

John De'mathew the King of Imagery in Gikuyu Songs: In Comparative Perspective with Queen Jane and Kamande Wa Kioi

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Abstract

The purpose of the article was to describe and explain imagery in the selected contemporary Gikuyu songs. Imagery is a common literary device used in African oral performance to enhance communication by creating visual images in the minds of listeners. Contemporary Gikuyu song artists have significantly employed the genre in their music, John De'Mathew taking centre stage in this arena. Use of imagery, however, may lead to difficulties in comprehension due to the multiple interpretations that may be assigned to each of them. Some of the interpretations may introduce properties which are not part of the language user's mental representation. The study used conceptual analysis and interpretation of the texts to identify imagery and its meaning in the three selected songs by John De Mathew. The study was anchored within the theoretical pillars of Stylistic Theoretical Approach (STA) and Ethno-poetics Theoretical Approach (EPTA), and employed a descriptive research design. Primary data was collected from three Gikuyu songs, and the identified metaphors were then categorised and their meaning interpreted. The study concludes that John De'Mathew has significantly employed imagery in his music compared to his peer contemporary composers; hence, he deserves the Title 'King of Imagery.'

Key terms: Contemporary, imagery, indigenous idiom, king of imagery, literary device.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Gikuyu music occupies a central place in Kenya's cultural and political life, fusing traditional oral performance with modern popular forms to address issues as diverse as gender, morality, and governance. Since independence, Gikuyu artists have used indigenous idioms and melodies to forge communal identity and comment on social change (Mutonya, 2013). The rise of electronic instrumentation and recording technologies in the 1990s catalysed Benga, neo-Mugithi, and other hybrid genres, multiplying opportunities for artists to reach urban and rural audiences alike (Muiruri, 2023). He posits that the commercial history of Gikuyu music can be traced back to the late 1800s as the colonial agenda picked up the pace, catalysed by the 1885 Berlin conference.

This study examines the music by De'Mathew, acclaimed as the 'King of Imagery' in Gikuyu songs, and the deployment of layered symbolism that deepens the tradition of Gikuyu social commentary. John De'Mathew revolutionised Gikuyu contemporary music by embedding complex imagery and prophetic social critique in his direct gender-focused narratives (Kiiru et al., 2018). In the present study, John De'Mathew was recognised as the Gikuyu prophet since his music passed across coded messages that came to pass. This study is anchored within a Stylistic Theoretical Approach (STA), which is effective in the study of contemporary songs since it is concerned with studying texts to explain how readers are affected by the texts when they read them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Biographical accounts such as the Star Obituary by Kisia (2019) trace De'Mathew from matatu tout to celebrated composer, highlighting his early struggles, spiritual inclinations, and eventual rise during the 2007-2013 election cycle. According to Thiong'o (2009), animal metaphor underlies his evocative imagery, and a quantitative cataloguing of over 200 coded songs supplies empirical weight to analyses of his political allegory. These studies establish De'Mathew's reputation for complex poetic layering and prophetic social commentary. Queen Jane's repertoire centres on the intimate spheres of love, marital fidelity, and a woman's social roles. Her use of imagery is evident but scanty in comparison to John De'Mathew's songs. She employs similes and straightforward allegory

sparingly; narratives are linear, and metaphors are self-evident and easily unpacked by any listener.

Imagery in music serves to create vivid and engaging sensory experiences for the reader. It enhances sensory experiences by bringing descriptions to life by engaging the reader's senses, which creates a more profound emotional impact. Kamande Wa Kioi's approach to composition of music is quite different; his music is designed to animate bar-room dance floors. His satire is explicit; most of his lyrics recount scandals and mock public figures, letting no metaphor stand between his critique and his subject (Staff Report, 2012).

John De'Mathew's reputation as the 'King of Imagery' rests on his masterful expansion of the Gikuyu oral tradition that has long drawn on natural phenomena. His works stood out for their metaphorical density. Rivers that ran dry symbolised moral decay, creatures like hyenas stood in for unscrupulous leaders, and broken pots for stale relationships. Audiences tuned in not just for melody but for layered meaning, decoding social critique and calls to action hidden behind allegory (Kiiru, 2018).

The Stylistic Theoretical Approach (STA) is a branch of applied linguistics concerned with the study of style in texts. Bally (1909) proposed stylistics as a distinct academic discipline and emphasised the emotional and expressive function of language, highlighting its ability to convey meaning beyond literal content. Oladosu (1997) argues that stylistics is the art of using linguistic rules and regulations to characterise a literary output. Widdowson (1975) further defines stylistics as the study of literary discourse from a linguistically oriented perspective and how readers interpret those effects. Crystal (2008) explores various languages and aims to establish principles that explain the choices made by individuals and social groups in their language use. STA is quite appropriate in the study of imagery in Gikuyu songs since it focuses on the interaction between texts and the reader, exploring how specific language choices shape emotional experiences and guide reader response (Bally, 1909).

The Ethno-poetics Theoretical Approach (ETA), coined by Rothenberg (1968), locates authority for interpretation within the culture that produces the

text. Ethno-poetics regards the text as culturally centred, thus requiring the application of the methods of literary criticism and cultural studies. John De'Mathew revolutionised Gikuyu contemporary music by embedding complex imagery and prophetic social critique in his lyrics (Maupeu & Wa-Mungai, 2006). ETA is appropriate in the study of contemporary Gikuyu songs since it is a method of recording written versions of oral poetry or narrative forms that utilise poetic lines, verses, and stanzas to capture the formal elements of poetic performance, which would otherwise be lost in written texts. De'Mathew's strategic use of repetition and modulation creates a dialogue with listeners, compelling them to decode complex allegories and participate in communal interpretation (Mbugua, 2019). An ethno-poetic score not only takes account of the words but also of silence, change in loudness, and tone of voice.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents research design, sampling procedures, sampling techniques, data collection and analyses; it will also take into consideration the ethical aspects.

Research Design

Research design pertains to the overall strategy employed to answer research questions; a research design typically outlines the theories and models underlying a project and the strategy for gathering data and producing answers from the data. Tenny (2022) defines qualitative research design as a type of research that examines and provides a deeper understanding of actual issues in the world. Shona (2023) defines a case study as a detailed study of a specific subject or a phenomenon in social, educational or business research. He suggests that a case study typically employs qualitative methods, which are effective for describing, evaluating, comparing, and understanding various aspects of a research problem. The researcher employed a case study design that emphasises the analysis of both primary and secondary sources. The researcher explored the categories and examined the relevance of imagery in the selected Gikuyu contemporary songs by John De'Mathew. The primary and secondary sources of data were accessed from pre-recorded songs by the selected artists.

Data Collection

The data for this study were collected from primary and secondary sources.

Primary Sources

This process entailed listening to audio recordings and viewing video performances of selected songs by Gikuyu artists, with the aim of identifying and documenting instances of imagery. This entailed listening to a total of 12 songs by every artist in order to sample three songs by each artist, and the criteria were the richness of imagery in the selected songs.

Secondary Sources

This was done through reading materials that reflect the theoretical perspectives from libraries and any other literary works with related information from the internet.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Comparative Analysis

John De'Mathew vs. Queen Jane

John De'Mathew and Queen Jane occupy complementary, yet distinct, positions in the Gikuyu musical landscape, each defined by contrasting vocal timbres and stage personae that frame their thematic aims. De'Mathew's baritone is deliberate and sonorous, his measured delivery punctuated by rhetorical pauses that invite listeners to ponder the layered meanings of his verses. His use of intonation, lingering on certain syllables or elongating key words, imbues his performance with the gravitas of an oral prophet, a persona he underscored by appearing on-stage in traditional regalia and occasionally invoking Gikuyu ceremonial instruments as props (Kiiru & Wa Mutonya, 2018).

Queen Jane, by contrast, cultivated a warm soprano timbre whose lilting melodic phrasing prioritised emotional immediacy. Clad in contemporary attire, often soft pastels or vibrant prints, she engaged audiences through direct eye contact and call-and-response choruses, creating an intimate "sisterly" rapport that underscored her image as a nurturing storyteller (Kiiru & wa Mutonya, 2018). The thematic divergence between these two icons is equally pronounced. Queen Jane's repertoire centres on the intimate spheres of love, marital fidelity, and women's social roles; her lyrics replete with everyday metaphors

spoil-a-mango, for instance, to convey moral lessons about honesty and mutual respect in relationships (Beautah, 2023). In her hit “*Muthoni ni kuria*” (“Wife is Food”), the domestic metaphor of sustenance becomes a vehicle for exploring partnership dynamics, fostering immediate identification among female listeners. De' Mathew, in contrast, situates individual behaviour within broader communal ecosystems, addressing issues of corruption, land rights, and moral decay through allegories drawn from nature. Songs like “*Wituite Hiti*” invoke shifting riverbanks and treacherous floodwaters to critique electoral malpractices and societal apathy, positioning his work as civic calls to vigilance rather than private consolations (Muiruri, 2023). These thematic orientations are mirrored in each artist's deployment of metaphor and imagery.

Queen Jane employs similes and straightforward allegory sparingly, her narrative arc is linear, and her metaphors, like the spoiled mango, are self-evident and easily unpacked by any listener. This approach reinforces her didactic goals, ensuring that her moral prescriptions resonate without requiring specialised cultural literacy. De' Mathew, however, saturates his compositions with multi-layered symbols that reward and indeed require active decoding. In “*Ngoro Tiga*”, he compares corrupt officials to hyenas circling a carcass, a metaphor that gestures to greed and moral scavenging but also evokes deeper themes of collective complicity and the dangers of silent by standing (Thiong'o, 2009). His densely packed imagery builds cumulatively: an opening reference to “drying streams” may segue into “ghost trees” and finally “echoing drumbeats,” each image accumulating historical and emotional resonance. Audience reception and societal impact further distinguish Queen Jane from De' Mathew.

Queen Jane's concerts and radio hits cultivated predominantly female listenership, with many women's groups citing her songs as inspirations for local empowerment initiatives from marriage counselling circles to microfinance cooperatives (Mutonya, 2018). Her influence is thus measured in grassroots social programs and elevated community discourse on gender norms. De' Mathew's impact, by contrast, extends into formal political arenas: his songs were not only staples of regional radio but also

catalysts for national debate, cited by journalists and scholars alike as emblematic of Gikuyu political sentiment (Muiruri, 2023). His metaphorical critiques appeared on parliamentary floors and in academic theses, reinforcing his dual identity as both artist and civic interlocutor.

John De'Mathew vs. Kamande wa Kioi

While De'Mathew and Kamande wa Kioi share a commitment to social commentary, their musical architectures and storytelling techniques chart divergent paths. De'Mathew's arrangement leans toward mid-tempo benga rhythms woven with contemplative guitar riffs in minor keys, evoking a reflective soundscape that mirrors his lyrical depth. His solos often resolve on dissonant chords, creating tension that underscores thematic unease. What begins as a gentle riff may subtly shift into an uneasy cadence, signalling moral turbulence (Maupeu & Wa-Mungai, 2006). Kamande wa Kioi embraces the upbeat strumming patterns of neo-mugithi, favouring major-key progressions that emphasise immediacy and joviality. His music is designed to animate bar-room dancefloors: sprightly rhythms, simple melodic hooks, and brisk tempos ensure instant physical engagement, while his guitar runs resolve into cheerful cadences that encourage communal revelry. Their political engagements diverge as sharply as their melodies.

Kamande's satire is explicit: his lyrics freely name local politicians, recount scandals, and mock public figures by moniker and anecdote. In tracks like “*Guciara*,” he derides a minister's bribery scandal in plain Gikuyu, letting no metaphor stand between his critique and its subject (Staff Reporter, 2012). This overt approach elicits immediate laughter and satisfaction among urban audiences who relish the comic reversal of power. De' Mathew's political engagements, by contrast, are circumspect and allegorical. He conceals critique within animal and environmental metaphors; hyenas, crocodiles, flooding rivers thus securing plausible deniability when faced with censorship or legal challenge (Staff Reporter, 2012). His “*Wituite Hiti*” alludes to vote-rigging without naming individuals, yet its impact on political discourse is less profound. Storytelling techniques further separate the two. Kamande's narratives are predominantly linear, unfolding like mini-dramas with clear protagonists, conflicts, and punch-line choruses. His anecdotal

sketches of corrupt chiefs, wayward wives, or unscrupulous businessmen are structured for immediate comprehension and comic payoff. De' Mathew's narratives are circular, weaving multiple threads of metaphor that coalesce in a final moral epiphany. He often repeats leitmotifs "dry streams," "distant drums" across verse, fostering a cumulative interpretive depth that rewards attentive listening. This circularity transforms each song into a journey of collective reflection rather than a simple story.

Finally, their trajectories in commercial success and critical recognition diverge. Kamande's bar-hit singles achieved rapid sales and dancehall ubiquity, yet they attracted scant academic attention or sustained critical acclaim. His music thrived in live performance circuits but was seldom the subject of lyrical analysis. De' Mathew's albums, while commercially modest by mainstream pop standards, garnered significant scholarly interest for their literary sophistication (Ndege et al., 2019). His catalogue has been mined in dissertations and journal articles, cementing his legacy as the "King of Imagery." Queen Jane occupies an intermediate position: she achieved both chart success and community impact, securing radio play, live-show sell-outs, and enduring status as a feminist icon, yet her work has only recently begun to attract sustained academic scrutiny. Together, these comparative portraits underscore the rich plurality of contemporary Gikuyu song. De' Mathew's metaphor-dense, civic-minded artistry complements Queen Jane's emotionally immediate, gender-focused narratives and Kamande wa Kioi's bar-top satire. Each artist harnesses distinct musical and rhetorical strategies to engage their audience, revealing the versatility of Gikuyu cultural expression in negotiating personal, communal, and political imaginaries.

Discussion

John De' Mathew's legacy rests on his unparalleled capacity to weave complex metaphorical tapestries that transform each song into an active site of audience interpretation. By layering animal imagery, environmental metaphors, and strategic repetition, he created a form of musical semiotics that demands listener engagement beyond passive reception (Thiong'o, 2009). This dialogic approach, where the audience must "decode" verses to grasp underlying social critiques, contrasts sharply with Queen Jane's

more transparent narrative style and Kamande wa Kioi's satirical tactics. Queen Jane's work expands Gikuyu imagery into domains of gender and personal identity, employing everyday symbols (mangoes, hearth fires, running water) to address women's empowerment and relational dynamics (Kiiru & Wa Mutonya, 2018). Her directness fosters immediate emotional resonance, making her music a tool for grassroots mobilisation among female listeners. In this way, Queen Jane complements De' Mathew's intellectualised allegory by ensuring that Gikuyu music remains accessible and socially impactful across demographic lines. Kamande wa Kioi, by contrast, epitomises the power and risk of explicit political satire. He names names, recounts scandals, and uses humour as a cudgel against corruption (Maupeu & Wa-Mungai, 2006).

While this approach generates immediate public buzz and dancehall appeal, it leaves him more exposed to censorship and legal challenges, as evidenced by the 2012 hate-speech case (Staff Reporter, 2012). His satire underscores the limitations of "speaking truth to power" without the protective veil of metaphor that De' Mathew so artfully maintained. Looking ahead, the continuing uptake of De' Mathew's dense metaphorical style by younger artists, often combined with Queen Jane's feminist motifs, signals an emergent hybrid genre. Digital platforms and cross-genre collaborations are amplifying these traditions, enabling novel fusions of poetic depths, electronic production, and global musical influences (Muiruri, 2023). As Gikuyu music evolves, the interplay between allegory, direct narrative, and satire will remain its defining strengths, ensuring that this rich oral-derived heritage continues to shape Kenya's cultural and political landscapes.

Imagery in John De' Mathew's Songs

Most of De' Mathew's songs draw imagery from nature and the environment to mirror human feelings, emotions and situations.

<i>Njata yakwa</i>	My star.
<i>Wendo wi murio</i>	Love is sweet.
<i>Rubaru rwakwa</i>	My rib
<i>Kuria Makoro</i>	Eating peels
<i>Hinga matu na Mbamba</i>	Lose ears with cotton wool

<i>Ciana Maua maitu</i>	children our flowers
<i>Muoyo ti kibande</i>	Life is not an identity card
<i>Uturo ni gichukia</i>	Life is a dance
<i>Mutumia kiura kinene</i>	Woman as a big frog
<i>Mutumia thingi Maria</i>	as holy as virgin Mary

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: This study has traced the remarkable journey of John De' Mathew from his humble beginnings in Mukurwe-ini to his acclaim as the "King of Imagery", demonstrating how his dense metaphorical lyricism and prophetic social critique reshaped the contours of Gikuyu contemporary music. Through close readings of signature tracks such as "Muno Mwihoti" and "Wituete Hiti," we have seen how De' Mathew layered animal and environmental metaphors; hyenas, drying streams, overflowing rivers to encode veiled yet potent commentaries on corruption, land injustice, and electoral malpractice. His strategies of repetition and tonal modulation created a dialogue with the listener, compelling them to decode complex allegories and, in turn, participate in communal reflection (Thiong'o, 2009; Ndege et al., 2019). Comparative analysis positioned De' Mathew's work alongside Queen Jane's and Kamande wa Kioi's, revealing three complementary modes of Gikuyu musical storytelling. Queen Jane's direct, gender-focused narratives framed by accessible metaphors of domestic life and delivered in a warm soprano empowered women and spurred grassroots mobilization (Kiiru & Wa Mutonya, 2018). Kamande wa

Kioi's bar-top satire, by contrast, traded subtlety for immediacy, naming political figures and lampooning scandals to generate instant communal catharsis, albeit at greater risk of censorship (Maupeu & Wa Mungai, 2006; Staff Reporter, 2012). De' Mathew's allegorical approach, situated between these poles, combined literary sophistication with political potency, garnering both popular acclaim and scholarly attention. By mapping these divergent trajectories, the paper underscores Gikuyu music's extraordinary versatility: it can console, entertain, satirise, and provoke civic engagement. De' Mathew's enduring influence, evident in the wave of tribute albums, academic theses, and hybrid productions by younger artists, attests to the continuing power of oral-delivered imagery in a digital age Muiruri (2023). As streaming platforms and cross-genre collaborations proliferate, emerging musicians are both preserving his metaphor-dense legacy and forging new syntheses with feminist themes and electronic soundscapes.

Recommendations: Future research might examine the role of social media in disseminating coded lyrics, assess how non-Gikuyu audiences engage with these symbolic traditions, or explore comparative dynamics across other Kenyan linguistic communities. Ultimately, this study contributes to African music scholarship by demonstrating how John De' Mathew and his peers have transformed popular song into a dynamic forum for cultural identity, moral inquiry, and political discourse, ensuring that Gikuyu contemporary music remains a living, evolving repository of collective memory and aspiration.

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