



East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences

ejass.eanso.org

Volume 7, Issue 2, 2024

Print ISSN: 2707-4277 | Online ISSN: 2707-4285

Title DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/2707-4285>



EAST AFRICAN
NATURE &
SCIENCE
ORGANIZATION

Original Article

The Way Selected Imbuga Plays Interrogate the Socio-Political System in Kenya

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Article DOI : <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.7.2.2435>

Date Published: **ABSTRACT**

22 November 2024

Keywords:

*Imbuga's,
Selected,
Politics,
Plays,
Interrogate.*

The main objective of this article was to re-read Francis Imbuga's selected plays, *The Successor*, *Game of Silence*, and *Betrayal in the City*, on how they interrogate the 21st century Kenya's socio-political system. The article used primary data gathered from the three selected Imbuga plays, while the secondary data were obtained from the University of Dar es Salaam main library and online library. This study is qualitative. The data for the study were obtained through close reading and were analyzed by classifying them into themes. By using new-historicism theory, it was revealed that the three Imbuga's plays interrogate the 21st C Kenyan socio-political situation in different ways by revealing socio-political issues like corruption, betrayal and poor leadership, oppression, and suppression, cruelty against women, conflicts, disunity, disillusionment, and poor power succession. The article concludes that Imbuga's literary works are timeless because they endlessly reflect the real socio-political situation of Kenya. This fact makes literature to be considered as a tool for social change.

APA CITATION

Mwalulesa, A. E. (2024). The Way Selected Imbuga Plays Interrogate the Socio-Political System in Kenya. *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 7(2), 284-293. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.7.2.2435>

CHICAGO CITATION

Mwalulesa, Azania Emmanuel. 2024. "The Way Selected Imbuga Plays Interrogate the Socio-Political System in Kenya". *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences* 7 (2), 284-293. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.7.2.2435>.

HARVARD CITATION

Mwalulesa, A. E. (2024) "The Way Selected Imbuga Plays Interrogate the Socio-Political System in Kenya". *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 7(2), pp. 284-293. doi: 10.37284/eajass.7.2.2435.

IEEE CITATION

A. E., Mwalulesa "The Way Selected Imbuga Plays Interrogate the Socio-Political System in Kenya". *EJASS*, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 284-293, Nov. 2024.

MLA CITATION

Mwalulesa, Azania Emmanuel "The Way Selected Imbuga Plays Interrogate the Socio-Political System in Kenya". *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, Vol. 7, no. 2, Nov. 2024, pp. 284-293, doi:10.37284/eajass.7.2.2435.

INTRODUCTION

This article explores how Francis Imbuga's three selected plays, *The Successor*, *Game of Silence*, and *Betrayal in the City*, interrogate the Kenyan socio-political system. In his new historicism, Stephen Greenblatt states that both literary work and the readers are affected by many elements outside the literary work. Hence, this approach denies reading literary works in isolation but to be read by establishing a complex relationship between fiction and nonfiction. (185). Therefore, this chapter explores how Imbuga's play interrogates the socio-political situation of Kenya by relating it to the real context. The selected plays interrogate Kenya's socio-political system through the themes extensively highlighted in this section. In short, the plays have criticized major issues like poor leadership, corruption, betrayal, conflicts, oppression and suppression, cruelty against women, disillusionment, disunity, and power succession. Such interrogations laid out in Francis Imbuga's plays have been uniquely analyzed in the following manner.

Poor Leadership

Francis Imbuga's three selected plays have interrogated poor leadership in various forms, including the weakness of leadership in the Monarch system of governance during the pre-colonial Kenyan society, oppressive administration during colonial Kenya, and the tyrannical leadership in post-independent Kenya in which leaders claimed to have democracy. Still, in the real sense, it was not so.

Through the play's portrayal, *The Successor* discusses the importance of good leadership as an ideal system of governing that involves all the people (66). It interrogates and criticizes the monarch system of leadership as a weak system of government because it gives power to one man to rule others depending on the King's views, which is reflected by the character of Emperor Chonda. Also, the play symbolically shows that the monarchical

administration system brings about bad governance since it limits individual freedom of expression and causes a lot of bloodshed in society due to the power struggle. For instance, the play portrays Emperor Chonda, a ruler of Masero, as a bad leader because he decides everything for his society, and society cannot deny his decisions; thus, the people are confused (23). This is shown stylistically within the conversation between Oriomra and Sasia when Chief Oriomra says that Chief Sasia is the choice of the people of Masero because he mixes freely with them. Thus, all the fingers of the people point at Sasia as their next Emperor, but the problem with Masero is that the Emperor may at any time point his own favourite successor, Chief Jandi (22-24). This decision of the Emperor ignoring the people's choice makes his Chief advisers, Chief Oriomra and Chief Sasia, conspire against his favored successor, Chief Jandi, thus causing Chief Jandi's fake death. But, at the end of the play, during a very emotional, touching event of judging a traitor, Chief Oriomra, Chief Jandi, and Segasega, the Emperor's food-taster, call for democracy, which may bring good judgment and leadership to their society.

In *Game of Silence*, poor leadership is shown as a source of humiliation to lower-class people. The play portrays poor leaders by using characters such as Bango, Dr. Zumaka, and Jimmy's Sister, who silence the lower-class people after they know the evils of the government. The term silencing is used as a symbol of killing and suppressing low-class people. Silencing is done by either killing them or detaining them. Thus, poor leadership does not consider the humanity of the lower-class people, but they are merely taken as animals. It is seen that the government leaves its people in poverty and great pain. As the 1st and 2nd spectators say, "There have been too many funerals down here, and in all four funerals we have attended, there was no food supply" (14-15). The play uses the symbol 'down here', which is also a visual image representing the homes of humiliated low-class people who are under the heavy hand of the top class, the rich, and the government.

In Imbuga's *Betrayal in the City*, through its complex style of a play within a play, it has been revealed that the concept of poor leadership in the socio-political system of Kenya is interrogated by showing that this matter leads to dictatorship, which may cause disillusionment to people, something which is against what they had hoped after regaining freedom from the colonialists. Through the bad leadership of characters like Boss, Mulili, and Tumbo, it is seen that many characters from lower class people, such as Doga, Nina, and Adika, are killed in an injustice way, and there is no one to be sued responsible for such evil acts. This bad governance affects not only the lower-class people but also the high and middle-class people who seem to be seeking justice. For example, Mosese and Jere are jailed to silence their struggle for justice. Also, the play interrogates poor leadership by using a complex style of setting a play within a play, leading to overthrowing the Boss's incumbent rule.

Francis Imbuga's three selected plays reflect poor leadership in the 21st-century Kenyan socio-political system. This fact leaves the selected plays unquestionable for their relevance in today's Kenyan community. Agutu Cecil (2008) asserts that for civil society to play the rightful role in the development of Kenya, it has to overcome many challenges, but the biggest challenge is poor leadership, which leads to corruption by people who lack the capabilities to fulfill the desired roles and, thus lack approaches to development that are not responding to the needs of communities (viii). This signifies that in Kenya, poor leadership is still a big problem.

Corruption

The study has found that the three plays Imbuga selected portray most male characters as corrupt because they are greedy for wealth. Imbuga's texts present that corruption is the source of many socio-political problems in Kenyan societies, including poverty, humiliation, betrayal, and destruction of culture.

Imbuga's *The Successor* presents corruption as a source of cultural destruction. In the play, the characters of Chief Oriomra and Chief Sasia are presented as men who are greedy for power and notorious to the extent of destroying the cultural system of power succession in Masero. The two Chiefs are even ready to kill anyone who intends to block their plan to seize power.

In *Game of Silence*, the play has a symbol of corruption as the means that the top class uses to intensively torture and humiliate the lower-class citizens while forgetting that the bottom classes were the freedom fighters who fought for the independence of their nation. For instance, the play portrays the way the top-class people silence Frola by being killed using poison, but corruption is used by the Doctor so that he gives a fake report that Frola died of a natural cause of heart attack (29).

Imbuga's *Betrayal in the City* interrogates corruption by showing how government leaders give corruption to benefit themselves and eliminate others. For example, through the conspiracy technique, Mulili, the Boss's adviser, reveals how Boss has ruined the economy of Kafira by stashing away millions of money, and he has kept millions of money in foreign countries. When Kabito seems to know the fact, he is secretly murdered by Mulili, who arranges the suicide plan. Also, Mulili is promised by Boss to be given a big farm and cattle when he stops Doga and Nina to conduct the shaving ceremony.

Francis Imbuga's selected plays have interrogated and criticized leaders who are corrupt and who do not care about others. Government leaders such as Mulili in *Betrayal in the City*, Chief Oriomra and Chief Sasia in *The Successor*, and Bango in *Game of Silence* are good examples of corrupt leaders. The texts have shown that there are only a few men who are in power who try to fight against corruption in Kenya, but they end up being murdered. Migai Akech (2011) argues that corruption is highly practiced in today's Kenya. Thus, Kenya has been measuring corruption since 2007 in the context of

ongoing performance contracting reforms. It has developed corruption eradication performance indicators and tasked the Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission (EACC) to monitor and evaluate their implementation, but in these implementations, the evaluations see that Kenya is rising in corruption instead of dropping down.

Betrayal

The current study has revealed how Kenyan leaders betray the people who gave them power. Three of Imbuga's plays show the leaders' behavior of being greedy with power due to personal desires for wealth gains through misuse of public funds. The plays clearly demonstrate how betrayal has consequences for both the leaders and the common people in the country. The three selected plays have critically taught the community about social evils, especially corruption, and killings among people themselves.

In *The Successor*, the play reveals betrayal through Chief Oriomra, whose greed for power is very; thus, with his conspiracy plan, he betrays every favored successor. His betrayal ends up killing Sasia and Zira. The play uses the visual imagery of storm and blood to show how betrayal can lead to bloodshed and dishonest amongst people in politics and culture as it is seen in the play when Chief Oriomra influences the Diviner to speak lies to the Emperor that the true solution of the Emperor's dream is to mention his successor or the storm could be inevitable to happen (12).

In *Game of Silence*, the interrogation of betrayal is revealed by showing how the Kenyan government leaders eliminate the lower-class people fighting to rise to power. Betrayal is seen in the visual imagery of educated elites like Dr. Zumaka and Raja, who are put in mental hospitals because they are over-educated, which is the sarcasm that mocks the stupidity of the unwanted government leaders. The educated people are accused of posing a threat to the government that their freedom is taken away to eliminate them before they take political power. The

government is seen to spend a lot of money on spying on the elites who are in studies. The play portrays Bango as the government official who spies Raja abroad so that he does not pose a threat to the government (1). The play has really presented the way officials waste a lot of public money on unnecessary expenditures instead of allocating the funds to development projects.

In *Betrayal in the City*, the play interrogates the betrayal of the Kenyan leaders by showing its effects on the government administration. The title itself, *Betrayal in the City*, reflects that betrayal would be the central issue portrayed in the play. Obviously, the play shows the character Mulili as the center of betrayal when he betrays every citizen of Kafira, and at the end of the play, he (Mulili) betrays Boss by saying he barely knows him as the one who killed Kabito and the one who hides a lot of money in foreign countries so, he must be killed. Finally, the play challenges betrayal by using Juser, who shoots Mulili and spares the Boss, to show that betrayal is unacceptable in society.

The three selected plays directly reflect the contemporary Kenyan socio-political situation in which betrayal has become common among the politicians themselves and their followers, the lower-class people, who always indirectly become victims. Therefore, Francis Imbuga's plays challenge the current socio-political system by showing its negative effects on the Kenyan community to learn and let things work according to natural forces.

Interrogating the Conflicting Kenyan Community

The three of Imbuga's selected plays have portrayed the Kenyan socio-political situation to be surrounded by conflicts. The three plays show how conflicts become the order of the day in the Kenyan state functionaries to the extent that even government officials have personal conflicts among themselves. The plays have also presented intra-personal and social conflicts. In the selected plays,

the issue of conflict has been interrogated in the following ways:

In *The Successor*, the issue of conflict has been interrogated by showing how it affects society by bringing problems like bloodshed. It has been found that the play depicts interpersonal conflicts between Chief Oriomra and Chief Sasia, who are against Chief Jandi in the rally for power succession in the Masero kingdom. Also, the play reveals Chief Oriomra struggling to become the successor; he plans to kill Chief Jandi and Chief Sasia to grab the Emperor's position.

In *Game of Silence*, the play interrogates conflicts between government officials. For example, officials like Bango and Dr. Zumaka, who work as government psychologists, have interpersonal conflicts. The play reveals that conflict may bring division even to people of the same social class. Apart from that, interpersonal conflict exists between the ruling class and the lower class in which government officials like Bango oppress common citizens like Raja and Flora.

Imbuga's *Betrayal in the City* has interrogated conflict as bringing cultural destruction and disunity among the people. The interpersonal conflicts between government officials during the entertainment committee in which Mulili and Kabito have different interests for their financial gains bring about disunity between them. Also, the interpersonal conflict between Mulili and Doga's family at the shaving ceremony brings about cultural destruction in the community. Again, there are social conflicts reported between the government and the university students, which resulted in Adika's death. In the play, it is shown that conflicts can end up causing the death of someone else in the community, as seen when Mulili kills Doga and Nina.

The three Imbuga's plays briefly interrogate and criticize conflicts that may be the source of underdevelopment in the Kenyan community. The plays present that conflict may be a form of struggle

for the oppressed people so that they can rescue themselves from the government's oppression and suppression.

Oppression and Suppression

The three Imbuga's selected plays have openly interrogated oppression and suppression done by the Kenyan authorities of the lower-class people. The plays have shown the way common citizens are arrested, jailed, or killed even without any fair trials. The three plays have been dramatically plotted in a dictatorial context to depict the presence of oppression and suppression in Kenya. Such a reality is discussed in the following accounts.

The successor has interrogated oppression and suppression by considering the situation as the source of violation of human rights. The issue of oppression and suppression has been symbolically presented by Emperor Chonda himself, who is autonomous in his decisions about important kingdom matters. For example, he banishes Chief Jandi without any consultation from others by chasing him away without ceremony, but he later realizes that Jandi is innocent (54). Also, Chief Oriomra and Chief Sasia oppress Chief Jandi in conspiring for power succession. Again, Chief Oriomra suppresses Chief Sasia by killing him to avoid competition in the rally of power succession.

In *Game of Silence*, the play interrogates oppression and suppression through the characterization of Bango, Dr. Zumaka, and Jimm's Killer sister, who are portrayed as government agents set as torturing machines of the majority lower class peasants and workers. The play shows how the lower class is not completely allowed to raise their voices against the upper class. For example, Raja says that poor people are silent during the daytime but howl like dogs at night (1). Raja's words indicate that the government oppresses the lower-class people by being denied their right to expression. In short, the play has interrogated the government leaders who misuse their power to suppress the lower class by showing their evil deeds.

In addition, *Game of Silence* shows how elites are oppressed and suppressed by experiencing censorship in a dictatorial government so that their education and publications should not affect the government administration led by the upper class. For example, Dr. Zumaka is a well-educated person, but the government censors him because he has been over-educated, and his education makes him crazy, so his advice is not needed anymore; thus, he is demoted.

In *Betrayal in the City*, the play interrogates oppression and suppression by presenting the way the government oppresses and suppresses the lower-class people in Kafira. Boss, exaggerated to be the supreme leader of Kafira, does not hesitate to silence anyone who opposes his order. For example, when the University students demonstrate against the government, Adika is killed, and during Adika's funeral, the university students are not allowed to carry the coffin of Adika; they are also not allowed to cry. Critical publications are censored and suppressed by the government, while critical ones cannot be published since they are considered dangerous. For example, Juspier's manuscript cannot be published because it expresses too much truth.

The play interrogates oppression and suppression in Kenya, which is the source of torturing innocent citizens, and it leads to the jailing of people without fair trials. Furthermore, the play has challenged the 21st-century socio-political system for being oppressive and suppressive, a thing which becomes one of the catalysts for forcing lower-class people to fight for real freedom from the upper class. For example, in *Betrayal in the City*, Juspier and his crew decided to overthrow Boss's government because of intensive oppression and suppression of people. Likewise, in *Game of Silence*, lower-class people like Raja and Flora attempt to rebel against the oppressive regime.

Cruelty against Women

The three plays Imbuga selected have interrogated how women are not allowed to take positions in the

Kenyan socio-political system. Still, they have been just tortured since the pre-colonial period. The three plays have presented that many women in Kenya have been facing sexual violence in the socio-political system. The three Imbuga's selected plays interrogate the social-political system of Kenya by portraying women as the center for revolution and change of the socio-political system.

In *The Successor*, it has been found that women are not given chances in political leadership. In the play, this fact is seen through the image of Emperor Chonda, who has no son to inherit his seat, so he names his successor from another family with a man (22). The play ironically interrogates Kenya's socio-political system by portraying Zira as a strong woman. Although she is stabbed with a knife on her neck by Chief Sasia, Zira does not confess to the conspiracy. She struggled to put her life on hold until she confessed the truth to Emperor Chonda. This makes her a forgotten heroine of the story that made a strong democracy possible in Masero.

In the *Game of Silence*, the play interrogates the socio-political system by showing the characterizations of Flora, whose sacrifice initiates the struggle against oppression and suppression in the community. Also, the play interrogates the issue of harassing women by showing that, although women are not given chances in government positions, they are still sometimes the ones who make sure their families maintain their positions in the government. This is shown when Jimmy's sister poisons Frola so that she does not marry her brother, who belongs to the upper class. It has been revealed that Flora struggles to unite the two antagonistic classes. Through the marriage that would result in a baby, Flora believes the technique is a means of penetrating the government's top. This shows that women sometimes make very strong decisions to make sure their families survive, although their government does not pay attention to their efforts and contributions to the socio-political system.

In *Betrayal in the City*, the issue of cruelty against women has been interrogated by showing the way

women are not included in political matters. In the play, the whole government is composed of male officials. This is seen on the stage at the entertainment committee, where only male figures are seen. Women are only portrayed to be discriminated against. Through the character of the Boss's wife, the way women are ill-treated in society has been revealed. The Boss's wife laments to Boss's ill behavior of wanting to rape Regina, but Boss responds by locking her in a palace cell. The given example also portrays how Regina is about to be raped by Boss. The play reminds us that the ills done to women communicate the need for change, as advocated by Juser, who wrote a revolutionary play that led to the revolution.

Thus, the three Imbuga's selected plays interrogate and criticize Kenya's socio-political system, which considers women as weak. Rather, the plays communicate a message that women are very strong and are the root cause of the socio-political revolution that occurred in the country from pre-colonial to colonial and post-colonial Kenya. In contrast, Imbuga's plays portray men's characters as a total failure. John Ruganda (1992) argues that Imbuga's male characters are the more blatant transgressors of the polity (2), meaning that Imbuga portrays men as the source of the community's socio-political problems.

Disillusionment in the Socio-political System of Kenya

Francis Imbuga's selected plays have interrogated Kenyan leaders who make their people hopeless and disillusioned instead of enjoying life by sharing the fruits of independence with them. The selected plays interrogate disillusionment in various ways presented hereunder.

In *The Successor*, it has been revealed that disillusionment has been symbolically interrogated by showing how Kenyan citizens are disillusioned by their leaders who are always in constant battle for political gains. For instance, it is portrayed that Emperor Chonda has the power even to deny the

people's opinions in making decisions; thus, the people are confused (23). The Emperor decides on who to be the next successor of his position instead of letting the people of Masero choose their next leader. He also decides on the punishment to be given to the people as he wishes without consultation of people in court. Also, Segasega signifies his dissatisfaction with the ruler, who is against the people's will. (22).

In *Game of Silence*, the issue of disillusionment is interrogated by showing the characters of leaders who make people hopeless by not allowing them to speak anything bad about their government. However, they are in great pain of poverty as a result of being forgotten by their leaders after gaining national independence. The play has shown how people are denied freedom of speech. For example, Raja says the bottom people are silent during the day but howl like dogs at night (1). This statement communicates the message that the Kenyan government is symbolically interrogated for suppressing the freedom of speech of most citizens who belong to the lower class. Also, the play challenges the leaders who kill citizens' hope by denying their important rights, such as education. For instance, Raja and Dr Zumaku are seen being suppressed because of their education, hence their disillusionment (29).

In *Betrayal in the City*, it has been shown how the new government disillusioned the lower-class majority peasants and workers in the Kenyan post-colonial time. The play presents this reality by reflecting the image of Boss, who interrogates the contemporary leaders who cause disillusionment in the Kenyan socio-political system. In the play, Boss is portrayed as the head of Kafira, who is hiding millions of money in foreign countries, and he chooses his cousin, Mulili, as his advisor while he is incompetent. Also, a Boss is a person who suppresses the freedom of speech of the people by silencing people by killing or jailing them whenever they criticize the government. Thus, the play

interrogates such leaders in today's Kenyan socio-political system.

Finally, Francis Imbuga interrogates the contemporary leaders of Kenya who claim to lead their countries fairly while completely ignoring the promises they gave to them. Imbuga shows that the citizens of Kenya had a lot of hope in their own leaders, but these hopes have been taken away by selfishness and greediness of power.

Disunity

Francis Imbuga's selected plays have interrogated disunity as the source of problems such as conflicts and social classes in the 21st-century Kenyan socio-political system. Also, disunity is interrogated by being presented as a thing that leads to the destruction of the cultural system of Kenya. And the way this matter has caused human suffering, like deaths of people, especially the lower class. In short, the three selected plays have portrayed disunity in the following ways.

In *The Successor*, disunity has been interrogated by being shown as the source of cultural destruction and torturing people. For example, the chiefs of the Masero kingdom are portrayed to symbolize disunity over the issue of power succession, for they fight each other instead of working together to get the next successor. In the play, Emperor Chonda causes disunity among the Chiefs by favouring Chief Jandi. Also, the three Chiefs, Oriomra Sasia, and Jandi, disunite over the issue of power succession. Chief Oriomra and Chief Sasia disunite against Chief Jandi, leading to his banishment. Chief Oriomra disunites against Chief Sasia and kills him so that he can grab the Emperor's position. This fact of disunity over politics is still evidenced in the Kenyan socio-political system, which politicians call the dirt game of politics.

In *Game of Silence*, disunity in the Kenyan socio-political system is considered a factor in conflicts between citizens and the government. Disunity is portrayed as the source of classes between the upper and lower classes. The play portrays the way the

upper class smashes the lower class by imprisoning or killing them without fair trials. For example, Flora is killed for wanting to marry Jimmy, who is the government official. Also, Raja is prosecuted for revolting against the government. This situation is very relevant to the contemporary Kenyan socio-political system, where the government is considered an enterprise of top-class officials who do not want the lower-class people to be engaged in its businesses.

In *Betrayal in the City*, the issue of disunity in the Kenyan socio-political system has been interrogated by being portrayed as the source of many social evils, like the killing of innocent citizens. The play portrays how top-class members like Boss, Tumbo, and Mulili are not interested in listening to lower-class people's problems, like the demonstrating university students Doga and Nina. For example, the government is fighting against the students who demonstrate against it (2). Also, disunity is challenged by showing the traditionalists, Doga and Nina, being killed by the modernists (government officials like Mulili) for they insist on the shaving ceremony of their son. Also, disunity is interrogated by showing that even the government officials themselves differ on the issues concerning African traditions. In the play, it has been found that some officials support African traditions while other officials strongly oppose them. For example, the two government agents (Jere Mulili) at Adika's funeral are disunited on whether the shaving ceremony is to be conducted or not.

The three Imbuga's plays, *The Successor*, *Game of Silence*, and *Betrayal in the City*, have successfully interrogated the issue of disunity by showing it as the source of social ills like killing and imprisoning innocent citizens without fair trials. The three plays have critically interrogated disunity in the country's socio-political system by demonstrating how government officials themselves differ on special state matters. This situation seems to be a hindrance to fast development in the country. For example, the political instability in the 2007 general elections

was caused by disunity between the ruling party and the opposition wing on who won the election.

Power Succession in the Kenyan Community

The three of Imbuga's selected plays have critically interrogated the contemporary 21st-century Kenyan power succession system. The power succession system has been interrogated differently in the three plays, though all plays maintain that the power succession system is unfair since the political power in the country has been passed down based on tribalism. In short, the three plays have interrogated the weaknesses of the power succession system in the following ways:

In *The Successor*, the hereditary leadership system is interrogated by how the head of state passes his power to his son, relative to a clan member. It is revealed that such a system is undemocratic since it can cause problems in the country. The play has openly interrogated such a power succession system as a system that leads people to conflicts and fighting. For example, in the play, Segasega rhetorically claims democracy to be born in Masero simply to present the 21st-century Kenyan socio-political situation in which the ruling class claims the country to have true democracy. At the same time, power succession is still hereditary in nature, based on only one clan of the Kikuyu.

Imbuga's *Game of Silence* interrogates power succession in the 21st-century Kenyan socio-political system as being based on classes. In the play, it has been shown that, in Kenyan society, the image of the top class people is always eligible for power succession while the image of the lower class people is not eligible, and when they try to penetrate to the top positions, they are suppressed by government repressive organs such as law and mental hospitals; while sometimes they are silenced by being killed. The play shows that this situation has been common in Kenya since independence, where the lower-class peasants and workers are not engaged in holding top political positions in the country. For example, the play portrays Flora, who

is killed by being poisoned for wanting to marry the upper-class man, Jimmy, to pave the way for penetrating the top political positions.

Betrayal in the City also interrogates the power succession system by showing how it is practiced inappropriately in the 21st-century Kenyan socio-political system through nepotism. For example, the play portrays Boss, the head of Kafira, who appoints his cousin, Mulili, to be a senior government adviser, as the character who accelerates classes in society. The play satirically criticizes today's high-ranked Kenyan officials for giving positions to relatives or fellow clan members in favor.

In general, the three Imbuga's selected plays have critically interrogated the poor power succession system in the 21st-century Kenyan socio-political system as totally unfair since the succeeding leaders have been coming from the same family, clan, or socio-political and economic status. Therefore, the three selected plays interrogate an inappropriate power succession system that may bring political instability and undermine true democracy in the country. Thus, the three plays propose a need for true power succession where all people should be involved in deciding their future leaders through elections.

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