



A Street Named Bi Pendo

By Carey Baraka



“Memory is short-lived/And more important instead/That streets are well-laid/Flowing and uncongested.” — Jonathan Kariara, *Naming Streets in Nairobi*

The main road that runs through Kisumu is called Jomo Kenyatta Highway. Named after the country’s first president, the road divides the town in a North-South axis that runs from Patel Flats (where it stops being Kakamega Road) to the State Lodge in Milimani. In fact, one might argue that it is the spine of the city, in the sense of it being the central nervous system and the other roads feeding off it. In other words, cut off this road from either end (at Kondele or at the intersection with Busia Road) and you have killed Kisumu.

During the 2017 electoral period, Jomo Kenyatta Highway was the epicentre of several violent clashes between opposition supporters and police officers. A general election had been held on 8 August and the main candidates in the presidential election were the incumbent, Uhuru Kenyatta of the Jubilee Party, and Raila Odinga of the NASA coalition. On 9 August, as tallying was ongoing, Odinga announced that the elections database had been hacked and the results were being manipulated in favour of his opponent, and that the hacker had used the credentials of [Chris Msando](#), the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) ICT manager who had been murdered less than two weeks to the election. Odinga said, “What the IEBC has posted is a complete fraud . . . to give Uhuru Kenyatta votes that were not cast . . . We have uncovered the fraud.”

In the wake of Odinga's rejection of the poll results, police officers moved onto the streets, and into neighbourhoods, alleging that they were flashing out the rioters who had hidden in residential areas. There were reports of police officers breaking into houses, and beating innocent civilians. Several residential areas in Kisumu remained in the constant haze of teargas that the police had lobbed in their pursuit of "rioters". At night, when residents had retired to their houses, police officers went door to door, lobbing tear gas canisters into people's houses, and attacking people in their sleep. According to a report by [Human Rights Watch](#), On the night of 11 to 12 August, as they carried out their house-to-house operations, police officers killed at least 10 people (a low estimate) in Kisumu, one of whom was Samantha Pendo, a six-month-old baby. Witnesses would later tell Human Rights Watch that, "on August 11th, police violently [attacked](#) her family, kicking, slapping, and beating with gun butts and batons everyone in the house, including the baby." This was at 12.30 am.

In the wake of Samantha Pendo's murder, Kenyans erupted. Numerous commentators on social media condemned the violence and the grotesque murder of a six-month-old baby. However, in a statement given the very day of the attack on Pendo, Interior Cabinet Secretary, Fred Matiang'i, denied that the police officers had been using excessive force on civilians. Even as Pendo was in a coma at Aga Khan Hospital in Kisumu, he dismissed claims of violence being meted out on protestors. Instead, Matiang'i claimed that those who had been injured had been in the midst of looting as police officers tried to prevent them from doing so. He said, "Some criminal elements took advantage of the situation to loot property. The police responded and normalcy has returned to the area."

After three days in a coma arising from a head injury, Pendo succumbed to the trauma. In the wake of her death, an unknown group of people went up and down Jomo Kenyatta Highway defacing all the road signs carrying that name. They scratched out the name Jomo Kenyatta Highway and in its stead wrote, in green ink, "Bi Pendo Road."

On 14 February 2019, an inquest led by Kisumu Senior Resident Magistrate Beryl Omolo found five police officers culpable of Samantha Pendo's murder. In her ruling, she also recommended prosecution against eight GSU officers who had been involved in the operation. Less than four months after her ruling, Odinga, who had since stumbled into an alliance with Kenyatta, urged his supporters to move on from the events of August 2017. He declared that it was the moment of healing and that people needed to forget the wounds of the past.

Kisumu refuses to forget. Two and a half years on from that August night, Bi Pendo Road is the main road running through the city. While, on paper, the road still bears its original name, in reality, the green ink on the road signs refuses to forget. Since the time of Jomo Kenyatta's regime Kisumu has had a violent relationship with the state. When Jomo Kenyatta came to open a hospital in Kisumu In 1969, the crowd erupted in anger at the speech he made, and his security detail opened fire, killing an estimated eleven people on the spot, and injuring hundreds. The cycle of violence continued. In 1982. In 1992. In 1997. In 2002. In 2005. In 2007, after the disputed elections, the police shot dead an estimated 115 people. On 30 March 2013, the day of a Supreme Court ruling on the disputed presidential elections, a police officer shouted at a group of youths, saying, "We forgave you people in Kisumu during the 2007-2008 violence. This time we are going to teach you a lesson". On that day alone, 5 people were killed and 24 were admitted in hospital with bullet wounds.

Kisumu is not alone in using street names as a way of resistance, as a way of refusing to forget. Derek Alderman, an American historical geographer whose focus is on landscapes of public memory, has written about how naming can be used as a way of symbolic resistance. Michael Hebbert has argued about the existence of a relationship between memory and space. In his [view](#), "a shared space such as a street can be a locus for collective memory and can express group identity through architecture, monuments, and street names." Further, he posits that street names can indicate a

community's desire to remember certain personalities or events.

Road names in Nairobi exist in similar praxes. When, from 1928 to 1936, the British colonial government moved to change street names in Nairobi; from numbered streets, they renamed the streets after figures who were important in their British imagination. In the wake of independence in 1963, the African government in power saw the need to rename these streets. For instance, Delamere Avenue became Kenyatta Avenue, while the four streets branching out of Kenyatta Avenue had their names changed. Originally named after the first, second, third and fourth colonial commissioners who would later become governors — Arthur Henry Hardinge, Charles Eliot, Donald William Stewart and James Hayes Sadler — they were given names of African personalities: Kimathi Street, Muindi Mbingu Street, Wabera Street, and Koinange Street. College Road was renamed Harry Thuku Road, while the road named after the Queen, Queens Way, was rebaptized Mama Ngina Street.



Kenyatta Avenue (formerly known as Delamere Avenue) in the mid-1960s. Photo. Flickr/Michael Jefferies

In Nairobi's Industrial Area, most of the roads had been named after towns in England. These were localised: Edinburgh Road to Enterprise Road, Aberdeen Road to Addis Ababa Road, Birmingham Road to Bamburi Road, Clifford Road to Changamwe Road, Dublin Road to Dakar Road, London Road to Lusaka Road, and Liverpool Road to Likoni Road.

A similar renaming was attempted in Kileleshwa, a neighbourhood popular with the emergent African elite. As with Industrial Area, roads which bore names that reflected localities in England were renamed to reflect the new reality of independence. According to Peris Teyie, an academic at

Maseno University's School of Planning and Architecture, the initial plan had been to name the roads in alphabetical order, like in Industrial Area. However, the planners got lazy. "They got tired of trying to do them alphabetically, and started naming them randomly." This is why Siaya Road, Gusii Avenue and Oloitoktok Road are to be found in the same zone.

It must be noted here that not everyone agreed with this process of writing away the colonialists. One James Kangangi Njuguna was reported to have argued for the preservation of history in the renaming process, even though it could remind Kenyans of negative experiences.

In their renaming, the ruling government revealed its politics in the patterns that the new road names followed. First, the road names were predominantly male, and remain so to this day, with Mama Ngina Road and Wangari Maathai Road being the only major roads in the city named after women. (Tubman Road, contrary to popular belief, is named after William Tubman, the 19th President of Liberia, and not Harriet Tubman) This is noteworthy, considering Wangari Maathai Road is a recent addition, and Mama Ngina Road is all about patriarchal patronage. Secondly, as Melissa Wangui Wanjiru and Kosuke Matsubara [note](#), "the naming of streets was biased towards the Kikuyu (the largest community in Kenya)," and there was a dramatic "erasure of Indian street names".

Walking through Nairobi's streets, one notices several names that are conspicuous by their absence from the politics of commemoration, names that in other realities would have been present: Oginga Odinga, Bildad Kaggia, Masinde Muliro, Achieng' Oneko . . . all of them socialist-leaning politicians. Wanjiru and Matsubara argue that, "Such was the case for many who were considered heroes in Kenya's fight for freedom, but who were vilified and alienated both in the colonial and post-colonial periods."

Pio Gama Pinto's case is an interesting one. After his death, there was a quest to rename Victoria Street after him. Vershi, a resident of Nairobi, suggested that the street be renamed after the Kenyan-Goan politician who had been one of the leading members of the Kenya African National Union (KANU). His request was ignored by the naming authorities, and the street was not renamed after Pinto. Instead, there followed a mass expunging of Indian names from Nairobi's streets. In 1973, 58 of the streets in the Central Business District bore Indian names. All of these were replaced, with the exception of Aga Khan Walk. For instance, Jeevanjee Street, which had been named after Alibhai Mula Jeevanjee, an Asian-born citizen who owned most of the buildings on that street, was renamed Mfangano Street. Moreover, the 21 streets in Ngara that bore Indian names had their names replaced with African names, as did the 19 streets in South C Estate, despite these areas being occupied mostly by Indian-Kenyan families. Streets whose names were changed include Jamnagar Avenue (to Idado Avenue), Hoshiarpur Road (to Mukarati Road), and Alamgir Avenue (to Muhuti Avenue).

That Aga Khan Walk survives is a testament to the power the Aga Khan wields in this country. Aga Khan is a title held by the Imām of the Nizari Ismaili Shias. Since 1957, the holder of the title has been the 49th Imām, Prince Shah Karim al-Husseini, Aga Khan IV. The Aga Khan's influence is most felt through his ownership of the Nation Media Group, although he also has interests in, among others, Diamond Trust Bank, Farmer's Choice Ltd, Jubilee Insurance, The Aga Khan Education Service, and Serena Hotels.

A street in Westlands was later named after Pinto. This is interesting given how Goans have, for the most part, been [written out](#) of Kenya's history. Pinto, Rosendo Ayres Ribeiro and Francis Xavier D'Silva are the only Goans who have places named after them in Nairobi. Ribeiro was the doctor who first diagnosed an outbreak of bubonic plague in the city, while D'Silva, better known as Baba Dogo, earned plaudits for his generosity towards [impoverished whites](#) who lived in Murumbi, an

area later renamed Baba Dogo.

However, there was an ethnic over-representation of the Kikuyu in the naming of the streets and, on 8 December 1970, in a session titled the "Colonial Names of Nairobi Streets," Tamason Barmalel, the MP of Chepalungu Constituency, took the government to task over this issue, asking how the government would "ensure that future street names would represent all ethnic groups in the country." The assistant minister in charge of the naming process, Nathan Munoko, assured him that the street names were mainly based on suggestions from the public, before they were analysed by the street naming sub-committee to ensure equitable distribution, before being forwarded to the minister for approval.

Four years after Pinto's assassination, Tom Mboya was shot dead on Government Road. After his death, there was a lot of clamour about how to memorialise him.. Since he had been killed on Government Road, it made sense to rename this road after him, and Jaffer, a resident of Mombasa, suggested this. He also suggested that Kilindini Road in Mombasa be named after Mboya, as well as one street in each town in Kenya. James Mbori, the Kasipul-Kabondo MP, led the charge in parliament, and during a parliamentary session titled "Change of name of Government Road to Tom Mboya Road", he asked the Minister for Local Government, Dr Gikonyo Kiano, whether this would happen. Dr Kiano demurred, saying that government policy was to rename those roads which bore names reminiscent of the colonial era, and Government Road was not one of these roads. In any case, he argued, it was not appropriate to rename Government Road since it was a symbol of the Government of Kenya.

However, it was thrown back at him that Government Road had been named thus by the colonial government, and therefore it was evocative of the British colonial administration. Upon Dr Kiano's further resistance, Mbori went on the offensive, implying that the road's name had been reserved for someone else. He asked, "Mr. Speaker Sir, would the minister deny that the name of Government Road is reserved for some future naming?"

Tom Mboya's supporters were aggrieved, and attempts were made to find another street to bear his name. St. Austin's Road was proposed, but it was turned down on the grounds that it wasn't important enough a road to bear the name of a man of Mboya's stature. This road was later renamed James Gichuru Road. Government Road remained Government Road, and the less important Victoria Street, the same one which had been denied Pinto's memory, was renamed after Mboya. In 1978, Government Road was renamed Moi Avenue, rendering Mbori's prediction true.

Then there are the Shifta roads, named after victims of the Shifta War: Wabera Street, formerly Elliot Street, named after Daudi Dabasso Wabera, whose assassination a week after Kenya had been granted independence sparked what became known as the Shifta War; and Lt. Tumbo Avenue, formerly General Smuts Avenue, named after Lt. John Charles Tumbo Kalima, who led the Kenyan military effort against the insurgency and was killed in an ambush between Garissa and Wajir.

Around Kibra (very importantly not Kibera), several streets bear Nubian names. A meeting of the parliamentary street naming sub-committee held on 30 March 1971 suggested ten street names for the Kibera Government Housing Scheme: Ihura Road, Toi Road, Kambui Road, Sara-Ngombe Road, Chief Suleman Road, Lemule Road, Apollo Road, Kambi Muru Road, Laini Saba Road and Adhola Marongo Road (CCN 1971). With the exception of Ihura and Kambui Roads, all the other names are of Nubian origin. The Nubian community is being remembered. Only, Nubian leaders would argue differently, given that the Nubian community occupies only 700 acres of land in Kibra, with the rest of the land, some 3498 acres, having been forcibly taken over by the post-colonial government with no compensation offered. The recognition of the Nubian community is, as Wanjiru and Matsubara state, superficial, since the real demands of the Nubian community were mostly ignored.

Street names in Nairobi, and in Kenya, have also been used as arenas for reputational politics. For instance, going through Kakamega is an immersion into Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Masinde Muliro Gardens . . . the man from further North in Bungoma, being commemorated in Kakamega. It is the same with Oginga Odinga in Kisumu and Siaya, Jomo Kenyatta in Nairobi, and Daniel Moi in Eldoret. In Nairobi, several streets were named after Pan-Africanists, but these were almost all Pan-Africanists with whom Jomo Kenyatta had interacted or personally admired. He and Ralph Bunche in London in 1936, and Bunche had visited Kenya at Kenyatta's behest two years later; Marcus Garvey, George Padmore, and W. E. B. Du Bois had also interacted with Kenyatta in London. Dennis Pritt had represented Kenyatta at the Kapenguria Trial in 1952 while William Tubman, Mokhtar Daddah, Albert Luthuli and Haile Selassie were, together with Kenyatta, all part of the Pan-African movement in the 1960s.

The battle of reputations came about with the proposed renaming of Enterprise Road to Kibaki Road. When the proposal was made, it was opposed on the grounds that government policy prohibited naming streets after living personalities except for heads of state. Yet Mama Ngina was, and still is, a living personality, and was not, and still isn't, a head of state. Still, much can be inferred from the fact that the road given her name was once known as Queens Way.

One of the main roads running through Mombasa is Mama Ngina Drive, which used to be Azania Drive, renamed at independence after a person who again, was, and still is, a living personality, and was not, and still isn't, a head of state. In 2019, there was a [furore](#) over a move to name a recreational park along the road Mama Ngina Waterfront Park. According to Okoa Mombasa, a coalition that led the opposition to the proposed name, this was a "gross deletion and obfuscation" of local history, and an attempt to "inscribe a historical memory alien to the place and local inhabitants".

All these years later, the big reputation in the landscape of naming remains KANU, *chama cha baba na mama*. According to David Lowenthal, the landscape is not just a product of human actions in the past, but rather a tangible symbol of people's attachment to the past. The main road to Eastlands, Jogoo Road, bears the symbol of the long-time ruling party of the country. One might argue that it is a symbol of the cockerel of the national coat of arms, but then, one would have to think about why the symbol of KANU is on the national coat of arms.

Wandia Njoya has written about how the Kenyatta family has taken control of national symbols, and has argued for the need to delink the family from national symbols and ideals. When Princess Elizabeth Way was renamed Uhuru Highway, the intention had not been to switch the name from the ruler of the Kenyan colony to the ruler of independent Kenya.

In the wake of the farcical 2017 electoral process and the subsequent violence, there was a violent renaming of things in Kisumu. Bi Pendo Road, yes, but also Jomo Kenyatta Sports Ground, where several signs were defaced, and Jubilee Market, which was renamed Orengo Market, and where, as with Jomo Kenyatta Highway, the signs with that name were defaced, and a new name inked over, a name that still stands to this day.

That Bi Pendo Road exists is not merely a monument to Samantha Pendo. Rather, it is an affirmation of Kisumu's refusal to forget, to move on from the victims of police brutality in 2017, in 2013, in 2007, and in all the other years, as Odinga urged in 2019, and continues to urge through the Building Bridges Initiative.

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