

Land as Story and the Place of The Story: A Contemporary Kenyan Illustration of Landscape as Text

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Abstract

The discussion of this paper seeks to contribute to the growing body of wide ranging studies which seek to analyse the diffusion of the core concepts regarding 'places' and 'landscape' as texts of social, anthropological and cultural analysis. These concepts according to Wilson and David (2002) are centered on experience through which social and personal expressions of place-marking signal a cultural presence and give the land social and cultural significance. This approach recognizes that the products of people's engagement with landscapes are meaningfully constructed social texts involving spatial and bodily experience. These texts are constructed as people, landscapes and things are constantly involved in the process of inscribing place. It is therefore necessary to study the social cultural and political contexts that provide geographical landscapes their textual/narrative significance. This paper explores landscape texts by discussing issues that surround the Gikuyu cultural heritage site at Mukurwe Wa Nyagathanga. The paper seeks to discuss this landscape in regard to Gikuyu identity and the tensioned-narratives emerging from the need to preserve the old but also to inscribe a new contemporary con-text of a globalizing Kenya.

Landscape as Text

Descriptions and depictions of place are an important part of East African oral literary heritage, art and history. Although accounts of our oral history are resplendent with detailed accounts of the complex relationship between landscape and our cultural identities, these relationships have tended to be sidelined in critical perspectives of our oral literary forms and our modern African literature. One of the most important element of landscape as text is its status as a cultural construct, which creates and is part of an intricate network of narratives which are themselves both created and lived by the folk who help to construct them. It is in the context of these narrative webs that the text metaphor is most useful in attempting to understand the relationship between landscape and its narrated representations.

An important contention for us in exploring the concept of landscape as text is the manifestation of landscape as a "representation". Hill (1996) argues that landscape is inevitably an ambiguous concept and that the term itself is a slippery one whose meaning slides between the actual and the virtual, the real and the *represented*. Landscape as text means both the physical fact of inland scenery, and the *representations* of that scenery. However, this distinction between reality and representation is not necessarily a clear cut one in relation to landscape. Daniels & Cosgrove (1988) see landscape as always and inevitably a kind of representation executed in a variety of materials and on many surfaces, be they paint, canvas, earth, stone, water, and vegetation on the ground. Therefore, representations of landscape in visual or verbal forms are in fact representations of something that is already a representation, because "...landscape is itself a physical and multisensory medium . . . in which cultural meanings and values are encoded..." (Mitchell, 1994, p.14).

As both medium and text, landscape includes both scenery and environment but it is considerably more than either of them. Jussim & Lindquist-Cock (1985) note that landscapes construed as the phenomenological world do not exist, and landscape can only be symbolic, "both as a construct of the 'real' world and as an *artefact* communicating ideologies about it." As such, they argue, "landscapes are so saturated with assigned meanings that it is probably impossible to exhaust them" (p.xiv). The idea that a written text is a cultural construct is readily accepted, but the notion that this definition also applies to landscape is relatively unexplored in analyzing issues of text in East African literature and specifically our orature.

Yet, as Hill (1996) notes, the vast differences in attitudes to landscape over the centuries seem to suggest that landscape and our understanding and use of it are as subject to cultural interpretations and change probably more so than written texts. Landscape, is necessarily "defined by our vision and interpreted by our minds" (Meinig, 1979, p.2) and operates in its widest sense as a shorthand term for the ways in which we interpret the external world as it appears to us. As such, Mitchell (1994) suggests that we think of it "as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed." (p.1). Quintavalle (1993) has also emphasised the need to study the relationship between landscape and cultural ideology.

Hill (1996) argues that there will always be some trace of human presence in landscape, to a greater or lesser degree, because its existence is presupposed by and relies on ours. There is always a figure in the landscape, because the term landscape automatically requires that a viewer, whether virtual or actual (represented or real), be present in order for landscape to exist. As Schama (1995) writes, "it is our shaping perception that makes the difference between raw matter and landscape" (p.10). If we say that landscape is a cultural construct, Hill surmises, "...then we can also say that it can only come into being through the presence of humans. The relationship between humans and landscape is that of the world which looks at the world. We are both in and of the world ourselves, so there can be no objective outside observer". It is in the context of the process of *inscription* and *interpretation* that our experience of landscape can most usefully be analysed in terms of our experience text.

Theorizing landscape – a conceptual Framework

Ricoeur (1971) identifies four main characteristics of written discourse which he uses to analyze social action. These are that meaning in written texts becomes fixed when it is inscribed, that the text inevitably exceeds the intentions of its author, that the text is often more significant than its immediate context and is interpreted and reinterpreted differently according to changing circumstances, and finally that the meaning of a text is unstable, and depends to a large extent on the interpretations of its readers. Duncan & Barnes (1972) sees landscape as characterized by all of these features, and suggest that 'text' is:

...an appropriate trope to use in analysing landscapes because it conveys the inherent *instability of meaning, fragmentation or absence of integrity, lack of authorial control, polyvocality and irresolvable social contradictions* that often characterize them.(p. 7)(Emphasis Mine).

Landscape share these textual characteristics with writing and so our interpretations of real and written landscapes are inextricably caught up in the inter-textual relationships between the two and our understanding of the conventions of each of them. These relationships and conventions are thus central to the ways in which we can decipher landscapes as textual systems.

Arising from the discussion above and, of importance to this paper is the assertion that in terms of our experience of landscapes as textual systems, landscapes are also bound up in narrative systems. Jameson (1981) believes that it is important "to restructure the problematics of ideology, of the unconscious and of desire, of representation, of history, and of cultural production, around the all-informing process of *narrative*" which he takes to be "...the central function or *instance* of the human mind" (p.13). The same could be said of the problematics of landscape and its representations. This is because one of the most effective ways we have of making sense of landscape, even in its most concrete form, is through the stories we tell about it. This assertion brings us to the next crucial discussion of this paper. This paper explores the Landscape of *Mukurwe wa Nyagathanga*, "through the stories we (the Agikuyu) tell about it". I start by situating the mytho-geographical landscape that is *Mukurwe wa nyagathanga* where, textually speaking, the story begins.

The Story of the land

I will proceed with a brief description of the present day Agikuyu (the Gikuyu people), their land and the landscape of interest to this discussion. The Agikuyu are a Bantu speaking community whose ancestral home is the central Kenyan highlands on the slopes of Mount Kenya. Although they have spread to other parts of Kenya, Africa and the world, all the Agikuyu trace their origin to the progenitor of the tribe a man known as Gikuyu – from whom the community gets its name. This brings us to the connection between the Agikuyu, *Mukurwe wa Nyagathanga* and the expansive Gikuyu-land. According to the narrative of Agikuyu origins, we are told that:

Long, long ago, in the beginning of time, Ngai the creator of the great world made Gikuyu, the father of Agikuyu. Ngai gave Gikuyu a large piece of land, from one end of the horizon clear across to the other end of the horizon. In between the horizons were rivers, valleys, forests and therein were fruits, vegetables and nuts of all kinds. Also resident on Gikuyu's land were animals of all sorts.

Ngai used to live at the top of the great mountain Kirinyaga [Mt. Kenya]. One day Ngai took Gikuyu to the top of the mountain so that Gikuyu could see all his land. Ngai showed him a spot where there were growing huge Migumo trees and told him to go and build his homestead there. The spot with the huge Migumo trees was called *Mukurwe wa Nyagathanga*. Ngai told Gikuyu, "Whenever you have a problem, you will take a goat from the animals of the land, and sacrifice it under the Migumo trees and raise your arms towards Kirinyaga and I will come to help you."

Gikuyu went down the mountain to the spot (*Mukurwe wa Nyagathanga*) where he had been shown. When he got there he found a beautiful woman waiting for him. He named her Mumbi and took her as his wife. Gikuyu and Mumbi had nine daughters together but had no sons. When the girls had grown older, Gikuyu wanted them to marry but there was no one to marry the girls. So he decided to go up the great mountain and ask God for help.

When he got to the top of Kirinyaga, he found Ngai and told him his problem. Ngai told him to go back to his homestead and sacrifice a lamb and a kid under the Migumo trees and his problem would be solved. Gikuyu did as he was instructed and alas! From the smoke of the sacrifice appeared nine handsome young men.

Gikuyu married the young men to his daughters. And from the nine couples came the nine clans of the Agikuyu. Soon, the Agikuyu clans filled all of Gikuyu's land from horizon to horizon. (From: *Folk Tales from the Agikuyu of Kenya*. <http://thesop.org/index.php?article>)

Accounts of this legend have been variously given by Beecher, (1944), Kenyatta, (1966: 1-5): 2), Kenyatta (1938: 3-8), Deegan, Eds. (1972: 5), Abbott, (1974: 10), Leakey, (1977: 48-51), Muriuki, (1994: 47) and Wanjohi (1997).

Thus, the Agikuyu lay a claim on the highlands surrounding Mount Kenya by divine right. Historically, the Gikuyu waged fierce guerilla warfare against the colonial forces in a desperate bid to repossess their land which had been alienated by the colonists after the colonial invasion of Africa at the end of the 19th Century. Legend has it that the freedom fighters took an oath of allegiance to the land army using soil, and fallen soldiers would die clasping soil in their hands. The concept of Githaaka – (land), is a highly sensitive one and a source of constant tension among the Gikuyu and neighboring communities to this day. Cultural life was founded on the provisions of God, the most important of which was land. Among the Gikuyu, land is intricately connected with the past, God and his beneficent qualities. In Gikuyu existential imagination, the tribe's existence was guaranteed by God in the past through the provision of land. Kenyatta (1938) asserts that in studying Gikuyu ethnic organization, it is necessary to take into consideration land tenure "as the most important factor in social, political, religious and economic life of the tribe" (p.21). He goes on to explain that as agriculturists, the Gikuyu people depended entirely on land for their survival. Land supplied them with the material needs of life, through which spiritual and mental contentment is achieved. Communion with the ancestral spirits is perpetuated through contact with the land in which the ancestors of the community are buried. The Gikuyu consider the land as the mother of the community, for the reason that the mother bears her burden for about eight or nine moons while the child is in her womb and then for a short period of suckling:

But it is the soil that feeds the child through a lifetime; and again after death it is the soil that nurses the spirits of the dead for eternity. Thus the earth is the most sacred thing above all that dwell in or on it. Among the Gikuyu, the soil is especially honoured and an everlasting oath is to swear by the earth (Kenyatta 1928,21). The importance of land in Gikuyu existential imagination with regard to its sustenance of life and perpetuation of the community is also dealt with by Kerschew (1972:193-197). She explains that to the Gikuyu, land is permanent. It is not only the place where the ancestors are buried, as explained by Kenyatta quoted above, "but is itself the prime ancestor". It is consequently part of the totality of relationships and creates its own" (p.193) (Italics mine). Thus the relationship between men who own the land and the land itself is a Mbari -(lineage) - relationship.

The land as ancestor has given birth to the group of men who own the land and who are ene a Githaka - (owners of the land). These men created a mbari - (lineage) - with land as baba - the ancestral father - to whom all the men are muriu - (sons). This conceptualisation of the relationship between land and men can be linked to the description given above of the term given to the descendants of Gikuyu and Mumbi-in the account of creation. The term Mbari ya Gikuyu na Mumbi, -the lineage of Gikuyu and Mumbi - refers to the whole community as they relate to their “prime ancestor”, the land of *Mukurwe wa Nyagathanga* which was given to them by God. Therefore, all Agikuyu as descendants of Gikuyu and Mumbi the ancestral couple, “can claim to belong to the mbari [lineage] of Gikuyu and Mumbi with consequent right to own land within Gikuyu country” (Kershew 1972 p.196).

The land as Center

The creation account describes *Mukurwe wa Nyagathanga* as being at the center of Gikuyu land. The account also describes it as being the primal shrine where the Gikuyu would commune with God. Mukurwe is the Gikuyu name for *Albizzia gummifera* and *Albizzia coriari*.. Gathanga is a type of a weaver bird inhabiting the general area. The site is in present day Murang’a district in Kenya’s Central province. It is located 50 miles North of Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya, and 30 miles south of the Equator. It lies on the slopes of Mt. Kenya with the Aberdare ranges stretching on the west to join the Rift Valley. The site lies about fifteen miles north of the Chania River which divides the Northern Gikuyu with the Southern Gikuyu.

The geographical position of the land gives an important starting point for the discussion of the contemporary representations of the land as the place of the story. Historical evidence shows that *Mukurwe wa Nyagathanga* was not always at the center of Gikuyuland. While roughly speaking, the site is at the center of present day Gikuyuland, history has it that the Gikuyu inhabited the land North of the Chania river and did not actually cross the Chania River until about 1700AD. The land south of the Chania River was inhabited, both according to Gikuyu legend and historians, by a tribe of hunter gatherers called the Dorobo. Because this was a pygmy community the Gikuyu called them Gumba which means “dwarf”. The Gikuyu displaced the Gumba and spread deep into the south to join the Maasai. It is this southward spread that placed *Mukurwe wa Nyagathanga* at the center of Gikuyu-land (See Fig 1 below).

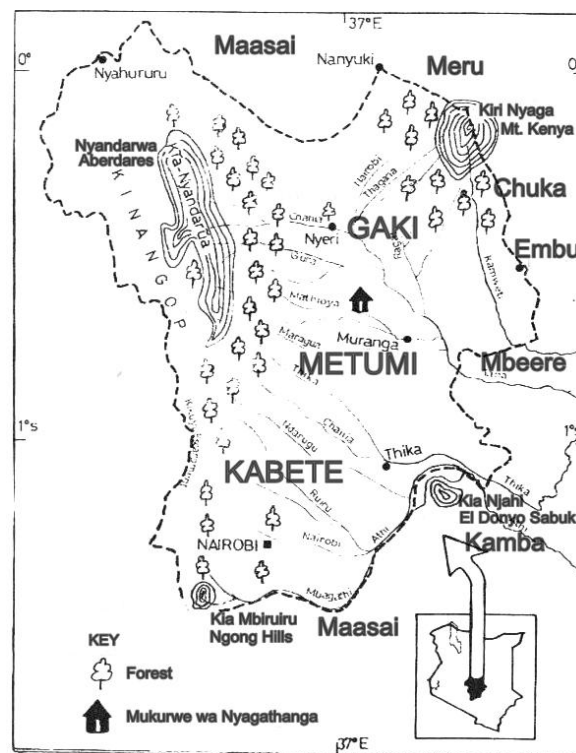


Figure 1. The Map of Gikuyuland. (Source <http://mukuyu.files.wordpress.com/2008/11/map-of-gikuyuland.jpg>)

But with the colonial alienation of Gikuyu lands, it became imperative that the Gikuyu legitimize their claim to all of Gikuyuland. Thus, the site becomes an important marker in the identification of Gikuyu claims in relation to contested space during the colonial rule. The perceived centrality of the *Mukurwe wa Nyagathanga* of 1900s was thus a big score in legitimizing the Gikuyu’s land grievances and their antagonistic position with colonial settlement in their “land”.

Beyond this, the centrality of *Mukurwe wa Nyagathanga* should be seen as a symbolic connection between the people, their land and God. Many accounts of creation of the Gikuyu will note that *Mukurwe wa Nyagathanga* was the place appointed by God for the settling of the original family. Its centrality thus goes beyond the geographical claim to include a psychic centeredness where man, land and God commune. There is thus an implied perpetual sacredness of the site, which gives the basis to the texts of contamination of the present day site.

The Land as the Place of the Story

As indicated in the foregoing discussion, an assertion of importance to this paper is that, in terms of our experience of landscapes as textual systems, they “restructure the problematics of ideology, of the unconscious and of desire, of representation, of history, and of cultural production, around the all-informing process of *narrative*”. Thus one of the most effective ways we have of making sense of landscape, even in its most concrete form, is through the stories we tell about it. We have looked at the story the Gikuyu tell about *Mukurwe wa Nyagathanga*, how it reinforced cultural integrity and provided the interpretations upon which the Agikuyu constructed existential imagination.

I set out on an excursion to the place of the story, to find out how the landscape is and its representations in the stories people tell about it in the contemporary setting, in other words, what stories the landscape tells and what stories are told about the landscape. Mukurwe wa Nyagathanga today is a 4.2 acre plot of land that stands on a hill about 6 km from Murang’a town. Taking a trip to this site is a journey of exploring re-presentation of what the site “means” for the Gikuyu Community in general and the community that surrounds the site and holds it in trust. The site was gazetted as a cultural heritage site by the museums of Kenya in 1998 and is held in trust by Murang’a county council and the immediate community.

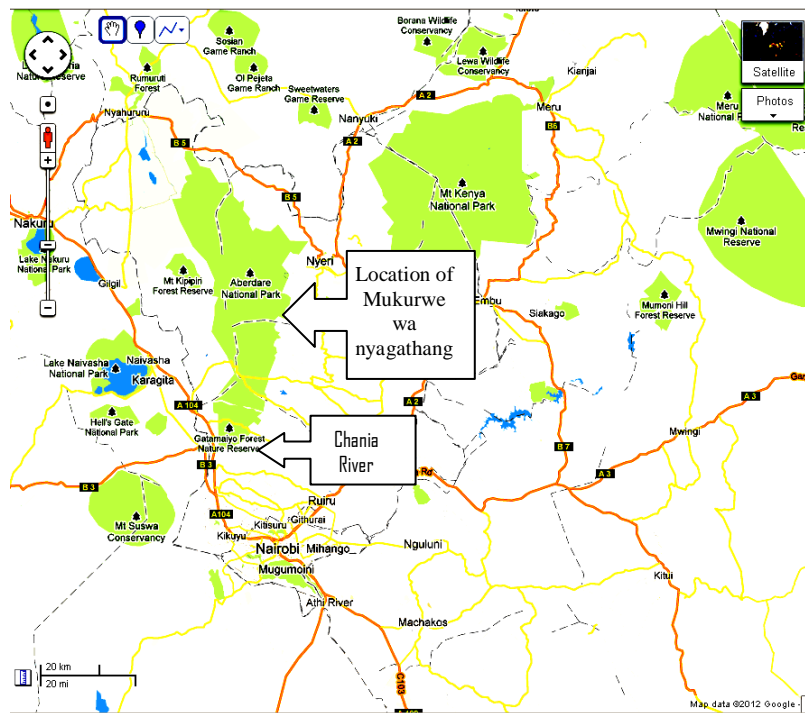


Figure 2 Location of present day Mukurwe wa Nyagathanga site. (Source googlemaps.com)

All that informs you that you have arrived is a green metal plate besides a sky blue gate written “Mukurwe wa Nyagathanga”.

In the enclosed compound there is an open area with a few trees in the front yard and a modern office block made of stone blocks, concrete and iron sheets. Two big trees stand out one on the right and the other to the far left. Adjacent to the tree on the left are *two* round houses representing the Gikuyu traditional houses. One is a woman's house and the other a man's house. Traditionally a Gikuyu man would have had several wives and each would have had her own house. The houses are round in keeping with the Gikuyu traditional architecture. They are however made of concrete and corrugated iron sheets. The traditional Gikuyu houses were made of mud, polished with cow dung and roofed with thatching grass. The woman's house was traditionally more elaborate than the man's house and this is well demonstrated in the two houses displayed at the site. The woman's house at the site has eight designated places here described anticlockwise from the Muromo - the doorway. Gicegu is the fattening pen on the immediate right. Next to it is kiriri, the girls' bedroom. Next is thegi, the store where cooked food was kept. Next is Uriri the woman's bedroom. The rest of the space stretching from uriri on the doorway to the left is Kweru, the sleeping place for sheep and goats. At the center of the house is riiko the hearth and Muhandu the firewood rack. In contrast to the woman's house, there is not much in the thingira - man's house and traditionally not much was there. The house was for the man and his sons. He hosted his friends and held important meetings there. Food was never prepared there although there was a hearth. While there is a good effort at remembering and representing Gikuyu architecture, the effort is for a different purpose than the reason the Gikuyu build houses in the first place. The rest of the compound in the present day site hosts several stalled constructions, incomplete at best. One of the structures was designed as a tourist resort where those visiting the site would be housed. The modern way of seeing the site as a tourist resort points to the changing texts of the landscape as it tries to adapt to changing social economic times in the face of capitalism and globalization.

The rest of the structures are nine round concrete huts made in the version of the earlier discussed houses. The significance of the nine huts lies in their connection with the account of creation, given above, and its subsequent implications on the social-cultural structure of the Gikuyu society. Gikuyu and Mumbi the original parents of the tribe had nine daughters. The names of the nine daughters were: Wanjiru, Wambui, Njeeri, Wanjiku, Nyambura, Wairimu, Waithera, Wangari and Wangui. The descendants of each formed the nine clans of the Gikuyu, who are named after each of the girls as follows: Wanjiru – *Anjiru*, Wambui – *Ambui*, Njeeri – *Aceera*, Wanjiku – *Agaciku*, Nyambura – *Ambura*, Wairimu – *Airimu/Agathigia/Aicakamuyu*, Waithira – *Aithirandu*, Wangari – *Angari/Aithe-Kahuno*, and Wangui – *Angui/Aithiegeni*. Instructively all the contemporary Agikuyu belong to either one of the nine clans.

Each of the houses in the site is labeled with these names. The physical structures constructed in the site give us an opportunity to engage the effort to re-member and re-present the essential aspects of the Gikuyu creation story. The purpose of the nine houses representing the nine daughters of Gikuyu and Mumbi and the nine clans of the Agikuyu, can be contrasted with that of the first two to demonstrate how the landscape oscillates between being the story and the place of the story. While the first two represent a homestead in the fashion of a typical homestead, the other nine are a representation, not of the Agikuyu homestead, but of the myth of creation of the Agikuyu. This is a good illustration of where landscape as text takes the place of both medium and subject. To the extent that the present day site seeks to represent the typical Gikuyu homestead, it's the *medium*, and to the extent it presents the myth, it is the *subject*, representing that which is itself a part of.

Contemporary narratives that play themselves out at the landscape mark it out with textual tensions of instability of meaning, polyvocality and social contradictions. Not surprisingly, the colonial period is remembered within this site as a time of upheaval where the integrity of the site was contested by the incursion of British colonialism and alienation of the Gikuyu people from their land. One incident of significance is said to have involved the colonial administration and the land army. During the emergency the colonial administration decided to contemptuously put up a home guard camp at the *Mukurwe Wa Nyagathanga* site. Home guards were local loyalists who were collaborating with the colonizers against the Mau Mau land army mentioned above. Seen in terms of contamination, it was sacrilegious to put up home guards on a site reputed to be the center of Gikuyu selfhood and the primal center of their communion with God. According to my guide the camp was destroyed by a mysterious fire in 1957. The sense of mystery is invoked in remembrance of the site as a holy shrine according to Gikuyu mythology. It is instructive to note despite such accounts of mystery and wonder, no shrine stands in the site today nor are there physical remains of any. Like we have noted, all the buildings in the site are stalled. It should be noted that stalled construction projects dot the whole country as a hallmark of the incompetence and the excesses of the former single party regime in Kenya.

Economic mismanagement and corruption of former regimes are thus plausible reasons why the building projects at the site would have stalled. The guide's explanation of the stalled projects in the site provides us with an interesting glimpse at how landscapes and narratives feed off of each other. The claim is that the plans to construct a tourist resort in the *Mukurwe* compound did not auger well with the community. This is because the site is still considered a sacred site, and a tourist resort would result in what the locals saw as an inappropriate tourist culture of promiscuity and a resultant desecrating of the site. It is this interpretation and inscriptions of the landscape that gives rise to "narratives of contamination". As I have noted earlier the land is held in trust by the Muranga County Council and the community. The council saw it as a good site for promoting tourism and thus bringing in revenues. Thus a tourist resort was proposed and started. The construction of a tourist resort met with resistance from the local community since they argued that the site was sacred and would be contaminated by the kind of ethos that would grow in and around a tourist resort.

According to a story posted by the Kenya News Agency, "The failure to involve locals during the project implementation was cited as the cause of the rejection by the community," (KNA 2008). It is evident that the conflict between the council and the local community regarding the contemporary interpretations and applications of the landscape bears the earlier referenced textual tensions of instability of meaning, fragmentation, lack of objective control, and social contradictions. These are further reflected by reproduction of some of the ambiguities that dog cultural tourism in Kenya. These ambiguities are a creation the constructs of globalization and mercantilism versus the perceived sacred essence of the landscape. Since the site was and remains an important spatial entity through which the Agikuyu define their selfhood and divinity, the sacred essence of the landscape must be put into consideration in any future endeavors to develop the site into a tourist resort in the business sense of the term. This is important in order to tamper with acceptance the inscriptions and memories of the landscape as a site of resistance against colonial power and neo-colonial mercantilism.

Conclusion

The advertised aim of this paper is to contribute to the growing body of wide ranging studies which seek to analyse the diffusion of the core concepts regarding 'places' and 'landscape' as *texts* of social, anthropological and cultural analysis. In introducing the section on landscapes as text, I noted that descriptions and depictions of place are an important part of African oral literary heritage, art and history and that, although accounts of our oral history are resplendent with detailed accounts of the complex relationship between landscape and our cultural identities, these relationships have tended to be sidelined in critical perspectives of our orature and our modern African literature. As I make concluding remarks about the landscape of interest to this paper, I would like to in the view of the above, reiterate the urgency to study the contemporary social-cultural, political and economic contexts that provide geographical landscapes their textual and narrative significance. Such landscapes are an integral part of contemporary Kenyan cultures marked out vividly in our communities' oral traditions.

They are identifiable in respective mythologies as sacred spaces, deified fixtures, ritualized and performance arenas, legendary battlegrounds, miraculous and miracles working shrines etc. While we are wont to bemoan the moribund nature of our verbal traditions, the significance of these permanent landscapes as concomitant lived texts that arise from and inevitably outlive their verbal corollaries is not always acknowledged much less appreciated. This paper nudges critics and practitioners in the area of texts, East African literature and contemporaneity, to pay attention to these texts as a way of making contact with the lived culture of our people and extending the scope and significance of our oral traditions. In asserting this we recall Jussim and Lindquist (1985) quoted earlier when they say that "landscapes are so saturated with assigned meanings that it's probably impossible to exhaust them." This should assure us that our folklore as the record of associative meanings between culture and landscape is alive and thriving and probably waiting for us to recognize its resilience and multifarious and changing meanings.

Coming back to the landscape of focus in this paper, we see that landscapes are not simple texts. As demonstrated in the discussion above, they are often characterized by conflict, contradiction and in the case of *Mukurwe Wa Nyagathanga*, opposition between globalizing forces and local sense of identity that emerges starkly out of remembered and practical manifestations of the landscape. Instructively, the study of landscape comes across as an exercise that aptly describes the complexity of peoples' lives, historical contingency, contestation, motion and change.

I say this because, although the landscape is a definite place as inscribed in the Agikuyus collective mythology, the representations that emerge in the contemporary site, while not altogether dismissive of the “original” story, seek to present a landscape in flux and that is bound to change and adapt itself to the changing world and people around it. This point is echoed by Lane (2001) when he says that landscapes contain the traces of past activities and people select the stories they tell, the memories and histories they evoke and the interpretive narratives that they weave to further their activities in the present and future. We can therefore say that as a text, the landscape of *Mukurwe Wa Nyagathanga* will continue to represent differing perspectives, and though containing traces of the past, the people will select the stories they want to tell about the site and the text will continue to evolve depending on the interpretive narratives that the people weave to further their activities in and around the site in the present and future. The myths of old will live in the landscape and will continue to inspire the new myths that will evolve from the landscape. The land as story and the place of the story merge and guarantee mutual survival, for they will always inform and energize each other, ensuring that for so long as the landscape lives...the story will never end!

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