country.

I have discovered that indeed they want to finish me totally using both open and secret weapons and if I don't do something, my toughness in the house will be no more by the time that a child will be born in Bethlehem, that is this Christmas. I don't know how I will survive when even my aunt Kezia has joined forces with those who want Son of the Soil out. The same lady who has been benefiting from my wallet in the form of sugar, tealeaves and Kimbo gifts whenever I go home has joined Operation Whis Out (OWO) (*Sunday Standard*, November 15, 1992).

He continues:

[w]hat worries me are the domestic forces since they are the ones spreading the propaganda about me including that I have ruined the domestic economy by not just looting the kitchen budget but by also having foreign accounts in Rhoda's place (ibid.).

Mapped against the political process in the 1990s, the author is satirically indicting the polity for ruining the economy by looting the country's coffers and transferring money to offshore accounts. In the article, this looting of the country is figuratively narrated as Whispers looting the "kitchen budget". The Moi government was literally scavenging on its own entrails. This is rock-bottom corruption. The writer also intrudes in the article, reminding his readers of the fact that members of the Moi government have foreign accounts where they siphon away money that belongs to the state. These are issues that were often discussed only in hushed tones in Kenya and which could not be reported through the newspapers' conventional genres such as news, news analysis pieces or editorials.

Another important narrative in the example is how the dominant create clients through 'gifts' and promises and how subject populations equally feed this culture of patronage. This was a popular political practice in Kenya. The examples noted earlier also show how the state is also capable of resorting to violence as one of its instrumentalities of survival or as a way of imposing what Odhiambo (1997) calls the 'ideology of order'. The articles hinting at ethnic clashes are a commentary on the regime's role in encouraging ethnic clashes in Kenya in the early 1990s to validate its claim about the consequences of multi-party democracy.

Whispers also takes stock of the various political (pseudo)ideologies, myths and political metaphors that are constantly employed in the 'dramaturgy of power' in Kenya, using these to discuss questions on power. Scott (1990) has noted that "rulers who aspire to hegemony in the Gramscian sense of that term must make an ideological case that they rule, to some degree, on behalf of their subjects" (18). He explains that although this claim in turn, "is always tendentious", it is "seldom completely without resonance among subordinates" (ibid.). Providing a similar argument are Michael Schatzberg (1988) and Mamadou Diouf (1996) who note that in 'Middle Africa', state-sanctioned ideological myths and imagery are crucial in the performance of power. These myths and imagery help in the "invention of traditions" and in legitimising domination. Diouf (1996) reminds us that political hegemony in Africa is characterized by various colonial and post-colonial fictions and fables. These entail a range of state-sanctioned and state invented ideological myths, motifs, histories, memories and imagery but which find resonance within subject populations. Through various 'modalities of management', the state "manipulates and continuously reinvents this range of traditions..." (cited in Young, 2003: 141). In Kenya, especially in the first and second republics, state ideologies, myths, histories, memories, motifs and imagery were continuously (re)invented and manipulated as important instruments in the performance of power. Although often variously consumed, they were employed by various actors both within and outside the state to define social and political relationships. Among the most persistent in this range of constructions was the (il)legitimacy of paternal systems of authority, drawn directly from the family and the various 'ideologies of development' such as Kenyatta's '*Harambee* motto' and Moi's famous political slogan of 'Peace, Love and Unity'.

The existence of the family often implies the existence of a father – at the top and children at the bottom – although this assumption has become increasingly

tendentious with the emergence of different 'model families'. Being at the top, the father is also associated with authority and wisdom. The paternal construction of authority was especially a common feature during the Kenyatta and the Moi presidencies in Kenya, a common theme in *Whispers*. It is an imagery that can be traced to several 'pasts'; pre-colonial, colonial and early post-colonial periods. The colonial period was especially significant in the diffusion of this imagery. As noted earlier, the Church played a particularly important role in this regard, being the colonial state's premier ideological apparatus having had almost absolute control of the school system (Schatzberg, 1988). One task of the Church was to inculcate respect for authority. The Native was taught he was not an equal even when he became a convert. He was a little more than an overgrown child. Ali Mazrui (1975) also offers other mitigating factors.

[t]he ritualistic language of Christianity in terms of "children of God," and the whole symbolism of fatherhood in the organizational structure of the Catholic Church all the way from the concept of the 'Pope' to the rank of 'Father' among some priests took an additional significance in African conditions. The metaphor of fatherhood within the Catholic hierarchy reinforced filial tendencies among African converts. Again the repercussions went beyond the particular members of that denomination, and reinforced the dependency complex in the society as a whole (80).

At independence, Jomo Kenyatta, like Mobutu Ssesse Seko in Zaire emphasized the validity of this metaphor of a united family with the father as head. Kenyatta was referred to as *Baba wa Taifa* (Father of the Nation).² But it is Moi's case that is especially informative in my reading. Moi, it must be noted, to paraphrase Bekhisizwe Peterson (1994), was 'an ogre of a theme' in *Whispers*, forever present, expansive and melodramatic. The political issues mainly revolved though not

² For a detailed reading of this metaphor, see Schatzberg, 1988.

exclusively around him. Like Kenyatta, Moi too became *Baba wa Taifa* and when discussed in *Whispers*, is parodied as such. As 'Father of the Nation', Moi had to assume the title *Mzee*, a title which is as honorary as it is functional. In Kiswahili, *Mzee* literally means "the old wise man" and is used to show respect to old men. But this title is also significant in structuring relationships in Kenya. Moi, a fairly youthful politician in 1978 when he came to power following Kenyatta's death soon became *Mzee*, in effect fabricating and legitimizing his "wisdom" despite his youthful age. As *Baba wa Taifa*, *Mzee* Moi was able to rule over 'his children'. As Aguilar (1998) would say, possible alternatives to leadership were swept aside through the invocation of (African) traditions that uphold rules of deference and submission between social and generational juniors and seniors. But Moi went further than just being *Baba wa Taifa*. When his party Kanu adopted the same familial metaphors and became *Baba na Mama* (Father and Mother), Moi assumed the same titles. He was the patriarch and matriarch all in one. He became the virtual provider. It was to be the apogee of his political domination and repression. Moi, like a number of other African leaders such as Mobutu Sese Seko, Kamuzu Banda and Ahamadou Ahidjo among others, having failed his subjects had to qualify his domination. Crucially, he added to his two titles a more powerful one, almost as though he was now above the political. He became *Mtukufu* (His Eminence) Rais *Mzee* Daniel Arap Moi. His stature was now to be seen as messianic. He was Moi the messiah, Moi the president of the republic and of course Moi the elder. As messiah, Moi was ageless. The idiom of age was pushed to vulgar extremes to legitimate domination. Underlying this appropriation certainly was the "accepted" relationship between age and gerontocracy in Kenya. Age and gerontocracy have always been inter-related in much of Africa. To create a perception of a *Mzee* despite one's biological age confers certain rights to an individual, if at the same time it also implies certain obligations. *Mzee* is therefore inherently an important cultural and social category but one manipulated by the state to legitimate

domination. Culturally and socially, it allows for several privileges and rights to the holder. Being *Mzee* confers respect from others, but perhaps even more importantly it also confers supposed wisdom and knowledge. It is in this sense that political leaders manipulate this title and its 'appurtenances'. The image of *Mzee* therefore naturally generates a hierarchy and legitimizes domination, which is not only politically sanctioned but also culturally legitimate. Those who are not *Wazee* especially in the political arena are children in the presence of a *Mzee*. Even when biologically older they are obliged to do as they are told. The post-colonial leadership in much of Africa especially at independence had (re)invented the myth of a gerontocratic leadership as the legitimate leadership.

The transference and affirmation of the legitimacy of gerontocratic leadership also includes the adoption of other 'accessories of power'. Kenyatta and Moi like other *Wazee* also physically 'performed their titles', Kenyatta with the flywhisk and Moi with the *rungu* (club). In Kenya, leadership is in most part a performance. A leader has to invest in various accessories of power. The symbols contribute in no small measure to the wide and sometimes wild myths about their bearers' legitimacy as leaders, drawing in most cases on what the majority of the subjects know from traditional or folk knowledge of leaders and leadership, while at the same time confusing the subjects by defying any attempts at presenting a widely accepted set of interpretations. For instance, just how many myths have been weaved around the *rungu* may never be known, yet predictably most interpretations touched on the near magical powers of its owner.

Another interesting addition to Moi's stock of political imagery appropriated in *Whispers* and equally significant in our reading of the 'dramaturgy of power' in Kenya is the symbol *Jogoo* (cock). *Jogoo* was the party symbol of the ruling party Kanu, although it was constantly used to refer to Moi. Just as the rooster crows

and lords over other chicken, so was Moi supposed to lord over the country. Once again, through this symbol, Moi portrayed himself as the benevolent father who knew how and when to crow, and what was best for his “children”. In a general sense, the state adopted the paternal imagery in a manner that seems to suggest that invariably; the head is male, masculine—and old and therefore revered. It would appear then that in Kenya, political power was constructed to wear a male face, was paternal and invariably elderly. Through these myths, the political leadership attempted to saturate the public space with their presence and to legitimate their domination in the form of a fetish, as Mbembe (1992a) would have it.

Just how these constructions are used from below is an important aspect of this chapter and a significant theme in *Whispers*. From the way these constructions are used in *Whispers*, I want to disagree with Schatzberg (1998) that those outside the state “unthinkingly accept the metaphors and the image they conjure up as a normal code of communication... ” (23). I agree with Schatzberg to the extent that these images are accepted as a “part of an easily grasped template”, but question the notion that they are necessarily “unthinkingly accepted”. Below are a few examples of how Mutahi appropriates these titles in his fiction in a manner that questions and critiques authority. In an evocative article titled “The antics of the next “Big man”, Mutahi reproduces the state’s symbols but demonstrates how they are ironised by subject populations. Narrating the “performance” that is orchestrated whenever the president arrives at public functions, the narrator takes the place of the president.

I have called one Emoite Opotti back from retirement and he is telling the world how wise I am. He is saying: *Mtukufu Rais Papa Whis, the very muthoniwa* is scheduled to arrive any time now. *Hapa kuna vifijo na nderemo* [Trans: His Eminence President Father Whis... Here there is great

applause] awaiting the arrival of His Excellency Papa Whis. *As usual, atakuwa amevalia ile suti yake ya rangi ya udhurungi na ua nyekundu* [Trans: As usual he will be dressed in his Argyria (blueish-black) coloured suit with red flowers]. His Excellency will be received with thunderous applause by the thousands and thousands of Kenyans who are gathered here. Our beloved president is addressing his first rally after his official visit to the People's Republic of Kyrgystan" (*Sunday Nation*, February 17, 2002).

While the excerpt above may read as fiction, interestingly, apart from the name Whis, the rest of the "performance" is very much a part of the language of Moi's presidential press service. In fact the "ritual" has been reproduced almost verbatim. Yet it becomes obvious that the very metaphors of the state here are being used to ironise power. In a more obvious vein, part of the article also reads.

Opotti is saying, *Naona msafara wa Mtukufu Rais Papa Whisi* approaching [Trans: I can see his Eminence President Father Whis' convoy approaching]. Yes, the beloved father of the nation, the Taliban of Talibans, is about to arrive. Parararaparaa! Paraparaa! *Mtukufu Papa Whisi ndiye huyo. Ndiye...*...[Trans: there comes the president... applause!]

Once again the ritualistic language of the public "performance" is appropriated. But note the curious allusion to the Taliban. It adds to the hilarity of the description yet at the same time this could be a very deliberate attempt to compare this regime to the murderous Taliban regime. What is clear is that although a range of revised traditions are appropriated and reproduced by the subject population, it is not always the case that they are accepted as they are. The way in which the said traditions are appropriated and reproduced by subject

populations is such that they are unmasked and portrayed as merely camouflaging repression. Below is another revealing example.

I think you have an idea that there is some sort of multi-party democracy in my house, which came not because I did not want to remain the only *jogoo* in my house but since there was too much pressure on me to introduce it. The democracy in my house came about because the internal forces led by my Thatcher demanded it. She was joined in the effort by all the people: Whispers Jr, the same fellow who was swearing before that he is *dadi damu*³ and that his loyalty to me was total and direct. The Investment alias Pajero did not require much to join Thatcher in demanding for democracy in the house. The external forces were led by members of the “Sect of many waters” of which Thatcher is a life member. They are the same people who don’t believe in secret weapons. Instead they choose a loud weapon called drums which they insist on beating when my head is feeling like a war drum itself on account of having too many at the right temperatures at Rhoda’s place (*Sunday Standard*, November 15, 1992).

The political relevance of the above passage is palpable. The excerpt is a reading on the introduction of multi-party politics in Kenya and generally counters a major official narrative. The narrator argues that Moi was coerced into accepting political pluralism in Kenya. He observes that Moi capitulated to national and international pressure, reconstructed in the article as “internal and external forces” and should therefore not present himself as the benevolent father, or *jogoo*. Narrated as a family feud, the national or internal forces are represented by Thatcher, The Investment and Whispers Jr who have apparently ganged up against Whispers. They are said to be working in cahoots with “external forces” notably “members of the sect of many waters” to be read in the figurative sense

³ This literally means ‘Father forever’, a common rhetorical way of expressing ‘loyalty’ in Kenya.

as representing the Church as well as the international community. By pointing out that political pluralism was forced onto a recalcitrant government, the narrator implicitly dismisses attempts to legitimise notions of pious benevolence of the father. More importantly though, note the use of the symbol *jogoo*. That it is used disparagingly is not in question. It seems to be associated with autocracy. Whispers (*jogoo*) monopolises the “crowing” in his house. “...I did not want to remain the only *jogoo* in my house but since there was too much pressure on me to introduce it...”. Note also that in this particular case, the *jogoo* actually failed its people by failing to crow. In other words, the paternal logic is actually seen to have failed—the father failed to provide. What is perceptible is the element of reciprocity in this relationship. You are only accepted as a father if you are also able to provide for your children. One may thus want to dispute Mbembe’s (1992a) suggestion about the ‘mutual zombification’ of both the dominant and those whom they apparently dominate robbing each other of their vitality leaving them both impotent (*impouvoir*) (4). Among the conclusions one is able to draw here is that there is, for instance, a ‘moral matrix’, as Schatzberg (2002) puts it, to being a father. A father must provide for his children⁴ otherwise he becomes an emasculated father, a *Kamzee* (as popularly used in *Whispers*). In other words, even when subject populations buy into the state’s myths, they have particular expectations which must be fulfilled. You are only accepted as father if you partake in a reciprocal and dialogic relationship. The rejection of Whispers particularly by an “ally”, can similarly signal a rejection of the state’s desire to weave unitary narratives regarding their subjecthood. Whispers Jr’s attacks on the state’s ‘modalities of management’ marks, to use Diouf’s (1996) phrase “a radical refutation of the modes of political framing” (145) of the youth as social and political marginals. We must also note that the youth here connote not only

⁴ I want to argue however that this matrix is only valid up to a point for in fact even in the ‘invented’ sense, the matrix itself is inverted when children grow and have to provide for their fathers.

its literal reference but also those assigned this age and place by the state as marginals.

In another revealing example, Mutahi “gives” former president Moi’s appointed heir Uhuru Kenyatta, a man in his mid-forties these very titles of the state. In “My role in the court of Jomo’s son”, Mutahi tells of how “one Joseph Kamotho” (one of Moi’s most loyal political lackeys at the time), famously known in the column as “Kathuku” (Kikuyu for parrot) will be addressing Uhuru as President. The ethnic accent, which is unmistakably Kamotho’s confirms the subject of the parody:

Uhuru Bamba, hata wakati ulikuwa mtoto, baba. Wakati nilijuwa natembelea bamba yako bamba, nilinjua Mungu alikuwa amekuamua bamba, ukuzwe mtukufu bamba (Sunday Nation, August 11, 2002).

Translation:

Uhuru father, even when you were a child, father. When I visited your father, father, I knew God had decided father, that you be the president, father.

The excerpt demonstrates how the very metaphors of the state are used to disparage the hypocrisy even absurdity of their appropriation by the state. Besides, as several other examples reveal, we see how these invented traditions are reproduced by subject populations, but then to “penetrate the state’s ideological and symbolic façade to see where these images originate, how the powerful manipulate them, and most importantly, whose interests they serve”.⁵ As Mbembe (1992a) explains, “people whose identities have been partly confiscated have been able, precisely because there was this pretence, to glue

⁵ Phrase taken from Schatzberg (1988: 73)

back together the bits and pieces of their fragmented identities. By taking over the signs and language of officialdom, people have been able to remythologise their own conceptual universe while in the process turning the *commandement* into a sort of zombie" (10).

Also satirised in much of the column is Moi's political slogan of 'Peace, Love and Unity'. Professed by the polity to legitimate its rule, Mutahi enacts how this slogan is given new meaning outside the official script. The polity's notions of peace, love and unity are constantly quoted amid instances of violence and discord in the country. The way in which this imagery is appropriated in the column is such that it loses its official meanings as it is unmasked and portrayed as merely putting a benign face on a decaying political system.

Mbembe has nonetheless argued that the process of "remythologising" does not in any way "increase people's subordination or their levels of resistance; it simply produces a situation of disempowerment (*impouvoir*) for both the ruled and the rulers. The process is fundamentally magical: although it may demystify the *commandement* or even erode its legitimacy, it does not do violence to the *commandement's* base. At best, it creates pockets of indiscipline on which the *commandement* may stub its toe, though otherwise it glides unperturbed over them" (10). That may be true, but as I noted earlier, our concern is whether there is a sense of critical consciousness perceptible in these relationships. Remythologising the state's language may or may not perturb the *commandement* but it is a critique nonetheless. One would also want to refer to Mbembe's (1992a) argument about the masses "joining in the madness and clothing themselves in cheap imitations of power so as it reproduce its epistemology and the power in its own violent quest for grandeur making vulgarity and wrongdoing its main mode of existence" (10). It is a spectacle quite evident in the examples above. But I want to argue that as the examples demonstrate, by engaging in the

“presidential carnival” the subject population does not necessarily endorse this spectacle. On the contrary, it is a critique of the absurdity of this carnival.

Whispers further becomes a form of political practice in its appropriation of rumour and gossip. Rumour and gossip are some of the “hidden transcripts” extensively utilised in the column. They are as Scott (1990) notes “forms of protest which dare not speak in their own name” (141). In the previous chapters, I noted Scott’s argument that gossip represents a relatively “safe social sanction” (142). Gossip normally has no identifiable author, “but scores of eager retailers who can claim that they are just passing on news”. (ibid.). Gossip, Scott observes, is “a discourse about social rules that have been violated... [w]ithout an accepted normative standard from which degrees of deviation may be estimated, the notion of gossip would make no sense whatever. Gossip in turn reinforces these normative standards by invoking them and by teaching anyone who gossips precisely what kinds of conduct are likely to be mocked or despised” (142-3). In a society where free speech is muzzled either by force or through indirect control of public channels of communication, rumour and gossip are ‘hidden transcripts’ that become ways of disseminating information but also spaces where people process reality. Mutahi also exploits the fact that rumour resists narrative closure. Scott argues that as a rumour travels, “it is altered in a fashion that brings it more closely into line with the hopes, fears and worldview of those who hear it and retell it” (145). Quoting Gordin Allport and Leo Postman, Scott argues that deletions and additions are added to fit the “general gestalt of the messengers” (ibid.). In Kenya, rumour has in the past taken a very specific political role. I also mentioned that Haugerud (1997) and Odhiambo (1987) have discussed how rumour-mongering became one of the informal oppositional institutions in Kenya, which offered the *mwananchi* (citizen) a democratic space to express their frustrations at the regime. As I noted in my introduction, various public spaces of expression were monopolised by the Moi regime. But Odhiambo

also points out that state also found in rumour a tool for governance. Kanu actually turned the rhetoric against 'rumour mongering' into a political campaign tool to discredit its political opponents. They would very conveniently circulate rumours and then act on them. For instance, most "Mwakenya activists" were victims of state rumour. Once labelled an activist, the state would then act on the activist for the 'good of the nation'. In his collection of essays *How to be a Kenyan* (1996), this is how Mutahi describes how rumours spread in Kenya.

Kenya is a land of 'true' rumours and of fertile imagination. It is also a land where despite the arrival of the satellite, the bush telegraph sometimes works more effectively than the mass media... By the time what started as a rumour is published, it will have been refurbished so many times that it will have no resemblance to what has been passed on by the rumour mills (55).

In an interesting example of how Mutahi appropriates rumour in the column, he writes:

Over the last month, Kenyans have become very economical with the truth... They belong to the species of humankind (not mankind) called *Homo Rumapithecus* that peddles merchandise called rumours. One characteristic of *Homo Rumapithecus* is to possess lips that tremble uncontrollably when he finds two or three Kenyans gathered. Of course you can be sure that when two of three Kenyans are gathered, the subject is not prayer. They are most likely talking opposition politics. This is what I heard such a *Homo Rumapithecus* say every morning in December. 'Don't say I told you this, but God is not a fool. Why else do you think he has sent the El Nino towards our direction if not to sweep Daniel from his seat

in State House?’ ...At that point he looks right and then left as if he is looking for Congo and says; ‘That cousin of my aunt’s husband has come with the news that the man from Sacho will head for Congo to seek exile.... (*Sunday Nation*, January 11, 1998).

Note the manner in which political issues are introduced as rumours. The rumours encode certain anxieties but also seek to explain them. The excerpt above reflects on fears over Moi’s plans. Having refused to indicate whether he would step down as president in the event that he lost at the polls, there was widespread anxiety over the country’s future. Circulating rumours included Moi’s possible exile, a take over by the army, war and many other frightening possibilities. Through rumours people attempted to find for themselves the answers to questions that would help them address their fears.

But quite apart from the fact that Wahome Mutahi had explicit intentions that this work is read at least on one level as political, I also want to argue that *Whispers* can be understood as constituting a critical political forum “outside the text”. Street (1997) has argued that state intervention in the production of works of art can turn them into political gestures. Giving the example of Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*, Street argues that the book became political only after the Muslim world declared a *fatwa* against the author. Similarly, in Kenya popular music such as “Muoroto” became political after being banned by the Moi government (Outa, 2002), while in East Germany, Wicke (1992) observes that by imposing control on various forms of expression in the former East Germany, the GDR government politicised these forms of expression such that the musician’s ability to make a difference, for instance, stemmed from the fact that the government gave their music, every gesture and symbol, political significance (cited in Street, 1997: 27). Yet acts of censorship need not be as severe to make a work of art political. The fact that *Whispers* was forced to rely mostly

on satire, parody, jokes and rumour, rather than deny the column political agency, emphasised this agency. The “hidden transcripts” of which rumour, gossip and satire belong are forms of critical political interventions. The reliance on “hidden transcripts” makes possible representation of political interests within a system that ordinarily suppresses those interests. I also want to argue that it was precisely because certain forms of expression were disallowed—the inability to discuss Moi by name, the inability to say the King is naked—that *Whispers* and similar sites of popular expression become sites of political gestures. This argument does suggest that the state partly made *Whispers* political.

Whispers, Ethnicity and Politics in Kenya.

I noted in my introductory chapter that because of the exclusionary tendencies of the state, people retreated into identities that they felt could best represent their aspirations. This in part led to the intensification of ethnic nationalisms. Schatzberg (1988) observes that in situations where people feel excluded from state structures the “excluded groups may come to identify themselves as disadvantaged ethnic minorities and perceive the state arena in ethnic rather than class terms” (23). Mutahi introduces in *Whispers* the patently ‘ethnic’ but more as a way of raising the issue of ethnicity in Kenya. Through this, we get a sense of the tensions between ethnic citizenship and national citizenship in Kenya. I also want to draw attention to Ngunyi’s (1996) observation that popular claims in society have tended to become ethnicised as the process of democratisation matures and that these forms of ethnicity are to be seen “not as pathologies in the usual/typical sense but as bona fide expressions of the desire of social forces to fight the monolithic structures of the state and the exercise of power” (184). Ethnicity thus, Mutahi seems to suggest, can be one possible response to political repression, it can provide “a framework within which

repressed ethnicities can renegotiate their position in the unitary project of the state" (ibid.).

George Outa's (2002) doctoral thesis "Performing Power in an African Postcolony: drama and theatre in modern Kenya", a discussion that partly interrogates vernacular theatre within the context of Kenya's transitional politics in the 1990s asks whether cultural workers such as Mutahi by resorting to using ethnic idioms in its various and expansive forms "succumbed to a new form of ethnic parochialism, which is analogous to the nationalist quest of the 1990s" (106). I want to argue that if the salience of ethnicity in Mutahi's work is located within the context of the political dynamics of the Moi era then the answer to the question Outa asks is negative.

Odhiambo (2004) has described Kenya as an "ethnic state" and that the treatment of political power as an "ethnic resource" became legitimised as a practice of politics and was routinised during the Kenyatta years. Regimes in Kenya have therefore become known as "the Kikuyu government under Kenyatta and successively as the Kalenjin government under Moi and most recently as the 'Mt. Kenya mafia' under Mwai Kibaki" (32). Odhiambo consequently concludes that ethnicity is the "fulcrum around which African politics turns" (41). Mutahi privileges the various "ethnic nations" in *Whispers* but in a manner to demonstrate how various ethnic communities use their ethnic identities to renegotiate their position in the political polity. But there are also other reasons, some literary, others aesthetic but also ideological. As an example I want to draw attention to the use of certain discursive practices particularly the use of cultural idioms drawn from various Kenya's ethnic outgroups in the column to demonstrate how, first, they help hail publics, and here I am referring specifically to the use of particular ethnic stereotypes, second, to show how these practices demonstrate the tensions between ethnic citizenship and national citizenship in

Kenya particularly within the context of the nation's exclusionary tendencies and thirdly, to underscore what seems to be Mutahi's point that there is need to debunk the myth of the nation as the only site where true citizenry can be forged because such a position oversimplifies the layered and contested nature of the Kenyan national space.

Quoting Odhiambo (2002), I noted in my discussion of ethnic stereotypes in chapter 4 that issues to do with ethnicity are lived reality and a practice of daily life in Kenya. Since people use tribalism as a practical vocabulary of politics and social movements in the country, when issues to do with the tribe or cultural idioms are appropriated in *Whispers*, it is a grammar that readers easily understand. But I also want to submit that cultural idioms as appropriated in daily discourse are not neutral vehicles for popular expression. Cultural idioms as Brubaker (1992) notes, "constitute interests as much as they express them" (16). Quite often, they are symptomatic of ethnic fears. Indeed, Omolo (2002) has noted that ethnic outgroups in Kenya embraced democratisation in the early 1990s mainly as an opportunity to overturn a system widely perceived as antithetical to their (ethnic) political and economic aspirations. The use of cultural idioms that are patently 'ethnic' in nature is thus suggestive of struggles over power both horizontally and vertically. Let us, for instance, look at Mutahi's appropriation of certain cultural struggle idioms, attributed to Thatcher, which we have looked at before in the previous chapter to illustrate our argument.

I hear that she is telling the donors of support who happen to be members of the sect of many waters. I fought for this husband of mine. *Nilipigania!* [Trans: I fought for] I was not given the husband on a silver platter. *Nilipigania na jasho* [I fought for it] and that is why I cannot allow this kawoman called Rhoda to disorganise our domestic budget (*Sunday Standard*, November, 15, 1992).

Even without detailing the context against which to make sense of the excerpt, the intended readership will be aware that this imagery casually draws from pre-independence images of resistance in Kenya. As earlier discussed, *Nilipigania*, *Nilipigania na jasho* are rhetorical idioms of resistance used during Kenya's fight for independence. But at the same time, I noted that they also remind one of Jomo Kenyatta's speeches in defence of Kikuyu nationalism and at the height of political opposition in Kenya's first republic. Kenyatta was as much concerned with Kenyan nationalism as with Kikuyu subnationalism. Throup (1987), among others have thus argued that as editor of the Kikuyu newspaper *Muigwithania* (The Reconciler) in the late 1920s and in *Facing Mount Kenya*, Kenyatta had created "a Kikuyu subnationalist ideology... within the framework of a revitalised traditional mythology" (36-7). Indeed, Haugerud (1995) asserts, "Kenya's early political struggles in the 1990's spring in part from opposition political structures that have been sporadically visible in the past, and that have deep historical roots both within Kenya and across its borders" (18). The struggle was a part of what Isaacman (1990) calls "a long oppositional history which over time took many shapes and forms, part of a larger engagement in the political world" (49) but which, as *Whispers* demonstrates, finds relevance in times of (current) political upheavals. Mutahi therefore at once appeals to Kikuyu nationalism but at the same time to a 'nationalist past' that provides a grammar of resistance which people can use to confront present challenges.

But one must also note that although this resistance past is sculptured as a narrative that should appeal to all those dominated, it privileges the dominant ethnies. Eyoh (1999) has observed that "although nationalist discourses aspire to homogenous and linear ethnic pasts, the stock of symbols, cultural traditions, historical memories etc with which national mythologies and public ideological cultures are sculptured, are commonly supplied by the dominant ethnies within

multi-ethnic nations" (281). The excerpt thus demonstrates some of the tensions around the mobilisation of cultural idioms in Kenya. The appropriation of sub-national symbols as national symbols alerts us to how ethnicity is part of a complex web of factors that are "implicated in and regulate struggles over arrangements of economic, political and symbolic power of multi-ethnic societies" (272-3)). The appropriation of cultural idioms in fiction becomes part of a political struggle, a struggle to remember and retain a populist past against a dominant view, which either denies or reinterprets that past. Yet even this populist past may always be contested. It is an example of what Lipsitz' (1990) has called "true lies" – depictions of the past and present that are comprehensible to us and that locate our own private stories within a larger collective memory" (163). This is done because of the need to create "a community around which people establish similarities and differences (identities), communities that exist in memory and in the passage of time" (39). But it is part of a collective memory whose validity is nonetheless contestable. David Coplan (2002) in a study of Basotho creators of aural texts argues that these (mis)representations of the past are able to attain social authority precisely because

they transport the salience of their previous applications into new contexts each time they are reapplied. In this form history gives meaning to the present as much as the present reconstitutes the nature of the past. Further, successive reapplications of established metaphors resonate with one another and gain force from new metaphors juxtaposed against them. These metaphors, at once historical and experimental, endure, wax or wane depending upon their capacity to interpret the actual in terms of a more durable social and moral meaning (137).

It is in this sense that sub-national symbols work and it is because of the need to create a certain 'imagined community' around a common problem that Mutahi borrows from this past.

In a discussion of Mutahi's portrayal of Jomo Kenyatta in his theatre productions, Outa (2002) cites notable "convenient deletions" and deliberate "historical gaps" that sometimes render the appropriation of history in Mutahi's fiction in the 1990s highly tendentious. Wahome's Kenyatta, Outa argues, is "designed to pass moral judgement on the entirety of Moi's tenure as leader" (118). Similar deletions and historical gaps equally feature in *Whispers*, where Moi's era is often judged against Kenyatta's "laudable" if sometimes curiously uncontested reign. Below is a good example.

In one of his articles "Jomo's big Jamhuri Day encounters" (*Sunday Nation*, December 17, 1995), written to mark Kenya's Independence Day, using his alter-ego Whispers, the author takes the reader through decades of stocktaking and shows how Kenya has degenerated since the country's first president Jomo Kenyatta died in 1978. Using the dream motif, the writer "resurrects" Kenyatta on the eve of Kenya's Independence Day and imagines him taking a walk in the city. Kenyatta's resting place is a mausoleum built next to the Kenyan parliament in Nairobi. In the article Kenyatta's journey begins with a visit to Parliament. There he finds MPs engaged in fisticuffs rather than debate issues for which they are in Parliament. The article likens the Kenyan Parliament to a "livestock auction".⁶ Kenyatta then walks towards City Hall and on his way he meets university students protesting against the murder of a government minister Robert Ouko.⁷ As he nears City Hall, he stumbles on potholes and wonders

⁶ In the period 1992-1997, many a time Kenyan parliamentarians unabashedly settled scores physically in the parliamentary chambers.

⁷ Robert Ouko was Kenya's foreign affairs minister in the late 1980s. He was murdered in February, 1990 igniting one of the country's worst political crises yet. Testimonies given at a

aloud whether these roads were deliberately built with potholes to reduce car accidents. Once at City Hall, Jomo finds the city mayor shouting at his councillors. The mayor can barely communicate in English and demands that because of his status as mayor, he now deserves to own a house in *Kiririchwa* (a corruption of the word *Kileleshwa*), one of the most affluent suburbs in Nairobi.

On his way to the city's public bus station, where he intended to take a bus to his home district, he meets street children who demand that they be "sponsored". He declines to give them money but shortly afterwards, he is mugged by three men. Kenyatta is concerned that even as he underwent the harrowing experience, nobody bothered to help. They watched with curious disinterest. He tries to rally those on the streets to his cause shouting out *Harambee!* (spirit of "togetherness"). He is taken aback by their reply. They respond shouting *Nyayo!* (Kiswahili for footsteps but now a political slogan popularised by the Moi regime) and he wonders what has suddenly gone wrong with his footsteps.⁸ As he tries to comprehend what is it that is wrong with his footsteps, a Kanu supporter comes over to him, professes his loyalty to the party but reminds him that he also has needs and therefore demands that he pays him for his loyalty. Kenyatta declines to give him money and continues with his walk. He meets a group of policemen and reports his encounter with the thugs but instead of being helped, he is labelled a "Hutu militia" because he does not have an Identity Card. He is asked to "jitetea" (Kiswahili for "defend yourself" but a word commonly used as a way of soliciting for a bribe). Although the former president recalls once defending himself when the British colonial government arrested him during the fight for

commission of inquiry set up to investigate the minister's murder implicated top-ranking government officials. The commission of inquiry was later disbanded before it released its findings. At the time of writing this, there is yet another commission of inquiry investigating the murder.

⁸ After Kenyatta's death, Moi vowed to follow in Kenyatta's footsteps (*Nyayo* in Kiswahili). *Nyayo* later outgrew its archetype and became a "philosophy", defining Moi's presidency. Deviation from Moi's *Nyayo* was met with the full brutality of the state. The result was the emergence of a corps of sycophants who equally 'performed' this philosophy.

independence, he realises the word has a different meaning in the “new Kenya”. The cops rob him of his money because he cannot “defend himself”. He decides to return to his mausoleum but on his way back, feels the urge to go for a short call. But where there once was a public toilet, he finds a Kiosk. When he asks what happened to the toilet, the woman at the Kiosk wonders whether he is “from the planet Jupiter” and tells him that with the right amount of money, he would get himself a place at Lang’ata Cemetery or even a public school to build a Kiosk. The reality then hits him that an “enterprising” Kenyan might decide to auction his mausoleum, and so he sprints back to his grave.

Using the dream motif, the narrator has incredibly taken the reader through years of stocktaking of the gradual degeneration of Kenya and offered a picture of the “Kenya Becoming”. Virtually every facet of the country’s life is now degenerate. Respectable institutions such as Parliament have become akin to livestock auctions, political murders are common, the country’s infrastructure has collapsed, while the presence of street children along the city streets serves to show the breakdown of the family institution and of the debilitating poverty in the country. Corrupt officials who are concerned about their personal aggrandisement rather than serving the city occupy City Hall. Thugs roam the streets and policemen, supposed to be the custodians of law and order have become ‘thugs in blue’, robbing the common man with impunity. Land is grabbed indiscriminately, showing the extent of corruption in the country. Mutahi’s most important point here is that there is nothing to celebrate to mark the country’s independence. Ultimately, it is the political leadership that is censured. Although there is no reference to Moi, certain familiar symbolic markers such as *Nyayo* and his party Kanu are used. This attests to the former president’s indictment as an author of this decay of a once comparatively prosperous country. There are various other stories in which the Kenyatta era is deliberately padded yet these are corollaries of traditions that have roots in

Kenya's first republic. Mutahi's representation thus sometimes passes as largely rhetorical and populist with curious deletions that makes his fiction's recourse to history tendentious. It is thus true that while the popular narrates alternative histories especially when dominant histories appear repressive, the popular also suppresses other competing histories. The selective appropriation of history should therefore alert us to the place of "political populism" in popular culture, one that Street (1997) cautions, allows cultural workers to claim that popular culture expresses the wishes and desires of the people (17). In achieving dominance, Street observes, "populist rhetoric adopts a variety of codes and genres. It can, for example, appeal to past myths or future fears; and it can dress them in different styles—hectoring or homely, grandiose or folksy. But what each is intended to do is to link its audience to a vision which in turn legitimates a particular course of action" (18). The deletions in *Whispers* might be seen in this light. There is a sense in which recourse to a populist past provides an identity that helps people comfort feelings of exclusion. This does not however mean that the populist past is necessarily free of contradictions.

I want to also argue therefore that the appropriation of cultural idioms in popular fiction can open up our understanding of how competing cultural claims are part and parcel of the 'popular'. The struggle therefore is not only vertical but also horizontal. This horizontal struggle is also manifest in the concept of "ethnic othering" which plays a major role in the creation of political hierarchies in Kenya. *Whispers* reveals how as products of human agency, ethnicity, as Eyoh (1990) explains, "valorised and transformed in the context of struggles over structures of power ..." (272). It becomes a strategy for survival. *Whispers* reproduces these constructions demonstrating how various Kenyan societies have taken to 'othering' as a strategy not only for the creation of political hierarchies but also for their very survival. I find useful Werbner and Ranger's (1996) argument that in the fight for political space, communities exclude each

other by “animalising the Other in their midst” (20). Circumcision for instance has for long played a significant role in the ‘othering’ of communities by most Bantu communities in Kenya. Among the Kikuyu, circumcision is an important rite of passage through which a boy symbolically becomes a man. The ‘othering’ therefore is such that the Luo, a dominant tribe from Western Kenya cannot rule over the rest, much less the Kikuyu because they are uncircumcised thus are “little boys” (ibid.). An interesting example of this ‘othering’ in *Whispers* is an article titled “Ethnic Clashes in Whis neighbourhood”. A woman threatens to ‘expose’ her husband to the ‘world’ that he is not circumcised should he refuse to agree to her mother’s visit to the city and to buy her “a new dress and sweater”. Apart from touching on the issue of ‘ethnic othering’, the story is written against the background of ethnic clashes in Kenya. At the same time, the story also reveals the tensions between the nuclear family and the extended family which we touched on in the previous chapter. In the article, the man initially discourages his wife from inviting his mother-in-law to visit the family, knowing only too well what such a visit means. He will have to spend way beyond his means since he will be forced to buy numerous presents for the mother-in-law. But he capitulates to his wife’s threats when she threatens to ‘expose’ him. The woman says:

[w]hat would the men you drink with say if they learned that you feared the knife? Hehee! A 40-year-old *omusinde* (Luhya for an uncircumcised man) from the slopes of Mount Kenya where Whispers ‘Son of the Soil’ says there are many warriors. Maybe even that Whispers fellow is like you, a *kehee* (Kikuyu for uncircumcised man) (*Standard on Sunday*, April 26, 1992).

Note the political agency given to the idea of circumcision. Circumcision makes you a warrior and legitimates your right to lead. Those who are uncircumcised

are portrayed as weak, easy to manipulate and effectively denied the right to lead. Mutahi uses a lot of these stereotypes which although taken for granted, in fact, encode certain struggles, tensions and anxieties among Kenya's many ethnicities. The Luhya community are, for instance, typified by their excessive culinary appetite especially for chicken and *ugali* (Kiswahili for mealie meal, but a word equally used to mean a bribe) which marks them as a weak and easily compromised people. The Kikuyu on the other hand are to be noted as enterprising but greedy and selfish thus cannot be trusted with the country's political leadership by other communities, while the Kisii are a dangerous ethnic group because of their 'short temperament'. Those from the Kenyan coastal areas are stereotyped as lazy while tribes such as the Maasai are illiterate and warlike. Mutahi quite often introduces these stereotypes in *Whispers* in a manner that seemingly reinforces these stereotypes. Renowned leaders from various ethnic groups are constantly stereotyped with "known tribal traits" while newspaper caricatures emphasise these stereotypes. I want to argue however that on the one hand this stereotyping is used in the column to hail public figures, on the other hand it opens up discussions on social conflicts and shows how communities subject each other to many "tacit, uncoded, internalised classificatory schemes and ethno-cultural markers in the political and economic arenas" as part of an ongoing social and political struggle (Odhiambo, 2002: 242-3). Ndegwa (1997) calls these negative stereotypes "rituals of exclusion" which "establish a hierarchy of power and status that when combined with other icons of power and status in the modern state, enable elites to mobilise within the ethnic community ..." (602). I want to therefore argue that besides the visible political struggles at the vertical level, what *Whispers* also reveals are the tensions at the horizontal level as ethnic groups also jostle for space in the social and political hierarchy. Subject populations should thus also be noted for their shrewdness in the manipulation of stereotypes to "negotiate conditions of political representation and participation within the wider political system" (Eyoh, 1999:

288). Quite clearly, this calls for a need to problematise the province of the 'popular' and to look at it as also representing a number of competing interests.

But could Mutahi's appropriation of 'the ethnic' be an indication that the artiste in him succumbed to a new form of ethnic parochialism? My answer is that the premise upon which the question is based can be persuasive but potentially deceptive. By appropriating 'the ethnic' knowing only too well that this is stigmatised territory, Mutahi acknowledges a political reality, the fact that many Kenyans now find refuge in their ethnic identities, which in fact demonstrates that they feel alienated by the state. But he also implicitly demonstrates the rejection of the unifying narratives of the state about what and who constitutes the 'nation'. At the same time, the discussion of ethnicity in *Whispers* serves to show the silent fights between the various competing ethnicities in the country.

It is however important to ask why if the column was political, indeed if it was largely oppositional, it was left to exist for two decades in the Kenyan popular press when similar works of popular arts were either censored or banned. Street (1997), Barber (1997a), among several other scholars of popular culture have observed that popular culture's can become a form of political management. Laughter generated through popular arts can be a safety valve for hidden feelings, which can be a form of political management. But this in no way robs popular culture of its ability to form popular critical political consciousness. In fact, such humour can be a useful strategy for introducing certain taboo topics into the mainstream.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to demonstrate why it is necessary to examine *Whispers* as a critical political forum. I have tried to tease out some of the political issues discussed in *Whispers* acknowledging however that there are far too many

issues it discusses that giving a complete inventory is not possible. Clearly though, while the political trend in the column easily fits within an oppositional political and cultural aesthetic, *Whispers* discusses the general political problems that face post-independence Kenya. Political betrayal, corruption, client-patron political relations and violence as one of the 'instrumentalities of survival' of the state, are some of the issues discussed. The discussion also looks at how Mutahi raises the issue of ethnicity in Kenya and how this reveals the tensions around and between ethnic citizenship and national citizenship in Kenya. Another interesting point is that this column complicates our reading of the 'popular'. The culture of 'ethnic othering' in Kenya does suggest very clearly that the province of the 'popular' is, in fact, a site of various competing voices.