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From Langston Hughes to Hilary Ng'Weno: Jess B. Simple Becomes Joe Kihara
The proverbial "man-in-the-street" leaves Harlem and goes to Nairobi.

by
Pete M. Mhunzi

James Langston Hughes (1902-1967), an Engineering graduate of Lincoln University, began his literary career in the summer of 1926 when he collaborated with other writers and intellectuals to found the short-lived magazine "FIRE" (so named because of the ambition to "burn" all the old established ideas about African Americans). Hughes, the author of more than thirty books, traveled widely, working as a seaman on voyages to Africa and Europe. At various times he lived in Mexico, Paris, Italy, Spain and the U.S.S.R. He wrote a newspaper column for the Chicago Defender in which he created Jessie B. Simple, a Harlem character who was featured in several short-story collections as well as in his stage musical "Simply Heavenly." Called the "original jazz poet" by Arna Bontemps, Hughes wrote verse which reflects the tempo and mood of jazz. He also distinguished himself as a writer of short stories, plays, novels, movie scripts, and songs.

Hilary Boniface Ng'Weno, without overstatement, is regarded as Kenya's most respected and analytically perceptive journalist. Harvard educated, he is a man who studied science and became a writer. Appointed the first Kenyan Editor-in-Chief of the Daily Nation, he resigned over a question of principle in 1965. As founding editor of Joe, he gave the reading public a satirical look at news and views that few people in East Africa thought possible. In May, 1975, Ng'Weno started the Weekly Review, a journal of political news, commentary and analysis. His attempts at fiction include The Men From Pretoria (1975). Of it Peter Nazareth wrote, "If Hilary Ng'Weno is willing to take the writing of fiction seriously. . . he may emerge as one of the important East African novelists."

This review attempts to identify the influence of Langston Hughes on Hilary Ng'weno by comparing and contrasting the character Jess B. Simple to Joe Kihara. The thesis of this review is that the creation of the character "Joe" was influenced by Mr. Ng'weno's knowledge and appreciation of "Jess B. Simple."

Each of the sample stories allows the reader to eavesdrop on a conversation between Jess B. and an unnamed companion about a current social issue. The setting is usually a bar. The name "Jess B. Simple" is a parody on America's expectations for the social role of

African people in the U.S.A. "Just be simple and leave the thinking to us!" This is the message that is conveyed through the literature of social direction and class hierarchy.

However, Mr. Simple is everything but simple! His knowledge of current events and their historical progression is developed. His analysis is thoughtful and mature. His self concept is positive. He is urban and well versed in American Classical Music and Afro-American Folklore:

Be-Bop music was certainly colored folks music which is why white folks found it so hard to imitate. But there are some few white boys that latched on to it quite well. And no wonder, because they sat and listened to Dizzy, Thelonius, Tad Dameron, Charlie Parker, also Mary Lou, all night long every time they got a chance, and bought their records by the dozens to copy their riffs.

Joe is a more earthy character than Jess B. Unshaven and dressed to resemble an askari (watchman), he is a rung below the middle class of Nairobi, twelve years after Uhuru (Freedom/Independence). Where Jess B. wears suits and, I would imagine, Stacey Adams pointy-toed shoes, Joe wears rough, ill-fitting clothes that are not representative of the models of fashion found in Kenya. Joe resembles a recent migrant from the rural areas. The askari image is characterized by the heavy overcoat and boots. Joe did not shop for the English wools that can even be found on River Road. Or the Kaunda suits that compete with western tailoring for those who prefer a smartly cut and well-fitted African suit of British cloth. . . . Nairobi can get cold at night. Joe is fresh from the shamba (farm), which is where the majority of Kenyans live. The wananchi (countrymen/ everyman) are small farmers in Kenya. In the U.S.A., everyman is a worker, an urban dweller. Simple's readership was largely urban. Joe's readership was a fascinating blend of the rural farmer and the newly developing urban working and middle class of Nairobi, Mombasa, Kisumu, Nakuru and other smaller towns.

Joe, the quintessential mwananchi, had other more pressing matters than fashion on his mind. He had no social grace or pretensions. You would not find him at the bar in the Hilton, or the 680. But you would find Simple at Birdland, or the Dunbar Hotel. Jess B. represents the Harlem Renaissance, a period of cultural assertion by the African American that was firmly grounded in the music and folklore of urban America and looked to Harlem for its role models and standards of excellence. Nairobi is yet to go through such a renaissance. There is no indigenous culture to be

found in the Hilton or the 680 which is representative of a united Kenyan people. There is hardly a distinct urban culture in Kenya. Nairobi offers comfort and opulence, not culture and art that are identifiably Kenyan in the holistic sense. Joe, therefore, is a forward looking character, representative of the urban migrant who looks to the future generations to create and mold the national culture and art forms of the national community.

A national culture and art will augment the current and historical pattern of cultural exchange active since Uhuru. This pattern traces the stratification of the individual ethnic communities, offering their respective cultures and arts to the national community in the markets, shops and galleries of Kenya.

The name "Joe" lacks the double meaning of "Jess B." It is well-grounded in Euro-American literature and folklore as "everyman" ("mwananchi" in Kiswahili). No parody was intended by Ng'weno. However, it does seem that the choice of an American as opposed to an English colloquialism was deliberate. This assertion is based on the fact that Mr. Ng'weno received his higher education in the U.S.A., not Britain. There are two schools of professionals in the English speaking professional world, the American school and the British school. In Kenya, an ongoing competition exists between the members of these two schools. Mr Ng'weno, being a graduate of Harvard, is one of the most distinguished scholars to return to Kenya from the U.S.A.

Joe, like his counterpart, Jess B., is an active participant in life in the big city. He expresses his opinions to an unnamed friend who closely resembles Jess B's anonymous partner. Joe speaks English with an educated vocabulary that belie his appearance. Consider his confidence in working his way through bureaucracy:

It's my way of getting to see the top man. Hospitals don't like scenes, because it's bad for their image of serenity and calm in the face of catastrophe.

Of real value to our analysis is to stress the importance of the good, colloquial, developed English of both Jess B. and Joe in attracting the intended readership of both authors. One important commonality of both Kenya and Afro-America is the ratio of formally educated to informally educated readers. The time periods being considered are the respective periods that the two characters function in post-WW II U.S.A. and post-independence Kenya. The common source of a colonial education with limited goals for the production of educated African people was responsible for the small number of formally educated Africans in both the United States of America and the British Crown Colony of Kenya.

Twelve years of Uhuru greatly expanded the readership of English language materials in Kenya while WW II was responsible for expanding the readership of African Americans during Jess B's days. A large number of both readerships were informally educated and very proud of their command of the English language. The large numbers of Africans who found work as waiters and servants both in Kenya and the U.S. acquired a polished command of standard English which flowered into metaphor, colloquialism, praise, and vivid description when spoken to a friend or fellow.

Both authors had to write challenging, thought-provoking dialogue that was unpretentious and representative of the workers and the middle classes of Harlem and Nairobi. The language had to invoke a positive identification with the character by the reader. A very delicate balance was achieved by both authors in that neither character is representative of the middle class. In both Hughes and Ng'weno the vocabulary and grasp of social issues belie the working class stereotype and its assumed level of education. Both Jess B. and Joe are what we call "regular brothers." They advocate social cohesiveness in the face of adverse social conditions. Joe is the new everyman of the newly independent Republic of Kenya. Joe is the "African"/mwananchi in the multi-racial society of Kenya. Joe could be a waiter, with only a few years of formal education, and still have his command of spoken and written English. Both readerships have a similar set of sensitivities to and pattern of usage of the English language. These sensitivities reject ungrammatical and undeveloped English language and at the same time promote the usage and development of colloquialism and slang, within a sound grammatical framework that draws on an ever-growing vocabulary.

There are colloquialisms and slang that are representative of English as it is spoken by Africans in Kenya. Joe speaks Kenyan English with an urban point of view. In Harlem, the African American dialect made the quantum leap from oral literature to written literature during the Renaissance. Jess B. was a principal voice in this classic period. His command of English bridged the gap between the formally educated and the informally educated reader of the African American community. The African American labored under the same judgmental eye that attempted to govern the usage of English in Kenya. The same judgements were made about slang and colloquialisms being representative of ignorance and crudity.

Both Jess B. and Joe represented the legitimization of the respective English dialects of Afro-America and Kenya. Joe represents the emerging "African" who is keenly aware of the challenge of national identity, and the contradictions this form of identity poses to ethnic identity. Both Joe and Jess B. have a

rebellious nature that is expressed in the questions they ask, the analysis they offer, and the self-awareness they reveal.

Joe parodies the game of golf thus:

You can scoff! But I was taught golf by
 one of the native masters of the game.
 I learned about it all from the "mashie"
 to the "niblick" from Cook Corporal Ginger
 Mac Andrew behind the officer's mess in Burma;
 and his father was caddie to St. Andrew who
 founded the original golf club in Scotland.

The subject of self-awareness exposes a vital difference in the two characters. While Jess B. reacts to racism, Joe is oblivious to race as a social reality. Joe reacts to tribalism/ethnic nationalism and neo-colonialism. Joe does not have to think about what it means to be black. Jess B. is the antithesis of his misnomer. Jess B. does not apologize for being black.

To be shot down is bad for the body, but to be Jim Crowed
 is worse for the spirit. Besides, speaking of war, in the next
 war I want to see Negroes pinning medals on white men.

Jess B. is a stand-up man, the type that can point directly to Africa as the home of the African American. Jess B. is alive and well in the Big Apple and Joe is secure in Nairobi and does not dream about maisha (life) in London. Both characters represent the further expansion of British society, and the social and political transformation that expansion has imposed on the African, and, within that transformation, the particular adaption African people are making to the English language in an urban setting. A clear statement is being made by both authors: that a unique culture was developing in Harlem that peaked during the Renaissance; and, later, another unique culture started developing in Nairobi.

Two cultures that are determined by African people and their adaption to the English language and English social values. The particular occupation of neither character is stated in their stories. Both reflect a working class profile. Sometimes Jess B. was unemployed. Joe sometimes appeared on the cover of the book in mock characterization of a particular occupation. This is consistent with the format of what might be called a comic book. Jess B. was not extensively illustrated in the books that I have seen.

Joe is a forward-looking character. Any historical reflections he would have would predate Kenya as a republic and, therefore, any possibility of a national culture. Joe shows his

sophistication through his knowledge of the dominant ethnic groups in Nairobi. He probably speaks Kigikuyu, Kiswahili, Kihamba, Kijaluo and, of course English.

Both Joe and Jess B. feel impacted by foreigners-Joe by tourists in the main, and Jess B. by immigrants. Both characters express dissatisfaction with their economic progress and social status. However, both characters are survivors who start each day anew and rise to the occasion, their short range pessimism being balanced by a characteristic sense of long range optimism.