

Oral Performance and the Creative Imagination in Penina (Mlama) Muhando's *Nguzo Mama*¹

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"La mgambo likilia lina jambo." ("When the ox-horn of mgambo is blown, something is wrong.")²

Tradition, like the past, is within us, not behind us. The traditions and the past from which I come are in my words each and every day.
(Mudimbe 1982)

The use of folklore for educational purposes may suggest images of instructors and students in classrooms. Folklore, however, comprises an enormous array of traditions "based on beliefs, ideas, symbols, assumptions, attitudes, texts, and sentiments of peoples" (Bodunde 1992:24), and it has traditionally been an important instructional medium both in formal and informal settings. Contemporary African authors frequently use folklore in their writing in order to educate their audiences about social and political issues. The world-famous Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, for example, views his novels, especially *Things Fall Apart*, as an instructional medium for educating both people in Nigeria as well as readers around the world (1975). Yet, within the context of African literature, using folklore to instruct general African populations poses serious challenges. If *Things Fall Apart* has achieved a global reputation as the most widely read novel in African literature, it still represents, like many other works of African literature, a form of verbal art that is inaccessible to many African people who can neither read nor understand English. In an effort to minimize this gap between writers and their audiences, a good number of works have been translated into African languages. In general, however, the readers of African literature remain largely confined within the walls of classrooms,³ and there are frequently problems with translations.⁴ On the other hand, African literature, written or performed in African languages, opens a more direct path of communication

to African audiences who use these languages every day. These works constitute convenient vehicles for messages which can be conveyed in traditional forms.

Unfortunately, literature written in African languages, including those in languages which have achieved prominence outside their ethnic and national borders such as Kiswahili, remains relatively unknown, not only to the general public, but also to scholars of African literature. Moreover, efforts to bring Kiswahili literature to Western audiences are often undermined by insensitive over-generalizations or misinterpretations. Elena Zubkova Bertoncini, for example, asserts that "the main serious theme in Kiswahili literature" is the clash between traditional and modern life (1985:5).⁵ This view reflects the casual attitude with which some of these works are treated. Positioning herself as an all-knowing critic of Kiswahili literature, Bertoncini oversimplifies and dismisses Kiswahili authors as misogynists. Such condescending approaches inhibit research and scholarship in African-language literatures because they misrepresent these authors and literatures as frivolous and therefore unworthy of serious attention. As a result, for critics like Bertoncini, the only serious African works are those written in European languages, especially in English, French, or Portuguese. This perspective leaves out a large corpus of literature written in African languages, including those written in languages which are internationally spoken and taught.

African literature written in European languages has grown considerably during the last five decades. Though it was once dominated by male writers, there has been a proliferation of women writers during the second half of this period. Though some scholars perceive this to be the most striking feature of contemporary written African literature, many literary historians consider this phenomenon to be a reclamation of lost territory, since women artists were indisputably at the forefront of the production of oral literature in precolonial African societies (see Nnaemeka 1994:137). Regardless of gender, the ability of contemporary writers to reach their African audiences is severely limited by low literacy rates in Western languages in many African countries and the prohibitive cost of both imported and locally published books. Given this situation, some writers, including Penina Muhando (1990) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1981b), feel an urgent need to find alternative ways of communicating with their audiences. The creative response to this communicative need is best exemplified through these writers' deliberate uses of African languages, orature, and other African systems of knowledge-choices which have political, cultural, social, and economic ramifications.

When a writer adopts an African language as a medium of communication and publishes books in Africa, the conditions of communication change, as do those of author recognition. The writer directs a message straight to the audience without the filters of European languages and editors. This choice, however, is not without risks, especially for African

women writers. One consequence, for example, is that those who choose to write in African languages consign themselves to relative obscurity, renouncing the international limelight that European languages afford African writers (Muhando 1990:17). Many people assume these writers do not exist. And, if they do attract some attention, they are frequently dismissed by critics.⁶ Yet, for some of these authors, such as Penina Muhando—a relatively unknown but prolific Tanzanian female playwright—writing in an African language is a political choice. Like the rendition of oral narratives by storytellers, writing provides African authors with an opportunity to educate their audiences (Thiong'o 1981a:5). Ngugi wa Thiong'o, a renowned Kenyan male writer, discovered firsthand not only the benefits, but also the potential dangers, of this choice when he was incarcerated by a government that feared his ideas would reach his intended audiences too easily.

In this article, I shall examine the politics of language choice, gender, and the dynamics of oral performance in one of Penina Muhando's plays, *Nguzo Mama*. I will show how in her continuous quest to educate her audiences through relevant and familiar dramatic forms, she employs many dynamics and techniques of traditional oral performances, deeply rooted in African folklore, to re-create and reconstruct traditional storytelling conventions. I will argue that Muhando uses the dynamics of oral performance as an idiom through which she reconnects with her roots, targets specific audiences, and communicates through aesthetic modes of communication with which her audiences are familiar. I will also analyze how Muhando has developed the characters and plot of the play to express her views on and educate her audiences about what she perceives to be some primary social and political problems in Tanzania today, especially those concerning gender relations and the oppression of women.

Within the group of African authors choosing to write in African languages, Muhando has especially been consistent in that she has published all ten of her plays in Kiswahili. Muhando's most immediate quest is to find the best way to reach her primary audiences in order to educate them. Since these audiences are African, her choice of language is critical. When asked why she writes in Kiswahili, Muhando unequivocally states:

I think it is a question of your immediate audience. In most cases, when I start writing, I feel I am writing for the Tanzanian audience first and foremost because I am dealing with problems which are relevant to the Tanzanian audience. (James 1990:75)

Her use of various communicative strategies, which I will term here "oralising," is an essential part of her resistance against imperial domination and cultural obliteration. Oralising—the act of drawing from a community's

repertoire of oral traditions, including incorporating the dynamics of oral performances as a means of communication—takes place through forms of mediation derived from a collective memory. From this collective repertoire emerges Muhando's dramaturgical strategies as well as thematic and aesthetic choices that appear in *Nguzo Mama*. Language and other appropriate communicative strategies become political choices from which Muhando, like other African writers, cannot afford to shy.

Since every writer operates in a specific context, African writers are grounded in and influenced by their contexts—their rootedness in their particular cultures and their complex historical experiences. Muhando emerges as a writer with a heightened sense of the dynamics and contradictions of the specific context within which she operates. For her, like many of her contemporaries, revisiting her ethnic base for themes and motifs, ideas, perspectives, and linguistic choices is essential and inspirational (see Jones 1992:5).

Muhando appropriates familiar expressive forms in order to articulate her resistance to dominant literary categories and/or alternative worldviews (see Furniss and Gurner 1995:14). Stylistically, this revisiting involves not only manipulating techniques of oral literature, but also the dynamics of oral performance, such as narrator-audience relationships, dances, gestures, and histrionics. In other words, writers such as Muhando turn to their ethnic groups for "appropriate structures and language to construct their visions...as filtered through the prism of their particular time, place, and ethnic group" (Bell 1987:xii). Besides their cultural bases, however:

they also have at their disposal the whole Western literary tradition...which has provided both thematic and stylistic inspiration for writers. The actual forms—fiction, poetry, and drama—show a double heritage. (Jones 1992:5–6)

Thus, as Bernard William Bell correctly observes, every writer:

works within and against a narrative tradition, oral and literary, that each inherits as part of one's cultural legacy and in which each participates, however marginally, in the elusive quest for authority, autonomy, and originality. (1987:xiv)

Bell goes on to argue that being aware of one's literary traditions is not enough. Each author has to find a place within the traditions to which he or she belongs. Thus, he posits:

whereas the awareness of the oral and literary traditions is helpful...it is the novelist's [read: writer's] reconstruction of the world or reality from a particular vantage point of view that constitutes the specific meaning of the imaginative narrative. Meaning in narrative, in short, is a product of certain shared systems of signification that attempt to make sense of reality; it is the result of a relationship between two worlds: the story teller's and the audience's, the author's and the readers. (1987:xv)

Bell refers here to the African American literary tradition, but his comments apply equally well to the complex issues of African-language literatures today. In order to fully appreciate the literary and political ramifications of this dual position for African writers, it is worth examining a text aimed specifically at an African audience. *Nguzo Mama*, Muhando's eighth published play, offers an ideal example. To appreciate her approach, it is important to understand first how she views the role of the writer, especially a female writer, in her society.

In the African context, the "book" as the writer's medium of communication does not effectively reach the common population (Muhando 1990:9). According to Muhando, an African writer makes a political choice when it comes to deciding the language in which he or she is going to write. Muhando considers her choice to write in Kiswahili to be not just for the sake of communication, but also a way of helping her society regain its cultural identity, or what she calls "being African."⁷ The importance of this choice becomes even clearer when we examine her views about the roles of African writers in their societies given the dire situation in which the continent finds itself. Muhando writes:

Many African writers find it more difficult than ever before not to say anything about the pathetic situation of African people. In his or her role as communicator of ideas and feelings, the writer does not want to stand by and let this humiliating era continue. It is also extremely difficult for the writer not to take the side of the suffering majority....The writer finds it difficult to suppress the urge to use the pen to communicate his or her people's anger and frustration. The writer often chooses to announce her or his position or to conscientize and to mobilize his or her audience into understanding, analyzing their plight. Even though the situation seems to be so hopeless, the writer feels the need to tell the audience not to despair.... (1990:8-9)

Because language politics plays a key role in determining Muhando's choice to write in Kiswahili, it is essential to examine her general views on writing in African languages. She argues:

For an African writer, the choice to write in the mother-tongue is not merely a whim. Those who choose to write in an African language belong to a class of writers who are willing to take a risk, writers who respond to challenges posed by the realities of our African society today. (1990:8)

The relationship between the audience and the writer in Africa takes place against a background of multiple, competing, and quite often antagonistic ideologies (Thiong'o 1981b:2). Pre-colonial Africa as well as the whole traumatic experience of colonialism and neocolonialism have shaped the historical consciousness of African writers. Their literary landscape is, to borrow Nellie McKay's words, littered with "skeletons of a shared history that refuse to be swept into an unmarked grave..." (1993:279). Many writers perceive a "need to liberate African peoples from neocolonialism and other forms of race and class oppression, coupled with a respect for certain features of traditional African cultures" (Davies and Graves 1986:1). Given this background, African women writers find themselves in a more disadvantaged position than do their male counterparts. Not only do they feel the need to write about colonialism and neo-colonialism, they also feel that they should write against both the residual and new patriarchal cultural paradigms which oppress them.⁸ In so doing, they challenge many of the precarious assumptions and stereotypes about gender which are ingrained and represented in much of the predominantly male authored, early African literature. According to O'Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, "one of the commitments of the female writer should be to the correction of these false images of the woman in Africa" (1994:61). Yet, women writers also remain aware of their position as "Third World" women. As Ogundipe-Leslie observes:

The female writer should be committed in three ways: as a writer, as a woman and as a Third World person; and her biological womanhood is implicated in all the three....Being aware of oneself as a Third World person implies being politically conscious, offering readers perspectives on perceptions and of colonialism, imperialism and neo-colonialism as they affect and shape our lives and historical destinies. (1994:63-64)

For Muhando then, one of the roles of African writers is to help their communities re-shape their historical destinies, moving toward liberation. Choosing to write in an African language is not only central to communication, but also an act of liberation for African writers, and by extension, for African literature.⁹ It is only in this context that we can fully appreciate the works of Penina Muhando and her contemporaries who choose to write in their mother-tongues.

As Stuart Hall observes, all writers "write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we [read: they] say is always 'in context,' *positioned*" (1994:392). For Hall, the

social, cultural, and political contexts are important in helping us to understand “the author’s world (view) or symbolic universe and where the author stands in relationship to his or her audience” (Bell 1987:xiv). Among Muhando’s plays, *Nguzo Mama* most effectively illustrates this issue of context.

Written in 1982, *Nguzo Mama* deals with the disillusionment of ordinary Tanzanians after several years of experimentation with the politics of *Ujamaa* or African socialism.¹⁰ In this play, Muhando focuses directly on the social, political, economic, and gender inequalities prevailing in her society. Some critics consider it to be her clearest statement on gender issues in the context of Tanzania, and more generally in other African cultures and societies (see Chesaina 1987). Muhando explores the various constraints that women face in their efforts to achieve social, economic, and political independence in contemporary Tanzania. She addresses the different strategies that women of the fictitious community of Patata adopt in order to improve their economic positions and overcome the constraints that they encounter.

Muhando creates a world in which fantasy and reality are fused through narrative, music, and dance, highlighting the themes of the play (Matteru 1987:40). She uses nine female character types who represent women in various fields—commerce, politics, farming, prostitution, and academia—in order to show the important roles that women play in today’s African societies. The action of the play centers around the female characters’ efforts to lift up *nguzo mama*, a mother-pillar that has been bequeathed to them by their ancestors to help them improve their standard of living. The ancestors give them three days to lift up *nguzo mama*. If they fail, the ancestors will take it away from them and give it to others who are more deserving. The first two days pass without any indication that the women will succeed in lifting it. The women’s efforts are bedeviled by various difficulties and trivialities, such as the personal differences between them, ineptitude and faulty leadership, the indifference of men who retreat to their beds upon realizing that the pillar is feminine, and their adoption of simplistic solutions which are not based on an understanding of a capitalist economy. Perhaps the most significant incident in the play involves a young school girl. The competing female characters each call the girl to help her. The young girl becomes confused, not knowing whom to follow. The play ends on the threshold of the third and final day. The play’s ending leaves the audience with the realization that by the end of the third day, the women will probably not have managed to lift *nguzo mama* because of the profound divisions between them.

In *Nguzo Mama*, Muhando draws heavily from various aspects of oral tradition to openly challenge the patriarchal structures that have prevailed in her society for many generations, as well as the neo-colonial and patriarchal ideologies imported from the West. These structures oppress African women, both as Africans and as women. She fuses oral narrative techniques,

structures, motifs, poetic forms, and authorial ideology, creating a work of multifaceted aesthetic and political perspectives.

Muhando uses various dynamics of African oral literature—the traditional form of a dilemma tale, the interaction between a narrator and her audience, the cyclical concept of time, and certain poetic and generic techniques including immediacy, repetition, and digression—in order to probe the different problems confronting African people in the contemporary period. She adopts the dilemma tale—“a narrative whose primary function is to stimulate serious, deep-probing discussion of social, political and moral issues that confront human beings in their every day lives” (Odamtten 1994:18)—to tropize the problems of patriarchal cultural paradigms, colonialism, neo-colonialism, and attendant class and gender inequalities, as well as to challenge the status quo. Dilemma tales are characterized by the presentation of a dilemma or a problematic situation at the end of which the narrator expects the audience to make an appropriate judgment. Following the form of a dilemma narrative, Muhando, like an oral narrator, ends *Nguzo Mama* without providing an explicit solution to the conflict; she leaves the question entirely to her audience to resolve. Thus, the play opens with a narrator, Bi Msimulizi, who poses a dilemma—how to lift *nguzo mama*—to the audience in the symbolic world of the play, represented by Chizi. The various members of Patata attempt to meet this challenge by enacting various possible solutions. At the conclusion of the play, the women have failed to lift *nguzo mama*, thus leaving the audience with the question of how this could have been successfully accomplished.

Through this play, Muhando poses a multi-dimensional question regarding the direction which gender issues and community development should take. The use of the dilemma tale points to the predicaments facing post-independent African countries and women in a neocolonial context. By drawing from the oral traditions of her community, Muhando appropriates elements of the oral past to portray the contemporary life of her community, and also contributes to the decolonization of African literature (see Chinweizu, Madubuike, and Jemie 1980). Muhando is not simply an uncritical imitator of oral tradition. The oral past for her is neither a panacea nor a smooth ride out of neocolonial Tanzanian or African problems. Rather, in her quest for relevance and her search for alternatives to the nefarious cultural, political, economic, and social systems now in place, she writes this play as a medium through which she can reach a wider audience while simultaneously weaving together multiple images of African experiences. For Muhando, borrowing from oral tradition amounts to an act of re-visioning—looking back, viewing reality from a different prism, and entering the traditional oral text from a new direction and critical perspective (see Mbalia 1991).

Oral performances often involve continuous interaction between narrators and their audiences. A narrator frequently opens a narrative with a set formula with which the audience is familiar. According to Solomon Iyasere, the performance of each oral genre is a process that involves the entire community in the creative and critical process (1980:169). This audience-narrator dynamic is recreated in *Nguzo Mama* through the play's omniscient narrator Bi Msimulizi, who opens the play with words typical of an oral narrative:

| | |
|---------------|--|
| Bi Msimulizi: | Hadithi! Hadithi! |
| Hadhira: | Hadithi njoo! |
| Bi Msimulizi: | Hadithi! Hadithi! |
| Hadhira: | Hadithi njoo! |
| Bi Msimulizi: | Hapo zamani za kale. |
| | Tena kale za mababu na mababu. |
| Narrator: | Take a story! |
| Audience: | We have taken! |
| Narrator: | Take a story! |
| Audience: | We have taken! |
| Narrator: | Long long ago. |
| | I say during the time of our great grandfathers. (Muhando 1982:3) ¹¹ |

Muhando recreates a cyclical concept of time reminiscent of traditional worldview; the past, present, and future interact in order to trace the positions which women have and continue to occupy. Bi Msimulizi takes the position of both an interested and disinterested observer. By commenting on past, present, and future events, she weaves a chronological narrative of the experiences of women in her society. Both Bi Msimulizi, who affirms the primordial role of women artists in oral literature, and the active fictional audience of the play, represented by Chizi, unify the story line with the temporal and spatial world of the play, giving it the immediacy of an oral narrative.

The use of poetic forms (much like the inclusion of songs in oral narratives) affords Muhando an opportunity to comment on the actions of each individual character without losing the essence of the narrative structure. She invokes authorial vision while also being a member of the society upon which she comments. She thus critiques her society from the unique position of an insider-outsider.

Muhando employs other generic forms, including immediacy, repetition, and digression, to comment on the contemporary political, economic, social, and cultural predicament in which post-independent Africa finds itself. In *Nguzo Mama*, generic and other dramaturgical strategies function as "disruptive and interpellative techniques [that] are consciously constructed to challenge Western generic as well as theoretical

compartmentalizations" (Odamtten 1994:5-6). They also function to valorize the African aesthetic and cultural values embodied in oral tradition. For Muhando, this is an act of self-identity. Commenting on the use of authentic African theatrical modes, she laments:

Unfortunately the colonized African was taken in by this attitude and accepted the Western theater style of Shakespeare, Sheridan... as "The Theater" and the only one for that matter. Through the school syllabus, dramatic societies, little theaters headed by colonizers, the Western theater form with its written play, the proscenium stage, the curtain etc., was established and that set the foundations of modern African theater. (Muhando 1975:1)

Muhando believes that theater that uses alien theatrical modes is of little use to Africans. Her manipulation of African generic forms to deconstruct the European dramatic text parallels the deconstruction of bourgeois and sexist ideology. She uses traditional forms not only to suggest the inappropriateness of the Western dramatic genre in an African setting, but also to authenticate African art as the best means of reaching a larger audience where orality still remains an important means of communication.

One characteristic of African oral literature used by Muhando is immediacy. According to Isidore Okpewho, an oral artist is a person "with a pressing sense of real and concrete presence, enjoying the closest intimacy with the physical and metaphysical environment" (1979:27). The rendition of an oral narrative, song, or any other genre of orature can be a response to an immediate situation requiring resolution or commentary. In *African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character and Continuity*, Okpewho postulates that:

oral literature, even when it deals with events of history, presents constantly to members of contemporary society the standards of excellence that they should practice in their own interests and for the survival of the society. (1992:117)

Muhando's awareness of the immediate problems besetting her society and their relation to their historical imperatives is evident in her use of the rhetorical question "*tukupambeje maua?*" ("how do we adorn you with flowers?") and in the three-day time limit the Patatans are given to lift *nguzo mama*. The task of lifting the mother-pillar calls for urgent and concerted efforts by all the people of Patata. The pillar, which represents the women on one level and the nation on another, is used to pose deep questions about Patatans' warped notions concerning development. The question is whether the mother-pillar should be adorned with flowers, Mercedes Benzes, Volvo ST's or SU's, gold, whisky, wine, or cakes (Muhando 1987:3). Such

adornments are not only clear symbols of economic exploitation and Euro-American imperialistic acculturation and exploitation, but they also comment on Africa's foreign dependency crisis. The result underscores the author's view that the problems facing African countries in general, and African women in particular, need to be addressed now rather than later. By using immediacy as a literary device, Muhando emphasizes the view that African people should not wait, but must wake up now and struggle to tear down economic domination and degenerate political structures.

Muhando uses the oral narrative techniques of repetition and digression to revision and recontextualize the role of a woman writer in contemporary Africa and to underscore problems faced by many African communities, symbolized by Patata. Muhando illustrates how a woman writer can use art to instruct her audiences about how to change society. When the play opens, the women sing repeatedly "*tukupambeje maua?*" ("how shall we adorn you, with flowers?") This line, together with the other choruses, functions as an interlude to the various movements that make up the structure of the play. Through several digressions by Chizi, Muhando reconstructs the interactive relationship between narrators and their audiences in order to engage her target audiences in a process of self-criticism.

In her depictions, Muhando is explicit: she finds the situation of women in contemporary Tanzania, particularly in their roles as mothers, complicated and far from enviable. Rather than attempt to satisfy African ideological and aesthetic representations of motherhood, Muhando sets out to thwart the deterministic impositions of these representations by recreating old images as well as creating new ones. Motherhood has always been a predominant theme in both oral and written literature. It is often portrayed as mystical and sacrosanct, quite often in sensuous terms. While Muhando does not negate the centrality of motherhood, she reaffirms it in a way that reconfigures its place in society. She indicates that, in spite of the important roles that women play in nurturing children and/or nations, they are not given satisfactory status. By portraying mothers' common everyday experiences along with an image of a fallen mother rather than a mother on a pedestal, Muhando portrays common experiences of motherhood without negating its importance and centrality.

Muhando also indicts African men for their cavalier attitude and complicity in the subjugation of women. This is evident in the various ways in which the play's male characters inhibit the women's efforts to lift the pillar. When the men of Patata realize that the pillar is feminine, for example, they lose interest in helping; they go back to bed. Muhando feels that any country that oppresses and discriminates against women is on a path to self-destruction. Yet, she does not absolve women of playing a part in their oppression. Rather than present women as victims, Muhando strongly censures them for their subservience and conformity to a system that devalues

and dehumanizes them. In the following lines, for example, Chizi, tells about a woman named Bi Pili:

Huyu Bi Pili rohani anakatisha
Aakufa maskini hohehahe kama mie
Lakini ninashangaa

Lakini yule wake mume
Sijui nini kamlisha
Kazi yote afanye Bi Pili
Matunda yote ale Bwana Sudi
Siku moja nitamwuliza Bwana Sudi
Dawa gani aliyompa Bi Pili.

Watoto anizalie na pia anililee.
Chakula anilimie na pia anipikie
Nguo anifulie na pombe anipatie....

This Bi Pili, is very pathetic at heart
She will die in abject poverty like me
But I wonder

That husband of hers
I don't know what he has fed her
She does all the work
Bwana Sudi eats all the fruits
One day I will ask Sudi
What medicine he has given Bi Pili

To bear and also bring up children for me
To grow food and cook for me
Wash clothes for me and give me beer.... (Muhando 1987:48-49)

Muhando's criticism of the Patata community is an affirmation of her belief that unity between men and women is necessary in order to effect real societal change. Thus Bi Nane advises, "*Tushirikishe wanaume pia. NGUZO MAMA ina faida kwa wote....Tuite na watoto wote-wao taifa la kesho*" ("Let us involve the men also. NGUZO MAMA is beneficial to all....Let us call the children. They are tomorrow's nation") (Muhando 1987:58). Muhando strongly rejects the notion that African women can be liberated outside of the economic, political, and social structures that keep them oppressed.

However, though Muhando is articulate in pointing out that unity is needed, she harbors no utopian ideals concerning the feasibility or possibility of achieving this goal. She is emphatic that women themselves are not united in their efforts to further their cause. Thus, the play revolves around the attempts by women to come together and improve their economic welfare. This theme is symbolized by *nguzo mama* and by the various economic activities that the characters carry out, both individually and collectively,

without much success. The women are set against each other by men, jealousies, and selfish interests all of which function to undermine their common goals. Through the narrator Bi Msimulizi, Muhando says:

Huko mbele ya safari
Zogo likatikea
Huyu tufanye hivi
Huyu tufanye vile
Patata ikapamba moto
Kila mtu akafanya lake
Akiamini kila alifanyalo
NGUZO MAMA litainua.

Ahead of the journey
A conflict arose
This one (says) let us do this
This one (says) let us do that
Patata went on fire
Everybody did what (s)he wanted
Believing whatever (s)he did
Will lift NGUZO MAMA. (Muhando 1987:13)

Ironically, Muhando's dilemma tale underscores a dilemma above which she herself, as an author, is unable to rise. Muhando's female characters, though determined to change their lot in life, cannot overcome the obstacles necessary for them to achieve their goals as women. According to Balisidya Matteru, Muhando is a writer at a crossroads:

...Penina's characters reveal the dilemma facing the author. She cannot make her characters appear outright in opposite of the prevailing images because then, she will not be true to reality. (1987:44)

The women of Patata despair rather easily and seem almost resigned to their fate. Bi Pili, for example, toils all day long while her husband Sudi drinks and chats with friends. Her mild protests only serve to make him more demanding, unreasonable, and sometimes physically abusive. She is the archetypal rural woman who is apt to put up with various forms of oppression. She works on the farm all day long with a child strapped to her back, coming home only to find a husband who demands to be served food, to have his children nurtured, and to have his clothes straightened. In spite of her problems, Bi Pili is one of the first characters to abandon the efforts to lift up *nguzo mama*. She believes instead that brewing and selling traditional beer—the proceeds of which Sudi takes—is the solution to her problem. Ironically, the consumption of this beer is what keeps men like her husband away from their

responsibilities; Sudi takes the money meant for their children's school fees, spending it instead on beer. Bi Sita, the prostitute, is another character who abandons the women's goals. She thinks only of herself and 'taps her resources' from men without pausing to think about the effects of her actions on the other women. Bi Tatu, the politician's wife, also abandons the other women's efforts to lift up the mother-pillar, believing that if she does not please the father of her children, he will refuse to provide her with food. Muhando emphasizes the women's lack of unity by comparing it to hunger:

Tuseme hii njaa iliyoingia Patata
Njaa ya kukosa umoja
Kukosa ushirikiano,
Kuoneana wivu na uzembe.

Let us say, this hunger that has gripped Patata
The hunger of lack of unity
Lack of cooperation,
Envy and excessive laziness. (Muhando 1987:32)

The women's problems are attributed not only to their economic positions, but also to their positions as women in a patriarchal culture. The most vivid illustration of the problems of patriarchy is Bi Saba's disinheritance by her brothers-in-law Kiando and Makange, upon her husband's death. They take everything away from her, including her children, bedding, and cooking utensils. In addition, they demand that she give them all the money her husband left behind.

Kiando: Ehee tena afadhali tumekuona.
Tumekutafuta sana. Lete zile pesa ulizoficha.
Makange: Umeficha mali ya ndugu yetu wewe mwanamke.
Huogopi hata waliokufa.
Makange: Sisi tumekwenda tukirudi tukute umeshazitoa hela za ndugu yetu.

Kiando: Eheee and it is good that we have seen you.
We have searched for you for a long time.
Bring that money you hid.

Makange: You have hidden our brother's property, you woman.
You don't even fear the dead.

Makange: We are going, when we come back we should find you
having brought out all the money. (Muhando 1987:55)

In the play, the women's problems, especially the obstacles to unity are transmitted to the younger generation of women. This dynamic symbolizes that the problems of womanhood in Africa are inherited by

successive generations. This is exemplified in the encounter between the young school girl and the other women. All the women call her, each to their respective sides, leaving the young girl confused as to whom to follow. In the following lines, voices representing the different women call her in different directions:

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|--------------------|------------------------------------|
| Sauti-Bi Moja: | Wewe njoo huku! |
| Sauti-Bi Pili: | Huku njoo! |
| Sauti-Bi Tatu: | Huku wewe husikii! |
| Sauti-Bi Nne: | Njoo huku huku! |
| Sauti-Bi Moja: | You, come here! |
| Sauti-Bi Pili: | Here, come! |
| Sauti-Bi Tatu: | Here, you can't you hear! |
| Sauti-Bi Nne: | Come here, here! (Muhando 1987:55) |

By portraying this extreme disunity, Muhando attempts to educate women about the need for change. Yet, ironically, the confusion in the above encounter reflects Muhando's dilemma as a writer, a dilemma which she acknowledges in an interview with Adeola James:

During the actual writing, I have faced certain frustrations...you try to portray reality, and when you are creating the characters, you try to place them in their settings. This creates a conflict for the writer when she comes to women characters. (1990:89-90)

This quote helps clarify the paradoxical deployment of gender that pervades this and many of Muhando's other plays. In her desire to remain true to reality, Muhando creates an ambiguous world. While she uses this encounter between the various female characters to educate women about the dangers of disunity, she appears, at the same time, to envisage no real changes unless both men and women change their attitudes. At the end of the play, *nguzo mama* has not been lifted; there is every indication that it will be taken away from *Patata*, thus effectively shattering any hope of improving the unacceptable situation.

If Muhando is frustrated with women for their lack of unity, she is equally critical of men for abandoning women in their efforts to lift *nguzo mama*. Men's negative attitudes toward women endanger the development of *Patata*. The men of *Patata* ignore women, and *Patata* is reaping the fruits of their folly. Muhando tells us:

Hakuna aliyejua
Ila hapo kwao *Patata*

Vurugu zilizidia
Maendeleo ya Patata
Hatarini yakaingia.

Nobody knew
But in Patata
Problems continued building up
Patata's development was endangered. (Muhando 1987:4)

Due to lack of awareness, the women seek artificial rather than genuine solutions to their problems. They form small organizations to make and sell various household crafts. But soon, the market is saturated and there is no room for their products. Muhando's implicit solution to this problem lies in a collective materialist consciousness. She urges a change in attitude, one in which class and gender can be addressed without subsuming one another. She implies that ultimately a solution that does not take into consideration the material contradictions of women's and men's lives is doomed to fail. Muhando advocates a strategy of political education and communication. It is because of the lack of communication that the people of Patata are not united and thus fail to come up with appropriate strategies with which to lift *nguzo mama*. Each character believes his or her strategy is best. Bi Nane, the academic, for example, has very useful suggestions to offer, but she is seen as a threat to Bi Nne's position. Bi Nane's desperate plea for unity for both men and women, "*tushirikishe wanaume*" ("let us involve the men"), at the end of the play echoes the author's desire to educate her audience on the importance of women and men working together, unified.

In conclusion, for Muhando, communication—the exchange and sharing of ideas through words—is central to the politics of language in African literature. Muhando's portrayal of a community caught up in a dilemma echoes the motif of dilemma tales. The use of this genre is an important instructional tool because her audience is familiar with the common fate of protagonists in dilemma tales. The community as a collective—men and women, leaders and ordinary citizens—is the protagonist in this story. Her use of techniques and forms of oral performances, including their dramaturgical strategies, represents a mediation, rather than a privileging of orality over literacy in new African social, cultural, and political contexts.

In *Nguzo Mama*, the author expresses a central dilemma confronting African people, especially women. She makes it clear that women suffer from a crisis that results both from their class positions in a capitalist system and their gender within a patriarchal setting. By recreating oral and written forms both stylistically and thematically, Muhando seeks to engage her audience in dialogue. She hopes to instruct and negotiate new avenues for women living in a contemporary context without either subordinating or

valorizing their pasts. In capturing the dynamics of the relationship between narrator and audience in an oral performance, she engages her audience in a process of self-criticism, while at the same time she seeks to re-educate men in her society who may have internalized feelings of superiority.

Notes

1 Most of this author's works, including *Hatia*, *Pambo*, *Talaka si Mke Wangu*, *Nguzo Mama*, and *Lina Ubani*, are published under the name Penina Muhando. Some of her later works either appear under the names Penina (Mlama) Muhando, Penina Muhando Mlama or Penina Mlama. In this paper, I will use the name by which most readers know her, Penina Muhando.

2 Opening words in Penina Muhando's *Nguzo Mama*. 'Mbiu ya mgambo' is the ox-horn used to call people together to hear proclamations.

3 The accessibility of African literature in African languages varies widely depending on the rate of literacy in those languages and the length of time that a tradition of reading and writing has existed. Kiswahili literature, for example, has a long written tradition, dating back many centuries. In general, literacy in African languages is far more limited in French-speaking countries, where African languages were suppressed in the classroom, than in English-speaking countries where, for example, in Nigeria and Kenya, some instruction was conducted in local languages in primary schools. African literature performed orally in African languages, such as epics and theaters, is more directly accessible to audiences who share a common language with the author or performers. In "On Writing in Gikuyu," Ngugi wa Thiong'o argues that "an African writer should write in a language that will allow him to communicate effectively with peasants and workers" (Thiong'o 1985:151–55). This is a statement born of his experimentation with Kenyan peasants at Kamirithu as well as some of his later works such as *Ngaahika Ndeenda*, *Caitaani Mutharabaini*, and *Matigari ma Njiruungi*.

4 There are good and bad translations depending on the translator's skills and level of linguistic and cultural preparedness. The one obvious example of a bad translation is Abdilatif Abdalla's translation of Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones are Not Yet Born* (translated as *Wema Hawajazaliwa*) (1968) where for instance the protagonist 'the man' is translated in more than ten different ways, including as "Mtu," "Yule mtu," and "Mtu yule," etc. This particular translation has many other problems that make the work almost incomprehensible.

5 Albert Gerard's *African Language Literatures* (1981), considered a landmark study in African-language literatures, is clouded by his use of outdated and misrepresenting works done by ill-informed Dutch-Flemish scholars of Swahili poetry, such as Jan Knappert.

6 See, for example, Lloyd Brown's argument in *Women Writers in Black Africa* that all women writers of any significance write in English (1981:1). It is not clear, however, what criteria Brown uses to make this judgment.

7 In *African Novels and the Question of Orality* (1992), Eileen Julien argues that orality does not imply an African identity by representing a set of traits or an atmosphere represented by writers. This argument reflects the view that orality is simply a set of formal elements. Conversely, I consider tradition/orality to be part and parcel of the cultural legacy of every African writer. The deliberate use of oral sources of knowledge and expressive forms for the purpose of communication, I believe, is what Muhando calls "being African"—drawing from traditional African systems of thought, while at the same time recognizing them as dynamic rather than static processes. They function communicatively because they entail a shared system of signification and knowledge between African writers and their audiences.

8 See also Carol Boyce Davies's observation that "certain inequalities and limitations existed/exist in traditional African societies and that colonialism reinforced them and introduced others" (Davies and Graves 1986:9).

9 See Ngugi wa Thiong'o's arguments that language choice amounts to self-definition (1981b).

10 *Ujamaa* or African Socialism was a political, social, and economic policy adopted by the government of Mwalimu Julius Nyerere through the Arusha Declaration of February 12th, 1967.

11 "*Bi msimulizi*" translates as "woman narrator" and "*hadhira*" is the Kiswahili word for "audience." This and all subsequent translations are mine.

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