Features normally associated with oral discourse preponderate in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Devil on the Cross*. Prominent among these features are the first-person narrator, allusions to the Bible, oral literature, and confessions.

First, the first-person narrator, a character hailing from the Ilmorog, assumes an oral persona in telling the story as “Gicandi Player” (7). According to Vittorio Pick, *gicandi* is an ancient “elaborately expressed” but orally transmitted “poem of enigmas….sung…by singers in a duet” (149) as they play a gourd instrument—the *gicandi*, a kind of rattle—on which beads are embedded. The narrator therefore is a rattle player, one of two people in a pre-literate society engaged in a verbal contest; to this extent he is an oral artist in a society where the mode of discourse is oral. It is in this role that the protagonist’s mother asks the narrator to “tell the story of the child I loved so dearly” (7).

Further, the narrator describes himself as a prophet. That as a prophet his discourse is in all probability oral is evident in a speech that suggests phonological patterning resulting from the repetition of same sounds and syntactical patterning resulting from the repetition of words and clauses as he talks to his ostensible aural audience:

So, come, come my friend. Come, my friend, come with me so I can take you along the paths that Wariinga walked. Come, let us retrace her footsteps, seeing with the eyes of our hearts what we saw, and hearing with the ears of our hearts what she heard, so that we shall not be hasty in passing judgement on the basis of rumour and malice. (215)

An earlier speech in verse accentuates the phonological and syntactic patterning:

Come, come my friend,
Come and let us reason together.
Come and let us reason together now.
Come and let us reason together about
Jacinta Wariinga before you pass judgement on our children…. (8-9)

These speeches are reminiscent of Isaiah’s oral message from Jehovah to the Israelites who have disobeyed Him: “Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool” (*The Holy Bible, Isaiah* 1:18).

The narrator’s implied audience is aural. While his role as a rattle player and a prophet suggests this aural audience, his use, once in a while, of the first-person singular pronoun for himself, the implied second-person pronoun for the audience, and the first-person plural pronoun for both him and his audience suggest an aural audience that he is not only addressing but also inviting to play a part in the narration of the story; narrative false starts not only accentuate the presence of this audience but also indicate patterns or turns in conversation.
through pauses suggestive of oral discourse. As these two statements show, such is the use of the exclamation mark to imply the imperative mood or the ellipses to mark significant hesitation or pause in the narrative:

“Wait! I am leaping ahead of the story. Warīnga’s troubles did not begin at Ilmorog. Let us retrace our steps.” (10)

Another Saturday. It is two years since Warīnga rejected the temptations of Satan at the Ilmorog golf course: two whole years since the Devil’s feast at the thieves’ and robbers’ den gave birth to the sorrow of jail and death.

Two years....

Where shall I begin? Or should I stop involving myself in other people’s lives?

He who judges knows not how he himself will be judged.

The antelope hates the man who sees it less than him who betrays its presence.

But I too was present at Nakuru. I saw with my eyes and heard with my ears.

How can I deny the evidence of my eyes and ears? How can I run away from the truth?

It was revealed to me.

Where shall I pick up the broken thread of my narrative?

Listen. Two years had passed....

No, I shall not proceed at the same pace as before. The seeds in the gourd are not all of the same kind, so I will change the pace and manner of my narrative. (215).

As a result the story appears as a presentation to an audience that the narrator seeks to involve in a manner similar to an artist seeking to involve an audience during a performance of oral literature.

The narrator uses stylistic devices that are associated with oral discourse. In this regard, he uses proverbs, on occasion indicating by implying that these are part of an oral discourse: “Is it not said that an antelope hates less the one who sees it than the one who shouts to alert others to its presence?” (7). The use of a proverb, as is evident here, underlines the narrator’s apparent oral discourse not only because he apparently addresses the question to an aural audience but also because proverbs are pithy crystallisations of wisdom used in social discourse as well as in oral literature. At the same time, the exploitation of phonological possibilities of language for aesthetic effect underscores too the nature of the ostensible oral discourse of the novel. To this end, as this example from Warīnga’s early life shows, the sibilants and the soft consonant such as “l” that sometimes alliterate underpin the semantics of the sentence describing her perception of the smooth life with her sugar-daddy lying ahead of her: “Suddenly she saw the world brighten; she saw a brilliant light illuminating a road that was broad and very beautiful” (143). Further, repetition of words, phrases, or clauses creates rhythm through syntactical patterning, while use of a number of soft consonant sounds indicative of pleasure in the first question and of a number of hard consonant sounds indicative of woe in the last question, as
well as the same number of syllables in the two questions, exploits phonological possibilities of language suggestive of meaning:

The brilliant light she had seen was no longer there. She saw the road that she had previously thought of as wide and very beautiful now suddenly become narrow, covered with thorns. The path that she had thought would lead her to Heaven now led her to a hell on earth. So the seas of pleasure had all along been seas of fire? So the carpet of flowers on which she had trodden had actually been a carpet of thorns? So her wings had not been really wings but chains of steel? (146)

This is not an isolated instance of the narrator’s exploitation of phonological features of the language, as is evident in the last four consecutive phrases but syllabically similar tonal units in the clause, “The Warīnga of today has rejected all that, reasoning that because her thighs are hers, her brain is hers, her hands are hers, and her body is hers” (220) and in the syllabically similar sentences, “He did not see Warīnga open her handbag. He did not see Warīnga take out the pistol” (253); in each case, repetition of similar syntactical structures enhances rhythm.

Second, the novel contains numerous allusions to the Bible; yet their origins relate to oral discourse. In this connection, Paul Soukup argues that the Bible “emerged from oral cultures whose narratives and sayings were written down as that new technology became available”; what is more, while “Matthew constructs the sermon on the mount in good oral fashion” the “parables of Jesus mark an oral way of thinking” (par. 17-18). The Bible and orality thus being no strange bedfellows, the ostensible orality of the words from the Sermon on the Mount which Boss Kihara regurgitates as he propositions his secretary becomes evident: “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth, and he that seeketh, findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened” (23). And telling his fiancée about his life in the United States of America, where he had studied music instead of the business administration which his father had preferred, Gatuiria alludes to the parable of the prodigal son. At the same time, reporting the exchange he had had with his father on his return to Kenya, he alludes to the parables of the talents and the prodigal son in a story-within-a-story, rich in features germane to oral discourse such as repetition of phrases or clauses, rhetorical questions, and parables and sermons:

He asked me, “Apart from money, what else is worth struggling for on this Earth? How can you bury your talent in the ground like the wicked, ungrateful servant?”…He summoned me again and asked me: “How can you strip me naked before the whole church congregation? How can you strip me before God, so that even babes in arms can see my nakedness? Remember the Ham of old, who saw Noah’s nakedness and refused to do anything about it—what did the Lord do to him? Do you know? He was cursed to sire the children of darkness forever. If God had not later had mercy on him and sent the children of Shem to our Africa, where would we, the children of Ham, now be? Go away. Follow in Ham’s footsteps. Go and wander about the world, and return home only after you have stopped casting before swine the pearls of...
your talents and eating rubbish from the same plate as those swine. (134-35)

The sermons and the parables the novel uses are forms of oral discourse that Jesus delivered to aural audiences. Consequently, employed in the novel, the parables and the sermons underpin its ostensible oral discourse.

Third, genres of folklore, such as proverbs, songs, and narratives, are used throughout the novel. The proverbs used throw light on events and characters such as when the narrator observes that Warīingga uses skin-lightening creams forgetting the wisdom of the saying that “Aping others cost the frog its buttocks” (12). Numerous songs in the novel commenting on, elaborate on, or illustrate events or providing relief are; such is the song, suggesting oral discourse through a series of proverbs and achieving phonological cohesion through alliteration, assonance, and rhyme, a young man sings to illustrate that the acquisition of money has become a creed in the country:

That which pecks never pecks for another.
That which pinches never pinches for another.
That which journeys never journeys for another.
Where is the seeker who searches for another? (16)

Similarly appearing as comments, elaborations, or illustrations are narratives such as the stories of “a leopard and a goat” (24), of the girl who picks unripe fruit, and of the girl a dove restores to life. Then there are allusions to stock characters in oral narrative such as the ogre, the avaricious human-like but human-eating creature with an extra mouth, concealed by hair on the nape. These stock characters as well as the folkloric genres found in the novel are products of an oral society where their mode of transmission is oral. Consequently, using these literary creations in the novel suggests oral discourse as its ostensible mode of transmission.

Four, over and over again, characters in the novel make confessions to themselves or to others or make public declarations. This narrative technique involves a speech act, shows features more often than not associated with oral discourse and presumes or presupposes an aural audience. On the whole, it takes three main forms in the novel: monologue, dialogue, and speech-making.

The monologue is a form of intrapersonal oral discourse; to this extent, it is a form of confession to the novel’s implied audience. One of its examples is when Warīingga asks herself questions, as she unknowingly discloses her innermost feelings and thoughts to the audience:

She sat down on a box and held her head in her hands, wondering: Why should it always be me? What god have I abused? She took a small mirror out of her handbag and examined her face distractedly, turning over her many problems in her mind. She found fault with herself; she cursed the day she was born; she asked herself: Poor Warīingga, where can you turn now? (11)

The dialogue, a form of interpersonal oral discourse as it is an interlocution between two people, employs elements associated with oral discourse when a character confesses or discloses intimate facts of one’s life to another character. These elements comprise use of genres of oral literature, dramatic techniques, rhetorical questions, and phonological features, as illustrated when Warīingga...
narrates her tribulations to the young man in Nairobi by creating Kareendi as a literary persona to disclose her tribulations, which are typical of girls of her class and education at the hands of unscrupulous lovers and elderly employers.

Her narration takes on the form of a confession; indeed, at the end of her narrative, she tells the young man: “Thank you for listening to me so patiently. My heart feels lighter, just as it used to feel after I had confessed to the Catholic priest” (27). As a father-confessor, the young man is a listener who she addresses directly and asks a rhetorical question: “So tell me, you who held my hand so that I shouldn’t fall again: does this mean that the Kareendis of modern Kenya have only one organ?” (25). Further, she dramatizes the narrative and impersonates characters, in the process taking on various characters’ roles and voices. What is more, a ballad, an oral narrative, the proverbs, and the verses that she brings up in the course of the narrative augment its ostensible oral discourse, as do the repeated same or similar words or similar and varying syntactical constructions:

“Take a girl like me,” Warīnig said, gazing down at one spot as if she were talking to herself. “Or take any other girl in Nairobi. Let’s call her Mahūa Kareendi. Let’s assume that she was born in a village or in the heart of the countryside. Her education is limited. Or let’s say, perhaps, that she has passed CPE and has gone to a high school…” (17)

The repetition of words and the impersonation of characters who utter them enhance her narrative’s ostensible oral discourse; such is her repetition of an employer’s similar supposedly endearing words to the secretary he is propositioning: “Beautiful Kareendi, flower of my heart,” “Darling, flower of my heart” (21), “Please Kareendi, little fruit of my heart,” “Kareendi, my little fruit, my little orange, flower of my heart,” “My little fruit, be mine now, be my girl,” “My little fruit,” “Kareendi, my new necklace, my tomato plant growing on the rich soil of an abandoned homestead” (22), and “My little fruit, my love” (23). The endearment has phonological features that enhance the employer’s ostensible oral discourse, however. Not only is this discernible in the two phrases—“be mine now, be my girl”—of similar syllabic length but also is this suggested in this sentence where rhyme marks significant pauses and together with parallel elements creates rhythm as the employer talks about the letters he intends to send to the secretary: “For I want to send them care of the address of your heart, by the post of your heart, to be read by the eyes of your heart, thereafter to be kept within your heart” (22). Comparable to phonological features are rhetorical questions, with similar words or similar syntactical constructions repeated at intervals, characteristic of forms of public discourse such as the ones implying an aural audience through the second-person pronoun she uses in three consecutive paragraphs: “Kareendi, where can you turn now?” is the last sentence in the first paragraph, “Little Kareendi, where will you turn?” is the penultimate sentence in the second paragraph, and “Who will wipe away Kareendi’s tears now?” is the last sentence in the third paragraph (17).

Speech-making gives the novel a feel of public oral discourse when a character discloses predominantly private experiences to a group of characters; to this extent, it becomes a confessional or declaratory mode of discourse, as evident
in the two settings it is for the most part used: the matatū and the cave. The features the speech-making employs are direct address, biblical allusions, oral literature, interruptions, dramatic techniques, and other rhetorical devices.

Used especially in the cave, the second-person pronoun suggests that the speakers have aural audiences that they not only are addressing but also seeking to involve in an oral discourse. This can be seen when Gatuiria uses direct address to tell an oral narrative to his fellow passengers in the matatū through questions—“How am I going to tell you?” (62) “Why do I say these things?” and “What could Nding’iri do now?” — and statements—“Let me tell you briefly the story that the old man from Bahati told me” (63). When Kihaaahu wa Gatheeca uses direct address to imply a second-person pronoun addressee—who simultaneously seeks to involve in the address through the use of the first-person plural pronoun—the implication of an ostensibly aural audience is apparent; the formulaic overture to telling oral narratives and the repetition of similar phrases reinforce the oral quality of his address:

I am not praising myself for the sake of it. We came here to hold a seminar in modern theft and robbery. I’ll sing a song about myself that will move our foreign guests to make me overseer of other overseers, watchdog over other watchdogs, messenger above all other messengers. Say yes, and I’ll tell you a story full of wonder. (109)

Musicality as well as cohesion arising from alliterative, assonant and parallel elements further enhances the oral texture of the address:

I am the cock that crows in the morning and silences all the others. I am the lion that roars in the forest, making elephants urinate. I am the eagle that flies in the sky, forcing hawks to seek refuge in their nests. I am the wind that stills all breezes. I am the lightning that dazzles all light. I am the moon, king of stars, at night. I am the king of kings of modern theft and robbery. (109)

The thieves who address the crowd in the cave make it clear that their audience is aural because of the use of not only the second-person pronoun but also ellipses indicating a sign of hesitation or pause and questions directed at the audience:

“My name is Nдаaya wa Kahuria. If I seem ill at ease and awkward, it’s only because I’m not used to standing up before such a large audience. But these hands you are looking at…” and he stretched out his hands to show the audience his palms and fingers,”…these hands you see are used to dipping into other people’s pockets. If these long fingers were to slide into your pockets, I assure you that you wouldn’t feel them.” (94)

Some of you may be looking at this little belly of mine, and when you see how it droops and when you hear me panting, you may be asking yourselves: How can Gitutu, son of Gатаang’urу, manage one wife and two young things? Our people, I would like to ask such sceptics the following question: why have you forgotten our proverbs? (100)

Suggesting this aural audience are numerous allusions in characters’ speeches in the matatū and the cave to biblical oral discourse in the form of parables, prophecies, or sermons that enhance the novel’s ostensible oral nature.
A central plank of these is the parable of talents whose opening verse Mwīrerī wa Mūkiraai recites in the form of a nursery rhyme, thereby enriching its oral discourse, and using soft consonants as well as sibilants that underscore the tone of his speech:

Mwīrerī wa Mūkiraai lowered his voice. He spoke gently, in a slow, soft voice, as if he were singing a lullaby to send their souls and minds to sleep. . . .

‘...For the Kingdom of Heaven is as a man travelling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods. And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one...’ (81)

From this point on, the parable is cited at numerous intervals and becomes a significant motif in the novel.

Similarly, characters use forms of oral literature such as narratives, proverbs, riddles, and songs in their speeches, thereby enhancing the novel’s supposed oral discourse. In this regard, the mention of the hyena—a detestable, foolish or greedy character in oral narratives—in Mwaūra’s speech, replete with lexical and syntactical repetition, suggests oral discourse; the fourth to the eighth sentences are phonologically significant, for the syllabic similarity in the fourth and fifth sentences and the syllabic similarity in the alternate four subsequent sentences create rhythm in similarity and variation in sentence length while mid-sentences pauses in the six sentences underline the rhythm and suggest orality:

As for me, there is no song I wouldn’t have sung then. Even today there’s no song I wouldn’t sing. I say this world is round. If it leans that way, I lean with it. If it stumbles, I stumble with it. If it bends, I bend with it. If it stays upright, I stay upright with it. If it growls, I growl with it. If it is silent, I am silent too. The first law of the hyena states: Don’t be choosy; eat what is available. If I find myself among members of the Akūrinū sect, I become one of them; when I’m with those who have been saved, I too am saved; when I’m with Muslims, I embrace Islam; when I’m among pagans, I too become a pagan. (47)

A number of songs build on, comment on, digress from, elaborate on, or illustrate events appearing as oral interludes in the narration; consequently, they not only are reminiscent of narration of oral narratives but also suggest the novel’s apparent oral discourse. Such is the endeavour by Warīnga to capture and mimic through onomatopoeic verses the hooting and the whistling sounds of a steam train by which she wants to commit suicide:

And suddenly the train appeared, heading towards Nairobi. Warīnga thought it was chanting the song that, as a child, she used to believe it sang: [151]

Going-to-Uganda!
Going-to-Uganda!
And her heart beat in time to the song of the train:
Going-to-Uganda!
Going-to-Uganda!
Going-to-Uganda!
And still the train came on, belching steam, breathing blood and death, saying farewell, on her behalf, to all the people of Nakuru:

Going…..

Going…..

Going….. (151-52)

The train came towards me, belching steam, breathing hard and seemingly saying:

Going-to-Uganda

Going-to-Uganda

Go-ing

Go-ing

Go

Go

Gooiiing...uuuuuu-u!

I shut my eyes. I started counting, one two, three, four, now take me.

(137-38)

Once in a while, individuals in the audiences interrupt the speakers or speech acts, sometimes creating a digression that gives rise to an oral interlocution, contest, debate, or exchange. An example of such a digression is an exchange, similar to and bordering on dialogue in drama or cross examination in court between Mwireri wa Múkiraaí and Mwaúra:

Mwireri: What is your name?


Mwireri: Do you own a matatú?

Mwaúra: Yes. I’m owner and driver. Matatú Matata Matamu, Model T Ford, registration number MMM 333. Motto: If you want to hear rumours, enter Matatú Matata Matamu. If you want gossip….

Mwireri: Can you recall last night?

Mwaúra: Yes.

Mwireri: Tell this gathering of modern thieves and robbers what happened.

Mwaúra: it was about six o’clock. I found you outside Sigona Golf Club, near Kikuyu, just before Njoguini, standing at the bus stop. I had four other passengers from Nairobi.

Mwireri: Did I tell you anything about a car?

Mwaúra: Yes. You told me that your Peugeot 504 (with petrol injection) had stalled at Kikuyu, that you had left it outside the Ondiri Hotel, and that therefore you were looking for a lift because you did not want to be late for this competition. (163)

A number of characters dramatise their speeches, sometimes impersonating characters or acting out events or incidents, thereby giving their speeches an aura of oral performances. This is evident when Gatuiri tells the passengers of his meeting with an old man and, assuming the old man’s persona, narrates the stories the old man narrated to him; in a sense, he takes on two personae—his own as a previous listener of the old man’s stories and the old man’s as the teller of the stories—that indicates that his is a double oral performance. In the process
is witnessed rhythm—such sentence variation—that contribute to the novel’s apparent oral discourse:

        Anyway, the old man from Nakuru, from Bahati, was the one who showed me the way. I had gone to him and I had begged him: “Father, tell me old stories—tales of ogres or animals.” He was silent. He looked at me. Then he laughed a little. He told me: “There is no difference between old and modern stories…Say yes, and I’ll tell you the stories I can remember.” (61-62)

These features are but some of the rhetorical devices in the novel which are normally associated with oral discourse. In this connection are rhetorical questions which contribute to oral discourse and rhythm through repetition when a speech act implies a direct audience that a character seeks to involve through the use of the second-person pronoun or the first-person plural:

        You say that if a bean falls on the ground, we split it among ourselves? That we shed blood because of the great movement that belonged to us, the people of Kenya, Mau Mau, the people’s movement, so that our children might eat until they were full, might wear clothes that keep out the cold, might sleep in beds free from bedbugs? That our children should learn the art of producing wealth for our people? Tell me this: who but a fool or a traitor would not have sacrificed his own blood for those glorious aims? (40)

At times, the repetition of similar or the same word or a syntactical construction becomes a vehicle of confessional discourse in which the dash marks a conversational turn:

        I, Wangari, who has never stolen so much as a single potato from anybody! I, Wangari, who offered my life for my country! I, the Wangari you now see before you dressed in a kitenge garment and carrying a basket, spent three nights suffocated by the stench of shit and urine!...But our people think: I, Wangari, a Kenyan by birth—how can I be a vagrant in my own country? (43)

All said, however, the novel is a form of written discourse. To this extent, its implied audience is the distant private reader not the intimate, open audience oral discourse implies. Yet, as a result of its preponderant oral features, the novel gives the reader a feeling that it is an intersection between oral and written discourse, an area worth investigating for its implications on the interface between oral and written literature.

Work Cited

