

# Protest Music in Kenya: Why the Deafening Silence?

My inquiry into the status of contemporary Kenyan protest music indignantly began with a hypothesis that this genre has gone mute in recent years. My agitation was fuelled after watching a documentary on the great artist of the American civil rights movement, Nina Simone hunched over her piano, singing *Mississippi Goddam*. The song was riveting, bold, defiant and 'in your face'. Her song, sung in 1964 at the height of the American Civil rights campaign, was exceedingly bold. Nina was a rising star and a commercial success, but her musical career took a different tangent after the release of *Mississippi Goddam*. The song was banned from the air-waves, supposedly because of the cuss word, 'goddam', an unacceptable term for the time. However, that did not stop the song from becoming the Civil rights' anthem and receiving more resonance than the popular gospel turned protest song, 'We shall overcome' mainstreamed by Pete Seegar.

Nina's song, spoke truth to power, the power of the white supremacist, segregationist intent on denying African Americans their human rights. In a sense, Nina committed commercial suicide in order to gain her political voice. The documentary led to my reflection on the role of music in political protest in Kenya, and left me wondering, when did the voice of protest music in Kenya fall silent?

Immediately after independence, there were "patriotic" songs composed to celebrate the newly attained *uhuru*. Musicians created songs reminding Kenyans of the independence struggle and the sacrifices that had resulted in self-rule. They also extolled the virtues of the main actors in this fight but slowly the music morphed into songs glorifying the first president, Jomo Kenyatta. As President Kenyatta consolidated power, the timbre of praise songs rose; the person of the president and the aspiration of the nation became one. It was the beginning of court poetry and a hero-worship culture.

The first major political shock to the national project was the assassination in 1965 of Pio Gama Pinto, the left-leaning journalist, politician, ex-detainee, freedom fighter and confidante of Jaramogi Oginga Odinga. Pinto was a Specially Elected Member of the House of Representatives and an avowed socialist. His

assassination followed the dissolution of KADU (Kenya African Democratic Union) that led to Kenya becoming a de facto one-party state.

The next major political event was the formation of Kenya People's Union (KPU) in 1966 that flung Kenya back to multi-party dispensation, but which, most importantly, signified the split in the original KANU (Kenya African National Union) and the beginning of the Kenyatta/Oginga-Odinga rivalry.

These events fermented the beginning of protest music in Kenya as artists began to respond to the political contestations. The state came down viciously on its critics and opponents, signalling the narrowing of democratic space. Artists began to speak truth to power.

In 1969, in an act of defiance, Abdilatif Abdulla, a poet and member of KPU, wrote the treatise *Kenya: Twendapi?* (Kenya, where are we heading to?), which earned him the notoriety of being Kenya's first post-independence political prisoner (1969-72). It was a bold attempt at speaking truth to power and revealed that the state was prepared to use all means to stifle commentary.

Speaking truth to power is described as a non-violent political tactic employed by dissidents against the received wisdom or propaganda of governments they regard as oppressive, authoritarian or an "ideocracy". Speaking that truth through music has the benefit of being able to inform, educate and mobilise through popular entertainment. The potency of music arises from its ability to mutate into contemporary popular culture and reach across the barriers of elitism that limit a novelist, an actor, a musician or any other type of artist.

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As the Kenyatta government progressively became more repressive, so did the intensity of the protest music. The manner that the state responded to protest music speaking truth to power offers us a window into understanding the current state of protest music.

## **Bitter independence waters**

As the dream of independence began to fade, Ishmael Nga'nga of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) Gathaithi Church choir released a song, *Mai ni Maruru* (The waters are bitter), which likened the deferred dream-fruits of independence to the bitter waters spoken of in the Bible. The expected fruits of independence had been replaced by aggrandisement by the political elite. Though his song was couched in biblical and religious symbolism, the powerful heard it. Nga'nga lamented that, *"Men and women are quarrelling/ over small matters, telling each other/ "I did not want someone like you"/ Because the water is bitter/ When you go to the office seeking assistance/ You find an angry officer/ When you try to enter, he tells you he is 'busy'/ Because the water is bitter."*

Ishmael's song was banned by the Kenyatta government and the president is said to have retorted that the fruits of independent could not be equated to the proverbial bitter water that caused concern to the children of Israel. The state resorted to silencing its critics using the public broadcaster that was the only one available at this time. This approach was to become a standard way of ensuring that the voice of protest was not heard.

The culture of political assassinations, mysterious deaths and disappearances of politicians began to become commonplace. Argwings Kodhek died in a suspicious accident in January of 1969. A few months later, the charismatic politician Tom Mboya was assassinated. In 1972, Ronald Ngala died in a Christmas Day accident that baffled many. In 1975, the fiery Josiah Mwangi Kariuki (JM), who had served as Kenyatta's personal secretary, was murdered. Joseph Kamaru, a personal friend of JM and a popular Benga musician, used his music to protest the killing of the politician. Kamaru's song was banned by the Voice of Kenya (later known as the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation) on June 20, 1975 and Kamaru is reported to have been arrested and, along with his collaborators, and whipped by the president himself. (This claim is, however, difficult to verify.)

Beyond the use of state machinery to limit access to audiences by shutting down the airwaves, physical threats and actual violence entered the repertoire of tools used by the state to ensure that criticism was curtailed. Kamaru is reported to have said that after releasing the song, he experienced very hard times because the song didn't go well with the ruling elite and he even started receiving death threats. He said, "I received threats that if I was not careful, my head would be

picked from Ngong where Kariuki's lifeless body was found."

After President Moi came to power in 1978, Kamaru enjoyed a period of molly-coddling Moi and even earned himself an official state trip to Japan. Upon his return, he sang the *Safari ya Japan* collection in which he heaped praises on Moi. This dalliance did not last long. When Kamaru supported multipartyism, he fell out of favour with Moi.

## **State capture**

In 1988, amid the infamous *mlolongo* queue-voting system championed by Moi, Kamaru released a song, *Mahoya ma Bururi* (Prayers of the Nation). During this time, the discontent with Moi's rule had reached boiling point levels. There was growing opposition to the state after the brutal 1986 crackdown on real and perceived dissidents, especially members of the Mwakenya movement.

Kamaru recalls that the song was an instant hit and created a lot of tension countrywide. He describes efforts by Moi to have him stop selling the Gikuyu version of the song. Moi went as far as giving Kamaru Sh800,000 to make a Kiswahili version of the song. Kamaru jumped at this offer and actually made the Kiswahili version, but was unsuccessful in his attempts to see Moi and to present him with his finished "homework". He concluded that it must have been Moi's way of trying to get him not to sell the song.

The state used its economic muscle to appropriate protest music by buying out artists and, in some cases, turning them into total pro-establishment praise-singers. The need for financial success and survival was enough incentive to silence voices of critics. When coercion did not work, the state was willing to "buy out" the artist speaking truth to power. Kamaru's experience with Moi is instructive.

Daniel Owino Misiani, another musician who had used his art to consistently critique the political repression by the Kenyatta regime, especially the political assassinations, was imprisoned on various occasions for his lyrics, which were deemed offensive to the state. He was also threatened with deportation from Kenya on several occasions because he was born in Shirati, which is administratively in Tanzania. Kamaru and Owino were unique musicians in that even though their music could be taken off the air by the national broadcaster, they had built a strong ethnic fan base. Their records sold in the thousands and,

therefore, their financial independence offered them a better chance of resisting the state capture of their protest music.

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The end of the Kenyatta presidency and ushering in of the Moi era gave some respite to the artists. However, this only lasted till the 1982 coup by the Air Force that was followed by state repression. The fact that university students, lecturers and intellectuals had supported the coup led Moi to clamp down on creatives.

As Moi's regime became more repressive, and as the economy sank deeper into a black hole, Osumba Rateng' released the song *Baba Otonglo* that detailed the economic hardships ordinary Kenyans were facing. In the song, a family is forced to adopt severe austerity measures, which were presented in a humorous manner, but which were painfully true. *Baba Otonglo* parodies the rigmarole surrounding the presentation of the annual budget in Parliament. Economic policies were singled out as sinking the ordinary Kenyan deeper and deeper into despair. He sings, "*Budget iko high, vyakula vimepanda, ukame umezidi, vitu vyote vimepanda*" (The budgeted cost of living is way too high, price of foodstuff has escalated, the drought has persisted, the cost of everything has risen." The state responded to this song in the usual brutal fashion.

When the song was released, it was considered to have political undertones. The thin-skinned politicians lobbied to have the song pulled off the air. Osumba was visited by police and questioned. He detailed his experience in an interview. 'Four policemen came to my house in Baba Dogo Estate, Nairobi and arrested me. They accused me of criticizing the Government and composing a song that incited people.' To save his skin, Osumba insisted that the song was just a creative spin at the hard economic times. He escaped without charges being preferred against him.

## **Hip hop, Sheng and angry urban youth**

The late 1980s and 90s marked a change in the socio-political landscape in Kenya. Among the most relevant change was the liberalisation of the airwaves and the

resumption of political contest after the re-introduction of multi-party politics. Between 1980 and 2009, the population of Nairobi ballooned from 862,000 to about 3.4 million. According to a 2009 UN-Habitat, more than 34 per cent of Kenya's total population lives in urban areas and of this, more than 71 per cent confined to informal settlements. Informal settlements in Nairobi, and other urban areas, are a consequence of failure of government policies and official indifference. Amnesty International has described the intricacies of the informal settlements in this way, "The experience of slum-dwellers starkly illustrates that people living in poverty not only face deprivation, but are also strapped in poverty because they are excluded from the rest of the society, denied a say and threatened with violence and insecurity."

Enter, Dandora and other marginalised urban settlements like Mathare, Majengo, Korogocho, Mukuru kwa Njenga and Kibera. Dandora, better known as, 'D' by the youthful musicians of this era became the code name for the Kenyan equivalent of the projects where Hip hop as protest music was born. The life and demographic profile in these inner cities mirrors the hip hop producing ghettos of the US. The hip hop story in Kenya is the story of Kalamashaka.

Kamaa, one of the founders of the Kalamashaka trio, describes how the group rose to express the tribulations of urban marginalisation and how the voice of this group and others like it were marginalised.

Kalamashaka was the most prominent of the pioneer Kenyan hip hop groups using Sheng to rap and infusing politics in their lyrics.

Kalamashaka began by rapping about the state of their existence in the urban ghettos of Nairobi dominated by serious social strife, depressed economies, ethnic tensions, state corruption, institutional failure, infrastructural collapse, crime, violence, police brutality and extrajudicial killings. Just like their American role-models, they were anti-establishment and explicitly political.

Kalamashaka made a mark in the music scene by their signature tune, '*Tafsiri Hii*' (Translate This) which, by default, managed to get a lot of air-play when it was first produced. The song was an indictment of the prevailing inequality in Kenya and the disenfranchisement of the youth. Kamaa describes their lyrics as "gangsta and radical." The use of Sheng, which at that time was struggling to shed off its identity as a street thug language and gain acceptance as a Kenyan patois

was revolutionary because it immediately drew a generational as well as class line.

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The emerging Hip Hop musicians spoke truth to power, describing how the system had failed them. The lyrics were described as “full of rage.”

Hip hop Sheng was inspired by American Hip-hop music that the establishment had problems with because of the explicit lyrics and the apparent glorification of violence. The urban ‘youth generation’ in the poorer settlements of Nairobi identified with Hip hop emerging from. The music was angry and retributive. Kalamashaka became the face of a movement that morphed into *Ukoo Fulani* - an angry and disenfranchised urban youth movement. Kalamashaka and *Ukoo Fulani* began to invoke the name, Mau Mau the liberation movement that remained banned in Kenya till 2002. This sent signals to the political status quo that the movement was potentially dangerous.

## **Market forces and political sycophancy**

The response to the rising protest music signalled a totally new era in censorship. It was no longer the state that took it upon itself to ban music; commercial radio stations did this job for the state. Kamaa describes how radio presenters began to shut out these sounds from the air, effectively driving them underground. The emergent commercial radio stations that were reliant on state and corporate goodwill and advertising effectively became agents of shutting down any anti-establishment voice. The use of Sheng was tolerated only to the extent that it allowed commercial interests to provide marketing information to the youth demographic. Any message that was aimed at raising social conscience was not acceptable.

Denied air time, and obviously not the kind of musicians who would be invited to perform at national celebrations, the economic marginalisation of this genre of music drove the artists deeper underground while their lyrics became angrier.

Denial of air time meant that their voices were limited because they did not enjoy the base popularity that Owino Misiani or Joseph Kamaru had.

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Commercialisation was the other factor that sunk youthful urban voices deeper into oblivion. Eric Musyoka, a producer, recalling his break-up with Kalamashaka, poignantly says, “I learnt that radical and hard stance does not help.” This marked his transition from a producer of hip-hop to commercial music. So-called “market forces” conspired to lock out the voices that were not in line with the status quo.

Just as had happened to Nina Simone, the interests of the commercial oligarchs meant that raw talent and protest music could not secure time in recording studios. Barred from commercial airwaves and recording studios, protest music became a marginalised genre. Even though there were some who were speaking about vices such as corruption, only the less controversial numbers, like Eric Wainaina’s *Nchi Ya Kitu Kidogo*, received acceptance and air time and were played at national celebrations. Though Eric spoke of the extent to which the cancer of corruption had metastasised in Kenya, he was not angry enough. Though he spoke of the fact that ordinary Kenyans are confronted with corruption in every facet of their lives, he did not squarely lay blame for this sorry state on the rulers. So whereas Eric’s voice is broadcast loudly, that of the angry hip hop and reggae musicians, such as Mashifta, Kitu Sewer and Sarabi, are pushed away from the mainstream and into the underground; effectively muted.

Political sycophancy is also responsible for muting the voices of musicians speaking truth to power. Tom Mboya Angángá, better known as Atommy Sifa, had to flee into exile in Tanzania after he and a nondescript musician, Tedeja Kenya, produced a song in which they lampooned Raila Odinga for being responsible for the political and socio-economic woes bedeviling Luoland. Though there are no records that indicate that Raila Odinga himself threatened him with repercussions, the opposition leader’s rabid supporters intimidated Atommy

enough for him to fear for his life. Tede received few brickbats because, unlike Atommy, he was considered a non-entity and had little following through his music. When politics is highly personalised and ethnicised, those perceived to speak truth to the prevalent power are silenced through political patronage. However, when it suits the political class, they will use musicians who sing in ethnic languages to their advantage. For instance, the hip hop group Gidi Gidi Maji Maji's hit song *Unbwogable* (Unbeatable) became the rallying cry of Raila and other opposition politicians during the 2002 elections that ousted Moi's KANU party from power.

Musicians, like all professionals, depend on the power of the market to make ends meet and commercial considerations, as we saw in the case of Kamaru, can silence the truth. In Kenya, musicians face immense struggles because of a poor infrastructure supporting the music business. Piracy and irregular payment of royalties for airplay makes it hard to be a commercial success. The market for live performances is low, with foreign artistes in higher demand and commanding better pay. An artist who hopes to speak truth to power gradually finds him or herself ground out of operation by penury. Artists like Owino Misiani and Kamaru could afford to be outspoken because they had a strong ethnic fan base that translated to a vibrant market. Their music being banned from the airwaves actually served to popularise their messages among ethnically-polarised constituencies. But they are more the exception than the norm.

The language used in protest music can also lead to marginalisation. The modern Kenyan musician, in an attempt to be more cosmopolitan, uses Kiswahili or English. These are not languages of political discourse in Kenya. Granted they may be used in public rallies, but the real political discussions happen in mother tongues. This explains why Moi was not comfortable with Kamaru's *Mahoya ma Bururi* in the Gikuyu language, but was willing to finance the Kiswahili version. Moi knew that the same song rendered in Kiswahili would suffer the same fate as Gabriel Omolo's, *Lunchtime* or Eric Wainaina's *Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo*. The passion of political protest only works in the language of the masses, and outside the urban informal settlements, ethnic languages hold sway. Any song rendered in Kiswahili or English carries no threat of insurrection.

Language for protest assumes a deeper complexity in Kenya. Whereas Bob Marley used Jamaican English to sing political protest and Fela Kuti used Pidgin English, which is the language of the downtrodden in most of West Africa, there is no

equivalent language of the masses in Kenya. For example, Juliani's song, *Utawala* (The administration) speaks of poor governance and impunity, but the moment he switches to rap and a hip hop style, he limits his audience. Hip hop and rap in Kenya are associated with crotch-grabbing African American wannabes who do not resonate with the ordinary citizens outside of the urban settlements. With time though, as urbanisation increases, and urban populations become a significant electoral demographic, this is likely to change.

The most successful musicians who have been able to speak truth to power are those who have a base, who speak in the language of that base and hence have a strong constituency. Failure to understand the true language of the ordinary citizen renders any political content irrelevant or innocuous. The powerful are not bothered by any message that will self-reduce to a touristy sing-song like *Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo* because it will never mobilise political response. Even the hugely successful Sauti Sol's recent song and accompanying video, *Tujiangalie*, which critiques the current government's neglect of ordinary citizens' concerns, has failed to move the masses, perhaps because the band is associated more with feel-good songs than with anti-establishment music.

If Kenyan musicians are to regain the chagrin and attention of the establishment, they must speak the language of the masses. They must break social taboos, like Nina Simone did with *Mississippi Goddam*. She was able to express the anger of the African American in his everyday language. So must our musicians express the anger welling up because of grand corruption, huge national debts, state wastage and opulence, extrajudicial killings, over-taxation and miscarriage of justice.

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One could rightfully argue that protest music in Kenya is muted, not because artists are not producing it, but because the genre has been effectively driven underground. It's vibrant in the digital repositories where the masses have little

access.

In addition, the artists themselves have been marginalised by commercial interests keen on maintaining the status quo, so they struggle against all odds. The state no longer needs strong-arm tactics like detention, jail and threats because the media is doing the work of censorship for them. Civil society might support these artists, but as long as access to mass media is outside their grasp, these voices will remain muted.

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# The Dark and Devious History of Tea: The Beverage That Floated Empires

No one knows when we, as the human race, decided that tea is worth drinking, though tea remains fabled as one of the world's oldest beverages. Its story of origin is scant - there is uncertain allusion to a strong beverage in a Chinese document from 59 B.C, and some architectural evidence pointing to a century earlier, traced to the Han Yangling Mausoleum in Xi'an in western China, which was built for the Jing Emperor Liu Qi, who died in 141 B.C.

But from its murky beginnings, this unassuming leafy bush would come to shape history as we know it. For millennia, tea has graced the tables of the mighty and the lowly, fuelling wars, building empires, and bonding societies in a relentless quest for that 'wondrous beverage' packed with caffeine and theanine.

There are four types of tea - black tea, green tea, white tea and oolong tea, originating from two varieties of the plant in the *Camellia* family: *Camellia sinensis*, a narrow-leaf variety originating in central China and Japan thriving in the cool, high mountain regions there, while the broad leaf variety, *Camellia assamica*, thrives best in the moist, tropical climates found in Northeast India and Yunnan provinces of China.

Turkey leads the global tea consumption at 6.96 million pounds with Ireland, United Kingdom and Russia coming in at second, third and fourth place respectively. Morocco is the highest tea consumer in Africa with annual consumption of about 2.5 million pounds followed by Egypt at 2.3 million pounds. As of 2017 China made about \$1.45 billion dollars form tea exports while Kenya remains the largest global tea exporter, accounting for 25% of all tea exports worldwide.

Protected by the mountain mists, and given just enough humidity, the plant produces shiny, dark green leaves and small, tender, white blossoms. The final quality of tea depends on a lot of factors - the soil, climate, altitude, and expertise of the tea-pickers.

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Research shows that tea has not always been consumed as a beverage. It was used in burial rituals among Chinese royalty, as a mixture containing the buds, some roasted barley, salt, and or ginger. It would later adopt other uses including as dowry payment for aristocrats, around 640 A.D. A thousand years later in the 1600s the buds would land in the British Isles, sipping its way into daily culinary preferences as it provided relief and a 'high' for workers who often had to contend with the drudgery of manual labour. Tea would have remained just another drink in the periphery of the British civilization were it not for its accidental encounter with a powerful ally - sugar. Out of this marriage came global capitalism, royal tea culture, health fads and the darkest of all outcomes - slave plantations.

The tea craze reached British high society through Catherine of Braganza, a Portuguese aristocrat who married into the British monarchy, to Charles II. As an early celebrity endorser of tea, her wedding to Charles II helped the fad to take off among the British nobility, making it as native to British royalty as white weddings.

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Catherine of Braganza's enthusiasm for tea, as well as the expensive nature of the new invention, sugar, made tea a hallmark and fetish for the status-chasing elites.

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From the 1600s the fortune of tea as a global beverage seemed relentless. Its cultural phenomenon as a mark of status meant lots of people developed new literature on this 'wondrous beverage', key among them an English writer named Thomas Tryon, who counted Benjamin Franklin as one of his fans.

Tryon was an advocate for tea in moderation, and not conspicuous consumption as was the case with the aristocrats of the day. Tryon developed self-help books around tea, for which his enthusiasm was tempered by his conflicted relationship with sugar. On one hand, he hated the slavery of the sugar plantations in the West Indies, while still savouring the magical effects of the substance in his tea. Tryon, well aware that the cruelty of slavery drained into the cups of British royalty as an enchanting beverage, expressed a love-hate relationship with sugar and by extension tea.

Some of the same health and cultural claims about tea that people like Tryon were making, including mental clarity, esteem, and momentary high, and the perceived analgesics of sugar - were also being made about coffee. But coffee lost out in prestige because of its origins in the Arabian Peninsula, then a poor periphery of the British Empire and its imperial interests. With little capacity for industrial production, coffee was limited in reach and adoption.

Meanwhile tea, tied to the far more developed Far East commercial treadmills had an easier time rising to meet demand in the West. England engaged in trade with China, through the East India Company, and the Dutch East India Company, exporting spices, silks and other goods like opium in exchange for tea. The multiplicity of good fortunes; a huge demand back home, naval trade, existence of the huge trading firms British East India Company and Dutch East India Company, spurred the first impulses of modern capitalism.

Soon the Chinese rejected opiates owing to their addictive effects and the British

realized that if they were going to keep pace with the tea craze back at home and not have to deal with the Chinese, they had to own tea plantations themselves.

Tea was such a lucrative trade, that, by the mid-19th century, the firm, through a Scottish botanist went on to steal tea seedlings and the secrets of tea production from China and used that to establish a tea empire in conquered India.

The British understood that getting their hands on the plant, and learning how to grow it, was not just good business, it was a cultural prestige, commercial coup and a strong geopolitical move.

Historian Sara Rose in her book *For All the Tea In China: How England Stole the World's Favorite Drink and Changed History* describes how Scottish botanist had written about the marvels of tea in his travel journals during a trip to China in 1845. His writings caught the attention of Victorian high society, who then tasked him to make a return visit and sneak out tea seedlings out of China and to learn the mechanics of tea production, which would then be planted in British-controlled India.

Fortune did not know it, but this would mark the beginning of the end of Chinese domination and a rise of imperial Britain, both countries' fates tied to a bunch of leaves dipped in hot water mixed with spoonfuls of sugar. As Sarah elaborates, (the aptly-named) Fortune never saw himself as part of a global conspiracy, but just as a humble botanist, even though he was about to commit what she calls "*the greatest single act of corporate espionage in history.*"

The impact of the espionage was incalculable; within decades, India surpassed China as the world's largest tea producer, China sunk never to recover until the 1970s, Britain rose and the global commerce moved to the West for the next 180 years.

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A new tea empire arose during that time, and true to Tryon's fears and disgust, a new kind of capitalism developed. It would be spurred on by bureaucratic, infrastructural, commercial and military capabilities, supporting slavery, colonialism and land expropriation aided by plunder through British institutions.

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That legacy implicit in our tea making cultures is still with us today. The great inequalities, between class divides and between nation-states that characterize the modern world can be traced to this global commerce's long and violent operations.

The tea empire in India evolved over centuries as a critical cog and a microcosm of the larger problematic capitalism with its oppressive social and political structures in places such as West Indies the Ottoman Empire and mid-1800s western India.

The centrality of slavery in the massive production of Tea Empire in India, the rise of 18<sup>th</sup> centuries tea merchants in South Asia and their centrality in the slave trade irked Tryon and his ilk. In tea, Tryon saw the dehumanizing excesses of global economies as well as the racist debauchery of the Euro-American enterprise in subjugating distant lands to feed the royal fetish for tea under the banner of violence and racism.

The British Empire's ability to modernize and industrialize rested on the power and reach of the two companies, their control of distant lands, naval superiority, and enslaved labour in India. Slavery, therefore, has always been an integral part of the sugar and tea economy; a core part of the Western world, and it took a violent struggle, most successfully in the 1790s in the French colony of Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) to break its yoke.

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Tea and sugar proved to be convenient alternatives to alcohol, a good addition to British culinary options, and good source of cheap calories for the masses. As the Industrial Revolution got underway, where the factory replaced the plough

beginning in the mid-1700s, tea sweetened the transition away from hard farm labour giving the factory workers regular hits of caffeine.

The mercurial duo of tea and sugar made not just cultural sense as a classy drink but also spelt a boon for British government coffers. As the wheels of industrialization grew louder and churned faster, tea accounted for every tenth pound into the royal coffers, while sugar imports could sufficiently fund the then global British navy. Sugar made tea popular while tea made sugar valuable to the empire.

The tea-and-sugar revenues filled the British royal navy coffers enabling them to conquer distant lands around the globe in the 1800s at a terrible human cost, especially in Africa and the West Indies.

In America, of all the British sensibilities that the Americans adopted, tea drinking seems to be one of those that simply dissolved into the Atlantic Ocean, with minimal traces of tea culture making it on the journey west. The Charleston Tea Plantation in Wadmalaw Island just southwest of bustling Charleston, South Carolina, is the only lush, green landscape that holds on to legacy of tea in the whole of continental America.

The sprawling 127 acres of gleaming rows of green leaves unfolds in Waccamaw, one of the Sea Islands that dot the shoreline. The plantation is owned by the Bigelow Tea Co., in partnership with third-generation tea taster William Barclay Hall. It is what remains of the legacy of the Boston Tea Party or what was simply known as “the Destruction of the Tea in Boston till 1830s.”

That incident over 240 years ago on the evening of Dec. 16, 1773, involved the Sons of Liberty in Boston, disguised as Mohawks, stealing aboard three British merchant ships and tipping over more than 340 chests of quality East India Co. tea into the sea. This destruction of tea leaves as a protest against England’s unjust taxation policy sparked the Revolutionary War between Great Britain and its Thirteen Colonies culminating in the independence as the United States of America.

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On the other side of the world in the choppy seas of the Indian Ocean lies the archipelago of Sri Lanka. This tea paradise’s long relationship with beverage goes

back to 1890 when Sir Thomas Lipton arrived on the island of Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, seeking to acquire real estate. 128 years later, the tea industry employs 1 million of the 22 million citizens.

A little further northwest of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) lies Myanmar (Burma), with its evolving generational politics of tea culture. Burma, as it is more popularly known internationally, is grappling with its tea-taking culture truncated across generational lines. Currently only middle-aged men keep the consumption of steaming *laphet yay*- Burmese tea alive. *Laphet yay* is the signature Burmese tea; black tea, evaporated milk and sweetened condensed milk. From Puta in the northerly region to Naypritaw in the central regions and in Yangon, tea consumption is more than regular past time; it's a cultural moment for Burmese citizens. Word has it that the pro-democracy 8888 political uprising against the 1988 military rule might have started in a tea shop somewhere in the capital, Yangon.

The Indian subcontinent, one of the cradles of ancient tea, is home to Darjeeling, a boutique tea, referred to as the 'Champagne Of Teas'. According to Jeff Koehler, author of *Darjeeling - The Colorful History and Precarious Fate of the World's Greatest Tea*, Darjeeling remains India's internationally renowned tea thanks to its auction sales even though it makes up a mere 1% of the 2 billion pounds of tea that Indians consume annually. India produces just 8 million pounds of Darjeeling tea out of 87 tea estates in the Himalayas.

However, it is further south of the Equator in Kenya that the true nation-state building power of tea lies. Measuring just about 582,000 square kilometres, Kenya has about 198,000 hectares of tea plantations churning about 480, 000 tonnes of tea annually. Introduced in the country in 1903 by GWL Caine the crop would be commercialized 21 years later by Malcolm Fyers Bell. Currently, Kenya has surpassed India and even China- the ancient homeland of tea - in tea production. Small- scale production is managed through 66 factories handling about 500, 000 small-scale farmers on 100,000 hectares of tea. Most of it is auctioned in the city port of Mombasa and exported abroad for blending with other lower quality tea varieties.

Now as the fortunes of the Asian giant rise once again, China is becoming a fierce and aggressive player in the tea sector, yet it still has to compete with Kenya and India who are former British colonies.

So was Fortune history's beguiling economic spy, or a mere botanist who brought tea and its technologies west?

*Now as the fortunes of the Asian giant rise once again, China is becoming a fierce and aggressive player in the tea sector, yet it still has to compete with Kenya and India both former British colonies.*

Fortune never saw himself as a spy or a great player in global geopolitical games. It is as though his greatness (or villainy) lies accidentally in him being a China and plant expert right at the point where the leaves that shaped the world lay halfway around the world from his Scottish neighbourhood. He was not a hero in his own eyes.

Nevertheless, by his small act, never has the fate of history been so drastically dependent on a bunch of leaves since Eve in the Garden of Eden, as when Fortune smuggled that humble seedling.

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## **The Kitenge Route: The algorithms and aesthetics of African fabrics**

I first visited Nigeria in 2009, and one of the first things that struck me as we drove around in Lagos was how festive everyone looked. It was an ordinary weekday, and people were doing ordinary things - selling wares by the roadside, navigating traffic, and just going about their day. But there was something striking about how they looked, and then it hit me - they were wearing what we in East Africa call kitenge or "African fabric".



Montage of African fabric-themed decor at Nyama Mama restaurant,

## Nairobi

I had never seen this in everyday life - to me, kitenge was Sunday best, exclusively worn to church or to weddings, and in fact, often only by women of a certain age. Growing up in middle-class Nairobi, you certainly couldn't catch me dead in kitenge in my teenage years, or more accurately, as soon as I had the power to resist what my mother insisted dressing me up in. It wasn't cool. We would make fun of kids at Sunday school whose parents would dress them up in matching kitenges; our aesthetic was very much influenced by 1990s African-American hip-hop - FILA sneakers, denim dungarees (overalls), Nike and FUBU, and midriff-baring crop tops that our parents would disparagingly call "tumbo cuts".

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In the 1980s and 1990s, many African countries were pressurised to adopt structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which were supposed to fix structural problems in African economies - remove foreign exchange controls, privatise state corporations, and liberalise trade.

These adjustments - sometimes grudgingly implemented by African governments, sometimes enthusiastically so - led to massive job cuts, crumbling public services and a stagnated formal sector. The social fall-out from these programmes was devastating to many communities, especially in the wake of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.



Read series: Beyond the Numbers

But the liberalised trade also provided opportunities for a different kind of route to prosperity in Africa. This was made possible by the expansion of three airlines: Ethiopian Airlines, Kenya Airways and South African Airways. Before the airline revolution in Africa, it could take days to transit from one city to another, and very frequently one had to transit through Europe - for example, Douala to Abidjan had to be connected via Paris.

However, these three airlines made for a very different kind of Africa. Via ET, KQ

and SAA, one could move much more easily around the continent and trade with each other, creating what we will call the “kitenge route”.

Perhaps analogous to the silk route through Asia and Europe, the kitenge route was an ordinary businessperson sourcing shea butter from Ghana, or Ankara fabric from Nigeria, and selling it at an open-air market in Kampala; or hundreds of artisanal curio traders getting their artefacts from Kenya and Tanzania and selling them at glitzy malls in Johannesburg.

Along with the airline revolution came satellite television, and primarily South Africa-based Multichoice/ DSTV. Although the absolute figure of DSTV subscribers in Africa is small - just over 10 million households, more than half of which are in South Africa - its impact on the continent’s aesthetic has been outsized.

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The explosion of urban African music in the past two decades has been driven by many forces, among them demographic change, globalisation and fast-growing cities, but DSTV’s Channel O was one of the first to create a space for urban music on the continent. Private radio and television stations were also sprouting all over the continent, sourcing music and films from fellow African countries. Platforms like YouTube made art travel even more seamlessly.



For a generation of young Africans who had grown up in the “lost decades” of the 1980s and 1990s, witnessing social decay and economic hardship all around them, the early 21<sup>st</sup> century was a time of possibility, even if the political reversals were many and economic promises yet to be fulfilled. Education expanded but so did unemployment; SAPs didn’t fix their country’s economic troubles, multiparty democracy didn’t quite deliver either, but at least they had this.

With that - and in later years, accelerated by social media - young urban Africans

were starting to get their cues on what was “cool” from icons as diverse as Mafikizolo, P-Square and T.I.D. They got their fashion tips from Nollywood stars like Omotola J. Ekeinde and Genevieve Nnaji, and shared these ideas online on places like Pinterest, Tumblr, and Instagram.

With that, a distinctly “African” aesthetic was created, drawing on different influences all over the continent, unapologetically mixed-and-matched, and melded together into a recognisable yet paradoxically vague “African” identity. You don’t quite know what it is, but you recognise it when you see it in a full Nigerian agbada or gele all the way in Nairobi, fused into an Ankara top-and-jeans combo, or all the way minimised into strips of kitenge fabric on the collar or cuffs of an otherwise “formal” shirt.

As second-hand clothing (called *mitumba* in Kenya) flooded African markets in this context of liberalised trade, having your own tailored outfit was increasingly a status symbol - leading to a whole demographic of young, self-taught designers and tailors who had picked up their skills from the Internet and from teaching each other. In many places, the previous generation of tailors had largely faded into obscurity from the onslaught of SAPs and *mitumba*.

Mancini Migwi is one such designer who has found her niche in producing African print designs. “My mother had several kitenge outfits, but my appreciation and love for Afro prints came later in life,” she tells me. “I’m a self-taught artist; I learned to design and sew from watching videos online. Pinterest is my style bible; I draw heavily from what I see people sharing there.”

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One of Migwi’s clients is the musician Dan Aceda, who is friends with the television journalist Larry Madowo. For a while, Madowo hosted *The Trend*, a Friday night variety show which was at one time one of Kenya’s highest-rated television programme. Madowo would wear a different design every week, and Aceda was performing in high-profile music events like the Koroga Festival and Blankets and Wine. Aceda tells me that he was competing with his friend to see

who could “unleash the best jacket”. It was a contest between friends that was playing out in front of millions of people – and subtly influencing what young people considered cool.



And for Rwandan designer Matthew “Tayo” Rugamba, the link between his rise as a designer, social media and an online buzz is even more obvious. The founder and creative director of bespoke menswear designer label House of Tayo, Rugamba was in college in Portland, Oregon in the United States when he put up a post on Tumblr in early 2012 of an idea he had – to create bow ties using African print fabric.

“Whenever I would say I’m from Rwanda, people would give me a look of pity,” Rugamba told me in a previous interview. “I didn’t like that. So I wanted to tell the story of African dignity – that being Rwandan, and African, wasn’t a pitiful thing.” Bow ties were his way of making this point: “They exude elegance and dignity.”

At this point he had not a shred of experience in fashion or design; what he had was his Tumblr post on how he was going to use bow ties to tell the story of an Africa that is dignified and sophisticated.

By sheer coincidence, that was the very week when big high fashion designers Vivienne Westwood and Burberry were launching some “Africa-inspired” designs. Whenever people would google “African fashion” that week, they landed on his Tumblr post – and immediately, the buzz began growing, with orders and interview requests landing thick and fast.

Rugamba had to turn down many invitations to headline fashion events in the coming weeks, as he actually had no material to showcase yet. But that was the unlikely beginning of House of Tayo, and in the coming months, Rugamba spent many hours teaching himself everything he could about design and colour combinations, mostly from online tutorials and following fashion blogs.

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Depending on the origin, fabric and production process, “African fabric” is not homogenous, but goes by many names and designs. Kitenge or chitenge is found

in East and Central Africa, notably Zambia, Malawi, Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Ankara is West African, but not quite exactly - the fabric we now know as Ankara finds its origins not in Africa but in Indonesia, where locals there had long created prints on fabric by using wax-resistant dyeing (batik). It was brought to West Africa by Dutch traders. Shweshwe is a printed cotton fabric design found in southern Africa, and traditionally was only produced in three colours - brown, red and blue. Baoule is a heavy, thick cloth from Côte d'Ivoire made of five-inch-wide strips of cloth woven together. And kente is that distinctive Ghanaian pattern made of strips of orange, yellow and green.

The one thing that all these fabrics have in common is colour. African print is unapologetically colourful, and wearing it in public - depending on the intensity of coloniality in your society - is taken to be a very brave move, or a political statement. In Nairobi certainly, formal spaces are very monochrome, especially for men; blue, black and intervening shades (light blue, navy, grey, white) are taken to be the proper tones for what Kenyans call "official" clothes.

The taboo of colour in formal spaces in Kenya is a legacy of the colonial imagination, and its attendant Victorian ethic, which saw everything African as a problem to be corralled, controlled and disciplined. And for African men, especially, the pressure to aesthetically conform is even more acute, because as men within the structures of patriarchy (even under colonialism) there is at least the possibility of social climbing in a way that excludes women simply because they are not men. In that way, women tend(ed) to have more room to continue wearing their kitenges, khangas and lesos.

*The one thing that all these fabrics have in common is colour. African print is unapologetically colourful, and wearing it in public - depending on the intensity of coloniality in your society - is taken to be a very brave move, or a political statement.*

It seems that the more one is in contact with the logic of whiteness, the more disciplined one's aesthetic will be. It is perhaps the reason why West Africans generally have a less complicated relationship with African prints - because they were colonised under indirect rule and did not have large numbers of white settlers to directly influence public life in that way. It is perhaps the reason why in a city like Nairobi, it was very difficult - until recently - to find anywhere to eat

“African food” in public that was not a kibanda (roadside kiosk). Beyond the kibanda is white territory, and therefore African food could not find a place in a formal restaurant. Only in the past few decades has this been changing, with a growing acceptance of African fabric, music and food in public spaces. A restaurant chain like Nyama Mama, an upmarket, African-themed establishment offering local cuisine, could have never existed in the 1990s Nairobi of my childhood. Even so, the menu at Nyama Mama tends to offer “modern” fusions or reinterpretations of local dishes instead of serving them straight up, like serving ugali as baked fritters instead of the traditional stiff porridge.

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Still, African designs are far from being unruly and chaotic. The repetitive motifs and designs of many fabrics are an example of fractals - geometric figures in which each part has the same character as the whole. Look closely at a piece of kitenge or Ankara fabric, and you are likely to see infinitely complex patterns that are repeated over and over again in an ongoing feedback loop.

Ron Eglash, professor at the University of Michigan Ann Arbor, in his book *African Fractals: Modern Computing and Indigenous Design*, explains how fractals permeate everything, from braided hairstyles and kente cloth to counting systems and the design of homes and settlements in many African communities. In his 2007 TED talk ‘The Fractals at the Heart of African Designs’, Eglash traces his journey into trying to understand African fractals, and the common pushback that he would get - that it was all “just intuition” and “Africans can’t possibly really be using fractal geometry...it wasn’t invented until the 1970s.”

*Ron Eglash, professor at the University of Michigan Ann Arbor, in his book African Fractals: Modern Computing and Indigenous Design, explains how fractals permeate everything, from braided hairstyles and kente cloth to counting systems and the design of homes and settlements in many African communities.*

“Well, it’s true that some African fractals are, as far as I’m concerned, just pure intuition,” he says in the talk. “So some of these things, I’d wander around the streets of Dakar asking people, ‘What’s the algorithm? What’s the rule for making

this?' and they'd say, 'Well, we just make it that way because it looks pretty, stupid.' [Laughter] But sometimes, that's not the case. In some cases, there would actually be algorithms, and very sophisticated algorithms. So in Mangbetu sculpture [from DR Congo], you'd see this recursive geometry. In Ethiopian crosses, you see this wonderful unfolding of the shape."

Eglash eventually traces these algorithms to sand divination that is common all over Africa, where priests divine your fortunes by making marks in the sand. These marks follow certain patterns that become diverse self-generating symbols that can be reduced to odd or even symbols, a kind of binary code.

Islamic mystics learned these divination patterns from African priests, and then took them to Spain in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. There they were kept alive among alchemy communities as the idea of [geomancy](#), or divination through the earth.

German mathematician Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz wrote about geomancy in his dissertation in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, using a one and a zero instead of odd and even symbols. English mathematician George Boole took Leibniz's binary code and refined it into Boolean algebra in 1847, and John von Neumann took Boolean algebra and created the digital computer in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century.

So every digital circuit in the world, according to this research, has its unlikely origin very long ago in Africa, and the humble kitenge is just part of a much bigger legacy. How very apt that these same digital platforms - social media, television, music and the Internet - are fuelling the spread of a culture that they owe their very existence to.

Prof. Ron Eglash's 2007 TED talk 'The Fractals at the Heart of African Designs'.

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# **Ayub Ogada: The Passing of a Nyatiti Evangelist**

The underlying tone of several online comments in response to the magnificence of Ayub Ogada's music ruefully note that the man was a proverbial prophet who failed to gain acceptance at home. Home here stretches beyond his birthplace Kenya into the vast African continent. The various comments suggested that he did not receive the level of respect and star recognition and treatment accorded him in Europe where he spent a large part of his creative life.

When he passed away on 1<sup>st</sup> Feb 2019, messages of condolence, as well as newspaper articles, generally reiterated that Ayub, the nyatiti icon, had been neglected locally. Commentators lamented that his music did not receive sufficient airplay and that he was not featured regularly in the media. Some even

suggested that the album he recently released, *Kodhi*, was all but successful. The narrative from another stream of commiseration minimised his musical genius and production to a single song, *Koth Biro*. The hauntingly melodious opening, “*Aaaayehaye aye aye...aye hayee aye aye*” is easily recognised even by those who draw a blank when asked, “Do you know Ayub Ogada?”

Granted, *Koth Biro* is Ayub Ogada’s most renowned song and signature tune, and has been rendered and re-rendered in countless versions by hundreds of artists all over the globe. However, to reduce him to the *Koth Biro* one-song wonder, displays a minimalist appreciation that obscures Ayub Ogada’s real contribution to world music and his success in putting Kenya and his adopted instrument - the nyatiti - on the global pedestal. This re-framing of Ayub Ogada’s quest, his narrative, his sojourn in Europe and eventual return to Kenya after almost two decades to settle in his rural home in Nyahera, Kisumu West, and his passion to work with the next generation of musicians paints a fuller picture of the man and his legacy.

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I first met Job Ouko Seda in the early seventies. He was a teenager with a thick American drawl and along with his brothers, David and Eric, joined Our Lady of Mercy Primary School in Nairobi. Eric, the youngest of the three Seda siblings, was my classmate and later became a good friend. They had just returned to Kenya from Chicago in America where their father had been pursuing his clinical medicine studies. While there, he was accompanied by his wife and the young Job as they gave performances of Luo music to Kenyan and American audiences in college campuses.

Job, who was 6-years-old when they relocated to America, was part of the travelling troupe and ended up getting exposed to multiple performance traditions early. He got immersed in the African American cultural and civil rights scene and recounts meeting and shaking the hand of Cassius Clay (Muhammed Ali) and experiencing the aftermath of American segregation. Job has described how going to America from Mombasa, where he was born, was a big culture shock comparable only to the counter-shock that hit him upon his return to Kenya.

Upon completing his primary schooling at Our Lady of Mercy Primary School, Job

joined Lenana High School where he played various musical instruments. He has said in interviews that the legendary Fadhili Williams of *Malaika* fame taught him how to play the guitar. While still in school he played for a band, *Awengele*, made up mainly of school mates. They experimented with rock and soul music that was playing on radio then. When he graduated from high school he teamed up with the likes of Gordon Ominde, Jack Otieno (Jack Odongo) and Ali Nassir to form Black Savage Band. The band drew their influence from psych and folk rock, funk and R&B. They recorded their debut album, *Something for Someone*. The album is described as having all songs in English with politically and socially aware lyrics.

The band went on to release three more singles, *Do you really care/Save the savage* and *Grassland/Kothbiro* and *Fire/Rita* - a reggae sound. The eclecticism of the music genre they produced points to young men struggling to find a musical identity. This was the time that the famous *Koth Biro* was composed. There has been controversy in some circles about the composer of the song. In an interview with John Lawrence published in 2015, Ayub Ogada said:

*“There was one afternoon when Mbarak Achieng’ and I were hungry, coming from rehearsals to buy some French fries in town. So, while walking along Waiyaki Way, the melody came, and we wrote Koth Biro.”*

The song is a Luo folk song imploring a certain Auma to be cautious because a major downpour is imminent and to hurry home with the herd of cattle. Black Savages went ahead and recorded it, but it was Ayub Ogada who remade the nyatiti version that has assumed iconic status.

When Black Savages fell apart, Job was tasked to form a band by Alan Donovan of African Heritage fame. The band was to accompany Kenya’s African Heritage Festival, which showcased Afrocentric fashion and design pieces. Alan Donovan’s brief to the band was to compose and produce original music, not the inauthentic tunes that were in vogue in Nairobi. This was to mark a turning point in Job Seda’s transformation as a musician, a transition to which he credits Alan Donovan. He has been quoted expressing gratitude saying, “I would be nothing without this man.”

*The song is a Luo folk song imploring a certain Auma to be cautious because a major downpour is imminent and to hurry home with the herd of cattle. Black*

*Savages went ahead and recorded it, but it was Ayub Ogada who remade the nyatiti version that has assumed iconic status.*

That was 1979. Job rounded up some of his former colleagues, Mbarak Achieng', Francis Njoroge Noel Sanyanafwa (Drury - an old school mate at Our Lady of Mercy and Lenena School) and Goro Kunii, and a unique musical journey began. Their repertoire included original compositions fusing traditional music with sounds of rock and soul. The band was later joined by Jack Odongo, Ali Mogobeni, Shabaan Onyango, Walter Amalemba, Sammy Eshikaty, Gido Kibukosya and Samite Mulondo from Uganda. They recorded *Niko Saikini* and *Handas*. Job's search for a real identity was still relentless. In between playing music, he was involved in film and is credited for work in *The Color Purple* and with acting roles in *Out of Africa* and *The Kitchen Toto*.

In an interview with Rupi Mangat, Job describes his epiphany, and conversion to the nyatiti. He recounts coming face to face with the musical instrument on display at the African Heritage showroom.

*"It was an instrument from my rural home, but nobody was playing it there any longer. So I bought it for a sum of Kshs 3,000 paying for it in instalments of Kshs 100. Then I found a teacher at the Bomas of Kenya to teach me how to play it. One lesson cost Kshs100. After six lessons, I could not afford the lessons anymore and taught myself. Since nobody played the instrument in Nairobi, I had to connect with the old people in Nyahera to learn more".*

Had Job Seda discovered the nyatiti, or had the nyatiti found him? Here he was, gravitating away from the mix of African Heritage's afro rock and soul, and returning to learn at the feet of the elders. It was a truly remarkable rediscovery of his Nilotic roots.

In an interview, Job recalls the beginning of his relationship with the nyatiti:

*"It was love at first sight for the nyatiti and Ogada. I often saw the instrument used by traditional groups or folk musicians. When I strummed the Kambanane strings, I instantly felt so strongly reconnected with my cultural roots."*

There was a metamorphosis happening and Job was giving way to Ayub Ogada. The *juogi* (spirits) that had been bottled up in him were slowly welling up and

consuming Job and giving birth to Ayub Ogada.

In his own words:

*“Job Seda had done a certain type of music that wasn’t African and I was involved in film industry. So I thought deeply about my life in 1986 and decided that I wanted to turn over a new leaf. When I discovered nyatiti, I went fully African.”*

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The origin of the eight-stringed *nyatiti* or lyre is shrouded in mysticism. It is noted that communities along the Nile river valley play versions of the instrument all the way from Egypt to the East African lacustrine region. It is more common among the Nilotic Luo and Kalenjin ethnic groups. Among the Bantu-speaking people, only the Abagusii and Bukusu have equivalents: the *obokano* and *litungu*, respectively.

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Speculation that the instrument originated in ancient Egypt, ancient Greece or Babylon is supported by images of the instrument on hieroglyphics in Egypt. The music scholars who have traced the *nyatiti* along the Nile valley assert that it is only found along the migration route of the Nilotic people. In Uganda, the Acoli – a Luo-speaking people – also have the *enanga* or *adungu* that is played by the Jo-Padhola and Ateso. According to Nyamungu Odindo, who was Ayub Ogada’s *nyatiti* teacher, the *nyatiti* came from Israel and passed through Libya, which is where Ramogi, the mystical progenitor of the Luo people, got the instrument.

The number of strings of the lyre in every community has symbolic significance. The *nyatiti* has eight and it is said that this number represents the four days of seclusion observed upon the birth of a male child before he is brought out. (A female child is brought out after three days.) The last four strings represent the four days of vigil observed upon the demise of a man. (It is three days for a woman.) The strings therefore represent the entire life of man, from birth to

death.

In this patriarchal worldview, the nyatiti player strums the entire continuum of life and death, in a sense acting as a mediator between the present and the past. In a recent interview, Ayub Ogada paraphrased this philosophy. He said:

*“Every time I play a song, I give you part of myself. So eventually, I must die because I have given you everything!”*

There is more to the strings of the nyatiti. When it is tuned, the fourth and fifth chord from either up or down have the same tune. There is a Dholuo tongue-twister that says, *“Nyatiti madiere móchodo chuny Jathum chutho.”* This could roughly translate to, *‘The middle cord of the nyatiti that completely breaks the heart of the lyre player.’* It suggests that the middle strings are the most important and if they break the musician and his music are as good as dead. It also suggests the spiritual bond or relationship between the musician and his instrument.

*In this patriarchal worldview, the nyatiti player strums the entire continuum of life and death, in a sense acting as a mediator between the present and the past.*

The nyatiti, unlike other string instruments, is very personal, and the tuning is dependent on the vocal range of and individual player. Researchers who have studied nyatiti players have noted that some players duplicate the tone of the voice while others produce a harmonic structure within which the vocal melody progresses. Nyatiti melodies are distributed to both hands and are played in an interlocking fashion using seven out of the ten fingers. The instrument is sacred in many respects, and it is believed that those who play it are not just musicians, but are possessed by the spirit of the *thum nyatiti*. The instrument is considered feminine, the prefix *nya* suggesting daughter of *titi*, which is onomatopoeic of the sound the middle cords. *Nya* is also the diminutive and so combined with *titi* it means “a small *titi*”. This feminisation of the instrument could be the reason that the nyatiti was traditionally only played by males.

An ethnomusicologist researcher tells us that women were discouraged from playing the nyatiti and that there was a social rule that stated that if a woman as much as touched the instrument she would be compelled to marry the owner. This

has recently changed and there are accomplished female players.

The nyatiti was also handed down from father to son and so not everyone could learn and play it; it had to be in your blood. Some studies have shown that the predecessor of the nyatiti - the thum - was slightly bigger, and the beat was maintained by a different player. The nyatiti was made smaller to accommodate the single player who had to combine all the accompaniments in competition with the one-man guitar.

Traditionally, the nyatiti was played while seated. The player would sit on a small stool (*orindi*) while wearing on his right big toe a wrought iron ring (*onduongó*) and a couple of small metallic bells. As he plucked his nyatiti, he kept time striking the neck of the nyatiti with the *onduongó* causing the bells to jingle as he did so. Thus the single nyatiti player was an entire ensemble, producing the percussive beat, the harmony through the singing, the melody through the nyatiti and the accompanying rattles.

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It is fascinating and illustrative of the transformation that in interviews detailing how he took up the nyatiti, Job Seda begins to refer to Ogada in the third person. The new identity associated with the instrument was taking him over. He said:

*“When you start to play the instrument, you practically get married. She won’t like you to play another instrument. You play and you enter a contract, and you have to be serious. Suits me fine; I’m happily married.”*

From his experience at the African Heritage, he was completely sold to the idea of developing traditional music made from traditional instruments. His frustration is felt in in this 1993 quote: “I lived a lot in the city and found it very difficult to have access to traditional music.”

The Kenyan music scene during this period was under the siege of Congolese rumba, soul and R&B, jazz, Latin pop and even country and western. For groups like African Heritage that were trying to be original, there was a shortage of role models. Further afield, it was the period when African artistes like Fela Kuti released global hits such as *Lady* and *Shakara*. Osibisa, a British Afro-pop band, was releasing hit after hit - *Woyaya*, *We are Going*, *Happy Children*. Artistes like Manu Dibango had released *Soul Makosa*. There is no doubt that these musicians

influenced Ayub Ogada's thinking and creative direction. Many parallels can be drawn to Ayub Ogada's transformation to artists like Fela Kuti who abandoned his birth name, Olufela Olusegun Oludotun Ransome-Kuti, and the high life type of music and adopted Afro-beat. Ayub Ogada however, never became as overtly political as Fela was, though he was a social commentator.

Job's restlessness persisted, and after a highly creative stint with African Heritage, he parted ways with the other members, including Gido Kibukosya, Wally Amalemba, Sam Eshikaty, and Jack Odongo, due to aesthetic and ideological differences. He decided to take the band in a different direction. He is quoted saying:

*"They wanted to get into more Afro-fusion (read Westernised) sounds while I wanted to stick with strengthening the indigenous African sounds of my music, so we had to go our separate ways."*

He was conflicted because he felt that he was not growing musically. So in 1986 he set off to the UK in search of kindred spirits. He stated in an interview that he needed to meet and interact with musicians making similar music away from the copy-cat scene in Nairobi and Kenya. He was by then an accomplished nyatiti player. At this point, it would be apt to paraphrase the famous quote by Neil Armstrong when he walked on the moon and state that this was one small step for the man Ayub Ogada and one giant leap for the nyatiti.

Ayub Ogada's sojourn in Europe is only comparable to what Lamine Konte of Senegal and Foday Musa Suso of Gambia did for the kora. These artistes brought the kora to Europe to dialogue with musical trends alien to the Mandinka tradition that had produced it. Lamine Konte mixed the kora with Casamance traditional melodies and harmonised it with Afro Cuban rhythms while Foday Musa Suso crossed the kora with jazz instruments. Artist like Toumane Diabete improvised and infused the kora with other types of music and gave birth to a revival of the griot tradition and the contemporisation of the instrument and its performance.

No one before Ayub Ogada had done this for the nyatiti. His was a deliberate decision and sacrifice. In a 2016 interview after his *Koth Biro* was played in his absence at the opening of the Summer Olympics, he reminisced about the visa-obtaining shenanigans that had made it impossible for him to travel to Rio. He

poignantly stated:

*"I know most probably our traditional instruments such as nyatiti are not taken with the seriousness like others. I am sure if it were some people carrying pianos, guitars, and other contemporary instruments, the treatment would have been different."*

The story of Ayub Ogada, roughing it out in the London Underground while playing his nyatiti, has been told and retold hundreds of times, but the point that is missing is the realisation of the nature of the sacrifice that led to the global recognition of the nyatiti and its distinct sound. Ayub Ogada and the nyatiti strode onto the global stage when he was invited to play at WOMAD in 1988. He was scheduled to play for ten minutes, but at the last minute a Mozambican band failed to turn up and he was asked if he could play. He describes that serendipitous moment in an interview with Francis Gooding in 2016:

*"I said, no problem. I went into this great, big concert hall. The place was empty. I set myself up, plugged myself in, and did my concert. Normally, I close my eyes when I perform, and when I finished, the concert hall was packed, over capacity, and the applause just nearly blew me over. I nearly fell off my stool. As I came off stage, Peter Gabriel came and escorted me and that's really how I began with WOMAD and Real World."*

As the saying goes, the rest is history. Peter Gabriel invited him to take part in one of the recording weeks and the rise of Ayub Ogada and nyatiti had begun. He went on to record *En Mana Kuoyo (It is Just Sand)*.

*Ayub Ogada's sojourn in Europe is only comparable to what Lamine Konte of Senegal and Foday Musa Suso of Gambia did for the kora. These artistes brought the kora to Europe to dialogue with musical trends alien to the Mandinka tradition that had produced it.*

Ayub Ogada and his nyatiti have shared the stage with various types of musicians and choirs. *Koth Biro*, in particular, has been rendered in uncountable forms with different instrumentation and even vocalisation of the nyatiti riff. The Luo lyrics of *Koth Biro* have been sung by hundreds of artists, with some renditions sounding totally ridiculous to the Luo ear. I am prepared to lay a bet that there is no other Kenyan song that has been as globally rendered as *Koth Biro* has. When I watched

a perfect cello remaking of the nyatiti, it spoke of the length that Ayub Ogada's sojourn had taken the nyatiti.

The nyatiti is not only inspiring new creations, but is getting incorporated into global beats, thanks to Ayub Ogada. He was by no means a traditional nyatiti player; he improvised and changed the playing position of the lyre. He cradled the nyatiti on his lap - a style that has now become more acceptable and probably allows the players more face-time with the audience. This playing position is also easier for female players of nyatiti to adopt. Working with varied instrumentalists, he created space for more and more instruments to accompany his nyatiti and he used the *gara* and *onduon'go* less and less. He incorporated djembe drums, thus adding a more powerful pulsating beat to his tunes, and welcomed the West African drums into the nyatiti's space.

Ayub Ogada might as well be credited with the upright nyatiti playing position that democratised the instrument by making it gender neutral.

In 2007 Ayub Ogada, the pilgrim and his nyatiti, returned home. He said:

*"Many people have forgotten traditional music. I feel a responsibility to re-introduce it. I learnt from here and I want to give back."*

Like an evangelist, Ayub Ogada had converted the world to appreciate this unique instrument that has a history of over 5,000 years. He had put Kenya on the map with *Koth Biro*, the tune that had featured in sound tracks of international films, and more recently in Kanye West's music. The remaining task for the nyatiti proselyte was to re-ground traditional music and instruments back to the source.

Ayub Ogada returned home to set up a studio where he could work with younger artists and provide the direction that he felt he lacked as a young man. Returning to one's roots - *dala* - is an imploring message in *Koth Biro: Auma keluru dhok e dala* (*Auma, bring the cattle back home*). The family's wealth, the cattle, finally returned to the homestead.

Upon his death, there were many, like the singer Suzanne Owiyo, who eulogised him as the inspiration that led them to taking up the nyatiti. Ayub Ogada's prodigy, Martin Murimi, who goes by the name Papillion, is taking the nyatiti to the next level. He has designed an instrument called *Anywal-Abel*, a combination of a harp, percussion and thumb piano. Papillion attributes his success to his

mentor, for whom he composed a song, *Ayubu*. In the song he praises Ayub Ogada as the quintessential teacher and mentor in whose debt he will forever be. He met Ayub Ogada in 2013 at a workshop and Ayub went ahead and invited him to the African Heritage and mentored him. He has since grown as an artist performer and designer of his own instruments. He is hailed as the only one in Africa. He said, "I felt the need to thank Ayub for the impact he has put in me and so I did it with my first song."

*Ayub Ogada returned home to set up a studio where he could work with younger artists and provide the direction that he felt he lacked as a young man. Returning to one's roots - dala - is an imploring message in Koth Biro: Auma keluru dhok e dala (Auma, bring the cattle back home). The family's wealth, the cattle, finally returned to the homestead.*

Unfortunately, Ayub Ogada remained largely unrecognised and unacknowledged at home - but he will be remembered globally for being a nyatiti prophet.

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## **An Inconvenient Truth: Pristine Wildernesses and Other Myths Peddled by the BBC**

BBC Natural History has [just announced](#) a new series, "One Planet, Seven Worlds", fronted by veteran broadcaster David Attenborough, to tell "the fundamental truth about what makes each [continent] unique." I'd be astonished if it covered one of the most important aspects of the "fundamental truth", which is the way local people have enhanced biodiversity and shaped "nature" since time immemorial, and what happened and is still happening to those people who have largely escaped being subsumed into the mainstream by colonialism and industrialisation. (These minorities are now labelled as ethnic, indigenous or tribal, depending on the regional context.)

Like most families in rural Britain, we got our first television towards the end of the 1950s. Every five o'clock came Children's Hour - rather dull puppets, some excellent cartoons, and of course "nature." My earliest memory is that of Armand and Michaela Denis filming "Pygmies" and constructing a rope suspension bridge in Africa (entirely faked, why would they want one?), and a boyish David Attenborough in fuzzy black and white chasing down wild animals to capture for the London Zoo. It was the start of something big: The BBC's Natural History Unit has gone on to become the world's biggest producer of wildlife films.

In the decades since the rope trick bridge, the BBC Natural History Unit has also presented a single, unshakable view of wildlife and conservation. No one doubts that it works magnificently; it's the corporation's biggest money earner. It formed and still shapes the public's view of what conservation actually means in distant continents. This specialised BBC unit shows us a pristine wilderness full of photogenic beasts whose existence, we are told (usually by the same David Attenborough), is endangered by loss of habitat, human overpopulation, and of course "poaching" - such threats apparently emanating from Africans or Asians.

The same narrative is also peddled by the big conservation organisations, which thrive in financial symbiosis with the BBC's orthodoxy as the corporation makes money from its programmes and as donations from the viewing public flow to the NGOs. Each presents the complex question of conservation in exactly the same way, and each proposes the same, simple - and entirely wrong - solution. It is "fortress conservation" with more and more "brave guards" and increasing military force and weaponry to defend the animals against the human killers (who are never white).

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To anyone who knows the other sides of conservation, the bias is obvious, but the BBC unit's ideology is relentless and impacts the wider BBC as a whole. The corporation's website, for example, almost always features a news story about poaching, illustrated with grisly pictures of mutilated animals, or it did until

recently.

## **“Massacre” in Botswana**

Then, in September 2018, something new happened. It began with BBC News [breaking a story](#) on elephant poaching in Botswana (“Dozens of elephants killed near Botswana wildlife sanctuary”) which, as usual, gathered in hysteria as it rolled around the web. It became a “[genocide](#)” and even one of the “[worst mass poaching sprees](#)” in Africa.

But the tale unraveled when scrutinised, and no one who’s followed it can now sensibly believe it was true. There was no “massacre”, it turns out that the story arose at least partly from the power struggle between the country’s former President Khama, an army general known for his implacable support for “fortress conservation,” and his successor, President Masisi.

In spite of a great deal of evidence to that effect, the BBC journalist who broke the story, Alastair Leithead, [stood by it](#), though the corporation itself quietly changed its tune. For example, over eighty per cent of BBC Africa tweets reported on poaching in the month prior to the “massacre” but there was only one story (about shellfish) in the following three months. Leithead’s source for Botswana was [Elephants Without Borders](#), an NGO with a vested interest in supporting ex-president Khama, and which would have raked in donations as a result of the story. Leithead was doubtless unaware of how he had favoured one political faction over another; he was presumably just supporting the BBC’s traditional conservation model in the run-up to the Illegal Wildlife Trade Conference due to take place in London the following month, October 2018.

That’s speculation, but what’s certain is that films that show a completely different side of conservation, such as the excellent “Unnatural Histories,” can be counted on one hand and are relegated to non-mainstream channels, like BBC4. The wholly different narrative they expose begins with the revelation that protected areas were never “pristine wildernesses” in the first place; they were home to local peoples who actually created the “wild” ecosystems, and who were then thrown out and destroyed when parks were imposed by national governments. The grass plains of the Serengeti, the Amazon rainforest and so on, were all formed by vigorous human intervention over thousands of years. Experts now accept this, but it remains little known among the general public. Why?

Because very few BBC nature viewers have ever been told the real history: After all, it profoundly undermines the fake one.

The destruction of the original landowners, the creators and curators of the world's "wildernesses", is criminal in several respects. One is that they were often far better at maintaining biodiversity than the incoming, usually white, conservationists. The latter often fail, and usually blame the locals when things go wrong.

Another point is just how protected these areas really are. They usually include an infrastructure specifically aimed at only the richest tourists. Most of the African parks marketed as "pristine wilderness" include roads, hotels (called "lodges," to make them seem smaller), luxury "camps", artificial water holes and salt licks to attract animals, airstrips, and so on. I have been in one where a leopard appeared every evening in perfect view of the hotel dining room, just as food was being served. The excited guests rarely stayed long enough to question what might lie behind this spectacular coincidence, but of course the tourists weren't the only ones being fed by the hotel staff.

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Protected areas are not only landscaped for elite tourism, some of the animals which fill our screens have been transported there. That doesn't always work out well, and some pay with their lives. For example, at least ten rhinos died in Kenya in 2018 as a result of being moved into a park. That's more than were poached in either of the previous two years. Sadly, it's not an isolated incident: Some twenty per cent of "endangered" cheetahs routinely die while being transported in South Africa [by conservationists](#).

But artificial landscaping and importing animals are just two aspects of what has become partly a film set: Protected areas are often home to mining (such as the Central Kalahari Game Reserve in Botswana), logging, destructive monoculture, such as teak and oil palm, and [trophy hunting](#) (such as around Lobeke National Park, Cameroon). Much of this happens in government-approved concessions and

some of the companies involved work in close partnership with conservation NGOs.

Since the Botswana elephant “massacre” was exposed as a sham in September 2018, I’ve noticed a quiet shift at the BBC: I haven’t been scrutinising rigorously, but I can’t remember seeing a single poaching story headlined since.

### **Pitting people against nature**

However, now there’s a new development, this time concerning India. It began with a BBC news report in 2017, [“Killing for Conservation”](#), by correspondent, Justin Rowlatt. His film exposed the atrocities committed in the name of conservation in India’s Kaziranga National Park – cinematically visited by Prince William and Kate – where rangers have “shoot on sight” orders and are never prosecuted for vigorously deploying them. They killed around twenty so-called poachers a year, sometimes more than the number of animals poached.

Some “animal liberationists” may raise a cheer at this gruesome news, but Rowlatt filmed testimony from innocent locals who had been devastated as a result, including relatives of a man with severe learning difficulties, fatally shot as he was rounding up cows near the park’s edge, and 7-year-old Akash Orang, crippled for life when rangers fired on him by mistake. His father told Rowlatt, “He used to be cheerful, he isn’t anymore. In the night he wakes up in pain and cries for his mother.”

Killing for Conservation was about Kaziranga in Assam, but many other atrocities have been reported from dozens of protected areas across India. At the time of writing, no less than 280,000 people, mostly tribal Adivasis,\* face illegal and forced eviction from tiger reserves, usually from places where they’ve lived successfully in close proximity to the big cats for generations.

Rowlatt’s film attracted a fierce outcry from the conservation establishment. The National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) clamoured for retribution, so the Indian government responded by banning the BBC from all protected areas for five years. In a stroke, the wildlife filmmakers were deprived of their most iconic non-African star, and all because BBC News had exposed an inconvenient truth about what “conservation” actually meant for local people.

At the end of 2018, the story took another twist when a letter received by the

NTCA [was leaked](#). It was seemingly written by Julian Hector, head of the BBC's Natural History Unit, but had no date or addressee. Hector expressed "regret for any adverse impacts" caused by the Rowlatt film. He noted the "successful efforts" in Indian tiger conservation, and was concerned that the work had now been "made harder". He proffered apologies for his failure to approach the tiger authority earlier. Stories quickly appeared in the Indian press falsely claiming that the BBC had apologised for, and even retracted, its film.

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Given the letter's missing date and addressee, Survival International initially suspected a hoax. We asked Hector's staff if it was genuine, but they weren't saying. We turned to the head of the BBC, Tony Hall, to ask whether or not the BBC stood by Rowlatt's film. The BBC boss quickly replied in the affirmative: It turns out that the letter really had been written by Hector, but the corporation was certainly not retracting its report that innocent people have been shot, tortured, and some killed, in the (supposed) conservation of Indian protected areas.

This was encouraging because we knew Rowlatt's report was just the tip of a monster iceberg: For years, Survival International has been reporting harrowing testimonies about atrocities committed against the Mising, Baiga, Jenu Kuruba, and many other tribal peoples in the name of conservation. Hector's letter was simply an attempt by BBC Natural History to get back to filming tigers - irrespective of the atrocities Adivasi people face in the reserves.

One can understand its desperation, of course. BBC Natural History was launching a new flagship series, "Dynasties", and it was as spectacular as expected. Its wonderful episode on tigers, broadcast in December 2018, repeats the usual old falsehoods. Viewers are lectured (by the very same David Attenborough!), "In India today there are new pressures, making it harder than ever [for tigers] to rear a family." This simply isn't true. According to the Indian

authorities, tigers are increasing in numbers, albeit slowly, and so wasn't it really "harder than ever" for them during the British Raj's tiger massacre (starting in around the 1870s and carrying on in independent India)? This "sport" lasted a hundred years and [killed tens of thousands](#), taking the animal to the edge of extinction. The blood from that slaughter lies on the hands of the parents and grandparents of many of today's British viewers, but it's always safer, and supposedly less "political," simply to blame poor villagers in today's India.

### **What needs to be done**

What all this highlights is the bias at the heart of the BBC's Natural History Unit. It relentlessly promulgates the foundation myth of Western conservation, that "wildernesses" must be defended against the Africans or Asians who actually live there. Never mind that national parks in Europe often include working farms and even towns; in other continents the locals must be thrown out, and then shot if they try and go back in. Such pitting people against nature may be the metaphorical lifeblood of a conservation industry that relies on the TV portrayal of natural history, but it's an entirely false antagonism that drains the real lifeblood from indigenous, tribal and other local people.

Things must change, and not only to respect the law and human rights. If they don't, we could soon be facing the end of protected areas and their wildlife. The local backlash against them is gaining increasingly angry momentum and is bound to prevail, especially in Africa where "our" cherished conservation is increasingly seen as nothing more than land-grabbing colonialism. The imagery that has filled our screens throughout my lifetime must acknowledge its bias and start reflecting the real world.

We should be shown how protected areas are the result of thousands of years of human habitation; how local, especially indigenous, people, have enhanced both the landscape and wildlife; how evicting and mistreating them leads to biodiversity loss; and how it is they who must be returned to the forefront of protecting wildlife, in all its forms. You don't need environmental qualifications to realise that the people defending their own land and resources are going to be better guardians than the hired, underpaid rangers who are easily tempted by corruption. We should be listening to them, the locals, much more than to the environmentalists and broadcasters (with their own sky-high carbon footprints).

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The BBC, with its millions of viewers, really should play a leading role in the conservation of nature, but it's not the one currently acted out on our screens: In the long run, the images now transmitted into the comfort of our living rooms are deeply counterproductive for conservation, irrespective of their undoubted beauty and the money and accolades they gather.

*(\*"Adivasi" is a term used for many of the 700 or so unique tribal peoples in India, numbering over 100,000,000 individuals. Some may not be more "indigenous" to the subcontinent than many mainstream Indians, and the government doesn't use the term "indigenous." They do, however, retain their own separate identity, are often largely self-sufficient, and maintain a strong attachment to their lands. They are widely discriminated against. I go into the fraught question of "correct" terminology in my book [Tribal Peoples for Tomorrow's World](#).)*

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## **Oliver Mtukudzi: The Art of Protest**

*'As far as Africa is concerned, music cannot be for enjoyment. It has to be for revolution.'*

- Fela Anikulapo Kuti.

On Wednesday January 23 2018, as Zimbabwean and one of Africa's most celebrated musicians Oliver Mtukudzi took his final bow in Harare aged 66, the floodgates of debate opened. Who was this cultural colossus? What about his politics cast against the turbulent reality of Zimbabwe? There is global consensus

that Mtukudzi was a musical giant, but away from the music, nuanced conversations were happening. Was Mtukudzi modeled in the image of Franco Luambo Makiadi, who towed Mobutu Sese Seko's line to stay in favour and keep producing music, or was he a Fela Kuti, a no-holds-barred bold anti-establishment figure?

There is little evidence to suggest that Mtukudzi was explicitly either a Franco or Fela replica - at least politically speaking. His loyal fans insist that he was simply Tuku, a man who handled his music and politics with a delicate balance as to allow himself the license to keep singing and touring, while avoiding the tempting trap of complicity by siding with the oppressors. One needs to revisit a little history to understand the obsession with situating a certain generation and caliber of African artists -a classification Mtukudzi belonged - within the prevailing political circumstances in their home countries.

During the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, musicians such as Hugh Masekela and Miriam Makeba, alongside writers and poets such as *Keorapetse Kgotsile and* Dennis Brutus, deployed their celebrity status to shape events both at home and abroad, thereby succeeding in drawing global attention to the plight of a segregated and oppressed Black population. Makeba, using the personal-is-political strategy, insisted that her music was not political, hastening to add - possibly as a caveat - that she only sang about truth. To her listeners across the world, what Makeba called truth was equated to her broadcasting the malevolent experiences suffered by Black South Africans, in effect deploying music to camouflage her anti-apartheid campaign. Makeba did not need to announce her politics from rooftops, because she was living her politics out loud for everyone to see and hear.

*As far as Africa is concerned, music cannot be for enjoyment. It has to be for revolution*

When Hugh Masekela, arrived in exile in the United States, he was still confused about what genre of music to pursue. He was mimicking a lot of American jazz before Miles Davis urged him to stick to the Southern Africa sound he had been experimenting with and take his time before digging his heels in politically. He benefitted from the counsel of African American musical greats such as Harry Belafonte, who persuaded Masekela against returning to South Africa to bury his

mother. Belafonte feared that the young Masekela had not built the influence needed to restrain the apartheid regime from arresting and imprisoning him. In time, Masekela slowly built the requisite stature, joining the likes of Makeba in using music to tell their country's story. Like Makeba, Masekela was not overtly political outside his music, but his compositions did not hide his position.

On his part, the poet Dennis Brutus - like his Nigerian counterpart Christopher Okigbo - went all out. Brutus put his poetry aside for a moment and successfully campaigned for the banning of South Africa from the 1964 Olympic Games in Tokyo, Japan. By the time the announcement of the ban was made, Brutus, who had returned home to South Africa, was already serving jail time in Robben Island - locked up in a prison cell next to that of Nelson Mandela - for his activities against the apartheid regime. On leaving jail, Brutus fled South Africa, banned from writing and publishing in the country.

Okigbo seemingly faced with limited choices took up arms to fight alongside his Igbo kin during the Biafra war, an act which resulted in the poet's death in combat. Okigbo's passing deeply affected his contemporary Chinua Achebe who eulogized him through his *'Dirge for Okigbo'* resulting in Achebe leaving Nigeria and assuming the role of Biafra's ambassador at large. Earlier, before the fighting had taken root, the poet and playwright Wole Soyinka appointed himself mediator between the two warring sides secretly meeting Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, leader of the breakaway Republic of Biafra. This act saw Soyinka imprisoned for two years by the country's military dictatorship. Closer home, in 1970s repressive Kenya, Ngugi wa Thiongo was detained following the staging of his play *'Ngaahika Ndeeda'* - Gikuyu for 'I Will Marry When I Want' - after the state considered Ngugi's actions seditious.

Like Makeba and Masekela, Mtukudzi fought a battle of memory. He may not have had a political-heavy discography but he took up the battle identity that ensured that his people would not forget themselves, in the process ensuring Africa and the world did not forget his people.

By consciously keeping away from overt political commentary in Zimbabwe, Mtukudzi in a way chose to look beyond Zimbabwe much as he was looking right into his country's eyes, his life mission being to make the rest of the world see, feel, touch, smell and taste the best of Zimbabwe's culture and artistry. To some, this was enough. To others, Tuku's apolitical nature was akin to neutrality,

construed as complicity.

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On the first Friday night after the passing of Mtukudzi, I made a midnight dash to Sippers, the Nairobi Rhumba hideaway, looking to find out who Mtukudzi was and what he represented in the eyes of my interlocutors. Following his long career that stretched decades of performances across Africa and the West, the man known as one of Zimbabwe's finest exports - according to his daughter Selmour - built a global following.

"He put Zimbabwe on the map," said Selmour, who is also a musician of note. "He's the biggest export from Zimbabwe, and all artists look up to him, to get to his level and surpass it. He set the gold standard."

In Kenya, Mtukudzi's huge following first originated from his popular hit *Todii* - which is all that a sizeable chunk of his fans knew about the man and his music. Mtukudzi also made frequent appearances in the Nairobi concert circuit, earning himself a more discerning followership that went beyond *Todii*. Much as the song is popular with revelers across Africa and beyond, *Todii* was born out of one of Mtukudzi's saddest life experiences. In 1996, four members of Black Spirit, Mtukudzi's band - including his younger brother Robert Mtukudzi, with whom he started his musical journey - got infected with HIV/AIDS. All the four succumbed to the disease, dying within a two-month window of each other's death.

"I wrote *Todii* to address the HIV/AIDS stigma," Mtukudzi told an interviewer in 2015. "It was a song meant to help start a difficult conversation, which many people didn't know how to go about."

It is safe to say that Mtukudzi was one of a group of African musicians - alongside the likes of Masekela - who were adopted by Kenyans as one of their own, invited back time and again for representing something which was at once soothing and liberating, always reminding their audiences that Africa was still one. Musically, Kenya has struggled to produce artistic personas of such stature, much as it has had an abundance of gifted musicians - such as the late Ayub Ogada - some of whom have even collaborated musically with these African greats. For various reasons, Kenya's cultural glue doesn't hold tight enough. Benga, for instance, a Kenyan sound which was exported across Africa and beyond during the 1970s, still struggles to pass for the quintessential Kenyan musical experience partly

because it is reduced to the 'ethnic' categorization, while artists from other African countries who sing in their languages are embraced as transcendent cultural icons. To cure this void, Kenya has found itself perpetually looking outside, to the likes of Mtukudzi.

"My impression of Mtukudzi was heavily influenced by the white neo-liberal view of him," said Oketch, a Kenyan professor of philosophy who spent years living and studying in the West. "Every summer, for as long as I remember, Mtukudzi was invited to Chicago, where he sometimes performed alongside his countryman Thomas Mapfumo. To the white crowd, he was this big deal African performer. That was my earliest introduction to the man - an African revered by the concert going Western crowd."

For some critics, Mtukudzi fits the criteria of the African export to the West - which in some quarters translates to being a sellout. Nonetheless, Mtukudzi did not limit his performances to Western capitals. Tuku possibly performed across Africa and in Zimbabwe in particular as much as he did away from home, building a solid homegrown fanbase.

Mtukudzi and Mapfumo were one time bandmates in their youthful years, playing for the Wagon Wheel band. Much as they were both influential in the later periods of Zimbabwe's liberation struggle, Mapfumo almost always rocked the political boat post-independence in 1980, with Mtukudzi taking the middle ground, both within and outside of his music. As a result of their different approaches to Zimbabwean politics, Mapfumo was exiled in the early 1990s, while Mtukudzi stayed put, giving Zimbabweans something to hold onto musically in times of serious political tribulations. Mtukudzi christened his music Tuku, drawn from his nickname, while Mapfumo dubbed his sound Chimurenga, continuing to be heavily associated with the liberation movement by the same name. Chimurenga, according to Ntone Edjabe - the Cameroonian DJ, journalist and founder of the Cape Town based Pan-African gazette, the Chimurenga Chronic - means "in the spirit of Murenga", who was a highly revered Shona liberation hero.

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“He was a Shona who was loved by the Ndebele,” said Irene who is a Kenyan consultant with a multinational who has worked in a number of African countries. “I was once told of how when my friend’s sister arrived in Zimbabwe from an overseas trip, she came across one of the largest crowds she had ever seen in Harare. On asking what the occasion was she was informed it was an Oliver Mtukudzi concert. That is how much the man was loved in his motherland.”

In many African countries, political competition gets highly divisive, setting communities against each other. Zimbabwe was no exception. *Gukurahundi* - a Shona term loosely translated to mean “the early rain that washes away the chaff before the spring rains” - was a series of massacres carried out against the Ndebele population by the Zimbabwean army under Robert Mugabe between 1983 and 1987. It was believed to have emanated from the rivalry between the two dominant political parties, ZANU led by Mugabe, a Shona, and ZAPU, led by Mugabe’s fellow liberation stalwart Joshua Nkomo, a Ndebele. The killings were intended to quell a supposed impending rebellion against the Mugabe state, resulting in thousands of deaths. This has remained one of the darkest patches in Zimbabwe’s history - just like Biafra for Nigeria. Therefore, the acknowledgment that Mtukudzi, a Shona, was celebrated in Ndebele land despite the painful historical fissures goes a long way in signifying the power of Tuku.

“I credit Mtukudzi with maintaining Zimbabwe’s cultural momentum,” Irene said, “something which a number of African countries lost post-independence. In that way, he became an invaluable national asset, a symbol of resilience, and a Pan-African treasure. If there is one thing we have continuously been reminded of as Africans, it is that you lose momentum, you lose the struggle. By singing about love, life, loss, Mtukudzi reminded us of what being Zimbabwean and living the Zimbabwean and African experience felt like, reinforcing the idea of art as the natural adhesive that holds societies together.”

Mtukudzi gave Zimbabwe what Fela gave to Nigeria - artistic endurance. Tuku was not Zimbabwe’s Fela, because Zimbabwe might not have needed a Fela with the presence of a robust liberation movement that solidly rallied around a beloved Robert Mugabe, before the man turned rogue. On the other hand, Nigeria had a series of coup d’etats after independence, resulting in successive military dictatorships that Fela felt obliged to keep resisting. The Fela comparison therefore only went as far as Mtukudzi’s artistic staying power, that he was perpetually present, towering in the lives of Zimbabweans from the time of the

liberation struggle onwards - metaphorically holding the country's hand through the good, the bad and the ugly.

“Why do we sing, why is there art?” Mtukudzi posed during the 2015 interview, grappling with the question of the role of art and artists, explaining his life's work. “Art is to give life and hope to the people. Art is for healing broken hearts. Like in Zimbabwe, you don't sing a song when you have nothing to say.”

*Mtukudzi gave Zimbabwe what Fela gave to Nigeria - artistic endurance. Tuku was not Zimbabwe's Fela, because Zimbabwe might not have needed a Fela with the presence of a robust liberation movement that solidly rallied around a beloved Robert Mugabe, before the man turned rogue.*

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In Mobutu Sese Seko's Zaire - the home of Rhumba - standing up to the strongman, whether an artist or politician, was like buying one's one-way ticket to prison, or at worse, writing one's obituary. It therefore took the likes of Papa Wemba - whose cultural contribution is not fully appreciated by many outside the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire) - to use their artistic influence to start cracking Mobutu's edifice, covertly. As Mobutu enforced his Zaireanization program, asking the Congolese to denounce Western influence - including fashion and names - Papa Wemba led a quiet rebellion by reimagining fashion, starting a sartorial elegance movement which did not fall within Mobutu's categorization of Western clothing, but equally didn't fit into African fashion as imagined by the President.

This created sufficient middle ground occupied by those who wished to defy Mobutu and his politics covertly, without necessarily going to the streets to battle against military tanks. Fashion therefore became a weapon, a place of solace, an assertion of personal and collective defiance, a reclamation of self-dignity. This gave way to the rise of the La Sape (Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes d'Élégance, translated as the “Society of Atmosphere-setters and Elegant People”) to which Papa Wemba became the unofficial leader, influenced by fashion trends in Milan and Paris - directly challenging Mobutu's anti-European sentiment, and by extension challenging his politics. It was the perfect illustration of soft power.

Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe - like Mobutu's Zaire - morphed into a cesspool which ordinarily results in artists being pressured to use their art for something bigger. Mtukudzi therefore found himself under the spotlight, seeing that his contemporary Thomas Mapfumo who some insist is the closest Zimbabwe has gotten to having a Fela, both musically and politically had long drawn the line on the sand and declared all-out war on Mugabe, just as he did with the colonialists before that. Yet Mtukudzi refused to get directly drawn into the politics of the day, by all indications pulling a Papa Wemba-like soft power move - picking to fight on the cultural frontline - because sometimes one has to pick their battles. There are those who will condemn Tuku for his apolitical stance, just as there are those who will understand where the man was coming from, because sometimes, under such strenuous circumstances, there is only so much one can do.

On that cultural frontline, there was one significant battle that Mtukudzi successfully waged in seeking to preserve the essence of Zimbabwean music. The genesis of Mtukudzi's pushback, as documented in "*Shades of Benga*" - a seminal work on Kenyan music history by Tabu Osusa's Ketebul Music - started with the appointment of the Kenyan music producer Oluoch Kanindo as the regional representative for the international music label EMI Records. Kanindo became so instrumental in EMI's Africa operations to a point of earning the privilege of jet setting across the continent, to seal recording and distribution deals.

Thanks to Kanindo's infiltration of the African market through his Sungura and Kanindo record labels, both of which exploited the EMI music distribution networks - the Kenyan sound, Benga, became popular in East and Southern Africa, going as far as being one of the more popular sounds among Zimbabwean freedom fighters. Benga started influencing Zimbabwean music especially in the late 1970s when Kanindo was in his musical prime as a producer. It was off the back of this musical invasion that Mtukudzi made a conscious decision to pushback against it, seeking to preserve the Shona and Ndebele traditional sounds, leading to the birth of Tuku. The influence of Benga was so strong that there are proponents who hold that much as he worked overtime to become a Zimbabwean purist, Mtukudzi borrowed elements of his music from Benga. This monumental pushback illustrates Tuku's sense of eternal cultural patriotism.

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Oliver Mtukudzi was born in September 1952 in Highfield, a Harare township

with historic significance as one of the founding hotspots of Zimbabwe's independence movement. As if predestined to be a musician, Mtukudzi's parents had met during a choir competition, passing down the music bug to their eldest son, Oliver and his younger brother Robert, who became bandmates in Mtukudzi's Black Spirits. In the early 1970s, the two brothers started experimenting with music and landed in trouble for sneaking out of the house to play at a local beer parlor. It was here that Mtukudzi got a rare opportunity to have his first encounter with an electric guitar, getting in trouble with his parents, who were against their two sons' pursuit of a career in music.

"I played the guitar so well," Mtukudzi recalled, "such that the following day, those at the beer parlor reported to my father how talented I was. It was the one time my father hit me, for sneaking out of the house and spending time at the beer parlor in pursuit of music."

As fate would have it, the self-taught guitarist who began experimenting, looking for his own unique sound that had observers saying he didn't play the guitar right - would land his big break while sitting right in front of his family home in Highlife. Brighton Matebere, at the time a leading journalist with the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation, had a love interest on Mtukudzi's street, and regularly ran into the young Mtukudzi practicing with his guitar outside his family house whenever he came around to visit his girlfriend. Matebere was impressed by Mtukudzi's skills and invited him to perform during his radio show. It was his impressive performance during the radio interview that resulted in Mtukudzi getting his first recording deal in 1975, never to look back again. Later, in 1977, he joined Wagon Wheel band, alongside Thomas Mapfumo.

"When I left school I did not get a job for at least three years," Mtukudzi revisited the birth of his politics, from where he learnt to hide in his music. "Blacks were not allowed to apply for jobs, but the colonialists didn't think of art as a weapon that could be used against them. So they allowed us to sing. It was therefore up to the artist to help the nation heal and grow. We used idioms and proverbs, knowing that Shona speakers would decipher the coded messages we were passing across without being explicitly political."

67 albums later, Mtukudzi still spoke as if he was in search of what to call a career, telling Forbes Africa in 2016, "I am yet to decide on a career to take on, because this is not a career for me. I am just doing me."

As debate rages on about Mtukudzi's legacy, Mtukudzi made things easier by summing it all up himself in 2015.

“Pakare Paye is my legacy,” he said, “the legacy I am leaving behind for youngsters to get somewhere where they can showcase what they do best. My generation and I didn't have similar opportunities.”

The Pakare Paye Arts Center, meaning ‘that place’, is an expansive piece of real estate which Mtukudzi transformed from a rundown junkyard into a state of the art facility with recording studios and performance spaces. The center is located in Norton, about 45 kms from Harare. Pakare Paye has become a space for artistic apprentices seeking a soft landing in a country where the government gives little regard to the arts. Yet Pakare Paye remains a reminder of one of Mtukudzi's saddest memories, since he originally built it intending for his only son and bandmate, Sam - who died from a 2010 road accident on his way from the airport - to run it. Following his son's passing, Mtukudzi took a two year hiatus from recording music, returning with *Sarawoga*, meaning “left alone”.

“Sam was more of a friend than a son to me,” Mtukudzi reminisced. “He was somebody who challenged me, not as a son but as a friend. It made me feel closer to him. He was so talented to a point where I couldn't believe how much he could do musically, because he hadn't had a very long music career.”

For now, the family musical baton rests with Selmour, Mtukudzi's daughter.

“Some come and say oh, your children are following in your footsteps,” Mtukudzi said, as if diffusing pressure off his children who had taken after him. “That's not true. I made my own steps, and my children make their own steps. God doesn't duplicate talent. So they can't be me. They have to be themselves.”

Mtukudzi seems to have made peace with himself - as a father, husband, artist and Zimbabwean - having done what he thought he needed to do as a Zimbabwean cultural vanguard. Yet more was expected of him by those who felt he should have done something, said something, regarding Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe. Mtukudzi chose to play cultural politics - and succeeded in safeguarding Zimbabwe's interests on that front both at home and on the global stage - but the political jury is still out on whether that was enough or whether those who demanded more from the man were justified.

In an interview with Kenyan actor and playwright John Sibi-Okumu, journalist and DJ Ntone Edjabe of the Chimurenga Chronic explained, responding to a question on the role of culture in raising public consciousness to tackle societal challenges, “Imagining culture as a tool, as something that can be used for anything but itself as an act of living and an articulation of that life is always dangerous, whether for positive or other reasons,” Ntone admitted that indeed art and culture affects society, but putting a weight of expectations on culture becomes inhibitive. “...but yes, aspects of culture, music, literature, film... the production of culture, can bring people together. We’ve seen this historically.”

If art can be left alone for its own sake, should artists, who become influential cultural figures in society, be left alone, or is that an oxymoron? On his part, novelist Chinua Achebe had no internal contradictions on what art is, and what function art plays in society and about the place of art and artists in politics.

*Imagining culture as a tool, as something that can be used for anything but itself as an act of living and an articulation of that life is always dangerous, whether for positive or other reasons*

“Those who tell you ‘Do not put too much politics in your art’ are not being honest,” Achebe said during a rare conversation with his African American contemporary James Baldwin. “If you look very carefully, you will see that they are the same people who are quite happy with the situation as it is. And what they are saying is not don’t introduce politics. What they are saying is don’t upset the system. They are just as political as any of us. It is only that they are on the other side.”

The jury is still out on Tuku’s politics, but no one will deny that he was master of his craft.

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# East of Uhuru Highway: Inside Nairobi's Most Iconic (And Much-Maligned) Neighbourhoods

Ismael Kulubi is a 66-years-old radio production guru with a scintillating voice that is still in great demand even after retirement. Advertising executives in need of an experienced voice hire him to do radio promos. By all measurable standards, Ismael has had a fulfilling career - he is a widely travelled man who has enjoyed life's successes as a professional media man.

But his advertising and media professional friends have been always been puzzled by Ismael. With all the riches he made over the years and his ascribed social status, Ismael has lived all his life in Eastlands area, the eastern part of Nairobi that every Eastlander seeks to run away from at the slightest hint of money and success.

## **Eastlands: "No pretensions here"**

A practicing Muslim, Ismael grew up in Majengo, the sprawling slum sandwiched between the famous Kamukunji Grounds and Eastleigh, the inner-city neighbourhood that is often referred to as "Little Mogadishu" Majengo has always been infamous for its variety of sex workers, some of whom come from as far as Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda and Tanzania. The slum dates back to the British colonial era when it was seen as place where prostitution thrived. Women living there were believed to be sex workers who met the sexual needs of the black immigrant labourers employed in Nairobi who were not allowed to bring their families to the city.

After every Friday afternoon prayers, which he religiously observes at Jamia Mosque in central Nairobi, Ismael heads straight to Majengo in his gleaming beige metallic Mercedes Benz, something he has done for many years. His vintage German engineering marvel is still a spectacle to be behold among the ghetto dwellers. But Ismael is considered one of them and his posh car parked outside on Majengo's main street is as safe as the Kenyan currency locked at the Central Bank building's underground vaults in Nairobi city centre.

*Majengo has always been infamous for its variety of sex workers, some of whom come from as far as Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda and Tanzania. The slum dates back to the British colonial era when it was seen as place where prostitution thrived.*

“Majengo has the best pilau you can find anywhere in Nairobi,” Ismael tells me matter-of-factly. Every Friday afternoon, his hot pilau, specially catered to his culinary tastes, awaits him. “Majengo made me and it is a place that gives me immense joy, helps me stay firmly grounded and connects me with the people.” For Ismael, the Friday afternoon sumptuous meal served on large dishes called *sinia* is a social affair: He has his usual group who he eats with that ranges anywhere from five to ten people.

At one time, Ismael earned a salary that was commensurate with what is paid to top executives of blue chip companies. But that never stopped him from driving from the Karen and Lavington suburbs, where his offices used to be, to enjoy a meal cooked in the ramshackle kitchens and restaurants of Majengo. “Good food is a social engagement, it is not so much about how much money you spend on it,” says Ismael. And he can spend a lot. On any given Friday afternoon, Ismael can spend an upward of Ksh5000, depending on the number of people he is eating with. They will eat from the same *sinia* with their hands, seated on the floor. “There are no pretensions here, we eat together the way we eat in our respective houses,” says Ismael.

As they eat, Ismael’s Mercedes Benz will be attended to by between three to five young men who give it a clean shine like no other. This is another ritual in Majengo. “My car is never washed anywhere else – the boys know it, they have cleaned it for many years, it is like going to the same barber for many years. You do not want to change him because he has learned the nooks and crannies of your bumpy head.” The young men know that every Friday, some good money will come their way. “*Ismael ni boy wetu... yuko chonjo...ua anatumcheiki kitu poa,*” (Ismael is our man...he’s cool and pays us real well), say the young men.

After the sumptuous meal, drowned by the freshest of unadulterated juice, Ismael does not leave Kije (Majengo’s popular name). He has his spot outside where he sits with other men to chew *gomba* (also known as *khat* or *miraa*) that is specially delivered to him by his supplier of many years. He will then chew *gomba* – *handas*

and *veve* are variants of the same thing - accompanied by copious amounts of black coffee throughout the evening, after which he will drive back home to his house in Buru Buru estate.

“People who live in the so-called leafy suburbs have ghettoised Eastlands,” quips Ismael. “They live in a make-believe world that has blinded them to real-life happenings outside their presumed safe cocoons. They think Eastlands is one huge criminal world. You can imagine what they think of my hood Kije: we are all sons of harlots. That young people here neither have ambitions nor dreams. They are so wrong.” Ismael, whose long dead parents came from Saba Saba location in Maragua, Muranga County, says, “In Kije, the people are real, they have what it takes to live comfortably and decently and they are as informed with local and global current news as the Kenyans of Karen and Lavington.”

If you fly over Majengo slum, you would be amazed by the satellite TV dishes that adorn iron sheet rooftops. Inside some of these mud-plastered houses are some of the latest and funkier hi-fi equipment and exotic furniture that one can only imagine in a Kileleshwa high-rise flat or in Loresho’s leafy suburbs. These dishes beam news outlets from such channels as Al Jazeera TV, BBC, CNN and France 24 English TV.

*I was born and bred in Eastlands, but Eastlands is often viewed as a place - if you were “unfortunate” enough to be brought up there - where you finished school and once you were done, you quickly left the area.*

“If you entered some of the houses here in Kije, you would literally be taken aback,” says Ismael. “There are houses that have 42-inch smart cable TV and Persian Bukhara rugs and Turkish carpets that can only be a dream for many of the pretenders to middle class tastes. You know those houses where you have to remove your shoes to enter?” Many of these items are imported from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar and Yemen.

The traditional suspicion about Eastlands as an area where “dreams are made” and once those dreams are actualised you flee from the area to go and live those dreams elsewhere is a long-held stereotype that persists to date. Indeed some of the Nairobians who started life in the Eastlands estates, dingy or otherwise, comprise a big chunk of the most successful Kenyans who now live on the west side of the city’s spatial suburbs. Their pastime is nostalgically recounting how

they are *wasee wa mtaa* (estate mates). Yet many, having bought into the Eastlands narrative themselves, are publicly embarrassed to be associated with the area.

My recent encounter with a high school chum of many years convinced me that the Eastlands narrative is not fading away in a hurry. Steve Ngotho, who has lived in Pretoria, South Africa, for a long time was in town recently. When he gave me a shout, we met at a restaurant in central Nairobi. After the usual pleasantries, Ngotho, who I had always known to shoot straight, asked where I lived...nowadays. "I live in Buru Buru," I told him. "Ah, you mean you still live in Eastlands?" he asked. What he really meant was: What in God's name would you still be doing in Eastlands?

Ngotho grew up in the western side of Nairobi, the general area that is west of Uhuru Highway. Uhuru Highway is the trunk road that cuts across the city centre and links the city to the highways that lead to Uganda, Rwanda, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the port city of Mombasa.

I was born and bred in Eastlands, but Eastlands is often viewed as a place - if you were "unfortunate" enough to be brought up there - where you finished school and once you were done, you quickly left the area. Ngotho, you can bet, is not the only former Nairobiian to still harbour the "Eastlands narrative" (even when he lives abroad) - a place for people with failed ambitions and aspirations, where dreams did not take off.

The Eastlands narrative has its roots in the colonial era when some "African" areas were associated with congestion and crime. Hence, Eastlands to date is viewed as a place that does not have the attraction and aura of suburban "posh living". For Eastlanders, the "leafy suburbs" imply breezy air, lots of jacaranda and pine trees, bungalows and maisonettes with compounds and open spaces that can only be found across Uhuru Highway.

Dr. Mosley Owino, a consultant dentist, likes to remind me that East London, where he trained as a dental surgeon, has many of the same characteristics and reputation as the Eastlands area of Nairobi: It is a place riven with deep poverty and overcrowding and which is not immune from the social problems that afflict such areas - the existence of rival gangs, loafers, social misfits and petty and hardcore criminals.

## **Buru Buru: “Like a suburban British hood”**

Buru Buru estate, where Ismael bought his house in the 1980s, is one of the iconic estates that sometimes still salvages the Eastlands reputation, even as the estate itself, which has five phases, struggles against ghettoisation. Largely built in the 1970s, with the last phase five completed in 1982, Buru Buru was the estate where newly graduated architects, accountants, lawyers, physicians, quantity surveyors, among other graduates, aspired to live and start out because it captured their upward mobility aspirational lifestyle, its Eastlands location notwithstanding.

Construction magnate John Mburu has lived in Buru Buru ever since he graduated from the University of Nairobi in the early 1990s. With a yearly turnover of hundreds of millions of shillings, Mburu’s friends in the industry cannot understand why he still lives in the same house he started out in. A shilling billionaire, Mburu says Buru Buru is a suitable place to live in – it does not have the wannabe pretentious suburban lifestyle like many of the new estates that have come up: “It still retains decent, respectable and habitable estate characteristics that represents the lifestyles of people who have progressively grown their incomes.”

Buru Buru is among most famous suburban estates in East and Central Africa. When I first went to Tanzania, a quarter of a century ago, my newly acquired Tanzanian friends would ask me which part of Nairobi I came from. “*Ule mtaa ambao unaishi mawaziri na wakuu wa serekali, unaufhamu?*” (Do you know the estate that Kenyan ministers and top civil servants live in?) It was amusing to learn that my Tanzanians friends considered Buru Buru to be such a posh estate that only elite government people lived there.

“Buru Buru is very much like a British suburban hood,” says Stacy Wanjiku, who lived and studied at the London School of Economics (LSE), University of London. “Even the way people park outside their houses on the roadside is so British.” Wanjiku, who herself lives in Buru Buru, says the picket fencing may have long gone, but Buru Buru still retain its stand-out character with its shopping centres and its semi-detached architectural design uniformity.

## **Woodley and Kimathi: Civil servant estates**

The estate that comes closer to once being a residential area for senior

government civil servants is Woodley, which is located in the south-east of Nairobi, adjacent to Moi Nairobi Girls on Joseph Kang'ethe Road. Woodley is a fashionable estate made of a mixture of high-rise flats and bungalow houses with huge compounds and while it was not largely inhabited by cabinet ministers - at least certainly not in the 1980s - for some reason, Woodley was the residence of the senior-most Luo civil servants.

Alex Oduor, who lives in the estate, which is owned by Nairobi County, tells me that Woodley has all the trappings of a proper middle class neighbourhood: his house is in a safe secluded area, has a big compound for kids to romp about and to host a barbeque and is big enough to entertain guests and host visiting relatives from rural areas. Oduor himself lives in the three-bedroomed house once owned by Washington Okumu, the humongous jolly professor who brokered peace between Nelson Mandela of the African National Party (ANC) and Gatsha Buthelezi, the leader of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), in Johannesburg, South Africa in the 1990s.

The estate closest in resemblance to Woodley in terms of design and layout is Kimathi estate in Eastlands. It is ensconced between Bahati and Jerusalem estates. Built in the early 1970s, Kimathi is your archetypal middle class neighbourhood that has a family ring to it: an "enclosed" estate with modest houses and little compounds. Mwai Kibaki, the third President of Kenya, kept a house there for the longest time. Up to 1974, he represented Bahati constituency which Kimathi estate was a part of. Hudson Mwangi, a businessman who has lived in Kimathi estate for many years, says the estate is unpretentious and allows him to operate "below the radar", without attracting too much attention from the prying eyes of gossipers and nosy people.

### **Kilimani and Kileleshwa: "Lonely jungles"**

The estates that were truly classical middle class neighbourhoods were the adjoining suburban areas of Kileleshwa and Kilimani located in the west of Nairobi. They were your conventional neighbourhoods for senior civil servants from 1963 to early 2000s. "But today, these areas have become concrete jungles; the high-rise flats that are coming up daily have completely erased the beautiful memory of the semi-detached bungalow and maisonette residential houses that adorned the area," says print journalist Oyunga Pala, who grew up in the Kilimani area. "In the days that I grew up in Kilimani, the area was attractive and scenic,

the houses had huge compounds for children to safely play and run around in, and the neighbourhood had lots of trees and kaiyaba (Kei apple) fences.”

The gentrification of Kileleshwa and Kilimani occasioned by the new money of the *nouveaux riches* and the recently minted millennial millionaires have transformed these areas into impersonal, “cold flats” where next-door neighbours live like total strangers, meeting only on the staircases and in lifts. Lilian Rice, a British national who lives in one of these flats, told me there is a “fake friendliness” among flat mates living in Kileleshwa. “Every time I visit my friend and workmate in Donholm in Eastlands, I notice the stark differences: the place is bubbly and full of life. The children are running helter-skelter, playing football or hide-and-seek. The neighbours pop in (unannounced) to share a funny anecdote or to enjoy a cup of tea together... I tell you the camaraderie is real and unpretentious.”

Rice says that the corner kiosks and green grocery vibandas (sheds) of Donholm really enchant her. “They serve as meeting points for people to banter and chat.” Rice concludes that Kileleshwa is “a lonely jungle” and Eastlands, with all its “dirt and disorder”, has “variety and vivacity.”

*The gentrification of Kileleshwa and Kilimani occasioned by the new money of the nouveaux riches and the recently minted millennial millionaires have transformed these areas into impersonal, “cold flats” where next-door neighbours live like total strangers, meeting only on the staircases and in lifts.*

This variety of life was best captured for me by Rhoda Mbaya, who was brought up in an old Kileleshwa neighbourhood. When their father, a senior civil servant, died suddenly, the family had to move out of their five-bedroomed government house and relocate to Uthiru, a peri-urban and semi-rural area on the outskirts of Nairobi, 12km west of the city centre, in a place called 87. “Of course, it was at first traumatising, but we quickly adjusted,” said Rhoda. “The thing about living in the old Kileleshwa was that we led a secluded and shielded life, so when we had to move to Uthiru, it was obviously a scale-down, but we soon realised that Uthiru had its own advantages.”

Used to a subsidised life all her life, Rhoda was gratified to find that Uthiru had a cheaper and affordable lifestyle that was commensurate with her middle class tastes and which did not compromise her family’s social upward mobility. Her five siblings still rent out a five-bedroomed bungalow there, which is much more

affordable than a house around the Kileleshwa/Kilimani “posh” areas.

“The vegetables are fresh and cheap, we get the milk straight from the cow, fresh and unskimmed and *kienyeji* (indigenous) chicken and eggs. The crux of the matter is that you can’t have your cake and eat it,” said Rhoda. “Uthiru is teeming with people, we weren’t used to that, but yet again, the people are cosmopolitan, friendly and hospitable...but you know what? We discovered *mutura* (a sausage-like delicacy made out of stuffed offal) and pork. Uthiru has the best pork place in town.”

The rapid gentrifications of the city’s better known neighbourhoods, says Oyunga, are robbing the city of its iconic suburbs and traditional beautiful look. Kilimani’s expanding gentrification is already encountering opposition. The Kilimani Residents Association is up in arms against Cytonn Investment Company, a real estate private equity firm that intends to mobilise funds and put up a multi-storeyed building in the area.

### **Eastleigh: “Where dreams are incubated”**

Gentrification in Nairobi has not been confined to the western side of the city. The Somali people’s influx in Eastleigh has led to a rapid and haphazard gentrification of the area. High-rise buildings have risen: some magnificent, some ugly and an eyesore. The buildings are both commercial and residential. A couple of years ago, a former powerful cabinet minister was persuaded to visit Eastleigh – a place he himself had confessed he had not visited for “donkey years”. The minister was astounded beyond belief when he found the area was home to two- and three-star hotels, complete with deluxe suites for accommodation and a la carte three-course menus.

Amid Eastleigh’s chaos, confusion, grime, mounting garbage, open sewers and systemic failure of services, there are Somali residents who live like Arab sheikhs in some of the most crowded and ugly flats. When Abdulrahman let me into his house on the top floor of a flat facing Pumwani Maternity Hospital, I was taken aback by the apparent affluence: The large sitting room was bedecked with jewelry and Arabian Nights-like ornaments, an imported sofa and a thick Afghanistan carpet. His prayer room was a wall-to-wall carpet affair. His expensive cutlery was like that of an emir. It was only after I came out of the house that I realised that indeed I was in the shambolic Eastleigh neighbourhood.

Inside Abdulrahman's house, it felt like I was in an affluent flat somewhere in Qatar or Yemen.

One of the areas that has been under perpetual threat of gentrification is Eastlands itself. The vast estates of Bahati, Hamza-Makadara, Jericho, (Lumumba and Ofafa) Jerusalem, Kaloleni, Makongeni, Maringo, Mbotela and Uhuru that make up the "real" greater Eastlands area and whose fame has rested on council houses belonging to the now defunct Nairobi City Council, are being targeted by "private developers" who have been marking them for a long time to bring them down in the name of constructing "better" and more spacious accommodation for the residents.

*"Eastlands maybe the place where dreams are incubated and people are not pretentious, but it can be also a place that drains and sucks up your energies"*

It is true that many of these houses could be past their building life cycle. Their average lifespan is 60 years - Maringo estate was built in 1958, for example. The Kaloleni "bungalows" were built in the 1940s. During the 1960s, this was one of the poshest African quarters. Jericho Lumumba was built in 1962, a year before Kenya got its independence from the British. A beautiful, well-designed and laid-out estate, with ample open spaces for recreation, it still retains its shine despite obvious neglect that includes peeling paintwork that no one remembers when it was last undertaken, uncollected garbage, dilapidated plumbing and open sewers.

Peter Mugo, who is a resident here, allowed me into his "humble abode" for a cup of African tea that has the milk, tea leaves and sugar all boiled together. Mugo's humble abode is a two-roomed affair but the house is nonetheless as middle class as they come: it has all the gadgets and trappings of modern urban living. He has the latest Samsung smart TV, Sony Hi-Fi music system complete with woofers, stylish settees and an expensive carpet to boot. "My subsidised rent allows me to save enough money to send my kids to quality private schools," Mugo told me. His youngest 10-year-old son is busy with his play-station, while his second born daughter is on her laptop googling her school homework on the Wi-Fi that her dad has installed in the house.

"Eastlands maybe the place where dreams are incubated and people are not pretentious, but it can be also a place that drains and sucks up your energies," says Victor Ochieng. Before moving to the west of Nairobi, Victor lived in

Donholm for several years. “I used Jogoo Road (the trunk road that runs through the major Eastlands estates). All the time I lived in Doni I can tell you the traffic snarl-ups on Jogoo Road used to give me incessant headaches. Doni was also not an easy estate to live in: if it’s not water shortages, its garbage strewn all over. And when it rains, it floods. That was enough stress for me.”

Still, after moving to the west side of Nairobi, he now appreciates that people in Eastlands at least live within their means. “There’s a lot of flush money in places like Kileleshwa and the majority of lifestyles are sustained by credit cards. In essence, people here live beyond their means, all in the name of maintaining class and status.”

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## **Big Fat African Weddings: Commercialisation of Traditional Culture, and Its Consequences**

During the early 1800s, the Nuer of South Sudan began pushing out of their traditional homeland and increased their territory four-fold at the expense of their Dinka and Anuak neighbours by the late 1880s. The anthropologist Raymond Kelley described it as one of most prominent cases of tribal imperialism in the ethnographic record. According to his analysis, the Nuer expansion, which involved the acquisition of resources far beyond that required to satisfy their normal material needs, was driven by the rising cost of bride price.

Today we are witnessing a variation on bride price inflation of a different order. The institution of marriage has given rise to a new economic growth sector in the form of the wedding industry. For example, the wedding industry is now estimated to be worth US\$ 60 billion in the United States and over \$300 Billion globally. The global figures probably do not include Africa, where the wedding industry is a newer but even faster growing phenomenon in many African nations.

### **An ancient institution**

Marriage is the most ancient and stable of human institutions. Anthropologists trace the institution to the need to avoid incest and establish the paternity of offspring.

Stone Age humans formalised the contractual bonding of husband and wife through the exchange of gifts, and most hunter-gatherer societies engaged in ritual courtship. We do not yet know whether or not mitochondrial Eve's marriage was arranged, but we do know that the institution of marriage contributed to the competitive advantage of *Homo sapiens* over their non-marrying Neanderthal neighbours.

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It is not difficult to see how the institutionalised demands of maintaining a healthy gene pool could make a critical difference in circumstances where humans lived in small and isolated groups. Human bands invested in social networks and developed complex kinship systems, while the cavemen who mated by clubbing a woman and dragging her to his cave became dumb and dumber over time. In any event, marriage became a defining feature of human existence.

One scientific publication described the institution in evolutionary terms as "reciprocal exogamy including the exchange of mates, goods, and services, and involving multiple kin lineages often existing in multiple residential communities". Anthropologists investigating the roots of the institution note that these parameters have remained relatively unchanged over the millennia.

With the rise of agriculture, marriage came to mark the passage from childhood to adulthood, conferring new rights and responsibilities in the process. The celebrations accompanying marriage played a fundamental role in fostering communal identity and solidarity. Before long, marriage was also key factor in building political relationships—a function that was elevated when the rise of royal dynasties saw marriage become an instrument of foreign policy.

This matrix of factors still obtains for marriage in African society. The institution is about much more than formalising the bio-emotional bond between two

individuals, which now characterises Western practice. In most societies, it encompasses normative behaviour patterns and traits, including the wedding ceremonies and exchanges that formalise the contract. The marriage itself comes with expectations of relative permanence: shared residence, gender-based division of labour and management of resources, a sexual relationship oriented towards procreation and cooperation in child bearing and training.

While these factors, like the primacy of the nuclear family, are universal, the model based on the contract's societal benefits has experienced significant attrition during the modern era. The wedding industry is the latest development to complicate the human dimension of marriage, and it appears to be racing out of control.

### **Conspicuous consumption**

During the 1960s, weddings, especially the lavish high-cost version, came to be seen as effete. The contract was increasingly seen as a bond based on the relationship between two individuals. Divorce rates shot up and non-traditional unions between individuals of different backgrounds, including people of different religious, racial or social origins, proliferated. Pairing was about love. The resulting unions did not require an external religious or secular authority to legitimise it; the conventional ceremonial component was passé.

This encouraged the pursuit of innovative weddings, often held in unorthodox settings that appeal to the romantic ideal. The barefoot-on-the-beach wedding was popularised when Becks betrothed Posh in a sarong. The couple showcased several outfits, including bright violet costumes for the wedding party and a matching cowboy hat for baby Brooklyn. David Beckham later admitted that the garb made him look like “one of the guys in Dumb and Dumber” [the movie].

*The prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed, built a 20,000-seat stadium specially built for his seven-day, \$100 million nuptials in 1981. The fashion among wealthy Indians is flying the entire wedding party consisting of several hundred guests to exotic destinations abroad.*

The Beckham extravaganza came after Princess Diana's 1981 “wedding of the century”, which made celebrity weddings fashionable. The wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton set a new bar for the 21st century—although, as in

the case of the Diana event, most of the reported cost of \$34 million was spent on security; the cost of the bride's dress, at \$434,000, was modest in comparison.

In many places, weddings have always provided a stage for conspicuous consumption. The prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed, built a 20,000-seat stadium specially built for his seven-day, \$100 million nuptials in 1981. The fashion among wealthy Indians is flying the entire wedding party consisting of several hundred guests to exotic destinations abroad.

Such extreme examples underscore the meteoric rise of the wedding industry across the planet. Fashionable contemporary weddings across the world now involve a full complement dressmakers, florists, reception halls, event planners, photographers, caterers, limo firms, DJs, bands, and jewellery designers. Few people can match the glass coach, the 25-foot bridal train, and the estimated 750 million television viewers of Princess Diana's wedding, but many are willing to go into debt to finance a ceremony that is becoming the nuptial version of the arms race.

The wedding industry is flourishing across continents and cultures. In China, the \$57-billion industry is registering a 7.8 per cent annual growth, but this will soon be trumped by India where the industry is expanding by 25 per cent a year. In the United Arab Emirates, the average cost of nuptials is estimated to be around \$80,000. In the US, the average cost of a wedding is equivalent to a year's salary for many service-sector employees or a year of university education.

These numbers appear to reflect relative differentials in income. The most expensive place in the US to get married is Manhattan, where the average cost is over \$76,000, or five times the cost in Utah where the typical wedding expenditure is \$15,257. The fact that this state is booming economically points to the influence of culture as well—which may represent the best hope for mitigating the more ominous implications accompanying the commercialisation of marriage and sexuality.

### **The Big African Wedding**

During a trip to Addis Ababa last year, I went to a studio to get some passport pictures. There were several picture albums in the waiting area. They were actually gigantic, hardcover ledgers showcasing glamorous pictures of wedding couples, bridesmaids, best men, and other sundry wedding participants

conspicuously adorned in some of the most expensively elegant finery I have ever seen. During the remainder of my visit I began to notice the proliferation of large and small wedding shops across the city.

I initially thought it was an Ethiopian thing. Wrong. Once alerted to its existence, evidence of Africa's new wedding industry started to pop up everywhere. In Zambia there are weddings that last two weeks. The wedding industry in Kampala has seen the ten event organising companies operating in 2010 to grow to more than a hundred in 2017. Televised weddings provide revenue for Ugandan television stations that now charge 1 million shillings (\$330) to broadcast lavish weddings.

Nigeria, true to form, is at the forefront of Africa's new wedding sector. The industry that some say is fueled by Nigerians' natural love of celebration probably owes more to their competitive nature. The CEO of one Nigerian wedding planning company explains: "People want their event to be the best. They want it to be better than the next person's so they won't spare any expense to do whatever they need to do to get it done."

This is a country where the wealthy elite once threw parties where they would impress their guests by displaying millions of Naira bank notes in glass cases. Now, "getting it done" at weddings includes stunts like "spraying" the wedding guests with US dollar bills. Although the currency on display under thick glass attracted the attention of Nigeria's audacious criminal class, it usually ended up back in the bank on Monday morning. Spraying guests with dollars upped the ante in the country's "go big or go home" stakes.

Kenya's fast growing wedding industry has spawned hundreds of wedding planners and businesses offering everything from florists to high-end caterers and other related specialists. This service sector actually dates back to the Western infatuation with the wedding as an adventure theme, which has drawn couples from abroad to Kenya to tie the knot. The wedding-in-the-bush is a niche market that is still doing well, based on the number of Kenyan tour companies advertising diverse safari wedding packages. But it is small change compared to the new urban African wedding complex with its complement of service providers, magazines, television shows, and family brokers skilled at maximising the returns on nubile daughters.

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On the one hand, the industry is a tech-savvy, Internet friendly economic sub-sector, but on the other, it is just another globalised neoliberal cash cow. At least in West Africa the industry is spawning a new fashion industry showcasing creative variations on traditional clothing. Fashionable African wedding attire has even added a few hundred boards to the 38 million and growing Pinterest wedding posts, and its pretty neat stuff. Kenya’s wedding juggernaut, in contrast, is driven by the couples’ marked preference for the Eurocentric “white” wedding.

### **“White” Kenyan weddings**

Ngugi wa Thiong’o built a literary career by exposing the mentality behind many Kenyans’ inverted relationship with indigenous values and preference for the trifles identified with Western ways. The contemporary white wedding is the latest flagship for this mindset. This line of critique makes Kenya’s first Big Shot wedding a bit incongruous—it was actually celebrated in Maasailand.

Sometime around the mid-1970s, the expansive Maasai Minister in Jomo Kenyatta’s government, Stanley Oloiptip, threw an exceptionally exorbitant wedding for his oldest son. Stylistically, it contradicted almost everything Maasai culture stood for. It was certainly as outsized by the more modern standards of the day as the girth of the physically immense politician.

The irrepressible Oloiptip justified the spectacle as a testament to “the fruits of Uhuru”. This explanation focused public attention on the diversion of state resources to fund the affair, a concern further compounded by the fact that the Honourable Minister had sired 46 other children.

As it turned out, there was no happy ending for the Big Man. In 1985, he suddenly found himself in prison for the misuse of public resources. Like the overpriced wedding gowns at the centre of contemporary weddings, the five normal prison uniforms sewn together to clothe him were used for only one day: he was released on bond the following morning and passed away several days later.

Although the Kenyan public has been treated to the occasional high profile wedding since then, the new big wedding phenomenon is defined by its distribution and scale. This is why some commentators applaud it as a vibrant growth industry and others hype it as symbolic of middle class prosperity—even though a large portion of newly weds don't have the money to pay for their weddings.

The moral of the Oliotiptip story dovetails with other qualities associated with the big wedding trend. Close to a quarter of the couples opting for these bling weddings go into debt to finance them, and the majority of them regret the expenditure soon afterwards. A more disturbing statistic: the bigger the wedding, the shorter the marriage.

Even so, the trend persists. One Ugandan professional stated that he has saved 50 million shillings for a big wedding. He says he only wants to have a wedding that befits his status as an educated man. If he can't afford that, he'd rather not have a wedding at all. No wedding is now the norm for many, and no marriage at all is increasingly common. One regional study found that 50 per cent of young couples were living in free unions and another 25 per cent of women were raising children as single mothers.

### **Traditional *communitas* versus wedding bling**

Weddings have long served as a vehicle for conspicuous consumption and the spread of consumer culture. The fact that both the rich and the middle classes now own fancy cars, TVs and designer handbags has raised the status-generating power of one-time social events like weddings. Wedding planners say that the industry is driven by women's desire to be a Queen, and the center of attention *albeit* for one day. Men play along for reasons of status and prestige.

Traditional ceremonies were ritualised communal affairs imbued with layers of symbolism and meaning. The primary functions of many ceremonies, such as weddings, were to mark passage to a new stage of the life cycle and to foster unity within the community. The anthropologist Victor Turner's classic study on African ritual and ceremony focused on the deep properties of these phenomena, and the universal role of *liminality* and *communitas*.

*Liminality* refers to the beginning or transitional stage in a process. The person at the centre of the transition is often regarded to be in a weak and dangerous or

inauspicious state. Rituals based on the society's spiritual, magical and religious traditions generate a state of *communitas* to insure the safe transition of the person in this liminal state.

The term *communitas* is associated with sharing a common experience that takes a whole community to the next level. Rites, rituals and ceremonies designed to temporarily negate differentials of rank and status create a social space based on homogeneity, equality and anonymity. This promotes a sense of group wholeness. Individuality is submerged in unity in a manner facilitating transformation. The way the spirit of a harambee fund-raising event induces you to contribute beyond your planned contribution is an example of the same.

The public ceremony is, in this sense, not an event, but part of a social process that facilitates the safe transition of the *liminal* individual, be it from girl to woman, boy to man, or candidate to group chief and leader. The state of *communitas* it engenders imbues the group with a lasting sense of unity and solidarity that allows society to function despite its internal conflicts and inequalities of wealth and status.

Turner describes how the process works in the case of the appointment of a new chief among the Ndembu of Zambia. After a period of sexual abstinence, the new candidate and his wife are housed in the specially constructed *kafu*, or death hut. They are dressed in rags and made to assume a submissive position. While in this state of liminality, elders revile the future leader: "Be silent! You are a mean and selfish fool, one who is bad-tempered! You do not love your fellows, you are only angry with them! Meanness and theft are all you have! Yet here we have called you and we say that you must succeed to the chieftainship."

The couple are abused and forced to stay awake all night while commoners are invited to berate them for any misdeeds large or small. They are beaten and rubbed with special herbs. After this ordeal, the chief-to-be is instructed in his duties:

*We have desired you and you only for our chief. Let your wife prepare food for the people who come here to the capital village. Do not be selfish, do not keep the chieftainship to yourself! You must laugh with the people, you must abstain from witchcraft! You must not be killing people! You must not be ungenerous to people! Today you are born as a new chief. If you were mean,*

*and used to eat your cassava mush or your meat alone, today you are in the chieftainship. You must give up your selfish ways, you must welcome everyone, you are the chief!*

The ritual results in the figurative death of the liminal candidate and his rebirth as a leader. Turner goes on to detail how many other ceremonial processes across cultures, including the coronation of Popes, display many of the same structural attributes.

*Ngugi wa Thiong'o built a literary career by exposing the mentality behind many Kenyans' inverted relationship with indigenous values and preference for the trifles identified with Western ways. The contemporary white wedding is the latest flagship for this mindset.*

Traditional weddings are a benign version of this ceremonial process where two individuals are reborn and transformed into a legally recognised husband and wife sanctified by the higher powers. The passages on marriage in the Quran, Bible and other religious texts underscore the sanctity and spiritual quality of such unions, and most cultural and religious weddings display similar dynamics to sanctify and bless the marriage contract.

In my own case, prior my own wedding, the idea of getting married was a remote and distant prospect. I was living in Lamu, and the process started as an idea suggested by close friends who told me, "Marrying is easy and since you are here you should give it a try even if just for a week." The idea evolved into an experimental possibility that in turn led to a proposal to marry, arranged in the usual manner.

The only request from my side was that the marriage ceremony would be a small, private affair. Swahili weddings, in my view, were carnival style affairs that did not fit my style. I wanted a closed personal ceremony to go with the already exotic circumstances.

"Sure, we will do it that way if that's what you want," my future in-laws told me. Although I did not know it, at the time, I was totally out of my depth, in a liminal state of ignorance, weakness, naiveté, and vulnerability.

I also did not realise that the coast was home to the region's most developed

indigenous wedding industry. As the time approached, I was informed of a series of unanticipated developments: a bus arrived with furniture and other trappings; the next day another came from Mombasa with a posse of musicians, a boat arrived with guests from the islands, and so on. This build-up countered my expectations of a small intimate wedding.

A week before the actual event, people started addressing me as *Bwana Harusi*. Lamu's normally shy ladies began to accost me with propositions, and several times women dragged me into their homes as I passed through the town's narrow alleys. My "handlers" told me that as *Bwana Harusi* I was fair game for such mischief until the formal marriage; it was best I stay indoors. They were otherwise helpful but not very informative. Among other things, they did not explain that a proper wedding is mandatory for a girl's first marriage, and that the arrangements were the exclusive province of the bride's family.

Three days of robust wedding celebrations ensued. I became caught up in the spirit, and consented to options for the groom's side, like holding the *kirumbizi* stick fighting dance and the all-night *kesha* party. My father surrogate arranged for the *kirumbizi*, which coincided with the district secondary school sports tournament. The presence of the archipelago's most athletically inclined youth insured it was the most fiercely contested *kirumbizi* stick fighting in Lamu's modern history. Swept away by the spirit of this *communitas*, I ended up splurging on food, miraa for my Somali friends, and a Bajuni *msondo* dance followed by what became a public party while the bride's taarabu music echoed through the other side of time.

After sunrise I was married in the kind of simple ceremony I had originally requested, although there was still one last surprise.

I had paid the conventional dowry for that time of several thousand shillings. But when the actual moment came, I was confused when I heard the town's most respected sheikh ask me the formulaic question: Do you agree to marry Safiya binti Mohammed Ali for the *mahari* of 50 Kenya shillings?

This was repeated three times. Though mystified and bewildered, I managed to utter "kabeitu, or "I agree" in Arabic. Only later did I learn that the small sum substituted for the dowry proper, often referred to as *mahari ya Kiarabu*, is designed to protect the family, which typically ends up spending more than the

dowry on the wedding. The provision comes into effect if the marriage fails or the groom has legitimate cause for rejecting the bride and reclaims the *mahari* proper. The dowry proper, in any case, goes to the wife, and not her father.

In the evening I was escorted to the bride's house where, according to the Swahili tradition of *fungati*, we spent the next week in the wedding suite where we were treated as royalty. We were both all so liminal at the time, although for different reasons. By the end of the week's seclusion I was integrated into the extended family and emerged as a culturally validated member of Lamu society.

*Traditional weddings are a benign version of this ceremonial process where two individuals are reborn and transformed into a legally recognised husband and wife sanctified by the higher powers. The passages on marriage in the Quran, Bible and other religious texts underscore the sanctity and spiritual quality of such unions*

As individuals, my wife and I were and still are very different people from totally different backgrounds. I am not sure if our union would have survived if it began as the private affair I originally envisioned. It took a while, but I came to understand how the process of public *communitas* and internal family bonding contributed to the fact that forty-one years later we are still together.

There is a broader moral to this love story.

### **The impact of commercialised weddings**

Victor Turner observes that liminality and *communitas* are essentially phenomena of transition. His analysis explains why many modern phenomena, from millenarian movements and the counter-cultural quest for alternative lifestyles to the rise of Nazism, borrow much of their mythology and symbolism from traditional rites de passage, either in the cultures in which they originate or in the cultures with which they are in contact. Turner documents many forms of these phenomena from once-a-generation ceremonies to the rituals of everyday life.

The same insights apply to the recruitment of jihadi terrorists, and the communal synergy generated by organisations like ISIS, Al Shabaab, and Boko Haram. The "Islamist problem" may appear far removed from the issues raised by the region's wedding industry, but the two developments are more closely linked than it may

appear. Lela Anwar, an administrator with the coast's Donge Charity Network, offers the following commentary on Mombasa's changing wedding complex.

*A typical wedding in Mombasa now costs more than an average citizen's salary, yet they are getting bigger and more dramatic. The Nikkah, the nucleus of any Islamic wedding, is a straightforward and inexpensive affair because it mainly involves a recitation of wedding vows followed by attendees sharing a quick repast of coffee and haluwa in the mosque. It is also a mainly male event, complemented by a smaller gathering of female relatives and close friends in another room. Even though the nikkah is the most essential part of the wedding, the reception consumes the majority of time, financial, and human resources. The reception, known as kupamba in Swahili, is an extravagant women-only event featuring an often evening of loud music, outlandish hairdos and makeup, jewel-studded dresses, and multiple servings of fancy food and drinks. Local women view the kupamba through the lens of social class: the fancier the reception is, the more status conferred on the family. Curiously, the kupamba celebration can exert more leverage on social class than actual wealth. A family that hosts an outlandish wedding is regarded as 'high class' even if the wedding was funded by loans and donations from extended family and friends.*

*Muslims are aware that the Prophet Muhammad recommended simple weddings yet despite the religious incentive for sticking to the sunnah traditions, the scale and costs of Swahili weddings continue to rise. This phenomenon is linked to attributed gender dynamics, and specifically to gender roles that are socially enforced in traditional Swahili societies. There are certain female social activities that are frowned upon even though it is fairly acceptable for men to go clubbing or spend long hours away from the family consuming miraa or pursuing other forms of entertainment. Swahili women who deviate from their prescribed roles are, in contrast, given negative labels and may be castigated as being promiscuous or prostitutes. Unlike men, you rarely see women spending hours with friends partaking in social activities outside the home. With almost no outlet or spaces available to women for entertainment, weddings are now the default venues where they can dress up and enjoy an evening of music and fun within a socially acceptable environment. Weddings are an outlet for self-expression; an opportunity for the traditional Swahili woman to morph into a glamour queen.*

*They are a welcome respite from her daily, culturally prescribed cocoon.*

*Weddings are so important that now invitation cards are sold for as much as Ksh. 7000 by invitees unable to attend. The downside of this commercialisation is that increasingly large numbers of urban and peri-urban youth are finding it difficult to marry. This has provided an entry point for radicalisation and terrorist recruitment as two recent studies on the coast of Kenya have documented.*

The wedding industry, as discussed in the first section of this essay, in many ways contradicts the role of traditional cultural processes. Weddings as events emphasise the conspicuous expenditure of resources for the sake of prestige and competition. Instead of transforming the couples to live in harmony and contribute to the public good, bling weddings condemn many of them to an uphill struggle to survive as a pair.

More traditional wedding ceremonies, as the passage above indicates, offer Swahili women a degree of gender-based *communitas*. The contemporary coastal wedding, however, also reinforces structural inequalities contributing to the radicalisation of both male and female youth. Sex is a powerful and dangerous force that easily leads one into a state of liminal danger. The wedding industry taps into this for material gain. Jihadi radicals effectively exploit the negative aspect of the same social change to recruit individuals who for various economic and ideological reasons fall outside the boundaries of mainstream Islam.

The role of such factors, including constraints associated with the commercialisation of weddings, have been documented by researchers on Kenya's coast and elsewhere. In the meantime, it turns out that a range of high profile players in the West have discovered the value of *communitas* and other spiritual techniques that help merge the individual "I" into the collective "We". Advocates include the top echelon of Google and other Silicon Valley executives, some of most decorated US Navy Seals team leaders, and other copacetic entrepreneurs like Richard Branson. The 2017 book, *Stealing Fire* by Steven Kotler and Jamie Wheal, reports how these players are seeking out ways of replicating the ecstatic sense of unity embedded in the African rituals studied by Victor Turner and others. In the words of the authors, "This feeling tightens social bonds and ignites enduring passion—the kind that lets us come together to plan, organize, and tackle great challenges."

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For the techies, entrepreneurs and soldiers who have adopted pursuits from yoga and bio-feedback meditation to psychedelics and extreme sports, getting into this zone is about enhancing productivity and their cutting edge. It is hardly surprising that the bad guys have developed their own form of *communitas* to do the same. In any event, society needs more of the problem-solving passion the world’s top entrepreneurs are seeking to cultivate than the competition driven by the bling of the wedding industry—especially when it comes to some of the human surrogates now being generated by artificial intelligence technology.

The rise of the wedding industry bookends one side of a larger neoliberal trend of inequality and social polarisation; developments on the other side of the spectrum have given rise to the technologically enabled sexbot, first predicted in the original 1975 version of *Stepford Wives* and updated in more recent films like *Blade Runner* and *Ex Machina*. One [blogger](#) summed up the implications for marriage and the family as an existential threat to humanity: “This will blow up the world. It will make crack cocaine look like decaffeinated coffee.”

A return to the ritually-reinforced social bonds that made the celebration of marriage a universal rite of passage is needed to sustain the family unit as the most basic human institution. Creative variations on the modern wedding may yet provide a platform for adaptive cultural innovations on this front. For example, last December, Laabied Mohammed Gurcharan of the Donge Network established a new precedent for Mombasa’s wedding scene. Instead of the usual by-invitation-only event, he shared his wedding feast with the children of the Mama Dhahabu Orphanage.

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# Food and Migration: A Culinary Journey Through East Africa

East Africa has a colourful history, particularly along the sandy beaches of the Indian Ocean coast where Swahili was born. From as far back as 2,500 years ago and as far away as China, this coastal region has been peppered by influences from a whole lot of visitors.

Historically, flavour and ingredients have changed a great deal in Africa. Before intercontinental trade, the most important staples were sorghum, millet, fonio, barley, lentils and, to a lesser extent, rice. In East Africa, Arabs, Indians and Persians influenced the cosmopolitan trend in the local diet, importing dried fruits, rice, sugarcane and spices, thus expanding the region's palate. As centuries passed, they also added bananas, oranges, lemons and limes from China and India, and, in a weird twist of fate, domestic pigs because their old gods had no problem with the hygiene regimen of their food.

Around 600 CE, a Phoenician fleet sailed south along the African coast. It is believed to have circumnavigated the continent before returning to the Mediterranean three years later. The fleet's occupants found trees, a bunch of mangrove crabs having a party and the sound of crickets. They didn't linger. The Egyptians then sailed down the East African coast around 500 CE. They just smiled and waved, anchoring only to refill their water casks, pick out a few berries that appeared safe to eat and subsist their diet with a fat ruminant.

Sometime after 500 CE, a disheveled band of Bantus arrived on the East African coast, having covered roughly 3,500 kilometers for some ancestor-forsaken reason. This was the first wave of what was going to become a full-fledged sub-Saharan Bantu migration. (Bantu is a general label that currently covers more than 100 million people across sub-Saharan Africa who speak upwards of 700 discrete languages.)

*For over seven millennia, since the grain was first domesticated from among the wild grasses of the savannah west of the Nile, sorghum has been the single most important food in Africa.*

Of Kenya's three major migrant ethno-linguistic groups, however, the first to arrive were the Cushites, believed to have begun a migration southwards into north and northeastern Kenya from southern Ethiopia sometime between the second and first millennium BC.

Next came the Nilotes down from southern Sudan around 500 BC. However, large-scale Nilotic migrations began in earnest only about five hundred years ago with the arrival of the Luo and the Maasai. They continued south along the plains of the Rift Valley, finally reaching Tanzania in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, pushing the Cushites East.

Until the arrival of the Nilotes, the Cushites occupied a much larger part of East Africa than they do today, extending into the verdant Rift Valley lakes, as well as central and southern Kenya, and displacing or assimilating the hunter-gatherer communities they encountered.

Today, there are over forty different ethnic communities in Kenya, each with their own distinct traditions, cultures, languages and beliefs.

### **Dinner in Africa in 500 BC was a somewhat subdued affair**

For over seven millennia, since the grain was first domesticated from among the wild grasses of the savannah west of the Nile, sorghum has been the single most important food in Africa. Millet, another savannah grass indigenous to Africa, comes a close second in terms of overall importance. One variety, Pearl millet, originated in Western Sahel and slowly made its way to the rest of the continent while Finger millet, a native of Ethiopia and the East African highlands, tended to stay within the region.

Yam is likely the main food that made the early expansion of the Bantu-speaking people down to sub-Saharan Africa possible. It was a hardy plant that could feed a family for days. Later, during the transatlantic slave trade, it was exported from West Africa and became a staple in the Caribbean, Southeast Asia and Oceania.

Guinea rice, a hardy rice indigenous to Africa, originated in the hot, wet Guinea coast highlands and in the Delta Basin of the middle Niger River. The Asian variety that we all know and love originated in Southeast Asia and was brought to the East African coast by traders who came to these shores using trade winds more than a thousand years ago, after the Arabs had wrested control of the

maritime trade routes from the Ethiopians and the Indians. It was regarded by the Swahili, who considered Finger millet *mjengo* (construction worker) food, as superior.

These cereals were supplemented by edible plants and leaves. However, the recommended vegetable intake was often not achieved. "Hidden hunger" - micro-nutrient deficiencies in vitamin A, iron, and iodine - resulted in an infant mortality rate estimated at over 30 percent. Until recently, the Maasai, for example, did not name their children until the age of three, when the family was certain the child would survive infancy. This made polygynous marriage a practical solution for the preservation of the community.

The Bantu largely consumed bananas, plantains, sweet potatoes, millet, wild vegetables, wild berries, taro and meat. Preparation was not elaborate and satiation, rather than enjoyment, was the chief purpose of eating. Admixing with the Nilotes probably made the Bantu lactose-tolerant.

*Around the first century, East Africa became a port-of-call along the Indian Ocean trade routes. For the next century or so, the simmering cauldron of heritage was seasoned with Arab and Persian influences as the Bantu population admixed with the traders.*

The plains Nilotes subsisted on a diet that revolved around livestock - meat, milk and blood were standard fare. This was subsisted with fruits, roots and resin from several trees. Certain shrubs were eaten as snacks by women, boys and girls when they were in fields.

The Luo made do with sorghum, red millet, wild vegetables, fish and meat. Women avoided the meat of the elephant, rhinoceros and hippopotamus.

Around the first century, East Africa became a port-of-call along the Indian Ocean trade routes. For the next century or so, the simmering cauldron of heritage was seasoned with Arab and Persian influences as the Bantu population admixed with the traders. Slowly, a new culture emerged that was an unlikely melding of language, tradition and skin complexion. The Bantus traded ivory, ambergris, timber and slaves for spices and ceramics.

Here is where another crop that shaped Arica likely made landfall. Varieties of the

plantain, which originated in Southeast Asia, quickly became a staple crop in the region and rapidly found its way west. Incidentally, Africa had an indigenous banana, labelled the false banana because even if it looks like the regular banana, it doesn't bear edible fruit. Its tubers, however were pounded and cooked as a dietary staple, its seeds used as ornaments and for medicine and its stems for ropes in Ethiopia.

Through the centuries, more foods were introduced to the East African coast by subsequent traders. Asian rice was quickly adopted by the Swahili, who preferred it to millet, which they viewed as "farmers' food". Pigs were introduced by the Arabs before they discovered their new God who doesn't take kindly to the close proximity of muck and animals. Sugarcane and peas also arrived with the trade winds.

Pilaf (or pilau, as it is locally known) is an ancient dish whose origins are probably lost in the sands of time. At its most rudimentary level, pilau is not really a dish, but a method of preparing rice, often in stock, combined with spices, meats and vegetables. It is more than likely a precursor to India's biryani.

While rice had been an Asian staple for millennia, the Persians only began its large-scale cultivation between 1000 BC and 500 BC. Shortly thereafter, some Persian with too much time on his hands - or an overactive imagination - invented the first pilaf. It may be that the technique is originally from India because they'd been eating rice for eons longer, but the name and the historical record that stuck, was Persian.

*While on the surface it may seem that pilau was introduced by the Indian immigrants, it is more likely that it predates the Indian presence here. Swahili culture, fused with Persian and Arab culture, likely had already come into contact with the flavourful dish.*

Biryani, which is a version of pilau layered with meat, vegetables, dried fruits and nuts, became a popular variation in India and made its way here. Here, though, it is made a little differently. Rather than packing the ingredients on top of each other, the meat is prepared separately from the rice and the rice is brightened with appealing food colour. If there's no accompanying banana and if it's not washed down with tamarind juice, then it's just rice and spicy meat.

While on the surface it may seem that pilau was introduced by the Indian immigrants, it is more likely that it predates the Indian presence here. Swahili culture, fused with Persian and Arab culture, likely had already come into contact with the flavourful dish. To this day, it is still prepared like it was prepared a thousand years ago, especially at the coast, with very little variation. Further inland, its preparation is a little more flexible.

Chapati is another increasingly popular Kenyan staple that made landfall with the Indians. It's a little difficult to explain. It's kind of like unleavened bread, but isn't. It's also a bit like a wrap, but isn't. Originally, chapati in the region was made with Atta, a type of whole-wheat flour, but this was gradually dropped in favour of regular wheat flour. Chapati dough is usually made of flour, salt and water that is kneaded and left alone for the gluten to do its dough-strengthening thing. When the dough becomes softer and more pliable, balls are pinched and rolled out on a surface with the palms of the hands and kneaded into long thin ropes. These are then wound into themselves into some kind of tight Fibonacci sequence spiral. The spiral is then rolled out with a rolling pin then fried on a preheated flat cast iron pan. For the longest time in many households, chapati was eaten at home with a variety of stews and sauces, but only during religious holidays or special occasions.

From Sofala in present-day Mozambique to Freddy Mercury's birthplace of Zanzibar to Mogadishu in the at-present fractious Somalia, a raft of cities sprung up all along the coast. As the centuries flitted by, the cities prospered. Kilwa in Tanzania, Stone Town in Zanzibar and Mombasa and Malindi in Kenya emerged as the big, important trading ports. A strict class system was instituted and, as is wont to happen when that vilest of humans, the career politician, appears, the blissful joy with which slaves were traded and elephants butchered for their ivory dissolved effervescently like a vitamin C tablet in warm water. In no time, none of the big cities were on talking terms.

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to pass by the East African coast, ostensibly looking for a sea route to India. In 1499, Vasco Da Gama, with gold bars in his eyes, returned to Portugal with tales of booty that set the King's heart aflutter. He returned with 19 ships and walked all over the bickering East African cities. The Portuguese went on to take over the trade routes, building outposts from Mozambique to India.

## **Portugal seeks alternate trade routes (and discover new foods in the process)**

On 6th April, 1453, the 21-year-old Mehmed the Conqueror invaded the last remaining bastion of the Byzantine Empire, laying siege to Constantinople. On 23rd May 1453, Constantinople fell under a hail of really slow cannon fire, and was renamed Istanbul, becoming the new capital of the Ottoman Empire under "Ceaser" Mehmed II. This marked the end of the last remaining strand of the once great Roman Empire that had lasted for over a millennium and a half, and effectively destroyed Christendom's hegemony in the Balkans and the Aegean.

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The fall also gradually eroded the Silk Road. Old Mongol treaties that had ensured safe passage of goods and traders along the road were now useless, making travel and trade fraught with peril.

European kingdoms (on the back of a number of very bad years that included a couple of black plague outbreaks, the Crusades and the sustained advance of Islam) were essentially broke, tired and depleted. Driven by a need to entrench their respective imperialisms and economic competition among themselves, and unable to get their favourite perfumes via the Silk Road, they began to look outwards for solutions

Portugal's John II jump-started the country's somnolent imperialising, and got Bartolomeu Dias to sail around South Africa to look for a route to India. Portugal and Spain, the two biggest European superpowers at the time, both figured that whoever controlled the maritime trade routes would be king of the hill.

In 1488, Columbus had this idea that he could sail west around the world and appear in the East Indies. He approached John II to fund the voyage but as Dias had just returned from a trip around the southern tip of Africa, John II figured he'd much rather work with the tried and true over the speculative and refused to fund the expedition. A tad miffed, but otherwise undeterred, Columbus approached the Spanish Crown a couple of times and finally convinced Queen Isabella I and her political advisors that it was a viable plan. He set sail in 1492

but didn't quite get to Japan because there was an entire continent in the way. He claimed these territories for the crown of Castille.

When he returned in 1493, he made a point of dropping by John II to royally rub it in. John dusted off the Treaty of Alcacovas previously signed with Spain and off-handedly pointed out the clause that said that basically everything Columbus discovered belonged to Portugal. Before Columbus had even arrived at Isabella I of Castille's palace, John II had already sent a letter to her threatening to send a fleet over and claim whatever it is that Columbus had found across the sea for Portugal. Spain thought it prudent to negotiate and met with Portugal. They worked out a new treaty, the Treaty of Tordesillas, that more or less split things evenly between the two.

In 1497, Vasco Da Gama set out from Lisbon around the southern tip of Africa to the East African Coast where, in Malindi, he picked up a navigator to guide him to India. And in 1500, Pedro Alvares Cabral set off and landed in Brazil. By 1503, a colony had been set up. This same fleet went on to explore the East African coast and head onwards to India. In 1549, with permanent settlement in Brazil, Portugal put the industrial machine into gear and began large-scale sugarcane production powered by native, and in short order, African slaves.

Although they didn't discover the vast caverns full of gold that they were hoping for, the Portuguese discovered a treasure trove of pau-brazil, Brazilwood, from where Brazil gets its name, and a cache of New World crops that would become inexorably linked to Africa, forever redefining its future. Maize, cassava, beans, peanuts, potatoes, tomatoes, peas, sesame and bell peppers all originated from the Americas but have become so entrenched and ingrained in the African palate that one would be forgiven for thinking that they originally came from Africa. These crops mitigated the infant mortality rate among African peoples and triggered a population increase that likely led to the various migrations that began spontaneously.

In the 16th century, the Portuguese brought maize (called *milho* in Portuguese and *maíz* in Spanish) to Mozambique. High yields and a neutral, borderline sweet taste quickly made it a staple, preferred grain. Unlike sorghum, its sheathed compact cob protected it from birds and made it easy to store in large granaries. In comparison, sorghum seeds had to be kept in fragile baskets. By the 19th century its slow, inexorable and erratic spread had reached the shores of East

Africa.

Ancient Peruvian pottery inscriptions show Native Americans holding beans in one hand and maize in the other, proving that *githeri*, or *nyoyo*, is really an ancient Americas recipe. Potatoes, carrots, cabbages and Royco Mchuzi Mix are recent ingredients incorporated by a certain ethnic community in Kenya that has a tendency to ..uh.. drill down food preparation to its most basic form.

Today, maize has all but replaced sorghum as the preferred grain in Africa, and in some parts of Africa, cassava has overtaken the yam.

Cassava quickly gained a foothold in the Equatorial rainforest and the poor soils in West Africa, fast becoming a staple throughout most of sub-Saharan Africa by the 19th century. Like the banana, and unlike sorghum and maize, cassava requires little land and labour which, coupled with its drought tolerance, make it an ideal food crop.

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It is more than a little ironic that it was the push for expansionism by the Portuguese, and the subsequent economic competition, that necessitated transporting millions out of Africa to the New World as slaves. Crops brought in from the New World injected the nutritional deficit that had plagued the African diet. Had this not happened, Africa would probably have become another United States of people-from-everywhere-else and I'd have spent my life compulsively gambling at a reservation in the middle of some infertile land far away from the nearest city.

In 1729, the Portuguese were finally evicted from East Africa's expansive coast by the Arabs but no sooner were they gone than a new threat emerged.

### **The British are coming (and going)**

When Europe began its process of "informal imperialism", traditional societies and cultures across the world suffered violent and catastrophic change. Far from being the "civilising" influence apologists extol it to be, this was likely the most

destructive socio-economic event ever to have occurred among the hapless communities it steamrolled over, often obliterating vast indigenous communities. Cultures that survived the shock of the upheaval lost much of their traditions and identity, which were violently uprooted and destroyed forever. These changes cannot be unmade.

In 1884, during the Berlin Conference that set the stage for the “Scramble for Africa”, Kenya was named a British protectorate, opening the proverbial floodgates as thousands of British settlers descended on the country to improve their lot by relocating the Africans settled on prime land to dry, barren reservations.

Cash crop farming quickly became the choice source of income for the settlers, especially with the large nearly-free labour force that they conscripted and the dirt cheap land. British colonialists forced Kenyans to work on their farms in virtual slavery and made it illegal for them to grow their own food. The colonial government also subsidised settler produce to drive out indigenous smallholder farmers who attempted to make a living selling cash crops. These farmers were only allowed to grow certain crops for sale at the local markets so that they could be taxed. This was the beginning of cash crop agriculture in Kenya. Some of these cash crops, such as tea, coffee and pyrethrum, remain Kenya’s leading exports today.

*British colonialists forced Kenyans to work on their farms in virtual slavery and made it illegal for them to grow their own food.*

With the British came Christianity to save us all from our collective impending doom. A concerted effort was made to rid local cultures of their traditions because one true God and his bearded, robe-wearing, miracle-performing son demanded it. The concerted campaign was more successful than the missionaries could have ever hoped for. It has taken less than a century and a half for a near-total abandonment of the old ways across the country, save for pockets of resistance that are slowly but surely succumbing to the unstoppable juggernaut of Jesus-ism. Traditional cereals, herbs and vegetables were promptly dropped for those with high market value and perceived desirability; if they were consumed, they were eaten in secret and infrequently, mainly in the reservations.

Often, Kenyan workers in settler farms were paid in sacks of maize. When they

returned to their newly allocated reservations, they took some of this maize with them. At some point in the late 1800s, a mysterious disease decimated millet and sorghum and drastically reduced yield. This was the foothold that maize needed. Until well within the 20th century, maize wasn't the mainstay of the diet in most of Eastern and Central Africa; in fact, it seems to have been unknown in Uganda even as late as 1861. Today, it is probably the single most important food and cash crop across Africa. Although one would be forgiven for assuming it has been here since God created the heavens and the earth because of how deep its tentacles have rooted themselves in Kenyan tradition.

Ugali, or sima, has been eaten with reckless abandon by just about everyone in Kenya for the last half century. It is also a little difficult to explain. It's a mix of finely ground maize flour and water cooked to a semi-solid consistency and eaten with an accompanying vegetable or meat dish. Some savages blaspheme by adding butter or margarine in the maize flour/water meal while cooking or, even more scandalously, milk, but thankfully, cases of this are few and far between. People have divorced their significant other and more than one fight has erupted because of the incorrect preparation of this seemingly simple meal.

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With land now a scarcity, and at a premium, Kenyans increasingly began favouring cash crops as opposed to subsistence farming. This erosion of the peasant household made food security a tenuous affair, especially because resistance against colonial rule was taking place at that time. The capitalist labour needs resulted in the emergence of new types of households: commodity-producing households, labour-exporting households, squatter households and working-class households that wholly relied on this new economic system.

In January 1960, the British suddenly decided to up and leave Kenya to its own devices, confounding everyone, not least the resistance. This came with some perks. The new, indigenous government could now resettle the landless and large-scale commercial farming could continue on select plantations. Food production improved as more land was opened up for cultivation. The government was able to improve roads in the schemes to help farmers transport their goods. People from different parts of the country and from different communities were able to

live together in joy and harmony, thereby creating national unity.

Today, there has been a resurgence of traditional vegetables - at my local supermarket, there's an aisle full of plants and herbs that I'm unfamiliar with, some pungent, some broad-leafed, some that make me sneeze, and all labelled with the wholly useless tag of "assorted vegetables". Rows of arrow roots, yams and cassava sit right next to artichokes, celery and button mushrooms. This was not the case a mere 20 years ago.

Increasingly, foods that were considered "high-brow" have become more readily available. Chapati no longer holds its hallowed position as the go-to celebrity meal, the prices of meat and chicken are (more or less) affordable for many and an influx of fast-food chains (a direct marker of a middle income market that can sustain these franchises) have introduced Kenyans to the pizzas and the burgers and the foot-longs of the First World. Even the beers on the shelves have increased to the point where we have local artisanal beers.

All we need now is for sorghum, millet, teff, barley and African rice to make a resurgence. Then we'll have come full circle.

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## **A Conversation with Visual Fine Artist and Painter Collins Odour**