

Verbal Irony in the Discourse of Sungusungu Vigilantism in Suneka Township, Kisii County, Kenya

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Abstract

When the state cannot provide adequate security, or citizens do not trust the state to do so, alternatives have been sought. In most cases, the alternatives lie in the nexus between the rich and the poor who opt for private security companies or vigilante groups (or gangs) respectively. Vigilantes have dominated security spaces in urban slums and rural areas in Kenya. This paper focuses on the discourse of Sungusungu vigilante groups in Kisii with reference to the Suneka township from the late 1990s to the present. The study that directed this paper was qualitative. Primary data were obtained using in-depth interviews, while secondary data were collected through a review of relevant literature. Irony was revealed through the way Sungusungu managed to control crime considerably within the short time of their emergence in Kisii, which the state had failed to address adequately. Thus, resenting attitudes were expressed towards the state. Secondly, after controlling crime rates, Sungusungu ironically engaged in the same crimes, besides degenerating into other illegal activities, including extortion, torture and illegal arrests. Consequently, the government dissociated from Sungusungu, banned them and reorganised community policing groups. Strangely, some members of Sungusungu found their way into community policing groups. Over time, Sungusungu have been associated with different identities, including community policing and *Nyumba Kumi* (Ten Households) on the one hand, and terror groups, underground movements, extortionists and “these people” on the other hand. There is no clear-cut identity difference between Sungusungu and community policing. As a result, the term “sungusungu” has been used as a generic identity for community policing, *Nyumba Kumi* or any group of people who partner with the state in the maintenance of social order in the community. Still, the debate around Sungusungu, community policing and *Nyumba Kumi* remains fluid and hazy,

and as Kenya approaches the 2022 general elections, Sungusungu are getting involved in the murky waters of politics.

Keywords: security; violence; identity; irony; Sungusungu; vigilante; community policing

Introduction

This paper explores verbal irony in the discourse of Sungusungu vigilante groups in Suneka township, Kisii County, Kenya. It particularly draws from earlier works on the genesis, development, identities and resurgence of Sungusungu in Kisii (Abrahams 1987; Abuga 2018; Feenan 2002; Gichira 2019; Heald 2007; Masese and Mwendwa 2012; Mkutu, Stanislas, and Mogire 2018), while identifying instances of verbal irony in the discourse about the transient identity of Sungusungu and their activities.

Verbal irony was analysed in the light of echoing what is said about the activities of Sungusungu and expressing dissociative or disapproving attitudes such as sarcasm, mockery, dislike and displeasure. Identity is about who one is and why individuals label themselves as members of a particular group. Labelling is a function of language that does not only express identity, but also constructs it (Evans 2016). It distinguishes how one group differs from another (Khokhar, Memon, and Siddique 2016). Thus, Sungusungu were identified as a mass of “small people” against “big thugs” (Abrahams 1987; Feenan 2002). This binary division informed the inception of Sungusungu among the Sukuma and Nyamwezi of West Central Tanzania in 1987 (Fleisher 2000).

As a group of small people, Sungusungu gained legitimacy within the community, ironically for cracking down on cattle raiders or “dangerous others” without the bureaucratic delays and corruption so hated in the state policing (Feenan 2002; Mkutu et al. 2018). Although Sungusungu vigilantism began among the Sukuma and Nyamwezi people of West Central Tanzania, it gained prominence in Kuria, Kenya, in controlling cattle raids (Mkutu et al. 2018) from where it was adopted by the Abagusii people of Kisii. In Kisii—and specifically Suneka, which is about 75 kilometres from Kuria—Sungusungu addressed a plethora of cases, including cattle theft, robbery, murder and rape. As in Tanzania, bureaucratic delays and corruption in formal security and courts were hindrances to averting these vices. According to Heald (2009), in such a situation, it was felt that Sungusungu were the only group that could bring justice to Kenyans.

While Sungusungu were successful in controlling crime within a short time of their emergence, it was ironical that they themselves engaged in the same crime they set out to extinguish and gradually morphed into extortionists and gangs for hire by politicians and businesspeople (Otiso 2015). In her analysis of *chinkororo* (a vigilante group that preceded Sungusungu in Kisii and gained community legitimacy in territorial protection), Bosibori (2021) argues that such mutations are characteristic of vigilante groups. This is also true of *amachuma* (a vigilante group) that operates in Kisii and

whose identity and activities have morphed over time from offering politicians protection and manning *matatu* (public service vehicles) termini, to offering security at a fee. This paper, therefore, analyses verbal irony in the discourse of Sungusungu vigilantism in Suneka township, Kisii, with respect to their morphing identities and activities, while identifying various attitudes attributed to the group, the police and the court systems in the security landscape of Kisii.

Vigilantism and Non-state Policing

The term “vigilante” is borrowed from the Spanish word “*vigilante*,” which means watchman or guard (Merriam-Webster n.d.). It has been used interchangeably with “militias” and “gangs” as a reference to non-state policing groups, and because the groups may also be armed, Bosibori (2021) refers to them as non-state armed groups. Perhaps the most referenced definition of vigilantism is that the groups arise to undertake law enforcement in their community because of the perceived failure of legal agencies, and they act as a last resort (Burrows, 1976). A key feature in law enforcement by vigilantes, as noted by Rosenbaum and Sederberg (1974), is “established violence perpetuated to further conservative ends” through the use of force, threat and violence. As time goes by, vigilantes mutate into criminal groups posing a challenge to national security: Sungusungu are a case in point (Gichira 2019; Mkutu et al. 2018). This may affirm the government of Kenya’s reference to vigilante groups as organised criminal gangs (Bosibori 2021).

Ideally, non-state policing groups, vigilantes included, are supposed to work with the police in the maintenance of social order and security in what Mutahi (2018) refers to as hybrid security (where the state shares authority, capacity and legitimacy with other structures). Regrettably, Mutahi (2018) observes that the state in a hybrid system is virtually absent from informal settlements, and therefore, other actors (gangs) have taken up its role in providing security. According to Mkutu and Sabala (2007), gangs, vigilantes and other private security providers take over because of a lack of trust and limited police capability.

In the slums and low-income areas, vigilantes exist as a distinct organ of security (Mkutu and Sabala 2007; Mutahi 2018). However, the vigilantes have degenerated into offering security in exchange for protection money that they extort, which ironically echoes the security services business model and taxes levied by the state (Mkutu and Sabala 2007). Mutahi (2018) notes that they levy illegal taxes on property and illegally take over land. Following from this, the boundary between vigilantes and criminals is both fluid and manipulable (Abrahams 1987). Consequently, the divide between the poor and the rich is a driving factor for the choice between private security and vigilantes. While the wealthy can afford private security, the poor opt for the gang (Mkutu et al. 2018). Such an ambivalent nature of community policing, defined by one’s financial capability, contributes to the maintenance of social inequality and the undemocratic order typical of a society (Ruteere and Pommerolle 2003). In fact, in the view of Phillips (2016) it is inequality that creates demands for vigilantism.

Paradoxically, while security is now perceived as a basic human need, Mkutu et al. (2018) note that security providers—be they private security companies, police reservists, state-armed paramilitaries, or local gangs in urban areas—may be a source of insecurity, instability and harm.

The Genesis of Sungusungu

Sungusungu arose among the Sukuma and Nyamwezi people of Kahama District of the Shinyanga region in the rural areas of West Central Tanzania in the early 1980s to provide a means of controlling theft, particularly cattle raiding (Abrahams 1987; Bukurura 1996; Heald 2007). The word “sungusungu” is rooted in both Swahili and Kisukuma languages. In Swahili, “sungusungu” means large biting safari ants. Metaphorically, its meaning shifted to a mass of “small people” against the “big thugs.” The blackness of the ants was mapped onto the clothes that Sukuma pastoralists wore (Abrahams 1987). Like the biting ants, the small people, who were mainly the aggrieved pastoralists, defended themselves by attacking cattle rustlers whenever they struck. According to Bukurura (1996), the word “sungusungu” was also derived from the Kisukuma word “busungu,” which refers to the poison tipped arrows used by Sungusungu. The various derivations of Sungusungu connote some elements of violence, which may explain the inherent violence of Sungusungu while handling suspected criminals and punishing suspected witches, most of whom were single or widowed women (Bukurura 1994; Cross 2013). The definitions also contradict the original identity of Sungusungu, *basalama*, which means “people of peace,” which was a slogan to safeguard their livestock without recourse to war (Abrahams 1987).

The *basalama* used magic and took oaths so as not to reveal their secrets, while their leaders were inoculated with protective medicine (Heald 2002). Medicine was planted at all corners of the villages, which according to Abrahams (1987), symbolised a witch-finding movement where witches were subjected to even harsher penalties. From here, the notion of Sungusungu vigilantism was implanted in Tanzania and adopted by the Kuria in Northern Tanzania.

The system spread to the Kuria people of Kenya along the border of Tanzania in 1998 and was eventually adopted in Kisii (Heald 2007; Masese and Mwenzwa 2012). According to the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (2013), in the Kuria district, Sungusungu were developed by the community assemblies called *iritongo*, and Sungusungu were the policing arm whose function was to denounce thieves. They worked closely with the local chiefs, and some were dominated by *inchaama*, a conclave of ritual leaders who were also regarded as the real government of the Kuria and described as the high court (Heald 2002). Initially, Sungusungu vigilantism was supported by the district commissioner as it created peace, but subsequent commissioners did not guarantee any support as they were worried about human rights violations (Heald 2002). In Kenya, Sungusungu are illegal (Heald 2007). Despite this, Sungusungu vigilantism was adopted in Kisii due to increasing crime rates occasioned by unemployment and high poverty levels as well as inefficient government, security

and judicial systems (Masese and Mwendwa 2012). In Kisii, it first emerged in Suneka township due to its proximity to the Kuria district.

The Morphing of Sungusungu in Kisii

The transient identity of Sungusungu, a self-help vigilante group that began operating in Kisii in 1998, is demonstrated by the dynamic discourses that outline its activities. While in West Central Tanzania and in Kenya's Kuria border the focus of Sungusungu was to protect their cattle from rustlers, in Suneka township, Sungusungu vigilantism began in order to protect citizens from criminals, including thieves, robbers, murderers and rapists (Heald 2007). At its inception, Sungusungu worked with the police and the district administrators to reduce crime rates, which were duly exacerbated by the state's inability to contain criminals (Abuga 2018; Masese and Mwendwa 2012). So paradoxical was this situation that Sungusungu undertook to deliver justice by lynching suspected offenders, burning houses of offenders and torturing suspects in kangaroo courts. Reportedly, this brutality was meant to deter would-be criminals. So brutal was Sungusungu's justice that they compelled relatives of their victims to bury them in the government cemetery in Kisii town, known as *Nyambera*, which literally means "a place of graves." The contravention of this rule led to the relatives of the victims being killed as well.

Within a short time after their emergence, Sungusungu managed to diminish crime rates in Kisii considerably, but regrettably through violent ways. They worked in cahoots with the police to apprehend suspects and produce evidence in court within the time allowed by the constitution (24 hours) (Gichira 2019). This was a turning point, both for the criminals who fled the area for fear of being killed, as well as for Sungusungu, whose relevance declined as their role in community policing did not place any more demands on them. The group that began as the people's defender resorted to serious violations of human rights while resolving crimes. It later engaged in the crimes it sought to deal with, including robbery with violence, and subsequently became militia for hire by politicians and business people as well as extortionists, all in the guise of community policing (Masese and Mwendwa 2012).

Like most other vigilante groups in Kenya, such as Babylon boys, Mungiki, Kamjesh, Taliban Boys, American Marines, Baragoi Boys, Gaza G15, Chinkororo, and Amachuma, Sungusungu diversified their activities to include offering protection at a fee, collecting garbage at a fee and even resorting to political involvement (Bosibori 2021; Mkutu et al. 2018; Mutahi 2018). Recently, in the Gusii counties of Kisii and Nyamira, Sungusungu members have been working with the county government as reinforcement officers and cleaners in health facilities (Nyaribo 2021). Undoubtedly, their attachments to these offices are for political expediency.

The ambivalence in the activities of the aforementioned vigilante groups led to their ban, following the enactment of the Prohibition of Organised Crimes Act (POCA) in 2010 after the promulgation of the Constitution. In Kisii, Community Policing Groups

(CPGs) were reorganised to rid them of traces of Sungusungu. However, members of Sungusungu found their way into CPGs. Community policing is a form of partnership between the police and the communities they serve to address issues of insecurity and social disorder (National Police Service 2017). Although CPGs were installed, there was a very thin line distinguishing Sungusungu from CPGs. To most people, it seemed that CPGs were a strategic way of overcoming the ban while still operating within a legal framework (Otiso 2015). According to Nyaribo (2021), CPG and *Nyumba Kumi* are conduits of Sungusungu. In Tanzania, where Sungusungu were also banned, community policing (*Ulinzi Shirikishi*) was perceived as an improved or modernised version of Sungusungu (Cross 2013). Consequently, as Brandström (2021) puts it, Sungusungu are still alive, both in the areas where they originated and in some distant areas where the Sukuma and Nyamwezi predominate, not to mention that Sungusungu are also alive in name and practice.

The reorganisation of community policing came with a change in activities and modes of operation. According to Otiso (2015), this included night surveillance and the co-option of intelligence units among informal sector hawkers. Also, they diversified into *boda-boda* (motorbike taxi) businesses, which afforded the youth some income. Notably, the youth were easy targets of Sungusungu due to high unemployment rates in Kenya. They also ventured into settling both land and domestic disputes at a fee as well as charging residents protection fees. Amidst all these, *Nyumba Kumi* began in 2013. *Nyumba Kumi* is a Swahili phrase which means “ten houses” or homesteads and provides a framework that anchors community policing at household or basic levels (National Police Service 2017).

Arguably, Sungusungu dynamism has earned the group various identities. The media conceive of Sungusungu as a lawless, dreaded killer gang (Onsarigo 2020). To perceived offenders and their relatives, Sungusungu are a discourse engraved in elusive justice as reflected in the linguistic expressions such as terror, “violence,” “lynching” and “fear” (Nyarora 2011). To the offended who cannot access conventional justice, Sungusungu can deliver it through arrests, prosecutions and judgement within a very short time. To Sungusungu, they are the law, and they must survive by all means (Onsarigo 2020). Hence their resurgence in the guise of community policing and *Nyumba Kumi* after the ban of vigilante groups, distorts even further the security landscape in Suneka township. To Heald (2007), Sungusungu were perceived as illegal; however, they were officially authorised, yet were not part of the state. In a paradox, Heald (2007) argues that Sungusungu were “officially tolerated.”

Echoic Interpretation of Verbal Irony

The commonest way of looking at verbal irony is to state that it relays the opposite of the intended meaning. In classical rhetoric, this notion is described in terms of a figurative meaning being substituted for a literal meaning (Sperber and Wilson 1995). One may, for instance, say, “How kind of you!” when it is obvious that he means “How mean you are!” In a discourse evaluating the effectiveness of Sungusungu in controlling

crime, this will be equated to the incongruence resulting from the expectations that Sungusungu would quell crime without participating in it.

In the Gricean account, a person using irony deliberately flouts the maxim of quality or truthfulness by implicating the opposite of what was literally said (Grice 1975). A parent who tells a child who has soiled herself, “you are very clean,” when it is obvious that she should have said, “you are very dirty,” flouts the maxim of quality. This is because she is saying what she knows is false. Gricean definition of verbal irony differs from the classical definition because verbal irony is reanalysed as a figurative implication (Wilson and Sperber 1992). Sperber and Wilson (1995) developed a model (echoic interpretation of verbal irony) that goes beyond treating verbal irony as merely communicating the opposite of what is literally intended. It also deviates from Grice’s maxim of quality, but it is an offshoot of relevance theory. Relevance theory collapses Grice’s four maxims of quality, quantity, relation and manner into one principle, which is “relevance.”

According to Sperber and Wilson (1995) and Wilson and Sperber (1992; 2004; 2012) there are two prerequisite conditions for achieving irony. First, as an echoic phenomenon, the intended meaning of the utterance must refer to a previous utterance, thought, expectation or pre-existing cultural or contextual assumptions. This is achieved through repeating, paraphrasing and retrieving from memory what a speaker said. Secondly, irony includes an expression of dissociative attitude in that the utterance must have elements of sarcasm, bitterness, wryness or mockery in order to show the listener that the speaker is distancing themselves from the opinions echoed.

The following example illustrates these effects.

- a) Anne: Did you hear what the deputy president said?
- b) John: Yes, the bottom-up model is the best.

In the forthcoming Kenyan general elections, the incumbent deputy president, who is also vying for the presidency, is using the slogan “bottom-up model” to woo voters. Both Anne and John in the above example share this contextual assumption. In (b), by restating what the deputy president said, John is echoing the deputy president or representing an opinion he attributes to him. In his response, John implicates that “the bottom-up model” is a campaign slogan the deputy president uses as a presidential aspirant. The hearer can also infer that John is not expressing his own opinion but representing a thought or an utterance attributed to the deputy president. John could also indicate his attitude towards the deputy president’s attributed utterance, in which case, according to Sperber and Wilson (1995), verbal irony will be a type of tacit echoic use.

By echoing the deputy president, John may express a range of attitudes from outright acceptance and endorsement to outright rejection and dissociation (Wilson 2007). For instance, John could be echoing the deputy president’s utterance with approval and

clearly endorsing that the bottom-up model of economy serves all Kenyans well. On the contrary, he may be echoing the deputy president's utterance with disapproval and indicating scorn or mockery, making it clear that the model will not be successful. Verbal irony in the example is achieved through understanding an utterance as echoic and indicating the speaker's attitude towards an attributed utterance. As Wilson (2007) indicates, it also involves expressing endorsing attitudes (such as supportive, approving and encouraging) or dissociative attitudes (such as mocking, scornful and bitter).

In this article, irony in Sungusungu's activities was analysed through echoic utterances of what was reported about them by the residents of Suneka township, Sungusungu members themselves or the media. This reporting, whether through quoting what was said by someone or oneself at another time, paraphrasing or recalling from memory, constituted the echoes that were attributed to Sungusungu. From the echoes or attributed utterances and attitudes expressed towards Sungusungu activities, irony was analysed.

Research Methodology

The area of study was Suneka township, which is administratively situated in the Kisii South District of Kisii County, Kenya, with its district headquarters at Kerina. In Kisii, the Sungusungu concept was first adopted in Suneka township due to its proximity to the neighbouring Kuria people of Kenya, who had already adopted Sungusungu vigilantism from the Kuria of Tanzania. The study adopted a case study research design. This research design involves a careful and complete observation of a social unit, be it a person, a family, an institution, a cultural group or even the entire community (Kothari 2004). In addition, the related contextual conditions are studied to establish the causes of underlying principles (Yin 2009). This method was useful in examining in detail the transiency and activities of Sungusungu vigilante groups in Suneka township.

The study was conducted in two phases. The first phase of the study was between April 2020 to March 2021. This involved participant observation where the researcher interacted with community members in their daily activities within Suneka. In-depth interviews with 15 residents of Suneka on issues broaching the identity and activities of Sungusungu in Suneka were done during this phase. This was followed by another phase in August 2021, where interviews with two foot soldiers of Sungusungu were conducted. In both phases of the interviews, respondents were sampled based on theoretical saturation. Saturation is the point in data collection when new data no longer bring additional insights to the research (Mason 2010).

A snowballing technique was used to select the participants. In snowballing, one subject is recruited into the study, who then gives the researcher the name of another subject who in turn provides the name of a third and so on (Vogt and Johnson 2015). This technique is employed to overcome the problem associated with sampling concealed populations, such as criminals and the isolated population (Faugier and Sargeant 1997). The researcher accessed the study area in 2020 and 2021 by spending time farming on her farm in Suneka. The farm hands, neighbours and friends were instrumental in

linking her with the interviewees. Nevertheless, some respondents were at times elusive on the subject and sceptical about the outcome of the interview and referred the researcher to other people whom they purported had “adequate” information on Sungusungu; at times revealing the identity of a prospective respondent as an ordinary resident or Sungusungu member.

The researcher sought the consent of the respondents before interviewing them besides assuring them about the confidentiality of the information they would give. They were also informed that the information that was being sought was for research purposes only and that their names would not be used in the article. The language used for the interviews was EkeGusii, a Bantu language spoken in the area and which the interviewer also speaks.

Secondary data were obtained from a review of relevant *Daily Nation* and *The Standard* newspaper articles, as well as videos covering the activities of Sungusungu in Suneka township. The videos were downloaded from YouTube and played back to obtain relevant information. Journal articles on Sungusungu were also used to obtain secondary data. The research was qualitative and data were presented in narrative form.

Verbal Irony in the Identity of Sungusungu

Although Sungusungu have operated in Kisii since the late 1990s, the meaning of the word “sungusungu” among the Abagusii has remained a mystery and left for speculation. When asked about the meaning of the word “sungusungu” 10 out of the 17 interviewees added the prefix *ki* in their response to form the word *kisungusungu*, derived from the Swahili word *kizunguzungu*, which literally means dizziness. Figuratively, this translates to the way Sungusungu rough up suspected criminals to obtain evidence. There is, therefore, a relationship between the way Tanzania’s Sungusungu attacked cattle rustlers like a black biting ant or how they used poisoned arrows to attack them (Abrahams 1987; Bukurura 1995). Notwithstanding this, the existence of Sungusungu vigilante groups in the Kisii security landscape is rather fluid. This fluidity has resulted in a shift of the labels identifying the group.

While in Tanzania, Sungusungu’s identity was in the realms of defending themselves against cattle rustlers. In Kenya, Sungusungu were identified as people who protected citizens against general theft. However, when Sungusungu vigilantism was banned due to the violation of human rights while handling criminals, and because of their involvement in illegal activities, the government formed Community Policing Groups (CPGs). One member of a CPG confirmed that CPGs work closely with the Officer Commanding Station (OCS) and the chief who oversees a location. He added that the names of authorised CPG members are kept in the OCSs’ and chiefs’ offices so that these authorities can monitor their activities. He argued that CPG members were prohibited from abuse of human rights, which characterised Sungusungu, and that their work was limited to reporting suspected criminals within the location. However, one teacher who was born in Suneka and understood the history of Sungusungu and CPG in

Suneka, argued that the reorganisation of CPG was a mere change of identity, which they labelled “baptism” or “operating under the guise” of a security outfit:

The government looked for a way of baptising them (Sungusungu) in a better name and called them community policing. (Researcher’s fieldwork, September 2020)

Despite this perception, to the government, the reorganisation meant that CPG members were prohibited from engaging in violence. Furthermore, the government dissociated from Sungusungu, particularly because of this violence. In this context, verbal irony is understood from the echoing of the violence that the government prohibited Sungusungu and the installation of the new CPGs, which sought government and citizen participation in non-violent community policing. As a result, attitudes expressing dissent, mistrust, fear and uncertainty towards the former can be gleaned and are the basis of irony in this article. Put differently; verbal irony is first manifested in the evaluative paraphrase that broaches the resurgence of Sungusungu, which the government labelled CPG. Secondly, it is manifested in the government’s response to a vigilante group that had wreaked havoc among citizens. Thus, there are two degrees of interpretive resemblances, each expressing dissociative attitudes with the original Sungusungu that not only triggered the reorganisation of CPGs but also defined and clipped the excesses of Sungusungu. According to Sperber and Wilson (1995) irony is analysed as echoes emanating from previous utterances or expectations which defy pre-existing societal expectations, with dissociative attitudes being expressed towards the actions or people who defy the norm.

The reorganisation of CPGs constructed a new identity for Sungusungu vigilante groups, which is described by respondents as a “community working with the police.” It was also meant to distance CPGs from Sungusungu, who violated human rights. As Otiso (2015) puts it, the aim was to have a more inclusive non-violent community policing that collaborates with local administration and the police. A member of a CPG, who was hesitant to give an interview, confirmed that CPGs even have offices in various locations in Kisii with the main one being in Gusii Stadium. To strengthen this partnership and bring security closer to the people, the government instituted another form of community policing in 2013, known as *Nyumba Kumi*, literally translated from Swahili as Ten Houses or Households. One CPG member recounted that CPGs did not enlist former Sungusungu members and that CPGs work with the police in conjunction with the Officer Commanding Station (OCS) and the location chief to report crime. He added that CPGs do not engage in any form of violence or take bribes when processing a crime. He distanced Sungusungu from CPGs and *Nyumba Kumi* and specified that CPGs and *Nyumba Kumi* are formally enlisted by the chief and members are known to the OCS. The researcher was told by a respondent that this member was a foot soldier of Sungusungu, a claim which he denied. He, in fact, asserted that he was in a CPG.

Given the contradictory view between CPG members and residents, the existence of Sungusungu and their connection with CPGs and *Nyumba Kumi* is a mystery.

Nevertheless, residents hold that both CPGs and *Nyumba Kumi* covertly resemble Sungusungu in their modes of operation, especially in mishandling suspected criminals in what respondents described as “*kupiga watu chini ya maji*,” which means “secretly assaulting people.” As recently as January 2022, the media reported that “community policing is a new version of Sungusungu” (Enock 2022). As corroborated by residents, some Sungusungu members sneaked into *Nyumba Kumi* membership.

Arguably, *Nyumba Kumi* meta-represented or mirrored Sungusungu, and it is the community’s word against that of CPG members. The community holds that there are traces of violence and demands for bribes when apprehending suspects, which, as respondents stated, are done “quietly” and “secretly.” These traces constitute echoes from which dissociative attitudes, including resentment, bitterness, repulsiveness, and indignation, were expressed. These attitudes are manifested in the labels given to Sungusungu such as “underground movement” and “these people,” which, if anything, communicatively reveal negation towards the group that is supposed to offer protection. Finally, the reorganisation and the overt government-citizen partnership draw another line of identity between the original Sungusungu and *Nyumba Kumi*. In this regard, respondents alluded to the existence of two variants of Sungusungu: the legal one that works in coordination with the police, and the antagonistic one that occasionally resorts to barbarism. It is the antagonistic one that makes people conclude that Sungusungu and CPGs are one.

The persistence of the name “sungusungu” among the residents of Suneka township and Kisii at large—despite the reorganisation of CPGs by the government—is echoic. Ironically, the name and the previous activities of Sungusungu are imprinted in people’s minds despite the government’s attempts to make people understand the reorganisation. Consequently, it has not been possible to distinguish between Sungusungu and CPGs. This accounts for the duality of reference: “original Sungusungu” which is more conservative and deterministic in human rights violation, and the latter variants, including CPGs and *Nyumba Kumi*, which collaborate with the local administration and the police. The CPG leaders who work closely with the government dissociate from Sungusungu and call them criminals. Notably, even within CPGs, traces of violence can be found. Whichever the case, residents prefer working with Sungusungu or CPGs because of their swiftness in processing crimes. The paradox in this proposition echoes Heald’s (2007) argument that Sungusungu were “officially tolerated.” This paradox invokes attitudes of desperation for the provision of security by Sungusungu as well as attitudes of resentment and contempt towards Sungusungu’s brutal modes of operation.

Verbal Irony in the Police and Judicial Systems

The police and the judiciary are the state machinery obligated to provide internal security and preside over cases, respectively. However, as Heald (2009) notes, both the police and the court system are corrupt and Sungusungu were the only group that could bring justice to Kenyans. In tracing the advent of Sungusungu in Suneka, a lady who operates a small shop and also engages in small-scale farming in Suneka argued:

There was insecurity in this place. There were violent robberies and murders every day. Wealthy people and businessmen were attacked and killed if they refused to give up their money and other valuables to the criminals. Women were raped right before their spouses and parents. The police took long to respond and asked for bribes and fuel for the government car. (Researcher's fieldwork, April 2020)

The utterances are attributed to the original situation that spurred the establishment of Sungusungu. This is then implicitly linked to the present context in which incidents of robberies, murder and rape were minimised, which implicates that Sungusungu stepped in to successfully do what the police could not do effectively. The implicit negation, that is, the police are blamed for the increase in crime, is key to comprehending verbal irony in this context. Verbal irony, in this case, is accompanied by a tacitly dissociative attitude that expresses resentment towards the police for not only failing to protect the citizens effectively but also for being corrupt, which is a forthright contradiction of societal norms.

There were also resenting attitudes expressed towards the judiciary system. This stemmed from the expectations that justice should be dispensed fairly and within the shortest time possible. Ironically, the judiciary system was perceived as inaccessible and ineffective, at least to the poor. It was also counterproductive to pursue justice because criminals were released on bail, and many victims feared testifying against these criminals. Consequently, such cases were withdrawn due to a lack of evidence. A man who resides in Suneka and does menial work such as weeding, planting and brick making in the neighbouring Riana area stated:

Even if you pursue the case in court, the thief or the murderer is released on bail and he comes back to threaten you. So, you will not testify against them (criminals) anymore because you are living together in the society. (Researcher's fieldwork notes, August 2020)

This response echoes a situation of despair and lack of trust in the judiciary before Sungusungu came onto the scene. The subordinator "even if" signals an ironic representation of societal expectation; that is, the judiciary system should dispense justice fairly. However, people felt that court systems favoured criminals who upon being released on bail, came back to the society to terrorise them. In addition, the judicial processes were lengthy and expensive for them. In the response, the evaluative statement "so, you will not testify against them anymore" brings out irony in the sense that people dissociated from the judiciary while expressing attitudes of despair, defeat and contempt towards the judiciary. It is this dissociation from the judiciary that made people resort to Sungusungu's way of delivering justice through kangaroo courts. Sungusungu swiftly addressed people's security concerns and allayed fears of retaliatory attacks from the criminals. Sungusungu's effectiveness met citizens' expectations of security. Mkutu and Sabala (2007) argue that the dissociation reflects a lack of trust and limited police (and judicial) capability. Sungusungu were, therefore, embraced and supported by the locals (Gichira 2019). This radiated outwards to other

parts of Kisii County, where Sungusungu's collaborative efforts netted runaway criminals. One man, employed in a carpentry shop in Suneka, said:

A suspect was thoroughly beaten by Sungusungu before being taken to the police station. Those who fled were also hunted down in far flung places like Migori and Homabay. ... Sungusungu's intervention has considerably reduced crime levels in Kisii County. We were fed up with the police who collaborated with criminals. ... Sungusungu helped recover stolen items immediately and returned them to you. (Researcher's fieldwork, May 2020)

This response is a representation or a report attributed to what happened in society. In the echoic interpretation of verbal irony, it is the first step toward understanding irony. The various events that are recounted do not originate with the respondent and are, therefore, identified as echoes. The echoes are traceable to Sungusungu's effectiveness in diminishing crime rates in Kisii. Verbal irony arises because the police and the courts deviated from the norm. That is, they were expected to handle crime within the legal framework, but citizens felt that they were not doing so. This response is, therefore, a mockery of the police, who have all the machinery to control crime at their disposal, but they do not. Instead, a vigilante group that has not been trained by the government, carries the day. Such mockery is an expression of a dissociative attitude, which is a component of irony according to Wilson and Sperber (2012).

Sungusungu have been applauded by the citizens for their effectiveness in controlling crimes. The police have also realised that they could not fight crime alone without involving Sungusungu, who were in touch with the community. One man, who transports people's farm produce and other items within Suneka, stated:

Sungusungu vigilantes know the suspected criminals in the community. They flush them out and deal with them swiftly. Criminals fear Sungusungu vigilantes. (Researcher's fieldwork, June 2020)

This evaluative statement interpretively gives a resemblance to the thought that citizens expected the police to protect them from criminal attacks. At the same time, an outright rejection of the police is expressed by the citizens. In the echoic interpretation of irony, such a rejection is perceived as an instance of irony. Notwithstanding instances of brutality in processing crime by Sungusungu, crime was resolved considerably. Consequently, the discursive practices of crime shifted the focus to criminals being flushed out, being killed or forced to flee the area for fear of Sungusungu reprisals. This mode of hunting down criminals ameliorated Sungusungu's identity, with most people referring their cases to Sungusungu.

Echoes of Resentment Towards Sungusungu

The downturn of Sungusungu's effectiveness in controlling crime, at least to the people of Suneka township and Kisii County generally, was arguably the involvement of

Sungusungu in the crimes they set out to control. A *boda boda* (motor bike taxi) operator in the market stage observed:

Sungusungu started very well. They stopped crime in Kisii very quickly. However, they started robbing people and being hired to kill other people ... one man hired them to kill his first wife after he married a second wife. ... The wife lives very far but they pursued her. ... Luckily, she was tipped. (Researcher's fieldwork, August 2020)

This account of Sungusungu history reflects a resemblance relationship with two degrees of representation. The first degree of representation includes the rise in crime, which Sungusungu has managed to diminish when the police and the court could not do so effectively, as echoed by "Sungusungu started very well." This was taken positively with approving attitudes. The second degree represents a dissociative attitude towards Sungusungu's involvement in the crimes they set out to control "they started robbing people and being hired to kill other people." The morphing of Sungusungu into illegal activities such as committing robbery and murders is not unexpected among vigilante groups (Mutahi 2018). This degeneration stems from vigilantes' desire to remain relevant after they have resolved crimes. There is, therefore, an implicit negation in this morphing accompanied by dissociative attitudes expressing resentment and mockery towards Sungusungu, which in this study represent irony.

Further negations were extracted from Sungusungu's diversification into illegal money-generating activities, including solving domestic disputes and arbitrating land disputes in kangaroo courts, as well as offering residents protection and collecting garbage at a fee. One man in his mid-twenties, residing in Suneka and who has attended kangaroo court sessions of Sungusungu, stated:

They (Sungusungu) sometimes solve family scores. A woman tells on her husband to Sungusungu. Sungusungu beats up the man or advises him. ... I don't like associating with these people because of this embarrassment. ... Domestic issues should be solved in the house. Also, if you take a debtor to Sungusungu, he must pay your debt through Sungusungu for them to deduct some percentage. When they solve land disputes, they also demand a certain percentage of the sale of land. You must bribe these people to solve your problem... people talk negatively about them. (Researcher's fieldwork, February 2020)

These attributed utterances highlight irony encased in an apparent degeneration of Sungusungu into extortionists, which negates the original mandate to partner with the government to control crime. Sungusungu have capitalised on the gaps left by the former municipal councils or current county governments in service delivery (garbage collection) as well as the police and court (debt collection, domestic and land dispute resolution). Mkutu and Sabala (2007) and Mutahi (2018) observe that extortion is a characteristic of vigilantes and they echo quasi governments. Consequently, citizens' dissatisfaction with this practice is expressed through dissociative attitudes indicating resentment, mockery and bitterness towards Sungusungu: "people talk negatively about

them.” According to Sperber and Wilson (1995), attitudes are expressed via echoing the original thought (mandate of Sungusungu), identifying its source and highlighting the dissociation (extortion) with ridicule, mockery, bitterness, resentment, contempt and wryness from the standpoint of the speaker. More dissociative attitudes towards Sungusungu have been expressed by CPG leaders of Kisii, who argue that Sungusungu are criminals, extortionists and murderers. To the residents of Kisii, it has not been possible to draw a line between Sungusungu and CPGs.

Conclusion

This paper discussed verbal irony in the discourse of the identity and activities of Sungusungu in Suneka township in Kisii County from the perspective of echoic interpretation of verbal irony. Many instances of verbal irony regarding the way the police, the court and Sungusungu fought crime were identified. The study revealed that echoing combined with various contexts through reporting security lapses and how they were addressed, highlighting the contradictions between the reports and the expected norms and expressing attitudes. It was evident that there were shortcomings regarding the way both the state and Sungusungu participated in security matters. These were the main sources of verbal irony and a myriad of attributed attitudes. While citizens’ trust in the state in security matters dwindled, it was ironically ignited by Sungusungu vigilantes’ vigour in crime control. However, this trust was ironically short lived when Sungusungu became criminals, extortionists and compulsive service providers.

In as much as their rise and existence were meant to complement the state in policing, Sungusungu found themselves in a mire of human rights abuses, political dirt games and a thirst for money. Nevertheless, Sungusungu’s effort in crime control is still a force to reckon with, especially when the state is riddled with bureaucratic delays and corruption. To uphold the essence of community policing, there is a need for the state to work with community policing groups that can help with intelligence work. The partnership of the citizens and the state in security matters should be without any blemish or human rights abuses from the outlawed Sungusungu. It is also important for the government to reclaim their place in fighting crime in order to restore citizens’ confidence in the state.

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