Postcolonial Modernity and the Maa Heritage: (Re)reading the Novels of Henry Ole Kulet

Stephen Muthoka Mutie[1], Nicholas Kamau Goro[2]
[1]Kenyatta University, Department of Literature, Linguistics, and Foreign Languages
[2]Laikipia University, Department of Literary and Communication Studies

Abstract
This paper interrogates the vision of African literature through its engagement with the discourses of postcolonial modernity, capitalism, and hybridity, which have long shaped critical discussions of African literature. To examine these concepts, we focus on the works of Maasai-born writer Henry Ole Kulet, specifically how his works interrogate modernity in the Kenyan and broader African context. The paper highlights the author's depiction of modernity's grip and its pollution of the indigenous Maasai-African episteme. Two fundamental questions on which the paper hinges concern the centrality of the writer's novels in conceptualising Kenya as a modern state and the kind of social consciousness his novels envisage. Situating the novels within the postcolonial theoretical praxis of Orientalism and a lit-crit methodology, the paper argues that Kulet's novels portray modernism's ambivalence as it persistently threatens to suppress indigenous Maa epistemologies. The paper concludes that Kulet's novels not only expose the vulnerable underbelly of modernity, its ambivalence and contradictions, but also offer salient solutions to the threat it poses to Maa and African indigenous epistemologies.

Keywords: Capitalism, Maasai, modernity, Ole Kulet, postcolonialism

Introduction: The Making of the Modern Citizen

> If you have been to a family festival in the Maa village, you may realise you are watching the full flowering of a tree which grew tenaciously from a mere seedling among many others which died because they were less sappy, fibrous and persistent. But this society has survived; it is now a complex organism adapted to its environment, thriving and bearing fruit. (Kulet, 2008, p.1)

While interviewing Henry Ole Kulet, the author of the three texts analysed here for this paper, he expressed displeasure with our definition of modernity. We used the common academic definition of modernity, which takes it to mean something measurable by, among other things, stylish dressing, the presence of smartphones, speaking English, and being 'cultured'. Looking at us incredulously, he asked: 'Whose modernity are you talking about?' In this article, we still grapple with this question. This interview took place at the Rift Valley Sports Club in Nakuru in 2020, during the Covid-19 lockdown in Kenya. Ole Kulet died on 16th Feb. 2021.

To answer this question, we can look to the mid-1970s debate over the direction and significance of modern African poetics. This fierce dispute pitted Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike – authors of *Toward the Decolonisation of African Literature* (1980)

– against Wole Soyinka, with the trio accusing Soyinka of 'larsony' – the practice of holding African writing to a falsely universalist standard of modernization (Lazarus, 2012). The point of divergence in this dispute is the relationship between modernism and modernity. Presenting modernity as 'Western' and suggesting that it be understood in 'civilisational' terms as part and parcel of the colonial project, Chinweizu and others leave themselves with no alternative but to uphold some competing notion of an essential 'African' way of life (Lazarus, 2012).

When applied to African literature, modernity becomes a Janus-faced term with several shades of meaning, depending on which side you face. It is an elusive concept that has created hierarchies in world literature, essentialising others and belittling great literature from Africa. Critics dismiss literature that foregrounds African modernism as provincial. It has been accused of romanticising Africa's past, a past that should be left to rot in Africa's many jungles. Who defines modernity is a pressing and pertinent question in African literature. Equally important is how, as a writer from a culture accused of resisting change, Ole Kulet constructs the modern citizen in the Maa-African context. This is because, as Achebe (1989) famously puts it, writers are teachers whose most important role is to chaperone a new order and to help their society 'regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement' (1989, p. 44). Even today, African Ole Kulet, like some other critical African writers, has struggled to locate himself in the modernity debate by constructing protagonists who operate at complex intersections of self, society, and cultural institutions.

In the opening quote above, Kulet portrays an attitude towards the Maasai that has shaped their long history of engagement with the complex, overlapping cultural processes and material structures of modernity. Structured and propelled by Enlightenment notions of individuality, progress, order, rationality, and civilisation, these processes include colonialism, economic and social development, missionisation, and nation-building (Hodgson, 1999). The Maasai, one of the most distinctive communities in East Africa, are an indigenous community that has retained much of their way of life since the advent of colonialism.

The opening quote above shows Kulet's deliberate rejection of a modern/traditional dichotomy conveniently inscribed on categories (such as ethnic identities) formed as part of the imperial project of imposing a modern order on the perceived chaos of the native. Throughout the interview, Kulet contended that portraying the Maasai as pre-modern shows that the development interventions critical to implementing the modernist project were crucial to sustaining and intensifying these oppositions. This narrative of the Maasai as non-modern reinforces their political-economic isolation while maintaining their distinct identity as pastoralists. This 'otherization' of the Maasai as 'traditional' creates a dichotomy with other 'modernising' Africans. In this context, Kulet's novels highlight the intricate relationship between Westernising/'modernity' and indigenous/'traditional' modes of existence, thereby silencing alternative (non-western) blueprints for development.

There has been a renewed interest in the Maasai culture across the literary, anthropological, and sociological landscape. Much of this interest can be attributed to modernity's unrelenting and corrupting discourse and the threat it poses to indigenous cultures. Whilst the Maa culture has resisted being eclipsed, and the Maasai signature red Lesos (big red scarf that is worn by the Maasai as a traditional attire) have become a sight of cultural resistance, it is important to interrogate how a society grappling with this desire to keep its culture conducts itself in the face of a corresponding and equally strong desire to forge a new identity in the corrupting din of modernity. In this context, it becomes necessary to interrogate Henry Ole Kulet as a writer who is also a guardian of a threatened culture.

Kulet's novels envision a society struggling to locate itself in a chaotic world that favours the homogenising discourses of modernity that strive to muzzle the voices of those who want to remain in the romantic Maasai past. Some critics of Kenyan literature have overwhelmingly applauded Ole Kulet. Kulundu's (1986) article 'Kenyan Author Shines in Switzerland' recognises the award he was accorded in the 1985 Third World Children's Books for his novel *To Become a Man*. It will be recalled that this novel has been translated into German and Swiss German. However, in Kenya, where this author hails from, his art is not fully appreciated. This paper examines this apparent isolation through the lens of gatekeeping in Kenya's literary landscape. It also examines the cultural conflict that arises from the interaction between a traditional way of life and a Western lifestyle. To wit, regarding Ole Kulet's novels, Mwangi (1999), for instance, writes that critics have 'inimically suppressed texts from ethnic communities (like the minority Maasai) in what might be termed as cultural and intellectual marginalisation'. (Mwangi, 1999, p. 15). This shows clearly that Ole Kulet has been a victim of a myopic literary establishment where gatekeeping, like landmines, litters Kenyan literary scholarship.

Drawing on Orientalism as a central ideological praxis, we argue that Kulet's novels show the relevance of contemporary Maa's cultural situation, fused with Western cultural dominance that threatens its very essence. As will be recalled, Orientalism is an attempt to demystify the prejudice that underlies Western culture. For Said, more important is the positioning of the Orient as the weaker side, which has, by implication, reifies the hegemony of Western culture. From this angle, hegemony refers to the continued acceptance of the unchallenged 'fact' of Oriental weakness, which enables Western culture to be constructed as superior both within and outside the West. This paper demonstrates how Kulet's *Moran No More, Bandits of Kibi, Blossoms of the Savannah, The Vanishing Herds* and *The Elephant Dance* offer a voice of reason to the essentialising knowledges produced about his Maa community. This is the point of departure for this paper.

Kuletian Imagination and Postcolonial Resistance

> They all were tall, their teeth were white and good, and their hair was stained a red brown and arranged in a looped fringe on their foreheads. They carried spears, and they were very handsome and extremely jolly, not sullen nor contemptuous; they were the tallest, best-built, handsomest people I had ever seen and the first truly light-hearted, happy people I had seen in Africa (Hemingway, 1935, p.168).

Of course, the relationship between African and modernist literary studies might be described as punctuated by occasional heated conflict. Conventional histories of European and American modernism's relation to the arts and literatures of sub-Saharan Africa leave little doubt about why. When examined through a Western universalising and analytical lens, African literature, particularly the works of Ole Kulet, is often interpreted from the same perspective that has historically portrayed non-Western peoples as primitive. This universalist reading of works of literature from Africa glosses African literature's 'emergence' as 'a confused yet persistent expansion of worldview and of self-knowledge that has accompanied the passage from a naive, oral tradition to a literature capable of absorbing the influence of such writers as Franz Kafka and James Joyce' (Stallknecht, 1972, p. x). From this position, African literature appears belated and peripheral—in the words of Eileen Julien, 'satellite literature of the literatures to the north' (Eileen, 1992, p. 3). This quote supports the paper's aim of formulating what the paper will largely present as the Kuletian (derived from Ole Kulet, who is a Kenyan author of Maa descent) imagination.

The Maa community has been interrogated and presented as the perfect example of 'a noble savage', of course, better than the other 'savages of the world'. According to Mbugua (2004), Ole Kulet's work evokes, or attempts to recreate, a pre-colonial, unpolluted Maasai past, rejecting the current world tainted by imperial immorality (Mbugua, 2004, p. 14). Ole Kulet's novels seem to embrace modernity even as they possessively cling to the Maa's tranquil past. Homi Bhabha (Bhabha, 1994) perceives this as mimicry, or the ambivalence of 'the white-masked black men' (Mbugua, 2004, p. 62). This ambivalent identification cannot be divorced from the syncretic culture, or the postcolonial heritage aptly conveyed in the Kuletian imagination.

Ole Kulet transcends ethnic consciousness to encompass a national consciousness. Mr Sopia illustrates this in his advice to his nephew, Malon: 'You are a Kenyan first; anything else is peripheral' (88). Hence the youth's national identity becomes paramount, while his other identities, for example, kinship and ethnic, are at the periphery. However, these parameters are no longer viable in the modern setup as portrayed in *Moran no More*. Roiman has no age-group. He testifies that when he was circumcised, 'there was no ceremony... there was only a simple operation done on me with only a doctor and me in the room' (70). Circumcision, the rite of passage that permits one into manhood and identifies one with fellow initiates, has lost its cultural significance. It is 'now a hygienic measure' (70).

Essentially, the title *Moran no More* proclaims the death of Moranhood. This thesis is advanced by Onyango, who says: 'what we have is a ceremonious fellow who puts on a shuka, shoes and carries a transistor radio as he looks after cattle' (49). This synthesis of traditional Maasai life and modern values suggests that traditional identity does not entirely die but is amalgamated with modernity to produce a hybrid identity. In an interview, Ole Kulet told me he does not foresee the death of the institution of Moranhood; instead, it should be restructured to fit the modern social setup, similar to the National Youth Service. The 'death of Moranhood' is the aftermath of its encroachment by modernity.

The evolution of traditional societies into modern societies is accompanied by rampant corruption. Wealth, in terms of material gain, is glorified, and new parameters for defining one's identity are shaped by social class and level of affluence. Roiman reveals to us that his uncle 'was secretly proud of his massive appearance which he thought enhanced his air of dignity" (83). His physical appearance is a marker of his rising status. His newly acquired identity as a wealthy man is announced by his attire. His expensive suits distance him from the traditional Maasai, who are adorned in a shuka - the traditional attire. Thus, dressing becomes a marker of one's identity.

The quest for prestige and a luxurious lifestyle as a symbol of a rise in one's social class compels some characters to be corrupt. At the top of this affluence-based hierarchy is Mzee Za-Kale. Mzee Za-Kale epitomises evil. His lust for wealth dehumanises him. Beast imagery identifies his traits. Za-Kale has a 'gorilla-like figure' (138). He turned 'his stiff neck like a rhino' (138), and interestingly he conveys himself in a beastly manner; this is evident when the narrator informs us 'Za-Kale gave his gibberish speech about how he undermined others' (139). Thus, Za-Kale's image is closer to a beast than a human being. The image of his physical appearance also attests to his dehumanisation. The narrator posits thus:

> He was a bulky, thick, large-framed person, with such an extended pot-belly that he was forced to sit astride. His hands hung at his sides like the wings of an injured bird. His dry face was the colour of an old-overused hide, with warts dotting all over it. (Kulet, 2008, p.136)

Za-Kale is presented as petrified. When the narrator shook his hand, it felt 'like a lifeless limb' (137). This reinforces Za-Kale's sense of estrangement from humanity. Thus, corruption is portrayed as a threat to human sanctity and dignity, and those who engage in it lose their human identity. The modern woman strives to liberate herself from victimisation by her society that is governed by patriarchal ideology. Importantly, corruption and capitalism, according to Ole Kutet's imagination, are shades of modernity.

Anna Nalangu, the community educator, epitomises the liberated woman; the woman who has overcome patriarchal domination. She is economically empowered and also in control of her own and her society's destiny. Though modern, the enlightened woman is still a custodian of her community's cultural heritage. Old Olodalu commends Anna Nalangu for her keen attention to the wisdom of the sages. He says that 'Many young people will not listen to the elders nowadays and when I see one so tender, so young and learned wanting to listen, my heart jumps with joy' (37). Thus, even as she spearheads improvements in her society's living standards, Nalangu remains anchored in her community's cultural heritage.

Madness, Modernity and the Maa Heritage

> There is no master model of the communal: the communal is inscribed in all non-modern memories that, since 1500, have been pushed aside and placed in the past in relation to Western ideas of modernity. (Mignolo, 2021, p. 34)

In this section, we explore the intersection of Maa epistemic traditions and modernity. What constitutes the resultant space that the embryo formed when modernity fertilises the Maasai romantic past? Modernity seems like a disease that can only be cured within the context of Maa's traditional epistemologies. One such cure is situated in circumcision. In *Blossoms,* we are told that immediately after the welcoming feast, Parsimei orders his wife to prepare their daughters to undergo the cutting ritual to turn them into desirable wives for local men. But her entire upbringing has socialised her into wifely submission even on this point, and after a feeble attempt at protesting on behalf of her daughters, she gives up and promises to comply with the instruction.

Their father takes it upon himself, in his usual pompous manner, to tell the sisters that he himself has engaged Joseph's services to teach them clan lore. While Tayio has her own private reasons for being pleased with this plan, Resian senses the darker implications: that they can soon expect to be forced to undergo the 'circumcision' rite. She bursts out in the privacy of their shared bedroom: '[A] male in the name of a clan brother is sought to … teach us the "a b c d" of a good Nasilian wife so that we shall please our future husbands. No, I refuse to be taught. I will either be taught at the university what is universally beneficial to mankind or be taught nothing!' (73). The pressure on Milanoi mounts when Resian indignantly and (under the circumstances) unwisely expresses her fierce feelings about women's equal rights being disregarded in the local culture – in the presence of and in contradiction of her uncle's eldest wife, the aunt who is the family's female head. The older woman immediately (and angrily) 'diagnoses' Resian as being in need of the 'cure' of genital cutting to rid her of rebellious attitude: 'To hide a boil … under the armpit is unwise, for sooner or later it will burst and emit a foul smell', she tells Milanoi. 'It is time to circumcise your daughters and get rid of *olkunyeni* [glossed as "stupidity, folly or madness"]. It is that simple' (78).

In Kulet's *The Blossoms of the Savannah*, Joseph Parmuat, a character who also serves as the sisters' Maasai cultural instructor, answers their questions about the origins of female genital

cutting by recounting an episode from early Maa communal history. According to this character, many generations ago, when their clan was conquered and humiliated by a stronger clan, the women of the clan felt shame at their inability to resist the invaders' sexually suggestive and provocative advances. The women then got together, he says, and decided that the surest way to subdue their own sexual urges was to voluntarily undergo this ritual. Essentially, this ritual became their heritage. The Maa women use this heritage to maintain their honour. He says this is no mere legend, but a 'true story' (87). However, the two sisters, who have already become modernised, assure Joseph that this heritage is outdated and that they aim to join the *emakererei* (the veterinarian who campaigns against FGM in their community) in fighting this practice.

Female circumcision is an accepted and honoured rite of passage in this community. They believe it tames an otherwise wild gender. Like cattle that need dehorning, this tradition is meant to ensure women's docility. *In Blossoms of the Savannah,* Kulet tackles themes that emerge in a changing society. It depicts how a family that has lived in a town struggle to fit into a rural area, amid the difficulties of merging both experiences (Kamau, 2017). Tradition in society is vital as it binds members together and ensures harmonious co-existence. In the novel, the Maa society reveals a rich culture through various activities.

In the same breath, *Bandits of Kibi* reflects on the national decadence in post-independence Kenya, seemingly brought about by corrupting modernity. This decadence is epitomised by the tribal clashes that plagued some sections of Kenya between 1993 and 1995. Modernity has brought the incomprehensible gullibility that leads the Maasai community to butcher neighbouring ethnic groups. To capture the weight of this ethnic animosity, the author focuses on Ras Mento's family. Thus, this family becomes a trope for the nation, affected by tribal clashes; a nation that is on the verge of destruction after its migration to modernity. Modernity is portrayed as madness, corrupt and destructive, ready to eat away the tranquillity of the Maa's past. This Maasai's tranquil past comes out from the *Vanishing Herds* in the character of Norpisia and Kedoki, especially in their attire when they prepare to receive the prestigious award:

> So on that beautiful sunny morning when the couple was told they were going to meet a high-ranking officer in the environmental conservation office, Norpisia put on her new colourful *leso* and adorned herself with a beautiful multi-coloured bead necklace. She wore the white rubber shoes…Kedoki, on the other hand, wore his red *shuka*, over which he put on his Enkila-oo-ndeerri, a beautiful outer garment made from soft, woolly hyrax skins sewn into a gown-like cloak. In his hands, he carried a black knobkerrie and a flywhisk. The handle was beautifully decorated with multi-coloured beads….. (Kulet, 2011, p. 2)

The clothing portrayed here hints at the Maasai's heritage, tranquil and beautiful, yet threatened by 'the spirit of the West'. It will be recalled that the award Norpisia and Kedoki are about to receive recognises their effort in tree planting:

> Newspaper pictures of large forest cover, with lines of healthy green trees said to have been planted through her efforts, awed those who saw them. And the rains that had returned in earnest were partly attributed to the trees she, and others that she influenced, had planted…ironically, after helping to plant thousands of trees, she was unfortunate to have fallen victim to the resultant floods that nearly claimed her life. The floods impoverished them further by drowning their last one hundred heads of cattle, leaving

> them helpless and destitute… [but] Norpisia realised that each species had to struggle to survive in their natural habitat. Therefore, human interference with the natural habitat could only meddle with animals' lives and make it much more difficult for them to survive…. (Kulet, 2011, pp. 3, 4, 68)

This elaborate quote, which summarises the thesis in *The Vanishing Herds*, shows that modernity is slowly replacing the Maa's heritage. What strikes us, however, is how modernity is portrayed: the destruction of a tranquil environment where animals and humans live together in a symbiotic way. Modernity's blindness exposes its underbelly: ambivalence and the nuances of madness.

The same argument is echoed in *The Elephant Dance.* However, in this novel, Kulet goes further by explaining why modernity consumes traditional heritage. While this heritage is environmentally conscious, modernity is blind and hinges on the mad destruction of the environment. In *The Elephant Dance,* Mr. Dick Jones, an investor, meets Shedrach, Meshach, and Abenego, the three directors of Konini Ltd., to negotiate about:

> One hundred and fifty thousand acres of undeveloped land, unoccupied save for a few scattered pastoralists and a few hunters and gatherers. Half of the land lay on expansive rolling plains, teeming with wildlife, surrounded by undulating hills, crisscrossed by rivers, and offering an ideal climate for raising livestock and growing a variety of crops. The other half was covered with a dense indigenous forest of mature trees, which needed to be cleared to make way for a tea plantation. Beyond its agricultural potential, the land offered superb views and sites…. (Kulet, 2016: p. 14)

This passage hints at the destruction of '…the land was on expansive rolling plains, teeming with all kinds of wildlife, surrounded by undulating hills, crisscrossed…' for profit. Modernity in Kenya brought capitalist notions to communities that had triumphed under socialism. Socialism and environmental conservation are mutually linked. Jameson (1984) argued that postmodern culture logically corresponds to a stage in capitalism's development. This argument rejects the idea that socialism is helpful to a modern society advancing monopoly capitalism, which 'exploits the raw materials and cheap labour of colonial territories'. (Hall et al., 1992, p. 231)

This destruction of the environment for profit is strongly exhibited by Mr. Dick Jones (a white man and an investor) and his Kenyan minions, Shedrach, Meshach and Abenego, the three directors of Konini Ltd. Invariably, this capitalistic madness does not end with the environment. We learn that especially Abenego is involved in poaching, 'systematic culling in all animal species, including elephants':

> 'How lucky this elephant is!' Simon Labuto commented softly, his eyes on the bull's tusks. Had we been with Abenego, it would have been shot dead by now and his men would have been trooping down here with their razor-sharp machetes to hack off its tusks. (Kulet, 2016, p. 24-25)

Modernity turns out to usher in '…an underground entity whose sole purpose was to amass wealth' (p. 26). Poaching, which is an offshoot of capitalism, is an economic shade of modernity that has affected African culture negatively. Modernity, thus, brought with it the insatiable desire

for individual wealth. Although in Kulet's *Blossoms*, *Moran*, *Daughter,* modernity seems to have liberated girls and women from the archaic shackles of patriarchal subjugation, in *Elephant* and *Vanishing*, modernity has brought nothing more than the wanton accumulation of personal wealth, which made men lose their consciences [become mad]:

> He knew that at the end of the induction, like in the case of others before him, Dick Jones would have no conscience at all about carrying out specified underhand activities, including killing elephants and Rhinos for their tusks and horns. (Kulet, 2016, p. 26)

Following our trail of argument, it becomes clear that in Kuletian imagination, modernity is filled with ambivalence. It is Janus-faced – a double-edged sword which has brought untold suffering because of environmental destruction. On the one hand it leads to floods and the eventual destruction of Norpisia's herd, while on the other hand destroys the oppressive aspects of the Maa culture such as forced marriages and female circumcision. The liberating aspects of modernity come out clearly when we consider its portrayal in *The Elephant Dance*:

> As they rounded the corner and before they got to the village gate, Sena saw Naramat walking swiftly towards him. Without a word, he quickly moved towards her, lifted her with his strong arms, and moved her body upward against his until, bending his head, his mouth found hers, and his arms folded across the small of her back. And what followed was a kiss that shattered her senses, dissolved her will to resist and removed all concern for everything else except that moment, the joining of their hearts and hopes […] what happened that evening could be a precursor of a great bright future for the inhabitants of the forest. (Kulet, 2016, p. 45)

The ambivalence of modernity in the Kuletian imagination becomes clear. While it is 'a precursor of a great bright future for the inhabitants of the forest', it threatens the livelihoods of the people of the forest by destroying its environment, and thus it is destructive.

The same ambivalence is seen in *Bandits of Kibi*. In this novel, modernity has brought about intra-ethnic conflict. These intra-ethnic battles have severed the links that tie the family together. We are introduced to Mama Manta, who plans to leave because her husband, Rasmento, is about to return home from jail for aiding banditry. Mama Manta is haunted by shame due to her family's involvement in banditry. She is reluctant to welcome visitors to the family. Hence, when Inspector Dele is about to visit his friend, Sam Lang, a member of the family, Mama Manta complains, saying: 'Nowadays we can't even keep our shame to ourselves. Must some wretched outsider always force himself in, staring and interfering?' (2). From Mama Manta's lament, we realise that she considers her family ostracised, placed in the periphery of the community because of some of its members' involvement in banditry.

This family is not only severed from the rest of the community, but its members are severed from each other. This makes every family amorphous. Ottis Mopel betrays his brother, Harry Lanto, to bandits because Lanto tries to uncover his father's involvement in banditry. Mama Manta is determined to purge the evils that have plagued her family, which culminates in the murder of her son Harry Lanto. While her husband, RasMento, emerges as the epitome of evil, he is a villain who connives in his own son's murder. After his release from prison, his family disowns him except for Mopel. He considers the room prepared for him 'more pleasant isolation

than my cell in prison' (72). We further realise his sense of alienation from his family when he reveals to us that he felt like a leper who is 'cut out of the body of the family' (78). His sentiment reveals his loss of identity as the head of this family. Uprooted from the family and ostracised like a leper, he suffers as 'an outcast in his own home' (90). This portrays his dispossession by his family, driven by impending modernity.

Modernity here causes alienation not only from society but also from the self. RasMento is alienated not only from his family but also from himself. This is manifested in his split personality. When Mama Manta interrogates him about their son's murder, RasMento shifts his personality: 'he did not know whether he was thinking his own or the other's thoughts' (102). He acquires the 'sense of not belonging to himself" (102) in prison. Mopel is the other culprit in Harry Lanto's murder.

Moreover, he is still unemployed. His wealth stems only from his clandestine activities with the bandits. His unethical activities culminate in betraying his brother, Harry Lanto, who is murdered by bandits. Initially, he was Mama Manta's favourite child. However, after the realisation that he betrayed his brother, Mama Manta disowns him. This disownment is best expressed by Mama Manta's words thus: 'Don't call me Mama again', she said, 'I only had one son who you helped to be murdered' (186). Therefore, Mama Manta fractures the bond that links her to her son, Mopel. This spells out his loss of identity, thanks to modernity.

The whole family eventually disintegrates when Sam Lang deserts the homestead. He seeks exile away from this traumatising environment. He flees together with his love, Lilian Soila. This conveys a message of hope. Thus, *Bandits of Kibi* affirms life. This is because, despite the three grisly deaths in RasMento's family, we are informed, 'there was still something worth celebrating in life' (236). This is because the purging process of the perpetrators of banditry has been successful. From the ensuing discussion, we can see that the bonds that bind together RasMento's family are fractured. However, Sam Lang's elopement with Lilian Soila offers a glimpse of hope for the family's future. Metaphorically, it can be viewed as a hope for the nation after going through the traumatising tribal clashes.

The thesis suggests that although modernity has enveloped Maa culture and threatens to suffocate it, it still fights back through modernity's fractures: its ambivalences and contradictions. McKay's poem, *If We Must Die,* is worth quoting at length:

> If we must die, let it not be like hogs
> Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
> While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
> Making their mock at our accursed lot.
> If we must die—oh, let us nobly die,
> So that our precious blood may not be shed
> In vain; then even the monsters we defy
> Shall be constrained to honour us though dead!
> Oh, Kinsmen! We must meet the common foe;
> Though far outnumbered, let us show us brave,
> And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!
> What though before us lies the open grave?
> Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
> Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!
> (McKay, 1919)

The poem anchors the Kuletian imagination. Following Said's (1978) formulation of Orientalism, we note that by portraying the negative aspects of Maa's culture in novels like *Blossoms*, alongside exposing the madness of modernism in novels like *Vanishing Herds*, Kulet engages in cultural resistance. *Orientalism* primarily challenges the liberal notion that 'true knowledge is fundamentally non-political' (10). In literary criticism, the approach to literature is twofold. Literature is either conceived as a source of truth and morality or as an aesthetic expression of one's heart and mind. Said's rebellion against this interpretive procedure in literature is evident in his book *Beginnings: Intention and Method (1975).*

In reviewing Said's work, White (1976) identifies two far-reaching contributions that Said made to the field. Firstly, Said argues that a writer's work is directly implicated in social and political reality. Secondly, Said criticised the 'dynastic thinking' that has dominated literary thinking. This thought claimed that canonical texts constitute a repository of values and wisdom that serve to inspire good behaviour and taste. Said argues that modernist texts, unlike canonical or pre-modern texts, are an exercise of 'will'. That is to say, an author creates meaning in the general context of politics and culture. This conception marks a significant departure from the hierarchical values of dynastic ideology towards something 'traditionless', whose meaning is acquired in a specific context (1976, 10-11). Said's formulation of authorial-social connection was put to the test in *Orientalism*.

'Orientalism', Said wrote, 'is not a mere political subject matter that is reflected passively by culture, scholarship, institutions'. Orientalism is a discourse that shapes awareness of the Orient in Western minds and consciousness. As a discourse, Orientalism contained a repertoire of interests (political, economic, and cultural) and a will to explain, control, and manipulate the unfamiliar Orient (12). From this description, it is clear that Said understood the discourse of Orientalism as a field that enmeshed the interests of orientalists (academics) with those of political institutions.

Secondly, *Orientalism*'s thesis that culture is a political construction is revived in *Culture and Imperialism (C&I).* While *Orientalism* emphasised the way culture was being used for western domination, *(C&I)* demonstrated the ways culture had been used for resistance. Culture becomes a medium of resistance during the anti-colonial movement. Central to the process of cultural resistance is a 'rediscovery and repatriation of what has been suppressed in the native's past' (Said, 1993, p. 253). Stories from local slaves, prison memoirs, and folklore were restored to express a sense of national consciousness, which was crucial to rallying a united front against colonial power. In the process of discovering the 'pre-colonial self', nativism and radical nationalism emerged in the form of 'negritude', 'Islamic fundamentalism' and 'Arabism' as alternatives to Western-imposed identity such as 'negro' or even 'orient' (1993, p. 258).

Said's choice of secular humanism has been criticised by some scholars. Arac (1994) argues that Said has conceded too readily to secular ideology. Said has not carefully considered the contradictions in secular thought. Secularism is known for trivialising the native's customs, religion, and its forms of knowledge. Said's position on secular culture and resistance can be juxtaposed with another angle which sees culture or tradition as a modern invention. Homi Bhabha offers a similar view of culture as a construction. However, unlike Said, who thought 'tradition' belonged to the sphere of nationalistic adulation of the past, Bhabha (1994) argues that 'tradition' is a basic construction in a modern representation of culture.

Bhabha (1994) argues that the representation of culture involves a process of signification through which 'statement of culture or on culture differentiates, discriminates and authorises the

field of force and reference'. This suggests that culture is maintained and authorised by a political agency that sets the rules and content permissible in specific cultural representation. A cultural field is thus invested with political interest, whose legitimacy rests on certain cultural assumptions. The connection between power and culture enables a political authority to use culture for ideological justification and to build mass support. According to Bhabha, the political representation of culture:

> … problematises the division of past and present, tradition and modernity…. It is the problem of how, in signifying the present, something comes to be repeated, relocated and translated in the name of tradition, in the guise of a pastness that is not necessarily a faithful sign of historical memory but a strategy of representing authority in terms of the artifice of the archaic. (1994, p. 35)

In cultural representation, tradition becomes a political strategy. History and tradition are not accurate recollections or embodiments of the past. Instead, it is a form of political invention. The use and abuse of culture in contemporary power practice signals the social and moral importance attached to the idea of tradition. Although tradition does not assume objective existence, its symbolic significance as an archaic inheritance is a central to the field of culture. In this regard, authorities merely appropriate objects already present in tradition. However, the difference lies in repeated attempts to create a mythical linkage between past and present, giving the appearance of uninterrupted authority. This is why tradition or culture is immediately political. It has political usefulness which can both be demonstrated and challenged.

Mbugua, in his Master's thesis from the University of Nairobi, elaborates on the point of Maasai backwardness. He argues that in *Petals of Blood*, the arrival of Ilmorog peasants in the city shocks the residents, who associate the peasants' 'backwardness' with 'Maasainess'. The city drivers wonder, 'who are these Masai. These Dorobo and their donkey-carts should be banned from the city!' (157). This relegated image reduces the Maasai to the periphery of the Kenyan social milieu. Actually, for most Kenyans, the term Maasai is synonymous with 'Backwardness'.

It is therefore crucial to examine the Maasai worldview from an insider's perspective. This insider's view would generate as close to the truth as possible of the Maasai's true identity and imagination. Kuletian imagination is thus the best site. *In this section, we locate Kulet's novels within postcolonial resistance. We boldly advance the assumption that there is benign resistance that weaves through Kulet's novels. According to Wanyonyi et al. (2018),* Ole Kulet addresses the uncertainty his community faces as it tries to embrace modernity while upholding its traditions, leading to a double identity.

In this paper, we explored the author's fear that modernity will exterminate Maasai traditional heritage. We examined this by analysing how he has expressed it in his works. This aligns with what Bill Ashcroft et al. (1989) articulate in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practices in Post-Colonial Literatures*, that postcolonial theory covers 'all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day' (2). Thus, the theory interrogates the aftermath of colonial domination and the ongoing neocolonial relationships. A study of literature from a postcolonial perspective means attempting to unveil what the writer says about life from the standpoint of the colonized. The colonized is a trope for marginalization, a metaphor for being thrown to the periphery of the mainstream social set-up, or the subaltern.

Conclusion

In this paper, we set out to interrogate how Kulet's novels engage the intersectionality between the Maasai epistemologies and Western modernity. The paper has established that whereas Kulet imagines himself as a child of two worlds, traversing precariously between the Maa's romantic past and the beckoning modernity, his novels find themselves arrested between the need to remain and to become, resulting in postcolonial ambivalence concomitant with the malaise that characterises the postcolonial nation. The alluring, corrupting modernity plays a pertinent role in his conceptualisation of the self and his role as a Maasai writer.

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