

On *Mchongoano* and Riddles in Kenya

by

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Abstract

In Kenya, there is a verbal dueling game called *mchongoano* that is popular with the young, but also appreciated by many adults for its humorous content. This paper is about *mchongoano*, which is compared with the traditional riddle in Kenya. The two genres are shown to be very similar in terms of functions and characteristics. From the comparison it is evident that *mchongoano* shares with riddles functions like education and information, entertainment, socialization, social control, development of verbal skills etc., and features both as being of relative length, the practitioners and consumers are mostly the young, the use of proper, and kinship names are used in the immediate environment as the source of topics and subject matter etc. Thus, in the future, *mchongoano* is likely to replace the traditional riddle as a pass-time activity for the young, considering that it uses Sheng, an urban language that is popular among the youth and since the languages that package the traditional riddle are usually not used by the practitioners of this genre.

Keywords: *mchongoano*, riddles, Sheng, youth, oral literature, entertainment, functions

Introduction

There are numerous changes in the material cultures of many people in Africa. The changes are witnessed in many spheres of their lives e.g. language, forms of wealth creation, forms of socialization, education, governance etc. Of the many changes, my concern in this paper is changes deemed to affect the African oral literature, specifically, the riddles. Nandwa & Bukenya (1983:27) note that many oral performances pertaining to work, leisure, educational cycles and rhythm of the societies were destroyed due to the colonial experience.

Traditionally, adults (parents, grandparents, older siblings) facilitated riddling sessions; this is not possible anymore due to separation, dislocation, and eventual transplantation to the urban areas away from the older people who would be spending time with the young. In this context, my focus is on the youth created genre creation called *mchongoano* and the traditional riddle as a comparative to show that *mchongoano* is in many respects, similar to the traditional riddle and yet a potential replacement for the traditional riddle.

Mchongoano as a performed discourse, has not received sufficient scholarly attention; scholars have neglected it, “lest they soil their hands with the ‘filth’ therein” (Githinji, 2007:98), yet there are other studies are Githinji (2006a) and Kihara & Schröder (2012), but to the best of my knowledge, I am not aware of any research comparing *mchongoano* with riddles.

The *mchongoano* data for this article was sourced from six young people; three boys aged between nine and seventeen, three girls aged between eleven and sixteen. Additional data was obtained from printed sources (i.e., advertisements, a school magazine, etc.), and structurally, this work deals with: the background, functions and characteristics of *mchongoano*, Sheng, the functions and characteristics of riddles, a comparison of *mchongoano* and riddles, and last, a conclusion. The riddles discussed are from the Kikuyu in Kenya, provided by the author and several consultants¹.

Background to *Mchongoano*

Mchongoano is likened by Githinji (2007 and 2006a) and Kihara & Schröder (2012) to a popular African-American verbal art called playing the dozens, sounds, sounding, jonning, snapping, capping, the dozens, busting, signifying, etc. (cf. Abrahams, 1962; Labov, 1972; Morgan, 2002), a speech genre of playful verbal insults exchanged with an opponent and directed to another opponent directly or to his/her family members e.g. mother, sister, father, friends, girlfriend or boyfriend. Interestingly, these traits are also found in *mchongoano*.

Specifically, Githinji (2007:89) defines *mchongoano* as “a ritualized genre of verbal duel popular with the Kenya youth where one antagonist insults another or members of his/her family”. Of course this definition is not inclusive because there are many on-going changes in society. For example, *mchongoano* has different forms; it is now found in both print and electronic forms; the range of insults in *mchongoano* may also involve close friends e.g. girl/boyfriends the immediate family members or possessions like houses, pets, cars, cell phones, television sets, etc. Below is an example of a *mchongoano*.

Ati budako ni fala hadi alipoenda kununua ng'ombe akaiona ikikonjoa akasema, " Mimi sitaki hiyo imetoboka"

That your father is so foolish that when he went to buy a cow and saw it passing urine, he said, "I don't want that one which is ruptured"

In the above example, it is a father (*buda* is father in Sheng) who is the subject of a joke, because of his perceived foolishness (*fala* is a stupid person in Sheng); he cannot tell that a cow is urinating, but thinks it has a hole through which the 'water' is pouring out. Here it is evident that Sheng and code switching/mixing are characteristic of *mchongoano*.

Kihara&Schröder (2012) analyses this genre from the pragmatics standpoint of the relevance theory of Yus (2008), Sperber and Wilson (1995) and Wilson and Sperber (2004).Githinji (2006a) looks at *mchongoano* from the Bakhtinian approach to folk humour. He argues that the youth use the genre because the traditional institutions for socializing them are not there or are ineffective or out of touch with the young. This being the case, I would expect the traditional genres to have changed or ceased, hence this vacuum must be filled, and it is not surprising *mchongoano* is the verbal art form that does this since it resonates well with the youth in many aspects.

Origins of *mchongoano* just like the American dozens are unclear. There are those like Githinji (2007) who cite American influence. To Kihara&Schröder (2012), the art form derives its name from the Kiswahili word '*chongoa*' meaning "to sharpen" because a participant is expected to have "sharp" verbal skills, and the jokes are meant to "cut" or "incite/provoke one into action". They conclude that the origins of *mchongoano* should not be appropriated to the American influence, although comparison may be in order.

For the American dozens, Chimezie (1976) argues that they are carry-overs from Africa. He cites *Ikocha Nkocha*, an equivalent type of verbal duel from the Igbo of Nigeria. Schwegler (2007:136-37) citing Fu-Kiau KiaBunseki, a native speaker of Kikongo and an expert on Congo culture, reports that the Bakongo of central Africa had *Biensa* and *Nsonsani* as verbal duel systems. Schwegler this adds *Vociferación* and *vacilada* among the Palenque and Chota respectively, both peoples from the Americas as forms of verbal duels. And also, Lefever (1981:83-84) reports similar duels among the Apo of the Ashanti (Ghana), the Eskimo, and the Tiwi in northern Australia with Kihara&Schröder (2012) adding the Kikuyu example of *Hũhi* and other equivalents, e.g. the Luhya's *Okhuchayana* and the Luo's *Nyung'rwok*, all from Kenya.

It is clear this genre is not new in Africa. My contention is that *mchongoano* is like the original traditional African verbal art-forms, but now adapted to the present times in terms of language, function, themes, performance, performance setting, and participants.

Some Functions and Features of *Mchongoano*

Mchongoano, like other verbal arts of its kind, is known to satisfy some functions, hence a socialisation discourse which cultivates self-esteem (Githinji 2007:96-97), while Kihara&Schröder (ibid.) conversantly claim that humour is also a major concern of *mchongoano*.

Mchongoano's primary functions are socialisation, letting out frustrations and as a form of rebellion (Githinji, 2007). Thus, a form of socialisation with entertainment, education/information and observation skills embedded in it that now found in schools' magazines, situation comedies on television, advertisements, pull-out magazines, children's radio programmes, all designed to entertain even if social commentary or information-based content is intended.

Mchongoano also has distinct features. For example, its performance is dyadic and thus there are two actively involved contestants and an audience meant to judge, be entertained and encourage the situation. And within this dynamic is the non-performed version without a face to face dyadic set-up, but instead, an unseen audience, hence the reader of magazines, the internet, newspaper pull-out magazines, adverts etc. Here, if one posts a *mchongoano* to an unseen audience, one doesn't expect an immediate response, but at least in some cases as on-line, responses between far apart contestants and an audience just as those found in call-in programmes in radio stations in Nairobi, Kenya. And additionally, participants are usually the young, but consumers are of all ages, and if we were to consider the achieved appreciation of humorous effects shown by adults, there is turn-taking, however, it is not similar to what is normally found in ordinary human conversations. This also point to the fact that in *mchongoano* in some cases, there is no need reply to a topic, because it can stand alone. For example:

Nyinyi ni wadosi hadi dogi zenu zina dogi za kuzichunga
'You (your family) are so rich that even your dogs have guard dogs'

Dame wako ni fala hadi nilimkuta akiyell kwa envelop ati anasend voicemail
'Your girlfriend is foolish since I found her yelling at an envelope thinking she was sending a voice mail'

In the above, the *mchongoano* is a statement separate from other statements, but interestingly, it can be fuel for a later performance.

On *mchongoano* performance, the issue of gender is not very strict. From my own experience, girls would shy away from *huhi* probably due to the vulgarity contained therein and the fact that females have distinct communication patterns and they abhor vulgarity (cf. Lakoff, 1975).

Girls' participation, issues of social status and race in the performance of American dozens have been questioned. Morgan (2002) observes that girls participate in dozens. Schwegler (2007) reports vulgar duels among the Palanque women. On the race issue, Ayuob & Barnette (1965) found out that white boys in high school played the dozens dispelling earlier claims to the contrary. The youth consulted for this paper, had no issue with gender in performance. In fact, they say that the best and "most feared" participant they knew was a girl whom boys would hesitate to engage in *mchongoano*. Ordinarily, boys prefer fellow boys. Example 8 below is an example of a *mchongoano* directed to girl about her "poor" boyfriend. On social status, with humour being a universal human characteristic, I would not expect to find avoidance among the well-to-do but probably the topics of *mchongoano* might vary depending on social class and status. This is a grey area and further research is needed as it has been done in Sheng and Engsh, a variety that has more of English than Swahili and it is prevalent in the upmarket areas of Nairobi.

Mchongoano has a type of beginning which I call an opening formula. For instance, the most common is, *Wasee! Wasee! Mnaona huyu chali ...* loosely translated to "friends, friends, you see this lad...". It is followed by the *mchongoano*, signalling the start of a session, such provocations are reported by Labov (1972) and others in the American dozens. I recorded others shown below.
2

Ngatho ngatho ...

Ngazi ngazi...

Inyui ndigithiai...

Ndirathekire ndiragua...

Mako mako mako....

For the first one, there is a Kikuyu word similar to it, *ngatho* meaning gratitude but here it is not as used in that sense. I am informed that *ngaacũndũ*³ is closest to it and used to call for attention or show surprise. I do not have a reliable translation for the second and I cannot claim it is a Kikuyu word but I hypothesize that it is similar to a common exclamation *Ngai!Ngai!* (God!God!), a popular exclamation among Kikuyu speakers and non-speakers.

The third one is a dismissive statement meant to tell off others to show that the speaker has a more important or better thing to say. The fourth means that the speaker had had a good laugh most probably from somebody's folly or stupidity while the last is not a Kikuyu word and the closest counterpart it has in the language is *(ta)maka* 'get surprised/frightened' and I suppose it is meant to call for attention.

At times a contestant uses a statement that serves as a closing formula. If an opponent is overwhelmed by an insult or a series of insults, they may say, *Wachahiyoitoshe* Kiswahili for, 'let that be enough', or *umeniweza* 'you have outdone me'. Such statements indicate willingness to exit from a contest having conceded defeat at that moment and if the winner were to go on, it would be taken in bad taste. Statements such as: *kubali umewezwa* 'agree you have been outdone/beaten', *na hiyo ni kali!* 'and that one is hot' may come from the audience in a bid to make a contestant withdraw.

Mchongoano makes use of kinship terms like father, mother, brother, sister, etc. It is not unusual to find samples like: *Ati baba yako/budako...* that your father, *Ati masako.../mama yako...* that your mother, *Ati sistako/brathako...* that your sister /brother etc. Githinji (2006a) avers that there are *mchongoano* laden with sexual overtones and capturing the fact that most women are said to live in denial of the fact that they have grown old (example 3) and allusions to scatological humour, as evident in the *mchongoano* below:

Ati nyanyako ni mzee lakini hajaacha bado kujiita "sexy lady"
'That your grandmother is old but she still calls herself a sexy lady'

Ati mshuto wako ni mkali hadi mende za kwenu zinasema "ataafadhali Doom"
'Your fart is so smelly that roaches in your house say it is better Doom.' (An insecticide)

Mchongoano uses aspects of human and natural life as stock subjects. Data available show people making fun of many, if not all, facets of human life. People make fun of their poverty (e.g. small houses, old television sets, old cars, old cell-phones) many children/siblings, ugly girl/boyfriends, physical appearances (e.g. large backseats, big heads and eyes etc), peoples' low intellectual abilities and ignorance etc. Examples include:

*Ati we ni mjinga hadi ulirudia kunyonya.*⁴
'You are so stupid that you even repeated suckling'.

Nasikia ati gari yenu ni mzee hadi siku ile babako aliipeleka trade-in alibadilishiwa na simu ya 3310.

'I hear that your (family's) car is so old that when your father took it for a trade-in he got a (Nokia) 3310 phone [an example of cheap mobile phone].'

Ati ukona rasa kubwa hadi ukipiga corner zinapiga makofi
'That you have a large backside that when you take a corner /turn they clap (flap)'

Chali wako ni msoto mpaka badala ya kukubaia 'Always' yeye hukubaia "Rarely"
'Your boyfriend is so broke that instead of buying you "Always" [branded sanitary pads] he buys you "Rarely" [opposite of always; it does not exist]'

Other topics found are from the computer technology conversant with the youth, for example:

Ati wewe ni mkono ngumu hadi ukishika computer inajiandika "New hardware found".

“[It is said] that) you have such a hard hand that when you touch a computer it shows this message: “New hardware found”.

Mchongoano is an almost fixed speech genre with an almost fixed linguistic structure. The data I have has identical structure. Most notable is the opening word *Ati* ‘that’, which introduces indirectness, as a hearsay particle, so that the speaker does not appear to be the source of the joke so it appears as if they are reporting what someone else said. This strategy reduces the chances for a contestant taking the insult as real. The other common word is, *hadi* ‘up to’ or ‘even’ as in, *Ati gari yenu ni mzee had...* “That your car is old that even...” *Hadi* is replaceable with *mpaka* which has similar meaning.

The delivery of *mchongoano* depends heavily on Sheng and code switching/mixing. It must be Sheng’s prevalence in the genre that must have prompted Githinji (2006a) to refer to *mchongoano* as belonging to Sheng. Interestingly, some aspects of Sheng, for example, words borrowed from local languages are not more common in *mchongoano* than code switching/mixing, but Sheng remains the backbone and flavour of *mchongoano*.

There were examples of ideophones in *mchongoano*, e.g. *Una rasa kubwa hadi ikipiga ngoma zinasoundingi Tap!Tap!* “You have a large backside that when it plays the drum it sounds Tap! Tap!” *Mbwa yenu imewatch movie mob mpaka wagoni wakija inawafuata ikisema Teren !Teren!* “Your dog has watched so many movies that when thugs come to your home he follows them saying Teren! Teren! [Typical sounds in a horror movie]. These are some of the aspects found in *mchongoano*; their exposition provides points of comparison with riddles in the article.

Sheng: The Language of *Mchongoano*

Sheng is an acronym for Swahili and English to get SHENG according to Mazrui (1995:171), citing other sources. The origin of Sheng is controversial; Mazrui (ibid.) claims that Sheng may have emerged as early as the 1930s purely as a criminal argot, and Kingei & Kobia (2007) and Githinji (2006b) claim that Sheng developed in the 60s and 70s in Eastlands, Nairobi.

Local languages such as Kikuyu, Dholuo, Kikamba, Luhya, Hindi (Iraki, 2004; Githiora,2002), also contribute to Sheng. Githinjithus (ibid.) claims that the Sheng word “*manga*” ‘eat’ is from French, “*manger*”, whereas Mugane (2006:16) proposes SWANGLISH from Swahili and English to refer to Sheng, though convincing, I have not seen anyone else use the acronym. Instead, Sheng is a hybrid language (Bosire, 2006; Githinji,2007), a paralanguage (Rinkaya, 2005), an argot, a sociolect, jargon, pidgin, creole (Githiora, 2002) and a private language for young people (Mugane, 2006); a street slang that fits in the Kiswahili structure (Kingei&Kobia, 2007) and thus a slang based on English-Swahili code-switching (Mazrui,1995:171).

Functionally, Sheng is a marker of identity, a vehicle of socialization,an expression of creativity, and a means of emotional release and group cohesion (Mazrui, 1995; Githinji, 2006b; Ogechi, 2008; Iraki,2004), etc.Githinji (2007:89) also describes Sheng as “a linguistic device that promotes artistic creativity...”, and it has found its way into creative, written literature (Rinkaya,2005). And the emergence of *Kwani?*, a literary journal, has given Sheng a platform of even greater creative expression, but not without opposition from the older academics.

Sheng has been condemned for the poor performance by students in English and Kiswahili. Recently, the Minister for Education while releasing the 2010 and 2011 primary and secondary schools examinations results lamented that Sheng had negatively affected the performance of languages, views also held by others Momanyi (2009) and Kingei&Kobia(2007). However, Sheng has support in some quarters. Mwangi (2011) argues that the failure to promote the use of Sheng in schools may lead to an identity crisis. He suggests that teachers should use Sheng to teach English and Kiswahili just like they use vernacular (in some schools) to teach the two languages, and he posits that in other parts of the world like India, West Africa, the Caribbean, equivalents of Sheng are valued.

Fredrick Iraki offers the greatest hope for Sheng. He predicts that Sheng and English in the next fifty years will be the most dominant languages in Kenya. He notes, “Condemnation of Sheng is one of the greatest linguistic tragedies of our time because we fail to recognize it as legitimate medium of communication...” (quoted by Chege Muigai, *The Daily Nation*, Feb 12, 2012). Iraki (2004:67) observes that Sheng competes with English, Kiswahili and indigenous languages because they lack “the cognitive and pragmatics needs of young people in urban communities, especially the deprived communities. It breathes, innovates, grows and rejuvenates itself continuously”. This is captured in the many complaints that Sheng has an ever-changing vocabulary which should not be viewed negatively.

In Kenya, the use of Sheng is spreading fast to the rural areas and beyond our borders, initially thought to be far from its effects. The rural areas receive Sheng from popular culture like music, *mchongoano*, television, radio etc. Sheng has gone beyond our borders and it is reported that Kenyans in Germany have come up with “Dosheng”, an amalgam of Kiswahili, English and Deutsch (German).

Professor Riedel, a Kiswahili scholar in Germany, advises that “Sheng should not be demonized because no language is inferior as long as it fulfills the purpose of communication” (Muigai, 2012:2), Sheng does this. Pollard (2003) talks about ‘Rasta/Dread Talk’ code used in Jamaica as a language of emancipation but it has now gone beyond this and it became a the language of creative productions. Sheng may have come up as an argot or anything els, but one clear thing is that, it has developed beyond the original intentions and functions and is now used in creative endeavours like *mchongoano* among other creative arts. Below there are aspects of Sheng.

Ati wadingo wakinja kwenu husema, “fungueni ama tukojolee ukuta”
‘That when thugs come to your home they say open or we urinate on the wall’

Wadingo is an inversion of the Sheng word, *wangondi* ‘thugs’. The word is a reversal of syllable *di* that is brought forward. This is characteristic of lexical manipulation in Sheng (Bosire, 2009). An observation made by my consultant was that the use of more ‘concentrated Sheng’ in *mchongoano* is part of an opponent’s way of bringing down other contestants who might not know the words used or their meaning(s).

Some Dimensions of Riddles

Ishengoma (2005:144) defines a riddle as “an enigmatic statement or description that contains a hidden meaning to be guessed by those to whom it is addressed”. Riddles are oral literature short forms, seen as constant exercises related to observation and imagination and performed as contests, and for children’s play games (cf. Finnegan, 1970, Noss, 2006, Njoroge, 1994).

Riddles are seen as basically for children though adults are also known to be active participants. In some societies, riddling is an adult pursuit (Burns, 1976:47). Adults could be part of the riddling session with children where they share their riddles with them or they could also riddle among fellow adults, especially in societies where riddles are similar to proverbs. For instance, Finnegan (1970:441) notes that among the Chaga of Tanzania, there are riddles used to threaten, to convey secret information and to effect indirect suggestion, these are obviously for adults. Amuka (1994:13) also observes that “riddling is a children’s verbal and intellectual game, preparatory to sophistication in oral traditions and branches of knowledge”, hence, this observation makes riddling a serious activity, not just a child game.

In general, riddles are dialogic/dyadic contests (Nandwa & Bukenya, 1983, Finnegan, 1970); and the performance requires a challenger and a respondent and an audience. It is the challenger who passes a riddle to a respondent and they are required to give an answer or ‘unveil’ the riddle. Thus, there is turn-taking in a riddling session where one contestant presents a riddle to an opponent, and vice versa.

Riddles have an opening formula to signal the beginning of a riddling session or to prod an individual into a riddling session. The opening formula is stereotyped and fixed (Finnegan, 1970:436). Harries (1971) suggests that any definition of the riddle genre must include: an opening formula and the binary construction, he claims that these universally occur in African riddles, “to establish the contextual situations for riddle exchange” (p.383). Accordingly, the performance of riddles is guided by understood rules. For instance, riddles are mostly performed at night as a form of social control (cf. Harries, 1971; Ishengoma, 2005); reason being that time is not wasted; hence, meant to train children to follow time-lines and activities, and for them to not forget their other given chores (Ngonyani2005).

In some societies, if a respondent is unable to answer a riddle, an imaginary token is given to the challenger (who can accept or reject) but with acceptance, an answer is given. In addition, there are riddles that can be categorized as vulgar, socially acceptable and those used by adults to advise or ridicule (Njoroge, 1994:57). In these categories, there are unspoken rules where adults cannot participate, say, in the vulgar type with children, and thus children cannot riddle with each other if the riddle is vulgar in the presence of adults so as not to appear disrespectful. Below are examples:

Maigoya mahohu [nyee cia athuri] “Withered Maigoya⁵[men’s testicles]”
Githingithia, Menũ ![rũharo rwa atumia]”An earthquake, Menu![women’s’ diarrhoea]”

Such riddles would be used by youth in their own private space, and not by the fireplace in the presence of adults. Finnegan (1970:427) cites Simmon (1956) who reports about Ibibio riddles characterized by erotic content or allusion to sexual organs. These, like the one above, cannot be used by children in the presence of adults. However, Amuka (1994:13) notes that grandmothers, guiding a riddling session, might also touch on matters considered as adult content in the presence of children for teaching/learning purposes. Furthermore, riddles are brief and concise (Finnegan, 1970) and they are either simple or complex depending on the functions or syntactic structures (Njoroge, 1994: 58-59). Yet, a complex riddles is distinguished by length; complex ones have lengthy answers while simple ones may have a statement which requires an answer in a phrase or one word. Of course there are longer conundrums that an audience is meant to find a solution for, but they do not take the usual form of a short question –answer format. And also, riddles use proper names of people and places and kinship terms (your father, mother, sister brother, grandmother etc) as objects. Finnegan (1970) reported the same in Lyele, Yoruba, Shona riddles and attested by Gwaravanda& Masako (2008) in the Shona riddles. Some Kikuyu examples with kinship terms are:

Cũcũ nĩ mũraiĥu na ndangĩndũĩra ndare [mũkwa]
My grandmother is tall but she cannot pick for me berries [Rope]

Ihiga rĩa mbarĩ ya Kariuki rĩtiniaraga [iniũru rĩa ngombe]
The stone of the Kariuki's family never dries [the nose of a cow]

Ideophones therefore characterize riddles. In Kikuyu there are those that are fully idiophoniceg. *Huu!*(letting out air as if gasping for breath; indicating fatigue) [*muka urĩ ihu*]. 'Huu! [A pregnant woman]' and others partial like, *Mwena uyu no Ku! Ku! Na ũyũ ũngĩ no Ku! Ku!*[*iguku rĩa ngombe*] 'This side is Ku! Ku! [Hump of a cow]. This example captures the movement of the hump as the animal moves and is very similar to another one about girls' breasts. These examples and others like it, show that some riddles are captured by sound and it ties in with Finnegan's observation about ideophones and riddles (ibid.p.436).

Some Functions of Riddles

According to Miruka (1999:141)entertainment, recording of history, commentary in human life, instruments for linguistic, environmental and scientific educationare some of the social functions of riddles. Thus, he also notes that the entertainment function is the most recognized, while other social functions are ignored. Also, Finnegan (1970:426) notes that riddles are, "...the special domain of children ...to be for entertainment rather than *serious consideration*" [emphasis mine]. Yet, others like Farb (1973:98) counter this trivial treatment of riddles,noting that they were used in very serious situations of life and death, for example, Oedipus solving the Sphinx riddle. Indeed, this limited view has retarded the research of riddles and overshadowed other important functions.

Burns (1976:143-5) shows six occasions for riddling: riddling embedded in songs and narratives, in courting, in rituals like death and initiation, in educational encounters, riddling in leisure time and in greetings. These occasions show the significance of riddles in societies and report that riddles are serious activities as shown by Saville-Troike (2003:239-40) that notes riddling among the Quechua children begins near puberty and it is meant for sexual socialization and language development. Ishengoma (2005) also observes that riddles are not just about amusement and entertainment, but they afford the young a chance to participate in the social, cultural, political and economic aspects of their society as well as in helping them to develop critical thinking and exercise memorization. Gelfand (1979:85) cited in Gwaravanda&Masaka (2008:197) also refutes the claim that riddles are child-play, showing that grandmothers/fathers among the Shona use riddles to give instructions; therefore riddles are, "essentially crucial in shaping the mind and thought processes of the participants a well as a useful teaching method" to show that riddling is a serious activity and not necessarily child-like, childish or simplistic.

Hence, riddling sessions may also serve as a part of passing knowledge to the young through entertainment, because riddles as educational devices exercise, train the mind, impart cultural values and attitudes, teach dominance and submission roles, and promoting group cohesion and unity (Burns, 1976:139).

Ndathĩ ũũ ndathii ũũ [Njiracia ũtegi] “
I have gone this way and this way [tracks of a hunter]”

In the above, the respondent has to make out that hunters in hunting expeditions have to follow the tracks of their prey in order to track them; one must think wisely on how to track the animal. To solve a puzzle such as the above, it calls for greater intellectual activity and that is why riddles are described as a method of illustration that imparts knowledge, sharpens memory and reasoning ability in children and adults (Gwaravanda&Masaka, 2008). And also, in riddling, the contestant who answers most riddles correctly or poses the most challenging riddles is highly regarded by peers.

Nandwa&Bukenya (1983:11) cite Blacking (1961) on Venda riddles note that knowledge of riddles is also a social asset and those who are knowledgeable about riddles gain admiration, popularity and friends. Further, riddles are understood as instruments for linguistic, environmental and scientific education (Miruka, 1999:141). Additionally, (Njoroge1994:53-54) reports that riddles in the African context fulfill language competence, observation skills, normative skills, memory and intellectual skills and the entertainment skills functions. Hence, both show that entertainment is *not* the only and main function of riddles as Nandwa&Bukenya(ibid) also note that among the Luhya for children, riddles are didactic wherein they learn about the environment, are educated about their culture, their imagination is excited, and their wit is sharpened because they are expected to think fast and get answers to the riddle and/or to formulate their own. Hence, in general, language competence is valued in many African communities, as the use of riddles help improve children’s linguistic competence/verbal skills (Finnegan, 1970:431).

Riddling also serves other functions, Burns (1976) posits that through riddles, feelings of aggression and sexual desires are vented out while Finnegan (1970:442) argues that “[riddles] release tension imposed by moral and social code”. Riddles thus help the young to fully participate in the community’s social life because the social code is allowed to be broken.

And thus, riddles with either sexual overtones or scatological allusions help youth express their repressed desires and feelings. Youth too have repressed sexual desires and feelings which are kept in check by social norms and parental authority. This, in Freudian terms reflects the antagonism among the Id, the Ego and the Superego. For both youth and the adult, the riddling session offers them an opportunity to be 'naughty' without any social reprisal since such matters may not be said in any other forum without contradicting the social norms.

Riddles indeed comment on human life (Miruka, 1999:141) which range from a people's way of life, economic activities, fears, values, body shape and organs, general behavior etc. with observation playing a central role as reflected in the following riddles:

Ndarwithia kīhī gīacoka o kīhī [thaara]

'I have circumcised a lad but he has gone back to his former state(uncircumcised). [Napier grass]'

Gaikūrūka kahūtī kambata kahūni [kondo ka nyeni]

'It has come down hungry but went up full [a basketful of kales]'

Cia hitūkīra haha ikīnaga kandīnja [nyondo cia airitū]

'They have passed here dancing *kandīnja*⁶[girls' breasts]'

Riddles and *Mchongoano*

From the foregoing, there is evidence of analogies in riddles and *mchongoano*. Thus, comparatively both genres have an opening formula that is meant to signal a beginning of a performance, to prod a contestant into action or to call for attention. In *mchongoano*, there are 'requests' that a contestant can make e.g. *nikuchongoe?* 'do I engage you in a dueling?'. One can agree or refuse. Such 'requests' are here considered as opening formula because they are much like the ones found in the traditional riddle which sets the stage for a start. There could be an explicit indicator to an end of a *mchongoano* contest from an overwhelmed contestant, though in riddling the closing formula tends to be understood. However, the Nyanja have explicit ones like, "He has died" cited by Burns (1976: 153) as a victory statement and taunting of the loser. This is similar to previously shown for *mchongoano* when one concedes defeat or is told to concede by the audience. It is then plausible to claim that both genres have closing and opening formula; whether implicit, explicit/precise or a statement that concludes or opens a performance.

Second, both *mchongoano* and riddles are dialogic and or dyadic in performance; normally, there are two contestants and an audience meant to witness, encourage, judge, to be entertained etc. Both are dialogic in presentation, but they do not adhere to coherence, as in ordinary conversational discourse, but more to turn-taking involving non related items that only appear to be coherent in the context of the contest. Put differently, a riddle or *mchongoano* is not a reply to the one previously presented, and topic wise, it might take on a different topic all together. Yet, both genres depend very much on excellent and keen observation skills. A riddle, like a *mchongoano*, is a reflection of the source society (society of origin), and for any creator, they must have a good eye and ear to see and hear what is in their environment and to use it to create a riddle or a *mchongoano*. This calls for creativity and imagination on the part of the creator as well as the respondent, if the expression is to be meaningful. To illustrate, the preoccupation with money by the clergy in Kenya is captured by the *mchongoano* below:

Ati kwa church yenu wakati wa kutoa sadaka badala ya kuimba “toa dada toa ndugu” mmaimba “Mpesa! Mpesa! Mpesa!”

‘That in your church at offertory time instead of singing “give brother give sister” you sing “Mpesa! Mpesa! Mpesa!”

In this example, the creator has made an observation of what is happening in the society currently. Hence, *Mpesa* is a mobile telephone money transfer system that is currently very popular in Kenya, and here the clergy’s obsession with money in Kenya is shown. The contestant has adopted a common hymn “*Toa ndugu toa dada*” that is sang during offertory in church.

The creativity and imagination expected in both genres reflects the societal values and ethnic stereotypes (example 13), norms, fears, aspirations, expectations etc. This explains why current events, inventions and innovations e.g. the internet, the Facebook craze, mobile telephony are included in the following *mchongoano*, for example:

Nasikia ati gari yenu ni mzee hadi siku ile babako aliipeleka trade-in alibadilishiwa na simu ya 3310.

“I hear that your (family’s) car is so old that when your father took it for a trade-in he got a (Nokia) 3310 phone.”

Wasapere⁸ ni wezi mpaka venye nilienda kugoogle “Onyango stole my phone” ikaniletea “Did you mean “Kamau stole my fone[sic]?” then kwa related searches “Njoroge steals a fone ,”Nderitu hijacks a car”, “Wangui takes of [sic] with a fone ”

Kikuyus are such thieves that that when I googled “Onyango stole my phone” I got the message, “Did you mean, “Kamau stole my phone?”, then in the related searches, I got the following: “Njoroge steals a phone”, “Nderitu hijacks a car”, [and] “Wangui takes off with a phone’.

Ati uliingia Facebook kitambo hadi wall yako imecrack.

‘That you joined the Facebook a long time ago that your wall is now cracked’.

From the available riddles, I did not encounter the inclusion of such new inventions like the internet, the computer or the television but there was an example involving motorbikes e.g.

“Ndathiūrūrūka mūtītū na kibikibi ndune [mūkunga mbura]”

“I have gone round the forest by a red motorbike [the rainbow]”

The lack of mention of modern referents from technology in riddles can probably be as a result of the fact that traditional riddling is dormant or new riddles are not coming up to reflect this reality, although there are riddles that do mention the motorcar, which was an early entrant than the computer technology.

The participants and consumers of both genres are believed to be the young, though this is contestable, because in both genres the young and the old participate albeit in different capacities. For riddles, as mentioned above, there are those riddling sessions that adults (Ishengoma, 2005, Amuka, 1994, Njoroge, 1994) and there are those that the children/ youth perform amongst themselves depending on the topics; because for some reasons, the topics may not be comfortable to the adults in the presence of the young and vice versa. Participants and consumers of *mchongoano* cut across the different age and gender brackets. Children are not the only ones; there are grown comedians who are practitioners of *mchongoano*. Adults also participate in the genre, indirectly, when they read the jokes in the newspapers or adverts⁹ or on-line. Again, the definition of who a youth is varies. I have adopted Ogechi (2007) definition as those between age 13 and 35, though I am aware that children younger than this participate in *mchongoano*.

Functionally, riddles and *mchongoano* have much in common. First, both have entertainment as their main function, and second, humor pervades both and via humor both are popular with both the young and the old, because humor is universal.

For example:

Mkipika chapo kwenu huwa mnaandika “tumehama”.

‘When cooking *chapatis* in your home you write (on the gate/door)

“We have moved houses”’.

Here, this passage shows that the people from this source society value a particular food (*chapati*) and that to keep unto themselves; they would lie about moving so they would not have to share the food that was made.

Second:

Baba yenu ni muoga hadi hudoze kama amekunja ngumi

‘Your father is such a coward that he sleeps with clenched fists’.

Hence, there is incongruity, because it is expected that fathers are security providers in their homes and should not show signs of fear, and also irony in that fathers are expected to be brave, and probably he sleeps with his fists clenched in readiness to face an aggressor or in fear of being caught unaware of any danger. Plus, ordinarily, one can’t sleep with clenched fists because at one time, the hands will relax, and the fists will give way.

The above likeness of riddles and *mchongoano* are commendable, but there is indeed a significant difference between them in the language they use. *Mchongoano* has aspects of Sheng and code switching/mixing mostly used by the youth or those who have been urbanized and not understood and appreciated by many, and on the other hand, riddles have relatively a more standard status that is shared by most speakers of all ages, although riddles have archaic language and at times, also seemingly senseless words (Finnegan (1970:437). And finally in this exercise, I propose that riddles and *mchongoano* mark identity especially based on age and youthfulness wherein youth are curious about and excited by sexual matters, thus they might be most interested in those forms of riddles and *mchongoano* that are vulgar or have sexual connotations or allusions. But this would have to be investigated more fully in perhaps another study.

Conclusion

This paper aimed at comparing *mchongoano* and riddles. I have shown that these two genres share many characteristics and functions, and although the data on riddles is from the Kikuyu community; the assumption is that the same characteristics and functions are generally observed in riddles from other communities.

In the near future, I predict that *mchongoano* will take up the functions of the traditional riddle based on the popularity it is gaining. Considering that the practitioners of this genre are young people, there is likelihood that it has future since they will soon enter adulthood and thus *mchongoano* will be considered as part of their folklore. Due to urbanization and socio-cultural changes in the country, we can also expect Sheng to gain in usage as the languages in which traditional riddles were presented are seemingly no longer popular with the young considering that the set up that facilitated riddling sessions has changed because the adults and/or the grandparents are no longer available for the young interact with (as early as 1976, Burns [p.145] observed that, "...educational contexts for riddling appear to be diminishing"). Thus, it is important that *mchongoano* is taken seriously and be considered a part of the national folklore of Kenya, and therefore, accorded all the deserved status and necessary scholarly attention.

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Footnotes

¹ I thank students from the Narok University College, Kinagop Learning Centre for additional riddles.

² Recorded from *Inooro* radio station (98.9FM) on 19th November 2011 in “Wakariru”, a children’s programme where children use Kikuyu, their vernacular and Kiswahili.

³ C. Gichuhi (personal communication) on 10th March, 2012.

⁴ It is common practice for those who do not do well in school to repeat classes

⁵ A common plant in Kikuyu land whose leaves are very soft, *Plectranthus barbatus*

⁶ For this word I do not have a Kikuyu meaning but I suppose it could have been borrowed from the English expression ‘a dangerous car’ probably one that could be swerving dangerously from one end of the road to the other just like breasts do.

⁷ Harambee is a self-help (fund raising) slogan adopted at independence and was much abused by the provincial administrators in Kenya to extort money for services to be rendered. It was very unpopular with the poor who could not access services

⁸ This refers to the members of the Kikuyu ethnic group by Sheng users

⁹ P. Njenga in personal communication (7 July 2012) admitted he enjoys reading *mchongoano* in the newspaper and shares jokes similar to these with his friends but he cannot with those younger than him or unfamiliar to him.