

Geometric Circles, Zigzags and Waves: The Anatomy of a Kenyan ID

I.

Some years ago, I forgot my national ID in a jeans pocket before a wash and it's been steadily losing glue ever since. Now at least three corners of this sad rectangle have curled up to expose government paper with my zeros and ones. The card's many adventures inside the small purse that lives in my handbag are evident. The open border is freckled with dust, eyebrow pencil shavings and a dash of blue ink. *Imeona* life.

Fifteen years before that peeling skin, that festering wound, had formed, I stood against a classroom wall in Embu to get my picture taken. It was a hot day and the man in a lab coat didn't allow any of us to smile. We'd been advised to apply for our IDs while still in school to avoid the confusion and long queues at the chief's camps that would really be practice for the first day we'd vote. (Many years later I would visit this hectic space and secure a new ID only to promptly lose it.)

I'd written to my father, giving him the list of information needed by all Form Four students whose 18th birthday fell within a particular window. His reply arrived by Kenya Posta's express mail service and was written in red ink, greetings and all. Still visible on the top left column of the frayed card is the district of my father's birth. Listed below that are the division, location and sub-location. Each concentric circle was intended to lead to where my grandfather lay sleeping. My father, the cartographer, even let me know the exact village and chief at the time, in case that was needed too.

A part of me likes to believe that the countless M-Pesa agents and watchmen and landlords and companies that have accepted this ugly and, quite frankly, suspect identification document all decided to show me a kindness. However, I'm also aware of the privileges that allow me to slip past. It is the security of a presumably harmless surname.

In 2013, I visited a cousin who worked as a dentist in Garissa. It was a largely pleasant nine-hour bus ride, but as we neared the township, our vehicle was stopped and soldiers boarded the bus. I watched with terror as they moved from seat to seat with bright flashlights, asking passengers to produce their IDs. I frantically pawed through my bag but as fate would have it, I only had my NHIF and job cards on me. My cousin had forgotten to let me know that I needed this crucial document. Perhaps it was an assumption that I would naturally have it on me. But at that time in my life, the fear of being pick-pocketed or mugged for my handbag was bigger than worrying whether anyone would question my Kenyan-ness.

That night, the police let me through. On the day I was leaving for home, the bus was stopped yet again. This time the soldiers used magnifying glasses and took their time scrutinising the tapestry of geometric circles, zigzags and waves. I had organized to have my ID couriered from home so I was able to board the bus after the first checkpoint. I had a seatmate, a young lady who was travelling with a small child and an elderly auntie. When we first sat down, she had the child on her lap and we shared polite conversation. At some stage, they disappeared to the back where her auntie was sitting. Later, the lady returned alone.

We got separated when we disembarked the first time but she made it through okay. That is, until we got to the second checkpoint. This time, the soldiers boarded the bus as on the night of my entry into Garissa. The waiting card that had served my seatmate well the first time wasn't enough for these soldiers.

"Unaishi wapi?" (Where do you live?) asked the soldier, as he examined the laminated piece of paper.

"Garissa," she responded.

"Basi kwa nini ulichukua hii kadi Wajir? Ebu toka kwa gari." (Then why was this card issued in Wajir? Get off the bus), he replied.

And that was the last we saw of her. The bus pulled out of the checkpoint amid a flurry of animated shouts in Somali by the other passengers. As I craned my neck back towards the area we'd dropped them, I saw my seatmate being escorted towards a small *mabati* structure off the road. The conductor then came to sit by me and I asked him if the girl was coming back.

He said, “*Huyo tumemwacha kabisa.*” (We’ve left that one indefinitely.)

II.

“*But the slave who sees another cast into a shallow grave knows that he will be buried in the same way when his day comes...*” – Chinua Achebe, *The Arrow of God*.

III.

Mama, the last of Nyanya Kachui’s nine children, grew up right across from the mosque her grandfather had built and in the area her father had governed as chief. The story goes that her surname, *Godoro*, came from a joke her father had made when, as a young man, he marvelled at the length of a city bridge and how many mattresses one could fit on it. Her mother’s name was from her diminutive size as a child; she was as tiny as a chick, *gachui*.

Babu Mkuu Tairara died in Eastleigh.

Babu Godoro is buried beside him in Thika cemetery.

Mama was lain to sleep there too.

My other concentric circles.

If we traced my lineage through her, through them, if I was Salma, like my *shangazis* had wanted, would my tattered ID card still draw laughter if I’d given the district of their birth, listed the division, location and sub-location?

IV.

There’s a co-mingling of stupidity and smugness whenever I present my battered ID. They remain even when I’m trusted to enter my details into one of those large black notebooks as a nice security lady goes through my bag. To borrow Brenda Wambui’s term, that visitor’s log, beloved by procurement officers across the nation and no doubt purchased for its endless ruled pages and that no-nonsense hardcover, is *speculative fiction* at its best. I am simultaneously Wanjeri and Carol of ID 12345678 and neither of us is any safer.

V.

“The alarm at the Ruiru base of the Recce Company of the General Service Unit was sounded at 6 a.m. on Thursday last week. As they gathered, officers of the elite paramilitary unit were informed that a possible terrorist attack had been launched on Garissa University College by suspected Al-Shabaab gunmen.” - [Shame of slow response in 15 hour campus terror - Daily Nation](#)

“The Kenya Police Airwing plane was not immediately available to fly the Recce Company on the morning of the Garissa University College terrorist attack because it was flying a small group of civilians from Mombasa.” - [How police plane is misused for private mission - PHOTOS - Nairobi News.](#)

One hundred and forty-eight people lost their lives in Garissa on April 5th, 2015.

VI.

Every once in a while I think about my seatmate and what fate found her. I hope she came to no harm. I hope her waiting card was accepted. I hope she finally got an ID. I hope her son, if indeed he was her son, was allowed to continue practising his family’s faith without fear; allowed to form a *zebiba*, a black mark on his forehead from constant contact with his prayer mat, like that on the foreheads of my *wajombas*; allowed never to experience either the Kasarani concentration camp or the Wagalla massacre; allowed to mourn with dignity first and only in the face of the loss of two sons like it should have been for Haji Yassin Juma.

It is not enough to empathise with the persecuted and the dead but it is a start. It is a virtue that is sorely lacking. This grand project called Kenya calls on all of us to hold space for kindness—the kind that M-Pesa agents and watchmen and landlords and companies and soldiers should show to clumsy girls who carry worn tapestries of geometric circles, zigzags and waves.

You Only Leave When Home Is the Mouth of a Shark

For some reason, we only ever seemed to climb up to the waving bay at the airport at night. Crowding around the large windows, a gaggle of bundled up pre-teens up way past their bedtime. We'd stare at the rows of shiny metal birds; miracles of science, about to leap into the inky blue skies. We imagined our kinfolk nestled within one of those bellies. The grownups were scattered around us chatting among themselves; recalling a similar journey, as prayerful escort or terrified traveller.

The parents were a picture of sadness and pride. Soon, they'd choose a plane for us to wave at. Pressed together with strangers we'd mark its confident ascension, high and bright and pulled by an invisible chariot of fire until it became a tiny speck. It didn't matter that it likely wasn't the right aircraft we cheerfully sent off. Going down the dark stairwell afterwards, we were all countrymen saluting folks who would likely not return.

We didn't know it then, but it had all begun years before. In 1980, Kenya took its first Structural Adjustment loan from the World Bank. After nearly two solid decades of independence and relative economic stability, Kenya replaced the import-substitution policies it had pursued since independence with an open, liberalized trading regime. It was intended to "stabilize" the economy, which was under the pressure of debt repayments.

Did it work? The short answer is: no.

We took a second loan in 1982, same year as the attempted coup. The latter had an especially profound effect on how we were governed from then on, intensifying paranoia and tribalism in governance. But even ambitious economic plan, which looked good on paper, was designed to hurt the most vulnerable. SAPs required poor countries to reduce spending on things like health, education and infrastructure, while debt repayment and privatisation were made the priority. In effect, the IMF and World Bank [demanded](#) that poor nations lower the standard of living of their people.

Around that same time, Kenyans also suffered through the 1992 elections—where

the government borrowed heavily from local banks and caused inflation—and the 1993 Goldenberg scandal, in which 10% of the country’s GDP was squirreled away. To where? We didn’t know. But we knew it was bad.



Watch: THE COLONIAL STATE,
AUSTERITY AND “MIDDLE CLASS”
ANGST: An insiders perspective

No wonder my late father worked it out so that my eldest sister got on a plane to Germany to work as an *au pair* for a year. It was 1999 and at least one of us in the family would enter the new millennium with hope. To raise money for her departure, we circulated pledge cards, secured the family’s most generous friend as guest of honour and held a *harambee*. These fundraisers were a common practice among the middle class for travels abroad. We still hold them today but largely for funerals and medical reasons. (One day we need to unpack why churches somehow manage to remain bankrolled through whatever hardships. The same goes for wedding committees).

But back then *harambees* were festive occasions. The soon-to-be voyager stood coyly at the front, maybe draped in shiny tinsel, perhaps holding out a *kiondo* into which their donations were danced forward and dropped into. Folks were so generous; they didn’t just support academic trips. Sometimes it was to aid a lucky Green Card lottery winner. Only 50,000 US immigrant visas are available through that national lottery. It seemed that Kenyans snatched up quite a number. I was always either a raffle ticket seller (where the grand prize was something like a large towel) or I sold handkerchiefs at inflated prices. All to send so-and-so *majuu*.

However, it was harder to be generous as the economy sank lower and lower. The cold eyes from the portrait that bore down at us from the walls of our offices and schools and at the start of news bulletins were unrelenting. That is, until the opposition parties created a rainbow and pressed Moi into retirement in 2002. Nonetheless, my family—now a battered middle class—was still plotting how to send more people out there. Within a year we scrimped and saved and shipped off a cousin to America.

She was the last of us to go this way.

Yoked here by the fallout of economic distress of yesteryears, my family, like many other Kenyan households found studying abroad a luxury. It was still possible but even the brightest amongst us could not summon the *harambee* spirit. By the mid-2000s folks had to secure full or partial scholarships, and still finesse church, work and society trips to cross the Atlantic Ocean. That is, if they could jump through the many hoops needed to even secure a visa, and the irony of sitting for an English proficiency exam in a former British colony.



Read Also: NAIROBBERY: City of Injustice, City of Grief

When it was my time to enrol in university, Uganda and Tanzania were my best options for an alternative higher learning experience. By then I had just become an orphan and that's what literally pulled on the purse strings and got me into a journalism class.

Today, my 20-year-old nephew's best bet at a good education is turning to the Internet. It has become the salvation of the jaded millennial, myself included. Sure, folks can attend local colleges and polytechnics but the World Wide Web is the best university they can attend, it holds all the books they cannot buy and has become the employer, the platform and marketplace they seek.

Maybe flying out isn't such a big deal when information is pouring out of your phone and laptop. The ability to viably contribute to the web has turned everyday people into celebrities and birthed new occupations. Not forgetting the hundreds of dollars made monthly from vaguely suspect pursuits (online writing) to the definitely illegal (selling of pirated DVDs). Young people are somehow finding a way to make it in these harsh economic times.

If nothing else, the Internet has made the strongest assault against the almighty lawyer-engineer-doctor trifecta, but it can't save everyone. An impossible wage gap, brutal unemployment and perilous short-term *kibarua* jobs still persist. To quote poet Warsan Shire, "No one leaves home, unless home is the mouth of a shark."

For those who still try and make their way out, Middle Eastern nations offer the

lowest barrier of entry but at a terrible price. What are advertised as opportunities for domestic workers too often are a mask for modern-day slavery. Many, like Happiness Chweya, Mwanakombo Athman and Melsa Adhiambo Makhokha, return home in coffins. Those who narrowly escape recount tales of physical abuse and sexual depravity.

Yet hundreds still flock the fraudulent job agencies, thousands more have their passports seized and cannot return home. Their desperate pleas secretly recorded circulate on Facebook and Twitter as horrific vox pops.

Equally stuck are the waving bay generation, those who left. No doubt they have it much better - at least financially (?) - than their counterparts across the seas but what does it mean to long for home for 5, 10, 20, 30, 40 years? To be torn between renewing an expired student visa and risking deportation, and sending home payments received under the table, miserly as they are. It means watching your father's funeral through the small window of a smartphone thousands of kilometres away and sobbing and sobbing because home is still the mouth of a shark.

Gonna know we were here

This 'Brazen: Reflections' series was born out of a desire to continue the conversations springing out of the 'Too Early For Birds: Brazen' theatre performance in Nairobi in July 2018. TEFB-Brazen was a mix of straight-up scripted theatre, narration, poetry, music and dance that featured the little-known stories of six fearless women in Kenya's history - freedom fighters like Field Marshall Muthoni wa Kirima, Mekatilili wa Menza and Wangu wa Makeri; democracy activists Philomena Chelagat Mutai and Zarina Patel and even one iconoclastic yet nameless woman warrior who brought down Lwanda Magere, the legendary 'Man of Stone' in Kenyan folklore. The story of each hero was narrated by a corresponding mirror character on stage. The 'Brazen: Reflections' series seeks to explore the idea of brazenness, what it means in our daily lives, whom the idea of brazenness privileges or erases, and the place that brazenness has in

imagining freedom.

I recently found myself in a room with the mother of my auntie's husband who we all call Cucu. Having lost my biological grandparents, this sweet lady—who, at 98, has always been old to me—was fascinating to observe. Cucu sat in a corner, singing gospel songs with her feet elevated. She was snug and warm and aged in that good way; seen the world and sure of her bedtime.

I thought about the Kenya she met in 1920. A colony filled with fear, hunger and violence. Though I can almost hear Ciru's character in *TEFBrazen* chime in, "kinda like now", I wonder what uncertainties coiled in the belly of Cucu's mother as she looked down at her daughter. As a woman, I feel certain the same dread extends across each generation facing a hostile world that needs unmaking: Will they survive? Will they thrive?

Not enough to make it.

This is where we need the radicals and their rage.

They find the words, the exact colour and stroke, the perfect verse and tempo, the opening, the safety, the fearlessness, the cunning, the voice needed to challenge the world. March 16th, 1922 was Mary Muthoni Nyanjiru's time to be Brazen. She rallied a crowd of 7,000 agitating for the release of Harry Thuku, a political activist fighting against the colonial government.

They say that right there, outside Central Police station, Nyanjiru stripped naked, faced down the bayonets and yelled, "Take my dress and give me trousers! You men are cowards! What are you waiting for? Our leader is in there. Let's go get him!"

For author Grace Ogot, being Brazen was deciding to publish work in both Luo and English when she realized there was a dearth in work by East African women writers at the 1962 African Writers Conference. Her fellow attendee, Rebeka Njau went on to write a one-act drama that unequivocally condemned female genital mutilation. *The Scar* was published in 1965 and is the first ever play written by a Kenyan woman.

A decade later Rebeka would rewrite her award-winning debut novel *Alone with the Fig Tree* into *Ripples in the Pool* with a queer protagonist, Selina, a married woman who falls for her husband's sister. In a moment of reflection Selina reveals her motivation: "I have discovered that a woman must fight her way in this cruel man's world. This is what I'm doing now."

And women needn't be pioneers to shake things up. Daring to be different and refusing to be cowed or shamed is just as empowering. It is evident in how musician Akothee, the self-proclaimed 'president of single mothers', has made her Instagram account an island of ungovernability. That honesty with which socialites such as Bridget Achieng - featured on a recent BBC Africa Eye documentary - speak candidly about their lives and the cost of choices they make.

Brazenness is in the very bones of the Bar Hostess Empowerment & Support Programme. This organization is a haven for Kenyan sex workers. It also incorporates women who have sex with women (WSW), women using drugs and, bar hostesses. What's fantastic is that they offer training to sex workers as paralegals which helps them in defending themselves on the streets, in the back of the council vans, and in the courts.

When women refuse to be made invisible, they are able to question status quo. It is a struggle but there is glory in being alive this way. When transwoman Audrey Mbugua challenged the Kenya National Examinations Council to change the name on her certificate, she demanded to be seen for who she was. She won.



Read also: [The Brazen Edition](#)

When filmmaker Wanuri Kahiu took the Kenya Film Classification Board to court for banning her film *Rafiki*, she wanted to give Kenyans a chance to see two young people—who happened to be female—fall in love. She won and made over three million shillings to boot.

But it isn't about winning. It's about having the audacity to point out an injustice and not back down. In 2016, lawyers Marilyn Kamuru and Daisy Jerop together with the Center for Rights Education and Awareness led a petition against the Chief Justice and the National Assembly to dissolve Parliament. The Constitution

is clear. Everyone ought to be sent home for non-compliance with the two-thirds gender rule. The petitioners openly declared “there is no democracy without women’s meaningful representation in the national legislature.”

How powerful is that?

Yet and still, not enough make it.

Nyanjiru was the first to be felled by bullets that day.

*Liz was gang-raped on her way home from her grandfather’s funeral.

Jackline Mwendé’s husband chopped off her arms.

This is still the world we live in. Where our bodies are viewed as disposable, our fate inevitable and our triumphs erasable. That is why I enjoyed *Too Early for Birds - The Brazen Edition* so much. It hit all the right notes: truth, homage and genius. We need this kind of inspiration. We need our joys and pains documented. We need to grieve. We need to imagine new ways to be free. This is how we survive. This is how we thrive.