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Redefining "Home": The concept of *dala* in Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye's *Chira*

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Abstract
The debates about Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye's identity either, exclusively identify her as Kenyan or British-born Kenyan without explicitly interrogating the process by which she became Kenyan. This research recognises that Macgoye is Kenyan through her marriage to a Luo. The Luo are a language group whose traditional land is on the shores of Lake Victoria. To the Luo, the word *dala* has varied meanings including, but not limited to: a homestead, the ancestral land, the clan, and the general direction of *dala* before the Luo is Kenyan. As a Luo wife, Macgoye has multiple belongings to these *dala* spaces, which use location, ethnicity and gender to create Luo cultural identity in experiences involving an individual's past and the present. These definitions of the Luo *dala* are interrogated in various ways in Macgoye's *Chira* (a novel) showing her engagement with the different appropriations of the Luo *dala.*

This paper uses postcolonial and diaspora theories, and the Luo concepts of *dala* to show how her identity and belonging influences Macgoye's representations. It argues that Macgoye's Luo wife status informs and redefines postcolonial and diaspora concepts of home. The paper also shows how Macgoye's being "at home" is shown through her use of both the mother tongue and the mother in-law tongue. Luo storytelling structures and transliterations are identified as indications of Macgoye's concept of *dala*. The research aims to show how the cultural re-rooting of Macgoye challenges discussions of displacement, identity and belonging.

Introduction
Postcolonial theory has several notions of home categorised by physical geography, nostalgia, and memory. These notions complicate appropriations of home and undermine the tendency to read home within a dichotomy of destination and arrival. The structure and development of home includes, for diasporic identities, an element of in-betweeness which produces what is often termed, hyphenated identities. When Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye is identified as a "British-born" Kenyan, she performs within this hyphenated context, but she is also identified by critical works as exclusively Kenyan(Wasamba 2000; Kuria 2009). These debates notably fail to interrogate the process by which Macgoye became Kenyan or how she inhabits the hyphen. It can be

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argued that Macgoye is Kenyan by her marriage to a Luo, a Kenyan language group whose traditional land is on the shores of Lake Victoria. The resultant Luo wife status, arguably, accords Macgoye a Luo identity, belonging and subject position. Against this backdrop, this study enables the exploration of identity which can, redefine, enrich and inform current diaspora and postcolonial notions of home.

As a Luo wife, Macgoye has multiple belongings to Luo identity spaces, which use location (*dala*), ethnicity (being Luo) and gender (inclusiveness of the Luo wife) to create Luo cultural identity in experiences involving an individual's past and the present. The nuanced *Dholuo* expressions, including the title of the novel, *Chira,* are lost to non-Luo readers, or ignored or misinterpreted by critics keen to create (much needed at the time) literary analyses that responded to the emergence of AIDS in Kenya. *Chira* (the text) uses Luo cultural ideas and language in ways that create spaces worth exploring in the context of discussions of home and belonging. It is against this backdrop that this research draws on Macgoye's treatment of *dala,* that is, home in the Luo context, to expose how cultural conditioning remains a significant moderating influence to the self in relation to constructions of Kenyan identity. The study argues that the knowledge of the existence of local concepts and narratives in the Luo traditional spaces, *dala,* is the main issue that Macgoye deals with to show the cultural and social conflict culture faces as it struggles to fit modern disease into its fabric. Macgoye's *Chira* explores the power relationships and place of women in the city and in the traditional Luo society, displacement and alienation, and the Luo cultural understanding of *chira* (the wasting disease) as a self-directed predicament, something earned by the sufferer's sin.

The existence of cultural concepts and narratives in Luo traditional spaces has not informed previous readings of *Chira.* Kruger (2004) asserts that, 'AIDS translates into local concepts, local epistemologies and, finally local spaces' (p. 118), but this research argues that in confrontations with change, the Luo cultural view influences how individuals view their situations both in *dala* and in the city. Thus, the location of *dala* and the interactions from *dala* in addition to the individual's engagement with *dala* should underpin the readings of *Chira.* The role of *dala* in *Chira* creates spaces worth exploring for their contribution to discussions of what Komu (2005) only acknowledges as, '*some* ethnocentric elements in her (Macgoye's) works' (p. 9). This paper shows that it is these ethnic centred discussions, which inform the articulations of cultural issues in *Chira.* The discussions in the text explore more than *chira* and even this is presented from a Luo focus which includes interrogations of *dala* as: fixed locations, originary homes, oppressive sites, and spaces where individuals seek to understand disease and cultural values.

Postcolonial conceptions of "home"

The English language, in which postcolonial theory is predominantly articulated, defines home in different ways that involve cross-sectional elements of memory, longing and belonging which subvert notions of home as a point of departure and return. When individuals leave the places in which they were born and they carry memories of these spaces with them, home becomes a, 'mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination' (Brah 1996, p. 192). In this design, home is not a specific location, but a space constructed in the memory of an individual or a group of people with common origin who experience nostalgia even as they are unable to return to these spaces. Contrasting

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Brah's idea is Ahmed's (1999) definition of home as, 'where one lives, or where one's family lives, or it is one's native country' (p. 388). This definition identifies home with a specific location where one belongs by descent or nationality. Ngugi (2005) intersects Brah and Ahmed's definitions of home by attributing the construction of home to the combination of personal experiences of individuals or groups and their imaginations. A close look at all these ideas of home reveals the ties to socio-cultural influences and national identities in current postcolonial and diaspora theories of home. It also reveals the lack of a unified view of home as shown in the resulting hyphenated identities.

In the context of postcolonial Kenya, the attempts to subvert neat constitutions of home are complicated further by the fact that different Kenyan communities have their own definitions of home, so the hyphen in Macgoye's postcolonial identity problematises the concept of home in the English language context. In addition, it calls for a discerning understanding of "home" in the context of Macgoye's Luo-Kenyan experience of place. In this regard, Shutzer's (2012) criticism of the Kenya government for its, 'simplistic use of 'home'—as if it were a concept that all Kenyan citizens shared' (p. 348) is worth observing. Shutzer points out the effects of colonialism in current Kenyan definitions of home and notes the links between colonialism and the assignation of land which, 'embedded ethnic identity in geographic space' (p. 348). These colonial assignations of the "geographic spaces" as identified by Shutzer, are traditionally encompassed in the Luo word *dala* which has varied meanings including but not limited to: a homestead, the ancestral land, the clan and then Kenyan identity.

There are some commonalities between home in postcolonial and diaspora theories with the Luo concept of *dala.* Ahmed's (1999) definition of home as the location of an individual's beginning is incorporated in the *dala* reference to the Luo traditional concepts of birth where, 'those whose placentae are buried within the homestead are seen to belong, be upright, be secure' (Cohen and Odhiambo 1987, p. 269). In the pre-urban migration Kenya, the Luo homestead may have shifted, but the memories of the location were retained in the oral culture and sometimes marked by special features and included in the family identity as *gunda* (a previous location of *dala*). The placentae of one generation may have been buried either in *gunda* or in the current *dala*, but the clear identification of the location of previous homes allowed individuals to track and link their identities to the places their ancestors occupied. Referring to this as the *biero* (placenta) discourse, Cohen and Odhiambo (1987) argue that it identifies Luo people by where they were born, which makes *dala* a specific location tied to shared and legitimate ownership of physical and geographical spaces. Citing a translated Luo proverb, 'Of course Odongo does not feel at home because *home* is where the placenta is buried' (p. 271), Cohen and Odhiambo emphasise the Luo links of home to individual identity, belonging and feelings of being in *dala*. This is in reference to traditional Luo birth practice where the child was born in *dala* and the placenta buried in the homestead of the parents. Before the establishment of the western style health care system, if a birth occurred outside the *dala*, the placenta was carried to *dala* and buried there. The distinction between the Luo definitions of *dala* as a geographical and specific location was highlighted in Odera Oruka's (1990) witness presentations, in the S.M. Otieno case in which there were contestations of where S.M. Otieno was to be buried. In this legal case, Oruka made further Luo distinctions between *dala* and *ot* which challenged English definitions and showed the difference between English definitions and Luo

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understandings. *Ot* is a house in *dala* or in the city, but the city dwelling is not home in the Luo context; it can only be a house. According to Oruka, *dala* differs from home because the individual has no choice of where *dala* is. The clan, the collective to which the individual belongs by birth, determines the location of *dala* and it is a physical location (pp. 73–74). The distance from where *dala* is defined accords it fixity as a specified location at the same time flexibility depending on the site of definition. Within this construction of *dala,* any reading of Macgoye's *Chira* must acknowledge that *dala* is an essential construct that must be explored for a proper understanding of the text. Individual identity and belonging among the Luo, the community whose story *Chira* tells, are linked to where *dala* is as demonstrated by the Otieno case where it was argued that Otieno had to buried where the placenta was buried which was *dala* and not the *Ot* he had near Nairobi.

Within the placenta discourse, the cultural re-rooting of Macgoye would have challenged her Kenyan identity because of her English birth, and placed her in the interstices where she does not belong to either culture. However, Macgoye's origin is acknowledged in her virilocal home where she is accepted and included, and where she becomes an insider in the Luo *dala,* which influences her cultural understanding of the Luo values. As Petra Brittner (2009) notes, Macgoye's in-between position does not disavow her first skin, but it can also be argued that it does not deny her articulation of Luo culture and subjectiveness.

"The wasting disease"

In *Chira,* Macgoye not only identifies the Luo difference between *dala* and other locations, but also appropriates different characteristics of *dala*. *Chira* (the text) explores the contradictions between the "new" definitions of HIV/AIDS and the Luo traditional understanding of *chira* (the disease) as the consequences of transgressions of Luo cultural norms. The protagonist, Gabriel Otieno (Otish) explores the city life, through his Luo lenses, reviewing all of its new experiences such as employment, Christianity, slum dwelling, relationships and politics. He still has connections to his ancestral home (*dala*) through visits by people from *dala* and letters. At the beginning of the novel, Mama Samuel, Otish's aunt, is in the referral hospital in Nairobi, but demands that medicine be brought to her from her maternal home which Otish successfully arranges for. Whether she recovers because of hospital intervention or the medicine from home is not clearly stated, but Mama Samuel's belief in the efficacy of Luo medicine is a recurrent idea in the text. Otish travels home (*dala*) when his mother writes to him to visit because Samuel, his cousin, is severely sick. The now very frail Samuel confesses to Otish about an incestuous relationship with his cousin Josefina who has, by this time, died. It is notable that Samuel himself, in line with his Luo cultural beliefs, attributes his own illness to *chira*, because incest is a violation of Luo culture. *Chira* also explores the power and place of women in both the city and the traditional society, displacement and alienation and other postcolonial issues in Kenya.

Chira has predominantly been read as an AIDS narrative (Komu 2005; Wasamba 2000). Most of these readings were in the early days of the AIDS epidemic, where studies were earnestly seeking answers and ways of responding to the disease. Against these nationalistic readings of *Chira* as, 'a novel that responds to the HIV/AIDS pandemic' (Komu 2005, p. 7), is Kruger's (2004) assertion that the text, 'is not primarily a novel

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about HIV infected characters; instead, the narrative explores the contradictions and dilemmas faced by those likely to contract the disease, who are often torn between shunning the infected and expressing sympathy for their plight' (p. 117). There is a notable gap in discussions of Macgoye's in-depth understanding of Luo cultural norms and her use of Dholuo (the Luo language) expressions. Macgoye presents Samuel's confession of incest and the discussions between Mama Fibi and Mama Gabriel, which underscore her understanding of the cultural perceptions even in the face of the HIV/AIDS. The struggles to understand how *chira* has traditionally worked and the new manifestation is evident in conversations in *Chira* such as –

> "It is the red fish they eat down there. My mother always used to warn me about it and I have impressed it on my children. If you have fish, have *ngege.* It is the only safe one"
> "But people do not say it is a food sickness, my sister-in-law. They say it is *chira"*
> "But *chira* does not pass between kinsfolk" (p. 54)

Macgoye emphasises the cultural understandings of the beliefs of the origin of *chira*, cultural taboos that surround "the wasting disease" as the Luo characters in the text know it and the traditional beliefs in this context. These "ethnocentric elements" shape the tensions in the text between cultural values and the new disease. Macgoye subverts her Englishness from the outset, in the title, where the cultural values implied highlight the ambiguities in the text. *Chira* is an ailment culturally identified in the Luo *dala* and in her selection of the title of this text, Macgoye clearly shows that *dala* is not only associated with cultural understanding but also provides an explanation for a disease (*chira*) which complicates the present scourge of HIV/AIDS. When she explains: '*Richo e makelo chira*—it is sin that causes the wasting disease' (p. 49), Macgoye's *Dholuo* (language) and Luo cultural understanding is lost to the non-Luo speaking reader who has no knowledge that this is a popular Luo saying. It was first put in writing in *Dholuo* by Paul Mbuya Akoko in 1945, long before the AIDS narrative started. What is translated in the text as "sin" is redefined by Odera Oruka's citation of Paul Mbuya Akoko that, 'bad deeds bring about *chira*' (Oruka 1990, p. 81). Oruka further develops his own definition stating –

> *Chira* is a misfortune which befalls one because of an evil deed in the past—*gima rach matimoreni nyime ni mar rach ma isetimo chien.* It is also seen as a misfortune on one following one's conduct in breaking a taboo. (p. 69)

The taboos spoken of here are cultural values that are specific to the Luo and not necessarily shared values within other Kenyan communities. For example, sexual relations between cousins in some communities in Kenya may be acceptable and cousins can be married whereas, among the Luo, in the rules of *dala,* this is a taboo that undoubtedly result in *chira.* The previous readings of *Chira* as an AIDS narrative served the purpose of creating a unified nationalistic view of a social problem. However, Homi Bhabha (1994) would criticise these as attempts to locate writing in what he describes as, 'a containment of difference . . .the assumption that at some level all forms of cultural diversity may be understood on the basis of a particular universal concept' (pp. 208-209)

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in this case, the nation, Kenya. To read *Chira* only as a nationalistic AIDS narrative ignores Macgoye's engagement with the Luo *dala* and its rules. Writing from the Luo wife perspective, Macgoye does not deny the existence of HIV/AIDS, but she unveils the complications of getting Samuel and his family to transcend the cultural values that equate disease to transgression of social norms, which is named as sin. Kruger's (2004) statements that *chira*, 'is a local Luo term that interweaves a new medical condition, AIDS, with a highly problematic cultural status, that of breaking a taboo' (p. 117) and later that it is, 'an obscure, socially stigmatized wasting disease' (p. 121) fail to show that the Luo clearly understood *chira* and had cultural regulations to guard against transgressions that would lead to the occurrence of *chira*. Similar misunderstanding is expressed in Komu's (2005) declaration (in outsider distance) that, '"*chira*" is a common condition in this community' (p. 41). *Chira* is not a common condition, because people would do everything to avoid it; rather, it is a known condition which requires, 'a new speaking position in an affirmative idiom' (Krüger 2004, p. 125).

The ambiguity surrounding cultural norms embedded in the complexities of *chira* in Luo cultural values requires interrogation, rethinking and a new language. It is in this framework of a new language that in different research based on Nigerian settings, both Joseph Ogbodo and Adedeji Odunlade (cited in Komu 2005) identified the need for appropriate language to communicate HIV/AIDS education to the rural communities to stem the spread of the disease. As the HIV/AIDS campaigns continued in Kenya, the Luo coined new language to identify HIV/AIDS, which moved from speculations of the disease as *chira* to identifying it differently as *Ayaki matieka* (Aduda 2013), translating loosely to: robbery, exploitation, extinction—finishing, which are the characteristics of AIDS. Wasamba, though engaged in some explication of the text as an AIDS narrative is recognised by Komu as disputing, ". . . traditional beliefs that misrepresent . . . AIDS as a common wasting disease among the Luo known as *chira*" (Komu 2005, p. 127). It is this "misrepresentation," which shows limited understanding of Luo social norms and cultural values, that has led to *Chira* being read predominantly as a story of AIDS and not of a community struggling to find expressions of the challenges of postcolonial Kenyan society. In the traditional society, any sex outside of marriage was culturally unacceptable (Mboya 1945) and *chira* is only used by the Luo characters in the text to describe the known or speculated sexual engagement of the two cousins, which is a taboo in the Luo culture. It is notable that in the text, outsiders like Njoki, Theodore and Helen readily submit themselves to HIV screening while the other named characters, Luos who interpret their surrounding by the moral values of home, do not except MakOwuor who is pressured by Njoki to be tested. Wasamba (2000) notes that this shows that, 'people no longer fear to know their status' (p. 131), but fails to identify the cultural conditioning of the people he is referring to and their non-Luo backgrounds or influences.

Komu (2005) argues that Wasamba –

> Identifies the use of condoms, change of attitudes towards the disease, accepting its existence, HIV screening, going public with the disease, improvement of sexual habits and family life education as some of the solutions Macgoye offers to curb the scourge. (p. 30)

While these present valid and useful control and management of HIV, there is no evidence provided in Komu's critique of where these are included in *Chira*. Macgoye

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shows that Gabriel, Samuel, Mama Samuel and the villagers, though perturbed about the disease, have a resigned acknowledgment of *chira.* As stated earlier, there appears to be significant effort to capitalise on the text as an AIDS narrative to the exclusion of the dilemma scripted in the text as implied by the title. Macgoye clearly states (through the omniscient narrator, the women's village talk) and also shows by the behaviour of Josefina's father towards his sister, Mama Samuel, the disturbance of cultural values by the incest which is also articulated by Samuel accepting his illicit relationship with Josefina. Komu (2005) reads *Chira* as "pedagogical" writing (p. 34) exploring causes and effects of HIV showing Samuel's 'ignorance and denial of the existence of denial' (ibid.), but ignores the fact that Macgoye is silent on any other information on how, if she did, Josefina contracted HIV. In the letter that Gabriel receives from *dala* (another shift in narrative style—the reader hears Gabriel's mother's voice) Gabriel's mother says –

> We are asking you to come as soon as possible to see your cousin Samuel, who is very sick. The sickness in not understood by us. The doctor at the health centre has not been able to master it. (p. 44)

Reading this only as the villager's ignorance where ignorance means lack of knowledge or awareness would not be comprehensive because the statements show that even medical science does not have the capacity to deal with Samuel's situation. What Gabriel's mother makes clear is that some social norm has been broken; incest is immoral behaviour, a contravention of Luo social norms as a society that marries outside of their immediate clan. Since Macgoye does not imply or introduce other sexual partners of Samuel or Josefina in the text, it is not clear how the text's central idea can be unquestionably HIV/AIDS to justify Komu's (2005) conclusion, 'that Josefina and Samuel's infection originated from their incestuous relationship' (p. 40). Komu's argument would only imply that incest leads to disease, which is what *chira* is understood by the community to be. The confusion of the villagers in their experiences with Josefina's death and Samuel's illness can only be ignorance and unfamiliarity; their existing knowledge of *chira* challenges new information, which uses the same language to describe a new thing. Language, 'is a carrier of culture of those people to whom it is a mother tongue' (Ngugi 2005, p. 151), so *chira* is not translatable or equated to HIV/AIDS. As stated earlier, *Dholuo* has since moved on to adopt other language to distinguish HIV from *chira.*

Change in community values is depicted as closely related to the containment of the spread of AIDS in predominant readings of *Chira,* but the language used in the text, besides the title, indicates that language is an important consideration in this text. The use of the word "home" in *Chira* takes on different meanings. For example, at the start of the text Gabriel's comment to Theodore Maina, 'At home, really? On the edge of the city?' (p. 38) foregrounds the importance of language use and its implications on the Luo understanding of *dala* as a specific location. Gabriel muses over how the edge of the city can be *dala* and links this to individual identity when he asks Maina, 'How do you see yourself?' Maina's identity is constructed by where he calls home as incorporated in his response, 'Why not? I am an orphan. I have no other' (p. 38). By inhabiting the fringe of the city, Maina is in the Third Space between his ancestral home, which he does not know and the city where he sits on the edges of. This space is where hybridity occurs according to Bhabha (1994, p. 13) and in this liminality, the individual does not retain

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any of the originary culture. While movement to the city for Gabriel does not destroy his historical and cultural identity as he still has *dala*, for Maina it is tied up to his status as an orphan raised by his maternal grandmother, who has no connections with his paternal family. For Ngugi (2005), 'the choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment' (p. 143).

For the Luo characters in *Chira*, their "natural environment" is *dala* and that is their departure and return point. Thus, when Helen's mother returns to Kenya after the end of her marriage in Tanzania, the rules and values of her Luo departure point dictate where she is buried, because she no longer has *dala* in her place of birth. Helen's mother is in-between; she inhabits the hyphen and is excluded from both sides. Her situation highlights the plight of the alien against the Luo cultural values of *dala* that require a married woman to make her own *dala* in the husband's home. Helen's choice not to identify with her maternal Luo roots may seem as a choice and has been read as such (Krüger 2004, p. 120), but does she really have a choice in a patrilineal society? Helen is alienated from her Tanzanian background and does not really belong with her mother's people in the patrilineal Luo society; thus, she has multiple beginnings without a specified *dala*. Gabriel, on the other hand, has *dala* to which he returns. *Dala* becomes the traditional space endowed with cultural identity, acceptance and belonging without much individual choice of where and how much to belong. This challenges the observation that both Helen and Gabriel –

> Complicate notions of home and exile by generating a host of imagined communities and diasporic affiliations that emerge as intermediate and temporary locations and that question the familiar concept of home as refuge and a place of undisputed origin and identity (Krüger 2004, p. 121)

The spaces Helen and Gabriel inhabit are real communities that they engage with from the viewpoint of their originary identities, their understanding of *dala* and or lack of it. Gabriel returns home (*dala*) to visit a specific location, and Helen not seeking out her mother's people could be explained by the patrilineal nature of a society that will alienate a "daughter's child". Throughout the text, Helen's alienation is shown through references to her language in expressions that describe the type of Kiswahili she spoke as Tanzanian and even the use of the word "stupid" that Macgoye parenthetically references as Helen not knowing how bad that sounded to a Luo ear. Language, in the text, is shown as central to an individual's identity.

Conclusion

Chira supports the premise that Macgoye's multiple belongings to the Luo *dala* spaces have influenced her language choices and representation. The diverse Luo appropriations of *dala* are, therefore, important considerations in reading the text to explore how displacement, identity and belonging are framed in the *dala* lens throughout the text. The text echoes the Luo understanding that *dala* is a specific location. This construct challenges current postcolonial attempts to produce a generalised definition of home which does not conceptualise home with the geographical specificity of location imbued with the ability to create definite identities for some cultures. Macgoye's

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exploration of *dala* and use of the Luo *chira* depicts a community dealing with the transition of moral and ethical values in the face of a new disease, HIV/AIDS, which is only a backdrop for the bigger picture of change and the ensuing conflicts in society. Macgoye's Luo wife status accords her an insider position from where she is able to use Luo concepts of *dala* to inform and redefine concepts of home. She then shows that socio-cultural experiences influence ways in which individuals shape and negotiate their identities. Through her Luo characters, Macgoye shows individual and community definitions of *dala* as a fixed location. Macgoye shows, in the different connections with place, that even within Kenya, home is not a universal construct. She challenges postcolonial and diasporic attempts to standardise English definitions of home. For *Chira*, the fixity of *dala* is important in understanding the language and the society's understanding of *chira* and the problems inherent in using the same language or word for HIV/AIDS or reading *Chira* only as an HIV/AIDS narrative.

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