

Burnt Chapati  
By Hammond Samba

CAST OF CHARACTERS:

CICI[shée-shee], 18, she/her, child of Kenyan immigrants.

WAIRIMU[why-ri-mo], 48, she/her, kenyan immigrant and Cici's mother

NONI[no-ni], 42, she/her, kenyan immigrant and Cici's aunt

MACHARIA[ma-sha-ri-a], 49, he/him, kenyan immigrant and Cici's father

JAMIE, 18, they/them, Cici's partner and biology lab partner.

PLACE: Cucu's[sho-sho] house with an open living room and dining room plan.

TIME: Now

SCENE 1

The room is set up with a couch and armchairs, and a coffee table and a small bar behind the couch. There is a dinner table that runs next to this that has food set out and ready. On the wall is a portrait of the deceased. She has a kind yet stern look to her.

WAIRIMU enters through the front door. She is holding another container filled with food. She is then followed by her sister NONI. They start tidying up the room.

WAIRIMU

Mhmm! She said that Mary's kijana[child] is failing his course work. Eh! That boy needs to apply himself and focus otherwise he will find himself running around getting into trouble. But he is not my child so that is not my worry.

NONI

You gossip too much, you know? You should remove the log from your own eye before trying to remove dust from someone else's.

WAIRIMU

Don't lecture me on gossip. If anyone is the gossipier it's you.

NONI

When have I ever gossiped?

Wairimu gives Noni a look.

NONI

Eh! Hapana![no] That is not true.

WAIRIMU

Do you not know it's a sin to lie, Muthoni.

NONI

I don't lie.

WAIRIMU

Heh!

Enter MACHARIA followed by  
CICI who sits in a daze on  
the couch.

MACHARIA

What is all this noise?

NONI

Your wife is calling me a liar and a gossip.

WAIRIMU

And I stand by it.

NONI

Wacha tu![let's go]

MACHARIA

Okay everyone let's calm down. Would your mother want this?

NONI

It's just a bit of sibling rivalry. Nothing serious. Don't get  
your knickers in a twist.

Wairimu stops preparing the  
table and watches as Cici is  
on her phone.

WAIRIMU

Hiya! Your grandmother just passed and you're out here on your  
phone.

CICI

I don't get how the two are related.

MACHARIA

Is that any way to talk to your mother?

CICI

Sorry...

WAIRIMU

What time is everyone arriving?

NONI

Wambui said that they're leaving in a few minutes.

WAIRIMU

They're taking their sweet time that's for sure.

CICI

Ma, cucu[grandma] just passed. Give them some leeway.

WAIRIMU

I am aware that my mother has passed and yet I am here, and so is her other daughter.

NONI

Not everyone grieves the same Wairimu.

Wairimu waves this comment off.

She starts to search the dinner table.

WAIRIMU

Now where is that ka-"thing" that you use to serve chakula[food]

CICI

Huh?

WAIRIMU

You know, the thing for serving food.

CICI

A serving spoon?

WAIRIMU

Yes! See, you knew what I was talking about.

Wairimu leaves the sitting room and moves to the kitchen(o.s.) to continue the search.

JAMIE taps on the window which gets Cici's attention. No one else pays any heed. Cici opens the window a crack. They talk in a hushed tone.

CICI

What are you doing here?

JAMIE

I just wanted to see how you were holding up.

CICI

Aw, that's really sweet of you.

JAMIE

Just performing the duties of a partner.

CICI

Hush... Not too loud, my dad is here.

JAMIE

Wait, you haven't told them yet? I thought you were going to -

CICI

I'm at my grandmother's wake. I don't think right now is the time to uproot them. If anything this isn't the time at all.

JAMIE

Sorry, I didn't mean to come off as trying to force you out. I just want to be with you. All of you. That includes your family.

CICI

I don't think you want them.

JAMIE

But I do, cause they're part of you.

CICI

No they are not.

Noni notices Cici and Jamie  
at the window.

NONI

Would you close the window? I'm feeling a little chill and we don't want the food to get cold.

CICI

(to Jamie) I have to go. Bye.

Cici places a peck on Jamie's  
cheek and closes the window.  
Noni studies Cici as she  
trudges back to the couch.

NONI

Charia, Wairimu has been back in the kitchen for a while. Could you go check on her?

Macharia looks a little  
confused but does as told.  
Noni sits next to Cici and  
stares at her.

NONI

So... How's your girlfriend?

CICI

..partner... They're my partner.

NONI

Well, yes your partner, how is she?

CICI

*They* are fine.

NONI

Ah, I am trying. You need to understand that this "they/them" thing wasn't around when I was growing up.

CICI

"They" has been used as singular in the English language for ages.

NONI

You're forgetting it's not my first language. I am trying.

Cici accepts this as a stalemate.

CICI

Well, they're good. They just wanted to check in on me.

NONI

Oh, puppy love.

CICI

Hey, it was really sweet of them.

NONI

I don't disagree.

Noni sits not knowing how to ask the following question.

NONI

Are you going to tell them?

Tell who? CICI

Stop playing around. NONI

I'm not. CICI

Well, are you going to? NONI

Yes. CICI

When. NONI

Eventually. CICI

CICI  
NONI  
Cici. You can't keep hiding this from your parents. They're going to find out one way or another and it will be much better if it comes straight from the horse's mouth.

Horse's CICI

What? NONI

CICI  
It's "horse" not "hose". "Straight from the horse's mouth."

NONI  
That doesn't change the fact that you need to tell them. Sooner rather than later.

Cici doesn't want to promise anything, so she doesn't.

A muffled ringtone disrupts the silence. Cici rushes to Wairimu's bag which has been placed on one of the dining chairs and takes out the phone.

CICI

Ma, you've got a call!

WAIRIMU(o.s.)

(Calling out) Who is it?

CICI

It's Auntie Wambui.

WAIRIMU(o.s.)

Find out what she wants.

Cici picks up the phone.

CICI

Hi Auntie Wambui... Wait, could you slow down... Yes, mom is here... She's just busy doing some work in the kitchen so I can tell her what you wanted to tell her... Oh... Okay... Um... Okay... And there was no tracking number supplied for it?... Shit... Sorry Auntie... Sorry... Okay, I'll let her know.

She hangs up. Noni has seen this entire exchange and is slightly worried.

NONI

What's wrong? What did Auntie Wambui say?

CICI

Um... I'm not sure exactly how to say this but we lost cucu.

NONI

What do you mean we lost cucu?

CICI

We lost her...

NONI

I mean that's why we're here at a wake. Because she passed away.

CICI

No but now she's lost.

Enter Wairimu with a platter  
with serving spoons and  
Macharia trailing behind with  
a cake

WAIRIMU

Mnaongea juu ya nini? [What are you all talking about?] Whose  
lost?

Noni signal's to Cici not to  
tell her. Wairimu sees this  
and stares down Cici. She is  
caught between Wairimu and  
Noni.

CICI

Cucu's lost.

WAIRIMU

Huh?

CICI

Cucu's ashes are lost.

NONI

What do you mean they lost cucu's ashes? Is there not a tracking  
number or something.

CICI

That's what I asked but they told Auntie Wambui that they still  
aren't able to locate the package.

WAIRIMU

And so what now? What do we do?

MACHARIA

I'll call them to find out the details directly.

NONI

How do you lose a dead woman?

WAIRIMU

That "dead woman" is your mother, Noni.

NONI

I am well aware of the person who pushed me out into this world.

WAIRIMU

It sure doesn't sound like it.

NONI

Okay, I am disengaging. This is me disengaging.

Noni proceeds to do the most dramatic physical gesture for the idea of "disengaging". Cici giggles a little.

WAIRIMU

Oh, so this is funny?

CICI

Well, yes... I mean... no. No, it's not funny.

WAIRIMU

Tsk.

Macharia enters, on the phone.

MACHARIA

They have me on hold.

WAIRIMU

Hold? Give me the phone.

Macharia hands her the phone.  
She waits for a few seconds.  
The hold stops.

WAIRIMU

Hi, yes I'm calling to figure out where my dead mother's remains are, cause they are certainly not with me and they can't have just walked away because she would be here giving me an earful about how she would have planned her own wake differently...  
Hello... Hello, ma'am?...

Wairimu hands the phone to  
Macharia.

WAIRIMU (cont'd)

They put me on hold

NONI

Breathe, Wairimu, breathe.

WAIRIMU

I am breathing.

NONI

I don't think you are.

Noni receives a death glare.

NONI

Okay, you are.

CICI

It'll be fine. I'm sure it will turn up soon.

WAIRIMU

*She better.*

SCENE 2

Wairimu heads to the couch to sit down. Macharia goes to sit with her. Noni heads to the dinner table and starts picking at some of the food. She picks up a chapati and starts to eat it.

There is a knock at the front door.

WAIRIMU

Cici, could you get that?

CICI

Mhm.

Cici goes to the door and opens it. She is surprised to see Jamie.

JAMIE

Hi.

CICI

What the fuck are you doing?

WAIRIMU

Who is it, Cici?

CICI

It's no one.

WAIRIMU

"No one" can't knock on a door.

JAMIE

(to Cici) It's now or never, Cici.

(to Wairimu) Hi, I am Jamie.

WAIRIMU

I'm sorry, how do you know Wangechi?

JAMIE

We are partners—

CICI

In the biology lab. Yes. We have been working on the final project of the semester.

JAMIE

Yeah... Been very hard at work... With labbing and stuff... I just came by to see how she was holding up.

WAIRIMU

Well, that is very thoughtful of you.  
(to Cici) I like this friend.

Noni gives a nod of  
encouragement to Cici. Cici  
vehemently shakes her head.

MACHARIA

What are you shaking your head about?

NONI

Cici has something to tell you. Don't you?

JAMIE

(to Cici) You do?

NONI

Yes she does.

CICI

I have no idea what you're talking about Auntie Noni.

NONI

Whatever you say, Wangechi.

WAIRIMU

You two are odd.

CICI

I wonder where I got it from.

WAIRIMU

Eh! You talk back to your mother now?

CICI

Sorry...

WAIRIMU

Tsk. Cucu would cry if she heard you talk like that.  
(to Jamie) Do you want anything to drink?

JAMIE

Just water should be fine ma'am.

WAIRIMU

(to Cici) See your friend respects her elders.

NONI

Their.

WAIRIMU

Huh?

CICI

There. Auntie Noni was just agreeing with you right? Like  
"There... you go...". Right?

NONI

Right...

WAIRIMU

I don't get you two sometimes...  
(to Jamie) Well let me get you some water.

Wairimu moves to the dining table to fill a glass of water from a jug.

MACHARIA

So Jamie, have you ever tried Keynan food before? Chapati, githeri, kienyeji chicken?

JAMIE

Uh, no. No, I've never had the chance.

WAIRIMU

Well we must fix that immediately.

MACHARIA

And there is no one I would trust with your first experience than my beautiful wife.

WAIRIMU

Oh, stop it now.

MACHARIA

Hey, it's your cooking that locked me in. First time you had me over you made the most fluffy yet crisp chapatis. Not to mention the githeri which I dare say surpassed my own mother's. I knew a woman who took such care in preparing the most mundane dishes would pay the same, if not more, attention to other aspects of her life.

CICI

So basically mom's chapos[short for chapati] and "home making" skills were the only criteria that solidified your love for her? Isn't that patriarchal?

WAIRIMU

I don't understand what you young people go on about. Someone has to cook for the family and I just happen to be the one with the skill. It's not entirely a gender thing as your generation likes to make it.

CICI

Okay, then name a couple we know where the man does the "house making"

Wairimu opens her mouth to answer but realises she actually doesn't have an answer.

WAIRIMU

Still. I think this constant re-inventing of the wheel is unnecessary.

CICI

But change is the only thing that keeps us alive. Adaption is something all living organisms do and we are no different. If we didn't change we would still be dying of the flu and striking stones together to get fire to keep warm. We wouldn't even be multicellular organisms. We would be some amoeba floating in the primordial sea.

WAIRIMU

Eh! That's not what my bible says.

NONI

So, Macharia, have you heard about the whereabouts of cucu?

WAIRIMU

Now is not the time, Noni.

MACHARIA

I think it is.

Wairimu gives up this impending debate and backs down.

WAIRIMU

I'm going to go call Wambui and find out if there is an update on Cucu's ashes.

Wairimu exits into the kitchen. Noni looks at Macharia and they seem to come to agreement that it is Noni's turn to follow Wairimu

MACHARIA

(to Jamie) Sorry about all this. Grief makes strangers of us all.

JAMIE

There is nothing to apologise for.

They all sit in silence for a second. Cici is uncomfortable in this silence and breaks it.

CICI

(to Jamie) So how about trying a chapo?

JAMIE

A what?

CICI

A chapo, a chapati. It's pan fried flatbread but better.

MACHARIA

And Wairimu makes a good chapo. I wouldn't think about it too long before the rest of the family gets here. The chapatis will be gone before you know it.

JAMIE

Uh okay, I'll try it.

MACHARIA

Good!

Macharia heads to the dining table and removes a chapati from a tupperware. He then heads to Jamie to present him with it.

MACHARIA

So you guys are in biology together?

CICI

Yes

JAMIE

(with mouth full) I guess.

MACHARIA

Huh?

Jamie swallows the piece of chapati in their mouth

JAMIE

Sorry, I said "yes"

MACHARIA

Hm. It's funny cause you remind me of a deskmate I had in highschool who used to share his chapatis with me. His name was Mwangi. It wasn't biology though. I couldn't wrap my head around all those latin names. It was maths, I think. Oh, I loved maths. It's simple, you know. You are either right or wrong. Though, the one thing that always confused me was the fact that there are many ways to get to the right answer. In hindsight it sounds silly that I didn't realise that, but I really was determined to keep believing there was only one way to get an answer. One way to live. Mwangi was different. It's almost as if he lived in a different dimension than me. I was a 2D being only able to see in two directions, backwards and forwards. He saw forty. And I envied him for it. But sometimes I wonder if it was envy or admiration I didn't want to acknowledge.

(MORE)

MACHARIA (cont'd)

Admiration isn't the right word, is it? It was something more. I didn't want to be like him. No, I wanted to be able to see his forty directions and him, my two. I don't know what you would call that but it was something I'm thankful I had.

Macharia brings himself back from this tangent memory.

MACHARIA

I'm so sorry, I don't know where that came from.

CICI

Don't apologise, pa.

JAMIE

It was a beautiful story sir.

MACHARIA

Thank you Jamie. If you wouldn't mind, I would like to keep this memory between us.

Jamie and Cici nod. They have an understanding.

Macharia exits outside to the front porch.

Jamie and Cici sit in silence.

JAMIE

So are you going to tell them that we are together?

CICI

Sh! My mother is literally next door.

JAMIE

Come on. I'm sure it won't be as bad as you think.

CICI

I don't think you understand, Jamie. I know that your coming out was great and a beautiful moment for you but you need to realise that our families are different. I'm the child of Kenyan immigrants. The only child of Kenyan immigrants. Everything is riding on me. Their aspirations, their hopes. I am their legacy. My life is not my own. I wish it was but they've given up too much to give me the chances they never had. I'm not throwing that away no matter how much I love you. You said my family was a part of me. Well, I wish they weren't.

JAMIE

Did you just say that you love me?

CICI

Yes I did knucklehead. Now shut up about it and let me tell them when I know they can handle it.

JAMIE

Okay, okay. They're probably more ready than you think.

CICI

You just met them, Jamie. You don't know them.

JAMIE

Mkay.

SCENE 3

Wairimu walks back into the living room on the phone. Noni is trailing behind her trying to piece together the conversation.

WAIRIMU

Okay... okay thank you... this means a lot... Mhm... That's perfect... Bye bye.

NONI

Well?

WAIRIMU

They found her.

CICI

Wait, they found cucu?

NONI

Thank heavens.

WAIRIMU

They say that the driver just forgot to log their departure into their systems, so they had no way of knowing where she was.

NONI

Oh my god.

WAIRIMU

They should be bringing her in the next few minutes. In the meantime, Jamie tell me about yourself. I've been running around and I haven't gotten a moment to get to know you.

CICI

Oh, I think Jamie actually has to go, right? You have to go?

JAMIE

Uh?

WAIRIMU

Nonsense! Jamie, what do you do as hobbies, is there any special man in your life?

JAMIE

Now that you say that—

CICI

Jamie, no.

JAMIE

I'm tired of sneaking around.

CICI

That gives you no right.

JAMIE

It involves me too.

WAIRIMU

Is someone going to tell me what you are talking about?

JAMIE

Cici and I are together.

Cici stands still as if  
turned to stone. Wairimu is  
confused.

WAIRIMU

Yes, you're partners in biology. You've said that already.

Cici realises that there is  
no turning back.

CICI

No. We're together. Romantically.

WAIRIMU

But, she's a girl.

CICI

They are not. They are non-binary.

WAIRIMU

Non-binary? What does that even mean? What are you saying? That you're gay?

CICI

Yes.

WAIRIMU

No.

Wairimu walks past Cici in a daze and sits on the couch.

CICI

Ma...

NONI

(to Jamie) Why don't we give them space.

Jamie scurries after Noni and they escape to the kitchen.

CICI

Ma, this changes nothing. I'm still the person you raised

WAIRIMU

I did not raise a liar. I did not raise you to look me in the eyes and deceive me. Gay? Do you know what I have given up, so that you could have an easy life? The sacrifices your father and I made just so you could live better than we did, than our parents did. And you go and choose this?

CICI

You think I would've chosen this if it was a decision I got to make? Don't you think I've tried to deny it? Ma, it's who I am.

WAIRIMU

It is what you do. And I cannot condone it.

Wairimu storms to the front door.

MACHARIA (o.s.)

Guess who I found—

Macharia, holding the urn  
with Cucu's ashes, opens the  
front door and collides with  
Wairimu. The urn drops  
littering Cucu all over the  
floor.

WAIRIMU

No, no, no, no. Look what you've done Cici.

CICI

Ma, that was not my fault.

WAIRIMU

Will you take accountability for your faults for once, instead  
of blaming it on me. I am trying. I am trying so hard. And I  
lose my mother and daughter, for all my effort.

CICI

You are anything but blameless. And you know it.

MACHARIA

What is happening?

WAIRIMU

Your daughter is a liar and a sinner.

MACHARIA

Wairimu!

WAIRIMU

She is gay!

Macharia is steam rolled by this.

CICI

You know what? I can't keep doing this. I can't keep hoping that you'll magically realise the shit that you've done to me. That we've done to each other. Neither you or I are blameless. And I am no liar. You were just too blind to see my signs, too deaf to hear my cries. And I've waited. I've waited for you to finally realise that the life you imagined for me, this entity that you've created in your mind is something I will never be. I'm done waiting.

Cici exits out of the front door. Jamie rushes in to see what happened

WAIRIMU

Out! Get out!

Jamie rushes out the door. Macharia pats their shoulder as an apology as they leave.

Noni peaks her head around the door. She looks disappointed. She heads back into the kitchen.

Wairimu crouches on the floor to start collecting her mother's ashes. Macharia goes to help her but she stops him. This hurts him. He exits out the front door to find his daughter.

Wairimu is left in the middle of the room gathering her mothers ashes and putting them back in the urn.

WAIRIMU

We're two of a kind aren't we?

Fade to black.

END OF PLAY