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Born in 1963 in Nairobi

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PROJECT

Enacting Community: Death and Funerary Practice in Modern Kenya

This is a study of the cultural forms that dominate and arise from death in post-colonial Kenya. I want to proceed through textual readings of these forms – autopsies, obituaries, dirges, eulogies, text messaging – and of sites of burial. At every turn, I will be asking:

- What is the structure of this form?
- What messages does it convey, to whom, and how?
- What contestations are staged or triggered?
- What ethnic or traditional ways are invoked, and how?
- By what means has the form in question been diffused into the arena of national rather than ethnic life?

Because I am dealing with cultural forms as fragments, I will also unpack the dead body itself, as a marker of the final rite of passage and as a site upon which all kinds of narratives about life are written and rewritten (Musila, 2015; Cohen and Odhiambo, 2004; 1992). What is inscribed on the body, including the (contested) manner of dying, generates new economies of affection and governance.

My goal is to document and weigh death and funerals as sites of identity and nation formation. The guiding questions are: what do local practices around death and interment tell us about the kind of people Kenyans are? What core national values emerge from these practices?

Recommended Reading

Nyairo, Joyce, and James Ogude. "Popular Music, Popular Politics: Unbwoogable and the Idioms of Freedom in Kenyan Popular Music." *African Affairs* 104, no. 415 (2005): 225–249. <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adi012>.

Nyairo, Joyce. *Kenya@50: Trends, Identities and the Politics of Belonging*. Nairobi: Goethe-Institut Kenya; Native Intelligence, 2015.

–. "The Circus Comes to Town: Performance, Religion and Exchange in Political Party Campaigns." In *Kenya's 2013 Election: Stakes, Practices and Outcomes*, edited by Kimani Njogu and Peter Wafula Wekesa, 124–143. Nairobi: Twaweza Communications, 2015.

Dying in the City

Is Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya, a metaphor for death? What kinds of death are evoked in the city's historiography, in literary productions, and in the parallels frequently drawn between living in Nairobi and dying? Who is served by these associations of loss, and in what ways?

Some of these associations are amplified in the death and funeral announcements that are posted in the daily press. I read these announcements as more than a "journalistic genre in the print media" (Stein and Burnett, 2006). They constitute a literary genre, and I will demonstrate their poetic language of (dis)closures that has evolved over the decades of modernity. My talk will also illustrate instances when the work of these announcements overwrites authorial intention. Indeed, the contestations, othering, mimicry, and mapping arising from death and funeral announcements point to a cultural hybridity that echoes and at the same time negates the colonial present.

Finally, I look at the politics of Nairobi as a final resting place by outlining some of the practices that make interment at Lang'ata Cemetery a hazardous affair. These practices spark national debates about interment, but they also further colonial mapping and feed local narratives of identity and belonging.

PUBLICATIONS FROM THE FELLOW LIBRARY

Nyairo, Joyce (Hannover,2022)

The general and I : a memoir

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Nyairo, Joyce (Leipzig,2020)

Ten cities : clubbing in Nairobi, Cairo, Kyiv, Johannesburg, Naples, Berlin, Luanda, Lagos, Bristol, Lisbon : 1960 - March 2020

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=859959198>

Nyairo, Joyce ([Nairobi?],2018)

Dare to defy

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1031053948>

Nyairo, Joyce (2015)

The circus comes to town : performance, religion and exchange in political party campaigns

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Nyairo, Joyce (Nairobi, Kenya,2015)

Kenya's 2013 general election : stakes, practices and outcomes

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Nyairo, Joyce (Nairobi,2015)

Kenya50 : trends, identities and the politics of belonging

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Specificities : 'who can bwogo me?' popular culture in Kenya

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Nyairo, Joyce (Abingdon, Oxfordshire,2010)

Specificities : popular music and the negotiation of contemporary Kenyan identity ; the example of Nairobi City Ensemble

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Nyairo, Joyce (London [u.a.],2008)

Kenyan gospel soundtracks : crossing boundaries, mapping audiences

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