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**Title**

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**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0h17d663>

**Journal**

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 10(3)

**ISSN**

0041-5715

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**Publication Date**

1981

**DOI**

10.5070/F7103017279

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DAVID G. MAILLU AND THE  
EAST AFRICAN SOCIAL SCENE

By

Kalu Ogbaa

One of David G. Maillu's characters once declared:

*My hobby is observation; comrades  
pass  
I find this scene very interesting  
I like the way you make us believe  
that you're so big and important  
But you see  
I think it is the observer who sees  
the best and worst player.<sup>1</sup>*

This declaration could be regarded as an explanation of what Maillu is doing in his works. He is the silent observer of his unsuspecting East African society, but his stance, as he shoots the pictures of the various scenes is questionable. The poet-protagonist in these works sees "through the big plastic garments" of the corrupt politicians, the senior civil servants and their secretaries, the Pastors and their daughters, the prostitutes, the wayward housewives and the country wenches. And yet, he the observer is their comrade, a participant in the ugly social drama. So, any criticism he makes against the society is also a criticism of himself--another Canterbury Tales. This is the major function of Maillu's corpus and characters.

But in spite of this stated objective, Maillu's works could be easily dismissed as being too pornographic and formless. The author may not be given any credit for the few creative devices that sympathetic critics glean out of these works because such devices are purely accidental and the currency and importance of the themes in contemporary society are vitiated by low artistic taste. That Maillu's writing is amateurish is a truism; that within his fictive world there are the two opposed camps of art and action is apparent. These two camps are opposed because Maillu appears to have sacrificed intellectual and scholarly obligations in order to bear the self-imposed socio-political burden of the writer as a teacher, which the limits of his literary education do not permit. A criticism of these works implies examining how far Maillu succeeds in marrying morality and aesthetics, content and form--an exercise which raises aesthetic questions. This paper attempts to bring to focus Maillu's pre-occupations and commitment as a contemporary East

African writer, which a reading of any set of his works reveals. The argument presented is based on his The Kommon Man (parts 1, 2, 3), After 4:30, My Dear Bottle, Troubles, No, Unfit for Human Consumption, Dear Monika, and Dear Daughter. These identify some of the social ills, which are particularly rife in Kenya, but which also plague other African societies. They include neocolonialism, official corruption, sexual promiscuity and prostitution, misplaced and often confused social values, alcoholism and capitalism. His style and techniques, through which he exposes these social ills, are also examined briefly.

Having established their dominion over people in all walks of life, the rich politicians and senior civil servants demand sexual intercourse from their female secretaries, as of right, and actually make love to them in their offices and cars, and occasionally take them to hotel rooms for the same purpose. The girls who refuse to cooperate with them lose their jobs, seniority or promotions like Lili does in After 4:30. Housewives are intimidated and forced to commit adultery because their failure to yield often results in their husbands' loss of jobs. This practice is so widespread and occurs so frequently that some women, married and unmarried alike, have now accepted it as a way of life; others regard it as a cheap source of income. Prostitution and sexual permissiveness are no longer confined to the unmarried. To illustrate how sexually corrupt the society of these ten books is, only one character, Lili, fails to succumb to the seduction of men; and she pays dearly for her probity.

As he sees the rich politician and civil servants "eat" women and ride their long cars, "the kommon man," representative of the poorer masses, aspires to do anything to acquire wealth. The Minister sells domestic products overseas, where he expects to receive some handsome perquisites, although such products are needed at home. Their non-supply at home adds to inflation. The "kommon man" is forced to sell his conscience and turns a sychophant as he deals with his boss from whom he expects an unmerited promotion and pay raise. He sells some office equipment and auto tires in the workshop for a few more cents. The female secretary works "overtime after 4:30" with her boss in order to make more money with which to train her fatherless children. If she does not get enough "customers," she runs to the village medicineman, who prepares her some love potion with which to hook the men.

To buy a car is to increase one's chances of getting more women. A typical car brand is Toyota Crown. The one who gets the Benz becomes the King of all men because by it, his wealth is attested to even if his family is neglected. Besides, he can drive to any place at any time to get his catch. This

kind of misery-go-round not only destroys family unity but also promotes misplaced social values and the race for ill-acquired material wealth.

Another social ill which Maillu discusses is alcoholism, which appears to be behind every crime. The speaker of the lines in My Dear Bottle takes his "bottle" for a variety of reasons. As a poor man, he drinks to forget his poverty. He drinks to gain courage which he very much needs to face his wife, whom he has offended. Wine reassures him that he is still alive, but he is also aware that his "dear bottle" gets him into trouble. For instance, he beats his wife and commits incest with his cousin only when he is drunk, he recalls. In Dear Monika, Nduku, a representative drunk, writes his wife, Monika, whom he fights regularly and forces to run to her parents for refuge, and explains that his criminal offenses and sexual infidelity are committed under the influence of alcohol. Monika does not believe him. Also in No and Unfit for Human Consumption, we notice the wreckage of marriages which results from combined vicious effects of alcoholism, money and sex. The women and their children are neglected and exposed to hunger and disease. Men lose their self respect, jobs and lives. There are corruption and hypocrisy in the church, offices, political institutions and families.

These social ills are problems, which every new city, and here Nairobi, faces in the process of being urbanized. They are experienced in older cities and urbanized societies everywhere, all over the world. This means that they are old problems; but what attracts attention to Maillu's works is the gut he has to approach the old issues, using a new idiom embodied in his style, techniques and stance.

He refuses to be bound by conventional forms. He adopts the poetry format in writing After 4:30, My Dear Bottle, and The Common Man (parts 1, 2, 3), but his style is essentially a prose style. It is hard to classify his writings as poetry or prose; rather, it is safer to use the looser and noncommitting term, works. This is because, apart from the two letters, Dear Monika and Dear Daughter, and the mini-novels, his works (and for my purpose, the chosen set under examination) could be classified as books of poems or short stories. Whether or not they qualify as any of these classes is another matter. Their format disqualifies them as short stories; and when pitted against some other poetry written in East Africa, they may not pass as good poetry. The ones arranged in verse are essentially disjointed lines of colloquial utterances. They lack the terseness, texture and complexity of language which create the images, metaphors and symbolic meaning which characterize good poetry. If the lines,

However, as is the nature  
of all human beings  
women can't help dreaming.  
We men even sometimes dream we're birds  
or animals, or we dream  
We're touching the sun. . . .  
Let women dream of a day  
when they'll equal men. . . .<sup>2</sup>

are conjoined, retaining all the words and punctuation marks one will have this,

*However, as is the nature of all human beings,  
women can't help dreaming. We men even some-  
times dream we're birds or animals, or we  
dream we're touching the sun. . . . Let women  
dream of a day when they'll equal men. . . .*

which is neither an elegant prose construction nor does it come near what could be regarded as poetic prose. This is rejected not because it is prose style, but because nothing in the so-called poetry shows that Maillu understands the difference between prose and poetry. Gertrude Stein, who wrote the following lines, adopted the prose style and produced a very effective poetry:

*What is the current that makes machinery, that makes  
it crackle,  
What is the current that presents a long line and  
a necessary waist.  
What is this current  
What is the wind, what is it.  
Where is the serene length, it is there and a dark place  
is not a dark place, only a white and red are  
black, only a yellow and green are blue, a pink  
is scarlet, a bow is every color. A line  
distinguishes it.<sup>3</sup>*

Both poetry and prose may have rhythm and movement peculiar to each, because their performance involves pronunciation, a linguistic feature. The prose rhythm is emphasized by individual idiolects while that of poetry is retained by its basic and intrinsic meter. In other words, they are alike insofar as they have certain linguistic features, but poetry has more to it. If there must be good poetry, there must be prosodic features like complexity of language, meter, rhythm, pitch, prominence, and other linguistic givens which may be regarded as ictus or non-ictus. This is why a contemporary East African poet, Okot p'Bitek, is regarded as a more successful writer. He does not have to be a prosodist before he writes good poetry; but a pro-

sodist can easily discover the good features from his poem, e.g.:

*My father's name  
is Otoo Lenga-moi,  
He ate the title Lenga-moi  
In the battle in the Hills  
Ocol's grandfather's title  
Is Lutany-moi.  
You can earn the moi  
With your spear  
Or gun or sword.<sup>4</sup>*

Another weakness in Maillu's style is that he appears to treat the same themes in all his works. Read one of them, and you will have had an idea of what he is going to say in another. This stagnates the works and bores the readers. His setting is always the same--Nairobi and the countryside, that is. We grant that he is not the first to make use of repeated setting and imagery; Edith Sitwell had a fixation for water and the gem, emerald, but the images of gem and water which one meets in her last poem, "Music and Ceremonies," are the very images of her first poem, "Drowned Sun." Although they are the same images, she uses them to give different "shades" with different symbolic meanings. Chinua Achebe sets his trilogy, Things Fall Apart, No Longer at Ease and Arrow of God in Umuofia and its environs. He treats in them the recurrent themes of culture conflicts and invasion and individual failures and foibles. The same proverbs are contained in all three, yet there is change of focus or point of view, and forward movement of events and growth. Maillu's brand of repetition is naively handled. For instance, the last two stanzas of his book, The Kommon Man, Part I, are repeated on page 7 of The Kommon Man, Part II, and the last stanzas of The Kommon Man, Part II, are repeated on the first pages of The Kommon Man, Part III, word for word. The argument might be that such repetitions serve as connectives; yes, they do, and that very poorly.

Even if the weak prose style and colloquial utterances are tolerated or overlooked as the works are read, the author's techniques can only be appreciated as purely accidental. That is, they are qualities forced on the works. The poet-protagonist has several voices because he represents several people in several walks of life. He may appear as omniscient as God, but essentially he functions as first-person narrator. This is so because he is a participant in the acts he is exposing or mocking. His narration may appear authentic but ironically, he cannot be regarded as detached and all-knowing since he is part of the fictive world he is criticizing. This makes him unreliable. One thing, though, which is admirable in the major characters is that because they tell their own tales, they do admit their human weaknesses which

are brought to correction. Maiko, the hero of Troubles, finally accepts Delila as his wife, but Washington Ndava who says "no" to every piece of advice given to him against his faults and Jonathan Kinama who takes what is "unfit for human consumption" are disgraced and fatally maimed. They die because they undergo a transformation physically or spiritually. The protagonist of After 4:30, for example, practices prostitution after 4:30 p.m., which is the time that government offices close on week-days. She is a secretary who is seduced and made pregnant by a sugar-tongued man. She is later deserted by him and cannot take care of herself and her illegitimate son with her meager salary. To augment it, she does "overtime" with men. In sexual acts she enjoys "overworking" the men:

*I like the way I sweat men  
with this!  
A man is like a sheep,  
You see  
When he's inside you  
You can tell him anything on earth  
Call him a pig  
A swine  
A warthog  
Or sweetheart  
and he'll reply you, yes.  
Yes!<sup>5</sup>*

She may enjoy this because her life is ruined by a man but as she receives beatings from her clientele and reflects on her life and reputation, she gets transformed:

*Child, it's not my wish to be  
what I am;  
I didn't tell your father  
any bitter word;  
I never abused him  
Only that I was too ignorant  
Of what truth is to a criminal.<sup>6</sup>*

She has grown wiser and is now in a position to advise her younger sister, but she is not easily believed since she is still actively engaged in her "private practice."

Mailu appears to employ a modern fictional technique, "interior monologue," in most of these works: he undertakes to reproduce the course and rhythm of consciousness just as it occurs to him, and assigns it to his characters; and when the characters are talking, the author's voice disappears completely, or when it does appear, it does so minimally and only as a guide or commentator:<sup>7</sup>

Or, possibly  
it could be that tomorrow  
I could be poorer  
than I am today

. . .  
Come on, this thing . . .  
It does not seem to fit in properly;  
the car is wanted before lunch time  
the supervisor is angry with me  
saying that sometimes I'm not working  
but standing at one place

. . .  
Hey!  
Who's that chick outside passing  
in her mini dress?  
Gosh, privileges for the boss.  
The way she throws her hips  
makes my head turn round  
I could bet she's going to see the boss.  
Another qualified  
illiterate typist?

. . .  
This thing between woman's legs  
makes things really happen  
It made Samson tell the secret  
of his strength . . .<sup>8</sup>

These lines taken from a chapter in *My Dear Bottle* entitled, "What my wife thinks." The title suggests that he is telling about his wife's impression of him, but the content records what he is thinking at a time--several things at a time. But think of them, they are all related: his poverty, official corruption, prostitution and love of money. The author does not attempt to rearrange the mental process into grammatical sentences, or into a logical narrative order. He attempts to reproduce the exact consciousness of his characters. This is the function of the technique in prose, but certainly not in poetry which requires highly terse and conscious verbal and formal structures. And since Maillu regards his prosaic lines as poetry one considers his craftsmanship weak and monotonously repetitive.

Thus, the grammatical disorder in these satirical works should be seen as a major artistic error, which is coupled with numerous typographical errors seen here and there. Besides, most of the characters depicted speak ungrammatically in actual life. Some defenders of Maillu may argue that if the author has recaptured the language of the civil servants in his works, then such an effort has resulted in language realism. They ask, "What kind of language does one expect from an "illiterate typist," and elementary school-leaver whose additional qualification is sex?" Thus, the majority of his fictive politicians and workers



are even suspicious of the English language:

*Sometimes these things make me feel  
so small  
and ashamed of being an African!  
Everything we must import--  
even the language!  
If you want to colonize anybody  
force him to abandon his own language  
and speak yours.<sup>9</sup>*

Well, we know that the English language is a problem in Africa; but if there is any "standard" form of it spoken at all, it is the workers who use it since it attests to their social status. Politicians use the "pure" form in their prepared speeches. They only use the "pidgin" form when they address their "less-educated" electorate. Many African nations and writers have thought about this language problem. In East Africa, Kiswahili has been adopted as the *lingua franca*, but not without obvious problems, and in some West African nations, where indigenous languages have not been so adopted, "standard" English is still used at least in offices and business for the same social prestige. The pursuit of "standard" English, which the British administration and its ally, the Christian church fought hard to protect from African corruption could be seen by nationalists as a colonial vestige; but since we adopt its use, the form that Maillu's characters use cannot make for language realism.

Dialogue is another device that is so ineffectively employed that it stifles the dramatic moments in some of the works, especially *The Kommon Man* set. When Nzilia's brother, that is Makoka's husband, advises him on how to get on well with Esta Ndululu, Nzilia does not speak. But his silence which comes between Makoka's lines is intended to function as a reply and to give Makoka cues for further advising. But a more effective variation of this device is he allows a character, say, a man seducing a woman, speak throughout a "chapter" while the addressee in turn replies. The effect is dramatic: the reader is a ready audience; he shifts his attention from one speaker to the other. One can see his head turning right and left bemused by what he hears the speakers saying about their secret lives.

The most effective and powerful narrative device which is common to Maillu's works is horrification. Its method is sexual entertainment which ironically debases the moral stature of his characters. We learn two things from this device about Maillu and his view of life. One is that what one enjoys over much usually kills one. All the major characters and the society at large enjoy sex over much. Maillu sees the "eating" imagery to represent this sickness. His male characters "eat"

women; the politicians and workers "eat" life, and the nation, to death. They drink hard and eat to a point of over-feeding themselves at the hotel rooms and bars so that when they come home, they are too tired and exhausted to satisfy their too often neglected wives sexually. While men "eat" women, they in turn are eaten by wine and women. The "eating" imagery adequately points to the cankerworm, like consumption, which is endemic in East African societies. Maillu is at his best when he gives a description of people in the sexual act:

*She squirmed, twisted, scratched the floor, and hit his legs with her heels. And when he began racing for the finals, she joined with a savage reaction and a saxophone note leaped her anus. Her orgasm span to the gate synchronizing with his. Maiko began puffing out like a monster and just before they reached their climax, the telephone rang! But they hastened, punching each other wildly until the climax outbroke stormingly.<sup>10</sup>*

This kind of animal enjoyment is what makes it impossible for Maiko to listen to people's warnings against the dangers of sex: he is enthralled by sex. He reads and seriously evaluates the ideas of the article on sex written by Dr. Thiula Pachae, entitled "Sex As The Means To An End." Through his fictive Dr. Pachae's article, Maillu espouses his ideas on sex, setting out its pros and cons, but leaning more on the cons as a means of condemning lascivious behavior in society. The result is quick: Maiko reflects, and is finally redeemed in the village, where he accepts his new baby as well as addresses the girl he has hitherto neglected as "Delila, my wife" for the first time. But unlike him, Washington Ndava, the tragic hero of *No*, dies a most disgraceful death because he allows sex to eat him up:

*Three men wrestled with him on the ground and then did to him what even the devil would hesitate to do on a human being-- they cut off his penis! And he yelled! And they cut off both of his ears while the whole block went wild. While three powerful men worked on him, a third man had taken his clothes and was cutting them up too . . . then hurled him out of the house in the shape he was, as many a man, some clad in towels, watched while the women on the same floor screamed. The merciless men neighbors laughed. Others itched to join in murdering Washington Ndava.<sup>11</sup>*

He does not die immediately, but he loses his reputation and self respect. When he can no longer live in his maimed form, he commits suicide. This is horrific.

As a writer of popular "thrillers," Maillu's major achievements are Troubles and No, the two books that establish his reputation as a pornographic entertainer. Troubles serves as an example of his descriptive and narrative capabilities, especially where he describes people in illicit sexual acts. His sexual entertainment does not overlook the human foibles, genuine desires for love, and human psychology which eventuate in human drama and troubles the hero of the book, Maiko, goes through; but because Maiko undergoes a spiritual transformation in the end, he is redeemed in the village. No, on the other hand, gives a vivid description of a man who says no to his family and society when he is advised to avoid troubles which emanate from his indiscriminate sex involvements. He finally dies a horrific death. The description of such a death is introduced to horrify other Maikos, who may yet heed the warnings of death and change. Hence, No is essentially an embodiment of the author's thematic technique of horrification.

His works, for what they are worth, cannot be appreciated more than those of a writer pandering to popular taste by portraying Nairobi as a city of self-destructive sex. They could be enjoyed as a change made in East African literature, which, until the emergence of Okot p'Bitek, was primarily concerned with hackneyed culture conflict and colonialism. But if Maillu refuses to tow the lines of writers like Ngugi and others who stuck to the conventional forms they learned from British and American literatures, his refusal should have prompted him to create new and mature fictional techniques and style that would challenge the ones the older and established East African writers adopt. His themes may be topically relevant to East African society, to the social problems facing Africa as a whole. The books serve as his contribution to the social reform. Maillu's success in publishing these works, in spite of his not-too-high literary education, might be considered a promise of his greater future achievements. But since he adopts the same style, point of view, and discusses the same redundant theme in all ten works--a fictional mode which eventuates in amateurish, unliterary and monotonously repetitious works--we question his seriousness and commitment as a social reformer. The contemporary African societies are too educated to accept any and every writing as literature. Genuine experiments in language and form will continue to be conducted in African literature, but certainly the age of "Onitsha market literature" is fast becoming an anachronism.

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### Notes

1. David G. Maillu, The Kommon Man, Part Two, Comb Books, Nairobi, Kenya, 1975, p. 244.
2. *Ibid.*, Part One, pp. 24-25.
3. Gertrude Stein, "Long Dress," a poem culled from E. 392L handout, The University of Texas at Austin, Spring, 1978.
4. Okot p'Bitek, Song of Lawino, East African Publishing House, Nairobi, Kenya, 1974, p. 127.
5. Maillu, After 4:30, Comb Books, Nairobi, Kenya, 1975, p. 5.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
7. M. H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., New York, 1971, p. 165.
8. Maillu, My Dear Bottle, Comb Books, Nairobi, Kenya, 1974, pp. 95-96.
9. Maillu, After 4:30, *op. cit.*, p. 159.
10. Maillu, Troubles, Comb Books, Nairobi, Kenya, 1974, pp. 115-116.
11. Maillu, No, Comb Books, Nairobi, Kenya, 1976, p. 95.