

# Dramatic Irony as an Intervention Strategy in Two Dholuo Films: *Kalausi* and *The Cleansing*

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## Abstract

*Kalausi* and *The Cleansing* are two films set in Kenya whose storylines touch on death and rituals among the Luo community of Kenya. Both films are in the language of Dholuo and place sharp focus on widowhood and its prevailing dilemmas and anxieties within Luo culture. It is these dilemmas and anxieties that reveal the injustices that culture metes out to women. While *Kalausi* engages its viewers up until the burial ceremony, *The Cleansing* starts after the actual burial and focuses on post-burial rituals. Thus, the two films in a way complement each other in the presentation of the injustices and intrigues that a woman faces during and after the demise of a spouse. Dramatic irony as the trope of ambiguity in the two films builds up tension, suspense and comic relief. Consequently, we examine how dramatic irony participates as a socio-cultural device of intervention in the two films. Reading the two films from this perspective, dramatic irony as a signifying trope becomes paramount in unravelling the multiplicities of interpretations evident in the critical moment of death within the Luo community. It is an extremely intricate signifying device as it plays on the contrast between reality and appearance.

**Keywords:** *Kalausi*; *The Cleansing*; widowhood; Luo; dramatic irony; intervention

## Background of the Luo Culture

It is often taken for granted that Luo customs and traditions are well known to its populations. However, with the developments of modernisation, urbanisation, Western education and Christianity, many aspects of Luo culture seem to remain unknown, and are thus not fully observed, though most Luo urbanites would deem themselves apt practitioners of their traditions. In this article, we are interested in how two Dholuo films are framed as projects of intervention. The two films, in many ways, consciously locate



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themselves in the ongoing debates and discourses on Luo culture, traditions and rituals of death, and the place of the widow/woman in Luo culture. Before engaging with the concerns of the two filmic texts, it is important to explain how culture is construed in this article.

Culture is a broad concept, and is understood in different ways. Consequently, the meaning of culture is still being debated. One plausible approach is to distinguish between two notions of culture: a classicist and an empiricist notion. The classicist notion of culture understands the person of culture as one who is nourished in the great human and intellectual achievements of the West. Basically, within the classicist notion, there is only one culture, which is universal and, in a sense, permanent. Culture, from an empiricist view, on the other hand, includes sets of meanings and values that inform a specific way of life.

In view of the above distinction, one understanding of culture that can be considered empiricist is presented by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973). According to him, culture is a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms, through which human beings communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and their attitude towards life. Culture also includes historically transmitted and shared patterns of understanding (Geertz 1973).

A similar empiricist definition of culture is one which is proposed by feminists. According to Serene Jones, culture is “the entire system of symbols, languages, beliefs, actions and attitudes, within which persons live and learn to organise and make sense of their world and actions” (Jones 2000, 33). In this sense, culture is deeply ingrained and embedded in a person because culture is not simply about behaviour but also about ideas. These conceptions are not constructed outside of the individual. It can, therefore, be rightly said that culture is not something “out there.” It is rather a way of life that everyone is already taking part in. Therefore, the empiricist notion captures a social dimension of culture, while at the same time not neglecting the role of the individual who interprets from her or his own particular perspective and mindset.

The Southern Luo, who practise Luo culture, are of Nilotic origin. Dholuo is the name of the language spoken by groups of people in the Sudan, Ethiopia, Congo, Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania (Ocholla-Ayayo 1976, 13). Ocholla-Ayayo (1976) goes further to say that the Luo are a patrilineal society and senior members stand in the highest position in the kinship value hierarchy. Besides external influences, there have been internal transformations within Luo culture itself, with the example of the movement from a fishing and nomadic society to a settled mixed agricultural one. Luo culture, therefore, embodies all those symbols, language, beliefs and attitudes which the Luo people live by and use to make sense of their world.

Luo culture and society spans diverse territories. Yet, the Luo people live by similar norms and share a common understanding of social relations. Questions regarding

people's wellbeing and their status are explained within the framework of culture. What follows is a brief background to the Luo ideology concerning marriage, and the significance of death, bereavement and death rituals as traditionally understood.

The Luo custom of marriage is established on the principle that death alone does not dissolve the marriage contract. A widow still remains the legal wife of the deceased man, and may be expected to raise children to his name through leviratic relationships, such that a close kinsman of the dead man, in the line of brother-in-law (*Yuore*), takes on the role of caretaker (Ocholla-Ayayo 1976).

The death of a spouse is a devastating moment and a generally emotive experience. Luo culture makes this even harder for women since widowhood rituals have negative effects on the widow and her children. Bereavement among the Luo involves rituals and harassment and, like many other African cultures, places restrictions on remarriage or taking up other sexual partners. For instance, ethnographic material from a neighbouring community, the Abanyole, indicates that upon the death of her spouse, a widow is accompanied by a fellow widow to her native home to give the report of death. Before the widow leaves to go to her parental home, the body of her late husband needs to have been removed from the house and put under a tent. The widow cannot go to her parents' home before her husband's body is outside and under the tent. In the event that the widow is not present and it is time for her late husband to be removed from the house, people will have to wait until the widow returns. Indeed, they have to wait for her in order to start making the tent. This is also because it is up to the widow to show which bed is to be taken outside for the deceased to be laid on (Maseno-Ouma 2014).

Upon arrival at the compound of the widow's parents, the widow needs to come into the gate wailing. The widow must cry loud as she enters through the gate in order to alert the people in the homestead that there is a problem, so that they do not run towards her with gladness like they usually do when she pays a normal visit. The cry lets them know that something bad has happened. If the widow does not have the ability to wail, then she sings a sad song. Once the widow arrives at her parents' home, people from the neighbourhood come in order to confirm who has passed away. The widow then leaves her parents' home, accompanied by the person she came with and another person or persons from her natal home (Maseno-Ouma 2014).

After the death announcement comes the vigil (*budho*) where relatives of the deceased stay within the compound for several nights until the actual burial day. According to Wakana Shiino (1997), Christian songs, be they Catholic or Protestant or from new religious movements like *Roho* (Spirit), are also sung alongside lamentations, depending on the religious affiliation of the family. Further, Shiino (1997) notes that there are about 14 rituals that are performed for one deceased person in successive order. A widow takes part in *tero cholla*, a ritual which is meant to end the mourning. The widow is to have in mind the man who would inherit her and whilst she visits her natal home, this man is to sleep in her house for one night. Upon her return the inheritor and

the widow are to eat meat that she brings from her natal home. After that, they are to have sex (Shiino 1997). Shiino (1997) however notes that in recent times there are variations on how some rituals are performed, owing to church teachings and the erosion of cultural norms, so that people perform rituals the way they deem convenient to them.

Luo rituals for the dead allow the bereaved to express their sorrow, but they also become an occasion where the dead person's riches, seniority and greatness may be displayed (Shiino 1997). In a culturally sanctioned remarriage, known as *ter*, a male relative of the deceased takes over the guardianship of the deceased's family and wife so that the deceased's inherited property stays in the family. This, according to Gunga (2009), has been confused with wife inheritance. To him, *ter* entails cleansing the widow, which includes a sexual component in order to restore her to a state of normalcy by neutralising an assumed cultural impurity, so as to avoid *chira* or taboo violation. Gunga (2009) notes that in this context sex is a must to free the widow from *okola* ("bondage"), and may be supervised by the family to ensure that it actually takes place. This ritual cleansing, known as *chodo kola*, is only achieved through obligatory sexual intercourse to separate the widow from her husband and thereafter have the widow free to remarry or be inherited. It is then understood that the professional cleanser (*jakowiny*), a sexual pervert from outside the clan, thereafter assumes the state of contamination or uncleanness, thus accepting to be separated from the clan (Gunga 2009). Likewise, according to Ocholla-Ayayo (1976), a woman whose husband has just died must undergo a sexual ceremony of *chodo kola*, and should she die before this ceremony, she cannot be buried until it is carried out.

According to Abong'o (2014), the Luo treat a widow like an outcast who must first be cleansed before she can lead a normal life. The traditional thinking has it that death causes impurity and thus a widow is ritually unclean because of her husband's death. A widow who has not undergone the cleansing ritual is a tabooed person, socially restricted and believed to be able to transmit the agent of death or bad omens to others (Abong'o 2014).

If a man dies and leaves behind a young wife, one of his kinsmen will marry her on behalf of the dead husband. Such a man is called *jater* ("inheritor") and is expected to have intercourse with the widow. Failure to have a sexual union would lead to the man being accused of having broken the law of *ter*; it would then be said that the *jater* had "fallen asleep" and he would be dismissed the following day (Ocholla-Ayayo 1976). Furthermore, the consequences of sin known as *chira* are believed to bring incurable diseases (Ocholla-Ayayo 1976). These diseases can eventually cause death, prevent women from giving birth or even cause them to lose children before birth. They are also said to prevent women from giving birth to a particular sex of children, and to cause many more misfortunes (Ocholla-Ayayo 1976). At the same time, the use of *Manyasi* cleansing medicines is thought to cleanse the person and protect them from such calamities if the evil deed is confessed (Ocholla-Ayayo 1976).

According to the Luo, nothing happens without a cause. They say *ok timre nono*, which means nothing happens by itself, but must have a cause. Consequently, blame must be apportioned either to having broken *kwer*, having brought bad medicine into the village, or having offended the ancestors and as such it is either God's or the spirits' punishment (Ocholla-Ayayo 1976). *Kwer* of higher levels implies offences against the whole nation and the punishment is meted out to the whole society through experiences such as defeat in war, famine, epidemics and locusts, whereas *kwer* of the lower levels implies bringing *chira*—sin consequences—to the individual and his family or perhaps the lineage (Ocholla-Ayayo 1976).

Oftentimes, the enforcement of widowhood rituals is carried out by older women and widows in the community who are socialised into believing that these rituals are meant for the widow's and her children's own benefit. In general, due to the low literacy levels, relative vulnerability and lack of exposure, many widows continue to be subjected to these rituals, which is in contrast to what urban Luo women with economic stability experience (Shisanya 1996). It is within this cultural context that the two films are watched and read as intervention projects magnifying the injustices that some widows/women face as a result of the death of a spouse.

### ***Kalaus*: The Synopsis**

*Kalaus* means whirlwind in the Dholuo language. The film was produced by Culture Spill Productions and was directed by Juma Williams in 2012. The language used in the film is primarily Dholuo, with few sections in Swahili and English. The main setting of the film is Nairobi and a rural village in western Kenya (Nyanza).

The film features a man, Ayoki, travelling from Nairobi to Kampala for a work-related engagement. This is a one-week trip and he sets off after bidding his wife, Mrs Ayoki, farewell. However, while at the bus terminus he is pickpocketed and his phone and wallet are taken. He does not realise this until he arrives in Kampala. Unfortunately, the pickpocket is hit along a busy highway and dies. The police find the wallet and mobile phone of Ayoki with him and take it for granted that these items belong to the deceased. They call his relatives with the sad news that their relative is dead. Since the dead person was hit so badly, his facial form is not presentable and so it is assumed that he is the owner of the wallet and the mobile phone found at the scene of the accident.

The widow, Mrs Ayoki, receives the news of the death of her husband and the process of preparing for the funeral sets off. She is dispossessed of her phone, which her husband's nephew, Omwanda, takes for his personal use. This effectively cuts off her communication with the rest of the family. When the "dead husband" tries to reach his wife, her phone is in the custody of Omwanda who, after leaving the police station, takes it as a prank that someone should call purporting to be the deceased. Family members come over to plan the funeral, while ignoring the widow and, at times, silencing her altogether. Mrs Ayoki is silenced even as her husband's ATM card is taken

by Ayoki's brother, Chali, while shoes and clothes are taken from her house by Ayoki's other brother, Ochonjo, who even proposes to inherit her before the burial.

The funeral plans continue all the way to the service when the burial is set to take place. As is usual with burials in modern Luo societies, the local pastor is approached to preside over the ceremony. The pastor then, ironically, demands that he be given choice parts of an animal for food, be transported to the funeral, and be well remunerated for his participation in the burial. This is instructive because it reveals that it is not only the Luo cultures that have been adulterated by capitalist modernity but also the church. The cortège arrives in the village and there is wailing and mourning. However, what is striking is how Mrs Ayoki is left out and remains on her own, looking rather like a stranger in her marital home.

Her father-in-law gathers his children to discuss matters of the funeral. However, his children are more interested in the conspicuous consumption and material exhibitionism that ensue from capitalist modernity. For instance, they are concerned with how people will use toothpicks, which cars will arrive in the village, and which brand of mineral water they will drink; they are virtually oblivious of the mourning mood. Ayoki's sister, Petronilla, is in fact more interested in showing off her husband's wealth during the funeral. It is only Ayoki's sister, Mama Degree, who resides in the village, who seems affected by the death. However, her genuine grief is dismissed by the rest of the family due to her low economic status. After the family meeting that actually ends in disarray, Mrs Ayoki approaches her father-in-law to report to him what has been happening since the death of Ayoki: how Ayoki's clothes, ATM card and other possessions have been taken away from her. The father-in-law, Baba, sympathises with her, but also rebukes her as he is surprised that an urban woman like her is not conscious of her rights and tolerated such harassment when she should have been resistant.

On the morning of the funeral, Chali goes to the farm of the deceased and plants in it some charms to indicate that he should own this parcel, as the "deceased" (Ayoki) only has two girl children. The funeral starts off and right after the prayer a woman walks in with a child whom she hands over to the family of the deceased, claiming that the child is Ayoki's. Everyone is surprised and as the child cries, the pastor demands that the mother take her child, but she desists and walks away, leaving the child behind.

The crying child is taken away to be soothed and the funeral continues. Whilst the officiating pastor is speaking, the "deceased" walks in through the gate and when the mourners see him there is pandemonium, with people running away thinking this is a ghost. Many confessions then ensue from the pastor, Ayoki's brothers and sisters, the woman who brought the child, the widow and her mother, bringing to full view what really was on their minds.

The pastor is shocked at the ghost and wonders what he ever did wrong. One sister runs away, unable to come to terms with the arrival of her dead brother. The mother-in-law

of the “deceased” insists that she warned her daughter never to get married to “these people” but to marry another person, who now has *matatu* (“public taxi transport”) and a butchery and is getting rich. She vows not to remain in this place following what she has seen. The widow begs her mother not to leave her, for she, too, cannot remain in this homestead.

Meanwhile Chali, the brother, runs to remove the charms from the farm where he had hidden them. In all, the deceased man’s brothers are all drunk on the burial day and what ensues exposes the fundamental flaws in people’s reaction to death and burial rites that are radically opposed to what the culture envisions.

### ***The Cleansing: A Glimpse into the Story***

*The Cleansing* is a 2015 production directed by Owino Sangiewa. It is a 14-minute film which deals with customs among the Luo on widow cleansing after the death of a husband. This film puts a sharp focus on how one woman has a difficult time finding a solution to her dilemma, given the effects of the widow cleansing tradition in modern-day Kenya with the advent of HIV. This film was sponsored as an intervention film. It bagged eight nominations across categories, such as Best Original Score, Best Editor, Best Original Screen Play, Best Lighting, Best Short Film and Best Director, at the 2015 Kalasha Awards (Musambi 2015).

The film begins with a widow, Nyar Usonga, playing a traditional instrument, the *nyatiti* (an 8-stringed instrument played when seated on the ground or on a very low stool). Traditionally, the *nyatiti* is only played by men. But in this case a widow plays it while lamenting her woes following the death of her husband, Solo. Her father-in-law, Harun, demands that she goes through the process of *chodo kola* or else she must leave his compound. The widow, who has young children, is called away from her fish business stall to be given this news. In the process, all her fish are stolen and she is left in a dilemma. This adds to her emotional devastation as she ponders what to do.

She makes up her mind that she is willing to go through the widow cleansing ritual but on her own terms, insisting on the use of a condom. This demand from her limits the number of people willing to perform this cleansing ritual, with many turning it down. Harun is fearful that, eventually, no one will be available to cleanse his daughter-in-law.

Nyar Usonga invites Dennis, a friend, over the phone for lunch. When Dennis arrives, she welcomes him into her house and serves him a meal. Before he can start eating, she hints at her reason for inviting him over and her intention that he should help her in widow cleansing using a condom. When Dennis hears this, he immediately gets up and categorically declines the suggestion of using a condom, eventually walking away before he can have his served meal. On another day, Nyar Usonga leaves her house and visits a bar with the intention of finding a man who may be willing to fulfil this ritual. The drunken men call her over and carelessly fall around her, wanting to take advantage

of her. When she states that she must use condoms, they laugh at her, telling her that she will not find anyone who will agree to her terms. She runs out of the bar when she sees that the drunkards are getting unruly and beginning to touch her indecently.

However, an urbanite, Jacob Otieno, visits the village. Nyar Usonga makes known her request to him and he too is initially hesitant. Every moment she is in despair, she turns to her *nyatiti* to sing. She uses this typically male instrument to strum her pains as one who has been abandoned. It is while she is playing the *nyatiti* on one occasion that Jacob agrees to her terms and conditions, which to him are reasonable. Meanwhile, Harun is watching every move that Nyar Usonga makes. The film ends when the widow has led Jacob into her house and is about to go in when her eyes and her father-in-law's meet, her wink surreptitiously suggesting that she will be having sex with this man, but on her own terms.

## **The Theory of Dramatic Irony**

Irony is a favourite device in all dramatic literature. Irony may be tragic; it may be dramatic; it may be directed consciously by the speaker; it may develop unconsciously; it may be sarcastic or ridiculous, satirical or humorous (Hritzu 1944). Dramatic irony specifically plays around the ignorance of some people, in cases where some people know what others have no idea about. Dramatic irony is thus constructed on the foundations of misconception and illusion. This is often supported by the props of misapprehension and ambiguity, whose resultant ignorance on the part of a character or characters leads to the prolongation of the identification of facts.

Dramatic irony or the spectacle of blindness is that type of irony in which the characters in a drama, ignorant of certain facts, fail because of this ignorance to realise their objective, although the realisation is obviously within their reach. The speakers are themselves the victims of the illusion; they themselves are the victims of the mistaken identity. Owing to the ignorance of the identity of the characters addressed, their expressions assume an inner and outer meaning. The moments become very tense and surcharged with the emotions of expectation and anxiety, as the speakers approach the brink of recognition only to fall back again into the depths of misapprehension (Hritzu 1944). It is also the irony of a character's utterance, the double reference of which they are unaware: to the situation as it appears to them and, no less aptly, to the situation as it really is, the very different situation revealed to the audience (Muecke 1970).

However, if the resultant ignorance on the part of the character or characters leads to a catastrophe, this becomes tragic irony. Irony is a discursive practice and strategy that may be used and understood with latent consequences (Hutcheon 1995). To Hutcheon (1995), unlike metaphor or allegory, which demands similar supplementing of meaning, irony has an evaluative edge and often provokes emotional responses in those who "get" it and those who do not. She considers what might be called the "scene" of irony as involving relations of power based in relations of communication (Hutcheon 1995).



Primarily, it is irony in use in discourse which is her major concern (Hutcheon 1995). She describes the activities of both ironists and interpreters so as to bring together three different strands within irony theory: what is usually called the intentionalist position (ironist only), the reverse position that all irony is a function of reading (interpreter only), and the position that there is a shared responsibility (for both) in the use and attribution of irony (Hutcheon 1995). Further, Hutcheon (1995, 45) adds that irony does not “exist.” Instead, it is kinetic and inheres within a scene or event that can “happen” between speaker and auditor, or between curator and museum visitor; “the final responsibility for deciding whether irony actually happens in an utterance or not (and what that ironic meaning is) rests, in the end, solely with the interpreter” (Hutcheon 1995, 45). Starting off as interpreters of the two films mentioned above, we seek out irony in use within them. What follows is a discussion of how dramatic irony is succinctly captured in different scenes of the two films, *Kalausi* and *The Cleansing*.

### **Dramatic Irony in *Kalausi* and *The Cleansing***

Dramatic irony can be described as the irony of ambiguity (Hritzu 1944). In general, the basic feature of irony is the contrast between reality and appearance (Muecke 1970). In the film *Kalausi*, we have what Muecke (1970, 51) refers to as “satiric irony where the unsympathetic victim(s) are punished or defeated.” The “deceased” man’s (Ayoki’s) ignorance of the circumstances that are conspiring against him travels back to Nairobi and a neighbour runs away once he sees him. He finds his house is shut with no one nearby and he wonders what the matter may be. It is not until he sees his portrait as a deceased man at a nearby bar and restaurant that he realises he must travel to his village the same day.

The resultant ignorance on the part of the characters did not lead to a catastrophe. Rather, their ignorance leads to the prolongation and continuity of the film. In particular, this type of irony has characters in the film ignorant of the facts that surround Luo tradition and rituals and, because of this ignorance, they fail to realise their objective, although the realisation is obviously within their reach. This ignorance of tradition is evident in several incidents in the film: the funeral planners do not engage in a proper death announcement; the timing for the division of articles that belong to the deceased, *keyo nyinyo* (Shiino 1997), is not taken into consideration; the widow is disinherited and left on her own, when she should always be in the company of another widow or older woman; and the details of night vigils, *budho* (Shiino 1997), are not taken into consideration as Ayoki’s brothers continue to sleep before the funeral.

Another scene in the film that aptly uses dramatic and satiric irony is where Ayoki’s family meets in his house in the city of Nairobi to organise his funeral. It is amusing because the audience is already aware that Ayoki is not dead. But more important are the many verbal ironies in this frame. The whole meeting is a farce. The wife, Mrs Ayoki, is not allowed to participate in the discussions about the “funeral” arrangements of her own husband. The members of the family present trivialise all the issues. They

eventually end up talking about their own issues and remain extremely insensitive to the feelings of Mrs Ayoki. Other notable incidents of ignorance on the part of the characters come into play when an aunt of the deceased wants to take a microwave from the widow, thinking it is a television. Further, oblivious of Luo custom, the deceased's older brother plants items into the apportioned land of the deceased with the hopes of disinheriting him, since he only has two daughters.

Apparently, urban life and capitalist modernity have affected how these urbanite relatives of the deceased think about and fulfil their obligations to Luo customs, which they seem not to know. Therefore, they invent and reinvent other norms to live by. These changes add to the transformation of ritual activities; in the case of *Kalausi*, the gravity of the burial rites are trivialised when certain characters use this as a platform to impress, show off or provide mourners with mineral water and toothpicks, whereas they have little or no regard for the immediate nuclear family of the bereaved. According to Abong'o (2014), contemporary Luo are confronted with sudden changes and information which plunge them into utter confusion. This makes it very difficult to get a sense of direction in crucial matters of life such as birth, marriage, death and widowhood. Furthermore, most Luo people live in two half-cultures: the traditional culture which is not fully observed and the modern life which is more observed (Abong'o 2014).

When the deceased's nephew visits the police station to receive the wallet and handset of his uncle, the scene is full of dramatic irony. We, the viewers, are fully aware that the man is not dead, but we follow along and see how the nephew of the supposed deceased man weeps as he is addressed by the policeman. Later, as he leaves the police station, he receives a phone call from the deceased and his reaction presents us with a situation of even more dramatic irony because he cannot believe that it is indeed his uncle, Ayoki, who is calling, and as such he ends up calling him "a Nairobi conman." The recipient's uncertainty as to the identity of the caller leaves the audience in laughter, though the matter is extremely serious. During all the business surrounding the funeral arrangements, such as going to the mortuary and travelling to the village, there is a heightened sense of dramatic irony since those busy with these arrangements are ignorant of the fact that this person they believe to be dead is not dead. In essence, all their worry and anxieties are baseless.

The dramatic irony nears its climax during the funeral service. Here, much is going on with grief-stricken people waiting for the funeral rites to be performed. However, when the man they have been grieving for appears, they flee, claiming that this must be a ghost who has come to wreak havoc in their lives. No one is courageous enough to handle the ensuing uncanny situation. *Chothre*, the woman who brings a child claiming that it belongs to the deceased, cannot leave the compound before she makes her confession to the brother of the deceased. The dramatic irony here plays on the premise that the dead cannot speak for themselves to defend their honour and so any claim laid

on them would be taken to be truthful. However, at the appearance of the deceased, the claims so made are immediately unmade.

The dramatic and the satiric ironies at this point in the film are all amusing. However, beneath the ironies we find glimpses of a more serious purpose presented by the filmmaker. The filmmaker makes serious comments on modernity's ambiguities. The film scrutinises and attacks the subverted Luo culture and traditions which disinherit the woman as opposed to the cultural tradition that envisioned the protection of the woman through *ter*. In the cultural traditions, the belongings of the deceased cannot be shared arbitrarily. There is a rite known as *keyo nyinyo* where goods that the widow cannot inherit, such as the husband's clothes, are shared by his close relatives and other deserving members of the family. The film also criticises the emerging culture where some women come up to claim that they were secret lovers of the deceased and want the family to take care of their children. More importantly, the film also castigates the commodification of funerals as well as the exhibitionism that has become part of funeral rituals in Kenya, not just among the Luos. Finally, the film exposes the greed and hypocrisy of the churches that take advantage of the bereaved family to exploit their vulnerability. As Amuka (1993, 3) says about funerals in a different context, "a new tradition seems to have sprung up ... one may call all this cultural transformation and subversion ... it rekindles their history and points to the past in relation to the present."

At the end of *Kalausi*, Mrs Ayoki confesses that she cannot remain in her home any longer. Whether Ayoki manages to keep his wife is not revealed in the film. His mother-in-law is very clear that she wants nothing to do with the Ayoki family, given the turn of events. Clearly, the characters are themselves the victims of the illusion they created; they themselves are the victims of the mistaken identity. Owing to the ignorance of the characters, their expressions assume an inner and outer meaning before and during the funeral when the deceased appears and many confessions begin to flow. Thus, at the end, the film lays bare the injustices that widows/women go through and how their rights are violated within certain traditional contexts through the deployment of dramatic irony as a signifying trope.

*The Cleansing*, unlike *Kalausi*, portrays a widow who is able to assert herself and demonstrate agency. She is aware of the ritual that she must perform after the interment of her late husband and the dangers that this sexual encounter may present. Her father-in-law is ignorant of the real-life challenges that this act may cause, such as the contraction of HIV, which would ultimately lead to this widow's death, and thus not save her in any way from the feared bad omen. His frame of reference is limited to the cleansing which, when not done, would be a deadly taboo (*dhoch*) due to *chira* (Abong'o 2014).

*The Cleansing* demonstrates the everyday life of rural widows who are vulnerable. In this case, Nyar Usonga's fish are stolen, thus jeopardising her livelihood. At the same time, people seem not to be sympathetic to her as they are all aware that she has not

been cleansed as yet. She is deemed a bad omen, yet at the same time seen to be so vulnerable that people can take advantage of her, as in the case of the drunkards in the bar. The characterisation of her plump body in the era of HIV/AIDS brings to sharp focus the way villagers remain ready to have unprotected sex with her, wrongly assuming that she cannot be a carrier of the virus. Her resistance strategies are useful in negotiating sexuality as she insists on choosing the man to have sex with and also insists on using a condom. The example of Nyar Usonga brings to the fore the multiple complexities African widows have to manoeuvre and negotiate in order to experience autonomy with regards to their sexual needs and preferences. Nyar Usonga displays sexual autonomy in as far as she ensures that the occasion of sexual contact is carried out on her terms, emphasising her preference for protected sex involving the use of a condom. The trope in this play, then, is the resistance that Nyar Usonga puts up.

Dramatic irony is displayed in the scene where Jacob comes to the village and is willing to have the requisite sexual encounter with the widow. He is not aware of the full implications of cleansing a widow. He considers it just another sexual conquest, whereas the villagers understand that through the sexual encounter he will take away the evil spirits who will be absorbed into him (Abong'o 2014). In other words, he will be host to evil spirits and agents of death, and who is to tell the effects of such possession in a year or two?

In another scene, Nyar Usonga goes out looking for a suitable cleanser and comes into a bar where several men are drinking. We, the audience, know she is determined to use condoms and there is comic relief when she makes her request known to the men. The irony is that they are more than ready to be part of the arrangement, even immediately. But when she says that condoms must be used, they turn down the offer and grudgingly wonder why this has to be part of the arrangement.

Just as *The Cleansing* starts with the widow playing a *nyatiti*, an instrument that was the preserve of men, so she asserts herself by choosing which music she will play sexually. She will do the cleansing ritual, but she will be the one to select a reasonable man for the task and he shall play along to her tune of using a condom. This widow seems to suggest that just as she usurps male privilege by playing the *nyatiti*, she is going to challenge gender stereotyping by engaging in sexual negotiation. Abong'o (2014) contends that many widows are yearning for freedom, but cannot avoid succumbing to the levirate traditions as a result of pressure and cultural expectations from the community, with even some elite women capitulating to these. The widow in *The Cleansing* finds herself ensnared without any options as regards this cleansing ritual. She seems, however, to be aware of other options that may be plausible in her context, even as she negotiates around her father-in-law's rigid demands.

At the end of the film the audience can clearly see Nyar Usonga staring surreptitiously at Harun as she prepares to go into her hut where Jacob is already waiting. It is possible that Nyar Usonga has actually negotiated for no sex. It may just be that she and Jacob

do not really want to have sex, but they create the spectacle Harun wants, just enough to satisfy his demands. In the film, we are treated to suspense as to what will actually happen and who will bear witness to what actually transpires in the bedroom, whether it will be what has been deemed symbolic sex or actual sex, granted that these two options exist for *chodo kola* (Abong'o 2014). In general, dramatic irony remains pervasive in the film. The gazer, Harun, is being watched and his folly is that he is not as clever as he thinks he is.

## Conclusion

This article has examined the evaluative edge of dramatic irony and its usefulness for an analysis of the two Dholuo films, *Kalausi* and *The Cleansing*. Examining the two films side by side brings out the commonality of the contrast between reality and appearance. Both films, through dramatic irony, build up suspense, tension and comic relief. Both widows go through emotional anguish. However, whereas the widow in *Kalausi* is rather passive, the agency of the widow in *The Cleansing* is evident, notwithstanding that the former is an urbanite and assumed to be better educated or exposed. Consequently, the films bring to the fore the multilayeredness of the understanding of Luo traditional customs, and their actual performance in instances of rituals. These intervention films explore the impact that urbanisation and modernity have upon persons who still identify with Luo traditional culture and who eventually end up misrepresenting or transforming it. Thus, comic irony, in which we laugh at the follies of everyone, is evident in *Kalausi*. However, Mrs Ayoki remains a figure of sympathy. By contrast, in *The Cleansing* we are immersed in satiric irony as we laugh at the victim of the irony, Harun, even as Nyar Usonga resists the violation of her rights.

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