



Religion and Politics: The Devil Is in the Details

By Carey Baraka



On March 12th, 2019, former Kenyan Prime Minister, Raila Odinga declared that the River Jordan had crocodiles, and that he and Uhuru Kenyatta, the president, were building bridges for Kenyans to cross the river safely into Canaan. Raila Odinga, who was a presidential candidate in the Kenyan general elections in 2017 against Kenyatta had, almost exactly a year earlier, on March 9th, 2018, buried the hatchet with his rival and so he felt the need to defend the coalition. By using Canaan as a metaphor, Raila had brought his hitherto rival into the inner sanctum of the religious metaphor he had used to campaign for office.

Metaphors are powerful. Metaphors make us believe in an analogy that is better than reality. American poet Robert Frost declared that “an idea is a feat of association, and that the height of it is a good metaphor.” Raila understands the power of a good metaphor, the power of association that a metaphor conjures, and the power of his metaphor of Canaan in a predominantly Christian country.

In the month of May, in the lead-up to the August 2017 presidential elections, Raila travelled to Israel where he visited the Western wall in the Old City of Jerusalem and posted photos of himself praying on his social media pages. The Western wall better known as the Wailing Wall is a place of prayer and pilgrimage sacred to the Jewish people. Raila talked about how praying on the wall reminded him of his days in detention. He said, “The story goes that you write your wish on a piece

of paper, stick it on the wall and say a prayer and the message goes directly to God.” By referring to his stint in detention during his prayer, he was, in one fell swoop, establishing his credibility as both a reformer and a man of God.

Upon his return to Kenya from Jerusalem, Raila proclaimed himself as Joshua and that he would lead Kenyans to the Promised Land. In Christian theology, Joshua led the Israelites to Canaan, after fleeing from slavery in Egypt. Raila hoped to project the reign of Uhuru as one of hardship and suffering, akin to the biblical Egypt, and that Raila as Joshua, would lead them out of their suffering into the Promised Land, Canaan, the land of milk and honey. By caricaturing himself in this way, Raila intended to tap into Kenyans’ religious bent and influence them into voting for him in the August elections.

His opponents recognized the danger his methods held for them, and moved in to squash the idea of Raila’s personified as a Joshua. The Deputy President, William Ruto, who was Kenyatta’s running mate dismissed him as a fake Joshua, belittling Raila’s quest as taking Kenyans to a land of chang’aa and busaa, unlike the biblical Canaan, the land of milk and honey. This was snide reference to Raila’s proposal to legalize the sale of chang’aa when elected. Chang’aa is a traditional home brewed spirit popular among working class Kenyans. Mutahi Ngunyi, a political analyst and one of Kenyatta’s parrot men, also rejected Raila’s ability to be Joshua, arguing that Raila was full of “acidic pessimism” and negative energy.

Undeterred, Raila pushed on with his vision of Canaan. During his campaign, rallies he promised his supporters that he would take them to the land of milk and honey upon his ascension to the presidency. The more he invoked his utopia of Canaan, the more Kenyans from all walks of life, started talking about it. On social media, people shared creative [memes](#) about their aspirations once they got to the Canaan. Whether accidentally or by design, Raila was copying a script successfully used by Kenyatta and Ruto as running mates in 2013 election.

As part of their rhetoric during the campaigns, Ruto and Kenyatta alluded that Raila, had ‘fixed’ the charges at the Hague, and that, together, they would defeat the devil that was the ICC. The representation of the devil as the buzzword for one’s political enemy did not start with Ruto and Kenyatta.

In January 2012, William Ruto and Uhuru Kenyatta had been among the six Kenyans indicted by the ICC to stand trial over the 2008 Post Election Violence in Kenya. While many observers expected that the trial would lead to an end of their respective presidential bids, it did not. Rather, the two of them united in the face of a common enemy, the ICC. When they announced their coalition and joint presidential bid with Kenyatta vying for the presidency and Ruto as his running mate, they declared that it would be good for national reconciliation. Despite the [irony](#) that the two of them were once fierce rivals, they became the most serious threat to Raila’s bid for the presidency.

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In her book, *The Origin of Satan*, the religious historian Elaine Pagels tracks the origins of the ‘devil’ as a symbol for demonizing one’s opponents. In the book, which came on the back of her elegant analysis of the Nag Hammadi Library, Pagels reveals that, contrary to popular belief, the Christian religion was never *homogeneous*, even in its nascent days. While there were agents of malice in such

Judeo-Christian texts as Numbers and Job, these were not what we now know as the devil. The figure of the Devil (also known as Satan or Belial or Beelzebub) first appears in the first century AD, particularly with two radical Jewish sects — one called the Essenes, and another that coalesced around Jesus of Nazareth. These two sects painted themselves as embroiled in a cosmic war, and the Devil-figure was cast as the great enemy who wanted to see their destruction.

Kenyan politics is intrinsically ethno-nationalist, and deeply patriarchal, as Nanjala Nyabola observes, but it also has a very spiritualist bent. This spiritualist bent has led to national obsession with the cult of 'holy men' such as Pius Miuru, Prophet David Owuor, and Ambilikile Masapila, otherwise known as Babu wa Loliondo, and his 'wonder drug'.

However, as Pagels informs us, the members of these sects used the term Devil (and its variations), more often than not, to refer to their political enemies. For instance, the followers of Jesus of Nazareth used the term to refer to mainstream Jews (this Satanification of mainstream Judaism becomes the foundation of anti-semitism), to political parties such as the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and to the Roman Empire which was colonizing Palestine. In fact, when Jesus was executed he was killed for a political crime — that he claimed that he was going to establish a kingdom, and not because he claimed to be the son of God which the Romans did not care about — and he was given the punishment given to political criminals/insurrectionists — death by crucifixion.

Kenyan politics is by design ethno-nationalist, and deeply patriarchal, as Nanjala Nyabola [observes](#), but it also has a very spiritualist bent. This spiritualist bent has led to national obsession with the cult of 'holy men' such as Pius Miuru, Prophet David Owuor, and [Ambilikile Masapila](#), otherwise known as Babu wa Loliondo, and his 'wonder drug'. The March 2013 elections presented the opportunity for Kenyatta and Ruto cling to the image of the ICC as the Devil and they as God's persecuted followers. After they won the presidential election, Ruto broke down in tears during a church service proclaiming himself to 'surged over by the grace and favor of God.' It was a complete performance. The godly references did not end there.

In a political rally in September 2013, Kenyatta declared, in reference to the ICC charges, "We will defend ourselves and we will make sure that we have cleared our names and that of Kenya. We know that with God on our side and the devil will be ashamed."

At the same rally, Kenyatta added, "God will clear us of the false accusations that have been leveled against us. We therefore humbly request that you pray for us. I believe that when we go before the court and speak the truth, we shall shame the devil."

Two years later, in September 2015, the two, together with their political allies, held what they described as the "mother of all prayer rallies" aimed at "keeping the evil spirits of the International Criminal Court at bay." Critics were quick to dismiss the rally as nothing more than a poorly-disguised political rally. Writing in the aftermath of the rally, Ishmael Bundi, a Nairobi-based journalist, argued, "Kenyans have become very sensitive to naked displays of tribalism, hence the reason to call Sunday's rally a 'prayer meeting' and not what it was: a transparent ploy to drum up ethnic paranoia against the ICC."

Naturally, Uhuru and Ruto were quick to recognize the danger of Raila declaring himself a Joshua. In the months both preceding and following the election, they went on the offensive, and turned the devil jibe on him. In statements that were transmitted in vernacular Gikuyu and Kalenjin radio stations, Raila was likened to the devil. This would become the pattern of their diatribes against Raila, as they went on to accuse him of being a *mganga* (a witchdoctor) who couldn't compete with

the people of God, and bewitching his followers into boycotting the farce that was the repeat election.

In *The Gnostic Gospels*, Pagels explores the politics of the early Christian church, or the hodgepodge of believers each of whom claimed to be the true believers. While the term “the devil” was applied as a slur against one’s opponents, there also existed a space for healthy intellectual thought. For instance, in the group of believers who had coalesced around the disciples, there was a rift in how true faith ought to be practised. While most of the disciples agreed that the established way was through a strong church structure (a strong political church structure), Thomas (or the writer of The Gospel of Thomas), who was the first to have the authorship of a gospel attributed to him, argued that true faith was best practised individually. Rather than becoming a follower of Christ in a strong church structure, one ought to live individually and “become a Christ.” This was anathema to the other disciples, and John (or the writer of The Gospel of John) would come up with a story that established Thomas as a doubter, and thus sully his credentials as a true man of the faith.

Kenyan politics is not as subtle. In Kenyan politics, accusing political opponents of being The Devil is as strong as it gets. The devil jibe is not reserved for Raila. The list of people referred to as the devil by Uhuru, Ruto and their allies would make for interesting reading. In 2012, after his attempts at a coalition with Musalia Mudavadi floundered, Uhuru talked about “dark forces” that had forced him to join hands with Mudavadi. In March 2017, Uhuru referred to Josephat Nanok, the Governor of Turkana, as *shetani mshenzi* (a madman and a devil/ a stupid devil). In August 2018, Ruto referred to his detractors as “injili ya shetani” (the devil’s gospel). On March 14th, 2019, Oscar Sudi, a Ruto ally, declared, in the wake of the Uhuru-Raila handshake, “Since Raila Odinga ‘mganga’ joined government, there has been wrangles, gossip and sorcery. You greeted him, he has come to Jubilee with a magic spell and I see, he has bewitched you.” The list goes on. They have even turned the devil jibe on themselves, as seen when Moses Kuria blamed “shetani za kutangatanga”, a sly reference to Ruto, for his criticism of Uhuru. Just as Pagels writes about the Essenes and the followers of Jesus of Nazareth, referring to one’s political opponents as the devil, wild religious analogies such as the figure of the devil have come to dictate political discourse in the country. It was not always so.

At independence, there was a strong bias towards intellectual thought running in the country. The first president of the country, Jomo Kenyatta, authored the book “Facing Mt. Kenya” exploring Gikuyu religion and the first cabinet was full of people who relished intellectual inquiry. Tom Mboya and Oginga Odinga, both members of the founding cabinet, differed bitterly and publicly on matters of ideology. A few years after independence, when the first vice president’s relationship with the government imploded, he, Oginga Odinga, wrote a book “Not Yet Uhuru” detailing everything that he felt was wrong with the Kenyan state. Joseph Murumbi, Oginga’s replacement as vice president, was also a man of intellectual rigour, described by veteran journalist Joe Kadhi as ‘highly respected by journalists and regarded as far brighter than most of his peers’ and, after his resignation from government, he became a figure of importance in Kenya’s cultural history. Then came Daniel Moi, first as vice-president, then as president in 1978.

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Facing mounting pressure from critics and dissidents, Moi turned his focus towards the Christian church as a way to stifle the growing opposition towards him. Mungai writes, “The position taken by the EFK (Evangelical Fellowship of Kenya) during that time was one of consoling the State rather than confronting it; the image of the President as “God’s anointed” became a frequent one.”

In thinking about how religion was first used as a soporific by Kenyan politicians, we must examine Daniel Moi's use of religion to lull the masses. Christine Mungai has written about [how](#), during Moi's reign as president, religion became the primary focus of political discourse. While the war against intellectual thought in politics had started during Kenyatta's reign, it blossomed into a full frontal assault under Moi. Facing mounting pressure from critics and dissidents, Moi turned his focus towards the Christian church as a way to stifle the growing opposition towards him. Mungai writes, "The position taken by the EFK (Evangelical Fellowship of Kenya) during that time was one of consoling the State rather than confronting it; the image of the President as "God's anointed" became a frequent one."

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A similar, more widely studied pattern emerges with the South American dictatorships of the 20th Century. Uruguayan novelist Mario Benedetti was the first to write about how South American dictators used football as political soporific. Brazilian president Getúlio Vargas (1930-1945) for one recognized the duality of the sport in helping strengthen his reign. With the press censored, political parties banned, civil rights curtailed and restraints on the police lifted, Vargas exploited the value of football to establish commonality with the masses and as a tool of distraction from the violence of his tyrannical rule. In Italy, Mussolini's fascist regime was the first to use football as an integral part of government. In Argentina, Juan Domingo Perón (1946-1955) had slogans such as "Peron, the first sportsman," and "Perón sponsors sports," to turn the country's eye to the role of sports in the making of the new Argentina "which we all desire." Later, in 1978, two years after a junta led by General Jorge Videla had overthrown Peron government, Argentina would host the World Cup. While hosting a World Cup made little sense for a country grappling with a mountain of debt, the junta declared the World Cup a matter of national interest as justification for the hosting.

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"Religion is the opium of the masses," Karl Marx quipped, famously, in the introduction to a book of political criticism he never finished. While Marx was not entirely against religion, he dismissed it as a useful tool that the ruling class used to keep the masses sated, a source of phoney happiness to which the masses turned to numb the pain of reality. Marx's argument of mass distraction can apply to such things as sports and celebrity gossip, used by the ruling class to keep the masses sated. The South American dictators recognized the ability of football to do this, the same way Mobutu did with music in the DRC, and Daniel Moi with religion in Kenya.

Other writers have echoed Marx's argument in their writing. "Spirituality doesn't protest injustice, it just bears it," a character in Helen Oyeyemi's *The Opposite House* declares. Closer home, prominent Kenyan novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in his excellently-named 1977 play *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (I Will Marry When I Want), co-written with Ngũgĩ wa Mirii explores a similar theme. The two central characters, Kiguunda and Wangechi, convert to Christianity with the desire to see their daughter, Gathoni, marry right and be acceptable to their prospective in-laws, the Kios, Ahab and Jezebel. However, the financial burden of a Christian wedding proves too heavy for Kiguunda and Wangechi

and the two of them resort to taking a loan from the bank to fund their Christianity, going against their better judgement and the advice of their neighbors, Gicaamba and Njooki. The play ends with Kiguunda and Wangechi in destitution after losing ownership of their land to the Kios.

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Ironically, Christianity, the religion to which approximately 84.8% of the Kenyan population claim allegiance, was founded on the prism of political rebellion, but then repackaged into a faith of subservience and piety.

Just as the Kios used Christianity to blind Kiguunda and Wangechi from the brazen theft of their land, Moi used the same religion to get away with his kleptocratic excesses for twenty-four years as do Kenyan politicians use religious metaphors, particularly Christian ones, to attempt to veer Kenyan from the moral ineptitudes of those in power. Ironically, Christianity, the religion to which approximately 84.8% of the Kenyan population claim allegiance, was founded on the prism of political rebellion, but then repackaged into a faith of subservience and piety. It is this subservience that the political class continues to rely on as they talk about devils, raid churches and offer cash donation as they proclaim themselves God's chosen leaders and their enemies the Devil. There is real power in these metaphors.

In The Democratic Republic of Congo, the knowledge that Mobutu was using music to construct a veneer of respectability did not stop people from listening, dancing and worshipping Lingala music. The writer Alain Mabanckou, from the neighbouring Republic of Congo, pokes fun at "the country across the river", saying that Mobutu gave the people music so that he could have the power.

One would imagine for the millennial generation, the tricks that Moi used to stay in power for twenty-four years, the same tricks that Uhuru and Ruto are using, would not work in this era. Yet, it is apparent that history keeps repeating itself. From the dawn of independence, the same old script of religious manipulation has thrived. In a quote attributed to Jomo Kenyatta we first learnt, "When the missionaries came to Africa they had the Bible and we had the land. They said 'Let us pray.' We closed our eyes. When we opened them we had the Bible and they had the land."

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