



'Githeriman' and the Kenyan Middle Class Saviour Mentality

By Njoki Wamai



In the midst of the 2017 Kenyan election process and subsequent petition, a little-known Nairobi street sweeper became an overnight celebrity in mainstream national and international media after his picture started circulating among Kenyan social media users. The sweeper, Martin Kimotho, popularly known as Marto, was among the many Kenyans who were queuing before dawn on the 8th of August while eating githeri, a popular maize and beans meal, from a plastic bag as he waited for his turn to vote. Another youthful Kenyan, Ian Kinuthia, who was voting for the first time in the same polling station, took a picture of Marto and sent it to his friends on WhatsApp. The next day, Kenyans online, especially middle class Kenyans often found on Twitter, had christened the 42-year-old sweeper the "Githeriman" (#GitheriMan) and had decided that he was Kenya's hero because he had united Kenyans of different ethnic groups as they praised him for going to vote at 5 in the morning while eating his "measly githeri".

Saviour mentality

Leading corporates, including Safaricom, the multibillion-shilling telecommunications company, lined up to donate gifts to and dress up Marto in their own image. Marto's over-sized brown jacket was quickly replaced with fitting designer suits by a suit company where our political elite buy their clothes. They gave Marto a total make-over with clothes and shoes to look the part of a sleek Nairobi executive. A real estate and mortgage company also showed up with a house. This has been a harvest season for Marto's rise from grass to grace - just because he ate githeri from a polythene

bag at dawn.

Githeri is a common meal across Kenya's social strata, but in this context, the way he was eating it from a polythene bag rendered him a poor man who needed to be rescued from himself as soon as possible by patronising Kenyans online. I read one tweet where a former Kenyan celebrity offered to buy the "poor Marto" a pizza, which is ironical given that Marto's githeri is a much healthier meal than a pizza. But the Kenyan middle class couldn't see their folly in the excitement to save Marto from his githeri and his over-sized brown jacket, which was serving him perfectly well in his Kayole neighbourhood where he lives with his family while working in Dandora where he grew up.

I read one tweet where a former Kenyan celebrity offered to buy the "poor Marto" a pizza, which is ironical given that Marto's githeri is a much healthier meal than a pizza. But the Kenyan middle class couldn't see their folly in the excitement to save Marto from his githeri and his over-sized brown jacket

This trend where the Kenyan middle class and corporates on Twitter save low-income earners instead of challenging and volunteering themselves to fix that political and economic system that keeps the wananchi from attaining their potential is now a popular trend. Fly-by-night saviours with cheques and cameras appear immediately after something happens to Kenyans on the other side of town East of Moi Avenue. The story of the couple who had a Ksh.100 (about one US dollar) wedding comes to mind. Middle class Kenyans on Twitter and opportunistic corporates rewarded the couple with a honeymoon in Mombasa and land ready for irrigation in Isinya.

Like some Western saviours' need to save African children and women from their society, Kenyans online are increasingly becoming patronising towards those from the other side of town through their saviour actions.

The complexity of Nyambura

Unemployed youth in Kenya are also using placards to get jobs, which is thinking outside the box in a country with a very high unemployment rate. Nyambura's placard on Nairobi's Moi Avenue a week or so ago was the most attention-grabbing. The placard said that she was looking for a husband to help her take care of her daughter. She had decided to play by the rules set up by Kenyan middle class saviours. They want to save someone, she is up for it and she has learnt the current rules of the game: show up, tell them your needs and let the saviours save you from yourself.

Many of those who run to dress up those who show up in their Twitter world in the comfort of their penthouses in Nairobi's up-market neighbourhoods have challenges similar to those that Nyambura is facing - the need to connect with another human being deeply, the need to find a mother or father figure for your children to help them with homework. So when Nyambura shows up with such human needs, the saviours online become mute. Her case is too complex for a saviour story.

Interestingly, the Kenyan middle class saviours online have not been forthcoming with goodies, such as employment or offers of marriage, in Nyambura's case as her story is not attractive enough for their corporate social responsibility (CRS) section of the annual report. The husband story in there complicates matters. Saviours like simple stuff. Nyambura is looking for something deep and complex, a relationship, even though she needs a better income and education for her daughter. She is out to connect with another soul. She is human. She is not a statistic. She cannot be given a

moniker like “Githeriman” or “100 bob wedding couple” because Nyambura represents our complexities as human beings.

Many of those who run to dress up those who show up in their Twitter world in the comfort of their penthouses in Nairobi’s up-market neighbourhoods have challenges similar to those that Nyambura is facing – the need to connect with another human being deeply, the need to find a mother or father figure for your children to help them with homework. So when Nyambura shows up with such human needs, the saviours online become mute. Her case is too complex for a saviour story.

I genuinely hope that she finds someone to assist her to find employment or earns an income that can allow her to take care of her daughter. I also pray that a genuine partner who is willing to be her companion shows up.

The question is, why have we turned Marto and others like him into a fetish? The reason is that the Kenyan middle class is constantly looking for someone to save and Marto showed up on 8th of August fitting the bill. Nyambura, however, did not fit the bill. Unlike Marto, she represents complexity.

Active citizenship

It is time to become active citizens on and outside Twitter by holding our national and county governments to account so that they can provide quality public services that can restore the dignity of all Kenyans, not just the dignity of one “Githeriman”. We must stop creating private solutions to public problems. If we had a system that worked for every Kenyan, the middle class wouldn’t need to save the “Githeriman” and others like him. They would recognise them alright but not through fetishising them. I am very happy when low-income earners, such as Marto, get to benefit from an unfair capitalist economic system in these saviour circles. However, Kenyans online can do much more by moving beyond small populist gains that make the middle class feel good about themselves to systemically challenging the government and the corporates to guarantee dignity for all Kenyans.

It is time to become active citizens on and outside Twitter by holding our national and county governments to account so that they can provide quality public services that can restore the dignity of all Kenyans, not just the dignity one “Githeriman”. We must stop creating private solutions to public problems. If we had a system that worked for every Kenyan, the middle class wouldn’t need to save the “Githeriman” and others like him.

So, as a way forward, before joining the next online saviour series, how about starting a movement for quality healthcare in public hospitals and improvement of public education in your neighbourhood, town, city or county. How about also asking Safaricom to reduce their cost of transactions so that Marto and other low-income people can have enough money to buy food for their families because many low-income Kenyans spend a large proportion of their income on airtime for their mobile phones. How about asking those corporates lining up to have a photo op with “Githerman” to commit to equipping and maintaining the cancer machines at the oncology department at Kenyatta National Hospital to ensure treatment for Marto’s neighbours. You get the drift...on to the next saviour series.

Published by the good folks at [The Elephant](#).

The Elephant is a platform for engaging citizens to reflect, re-member and re-envision their society by interrogating the past, the present, to fashion a future.

Follow us on [Twitter](#).

