



Luo Lives Also Matter

By Magunga Williams



Warning: This article contains graphic redacted photographs.

A woman sits behind her desk, typing furiously on her keyboard, preparing minutes from the last faculty meeting. She is frustrated because of the many mistakes that she keeps making; silly typos that she should not be making given the fact that she has been doing this job for the better half of her adult life. So she decides to take a rest. She picks up her phone, scrolls through her phonebook, looking for someone to talk to. Her thumb rests on a name. She taps on it, then hits the green icon on the screen. It rings four times before a woman with a mechanical voice tells her that George is not available, but if she wants, perhaps she can leave a message after the tone. She declines the offer. Then tries again. She calls three times; all three times her son does not answer.

On the other side of town, a boy of 26 walks into a Java Coffee shop, peels the camera bag from his back and places it next to his feet. He exhales for the first time in a while. He looks around him and the restaurant is full of people going on with their business as if nothing has happened. As if nothing is happening. He wonders whether they are even bothered, whether they really care. He wonders whether they heard the blasts...whether they have been hearing the blasts for the past, what, how many months now? He envies their ability to remain unbothered. Knowledge is not power. Knowledge a burden to those who bear it, especially when people refuse to listen. Or when they do not care.

A woman walks up to him with a smile on her face and asks what he would like to drink.

“A vanilla milkshake. Thick, if you may.” He does not even notice that he did not say *please* until the lady is long gone with his instructions.

But nobody can blame him.

The sun outside is showing off. His throat is parched, dry, like a terrible joke. Not from the heat outside, though, but from the white smoke that he has been swallowing since mid-morning. It is not a normal kind of smoke that one. Its introduction is announced by a thunder that shocks your heart like a defibrillator. It starts as a thick ball of smoke, then rises into a cloud that spreads.

Unfortunately, this smoke preys even on those it was not intended for. And when it finds you, it will devour you methodically. It will get into your eyes and wash them with acid, then crawl into your nose to summon waterfalls of mucous. If you are careless enough to taste it, then you have tasted hell. Not even a Nigerian or Indian tongue can withstand that kind of fire.

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And it never leaves, this smoke, because long after you have managed to outmanoeuvre the people who unleashed it on you, it still stays, lodged in your throat, waiting to be challenged by something its own size. A thick vanilla milkshake, George thinks, will do the trick.

He takes out his phone for the first time in a long time and finds missed calls from his mother.

“Hallo?”

“Hallo. GG. How are you doing, *nyathina?*”

“I am fine,” he lies. He hopes that she does not pick up on the crackle in his voice when he lies. There are many lies told in that phone conversation. Lies that he did not have to tell, but come on, the old lady is fifty-something years old with awful blood pressure. What good is the truth to her? What good is telling her that he was in running battles with the police? Protesting against police brutality and the senseless killing of supporters of the opposition? That he luckily escaped being whooped by men in Ninja Turtle suits, wielding fat planks of death in their hands? That, in fact, the leader of the protest, Boniface Mwangi, was shot in the chest by antiriot police using a teargas canister?

Earlier this year, a video went on social media showing a man holding a kid in one hand and a gun in the other. A crowd of people surrounds them, helpless. The kid is already in his control, and he is visibly begging for his life. The man with a gun then pins him down, points, then fires. The first shot does not kill the boy. Neither does the second. It is the third shot that sends him to his ancestors.

There is nothing the crowd can do about it. But on social media, a good chunk of people praise the man with the gun. There are a few people who condemn it, but the majority of the people say that that these kids have been a menace, causing trouble all the time. That that kid deserves the fate he got. Nothing is done to the man with the gun. He is a policeman after all. A Hessy, so he is called. A

member of an elite branch of the police whose job is just that: to kill criminals. Thus, many a Hessy exist today in many crime-prone areas of Nairobi. Hessy wa Kayole. Hessy wa Githurai. Hessy wa Eastleigh. Hessy wa Dandora.

There is a new Hessy in town. Hessy wa maprotest. Actually, not just one, but an army of them. Unlike the other Hessies, these do not hide under the guise of plain clothes. They wear police regalia. Jungle green uniform, sometimes armed with guns, sometimes with clubs, sometimes with both. They are sent to quell protests and they do not give a damn about normal police work or procedure. They finish anyone or anything in their path. And just like the other Hessies before them, they commit atrocities under the lie that they are doing it for the greater good of the society.

According to a damning report by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, ever since the announcement of the results of the 8 August 2017 election, the National Police Service alone may have been responsible for the deaths of up to 67 people, the injuring of many more, and the source of pain for countless others. Up to 67 people is 67 people too many. (It is the same number of people who perished in the September 2013 terrorist attack on the Westgate mall in Nairobi, which generated worldwide sympathy.)

Thomas Odhiambo Oku, aged 26, shot by police outside his gate in Dandora. Kevin Otieno, 23, shot outside his gate in Dandora. Sammy Amira Loka, hit by a teargas canister on his chest by the police. Lilian Khavere, 40 years old, 8 months pregnant, teargassed, fell and was trampled to death by a stampede. Festo Kevogo, 30, shot in the head. Zebedeo Mukhala, 42 years old, shot in the leg and then trampled to death by a stampede. Jeremiah Maranga, 50 years old, G4S employee, beaten by police and left for dead. Victor Okoth Obondo, 24 years old, shot in the back.

The President of the Republic of Kenya has not come out to speak against this kind of injustice. He has not shown any remorse, except for when he tweeted about the death of one of his supporters who unfortunately passed away during one of his rallies in one of his strongholds.

Of course, the Kenyan police has since denied the findings of this report. But we all know that when it comes to the government, an allegation is never proved until it is officially denied. According to the government, these deaths were imagined. And that is the greater insult here - that it could execute the murder of people and then claim that it never happened.

If indeed the report by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch titled *"Kill Those Criminals: Security Forces Violations in Kenya's August 2017 Elections"* is a work of fiction, deserving only of attention of the organisers of the Man Booker Prize for Fiction, then pray tell me this: Where are they? Where are the men, women and children named in that report? If they can prove that even one of them is still alive and well, even just on a balance of probabilities, then we would take this report to the bin.

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These are just a few of the names that are listed in that report. If this report is a lie, then where are these people? And this was just in Nairobi, by the way. In other opposition strongholds, many more names abound. Audi Ogada, the Chairperson of Kisumu City Residents Voice (KICIREVO), has more to say about the kind of brutality that has been leveled by the police on the people of Kisumu. He has been one of the first responders, dealing with whatever is left in the wake of a police invasion.

Ogada speaks of a 28-year-old boy who had his testicles clobbered by the police and was then thrown in prison. He writhed in pain for days until he (Ogada) spoke to the police to allow him to take the boy to the Jaramogi Oginga Odinga Referral Hospital. Ogada speaks of the two-year-old girl from Nyamasaria who had a bullet the police put in her neck removed. And the women and young men who have had other pieces of lead removed from their buttocks. He speaks about police officers raiding shops in Kondele and robbing unarmed business people. Other reports on social media also speak about police officers burning down shops to smoke out protestors.

The report by KICIREVO is a graphic horror scene, featuring, among other atrocities, a man lying dead next to his work place, thanks to a bleeding hole in his head, another with a busted jaw, and children from Mount Carmel Nursery School admitted to hospital because the police threw teargas into their school.

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At what point will we cut the bullshit and call this what it is: persecution? This is not even about the protests. This is no longer about protecting businesses. Because a good majority of people who have been slain by the Kenyan police were not even protestors. They were innocent bystanders. Besides, there have been violent protests even in Jubilee strongholds, but none of those people have been killed for it, or been met with the kind of brute force that NASA people have endured, especially those of the Luo community. The areas reporting these kinds of hostilities are Kisumu, Homa Bay, Migori, Siaya and NASA strongholds in Nairobi like Kibera and Dandora.

History provides the context for the targeting of Luos by the Kenyan state. The whole Luo community has been branded thugs whose only characteristic is their high affinity for chaos - for the destruction of the businesses of others. This kind of branding and framing is reminiscent of what happened in Rwanda (the reduction of the Tutsi to *inyenzis* or cockroaches), in apartheid South Africa (calling black people *kaffirs*) and in the United States (when black people had no rights). The strategy is to reduce them into something less than human and thus make them easier to oppress and kill. Audi Ogada recounts how the police raided neighborhoods in Nyalenda, Manyatta and other neighborhoods in Kisumu. They stormed into houses, dragged out the men, beat them up within an inch of their graves...and in some cases (like the fateful night of August 10th) shot them dead.

And what was their crime? They were protesting. They were exercising their constitutional right under Article 37 of the constitution. They were picketing against the election results that the Supreme Court of Kenya declared null and void.

Luo Lives Matter is a slogan that was popularised on the Internet. The Government of Kenya, through its spokesperson Eric Kiraithe, claims that the slogan is part of a larger devilish conspiracy meant to instill fear amongst the Luos and to generate hatred

towards the police. But as a Luo, I do not need the help of a slogan to instill fear in me. I am already afraid.

Speaking to the BBC World Service, Ambassador Martin Kimani, Director of Kenya's National Counterterrorism Centre, defended this kind of police brutality by saying that the protestors were violent. This is true. It would be a lie to claim that the protests have been peaceful. In fact, protesters had set tyres on fire and barricaded roads. Some criminal elements in the group had also committed crimes, including looting and robbery.

Be that as it may, none of these alleged crimes deserved indiscriminate police brutality. They did not warrant the use of live bullets. It is a shame that a man of Ambassador Kimani's stature can embarrass himself like that on television. That kind of force is not proportional. Kimani should have referred to Article 244 of the Constitution of Kenya, as well as the Sixth Schedule of the National Police Service Act, read in compliance with Sections 49 (5) and 61 (2).

Yet, if we recollect well, in the call for any kind of significant change, violence inevitably rears its ugly head. Expecting anything else would be wishful thinking. Violence was part and parcel of the civil rights movement under the leadership of Malcom X and the Black Panthers, the Black Lives Matter movement in the US today, the fight against apartheid in South Africa, the struggle for independence throughout the world, and the clamour for multiparty democracy here in Kenya. There is a cause and there are the people behind it. It is important that we distinguish between the two. All of the above causes involved violence, yet they are celebrated today, and the people behind them are honoured. So why does the cause for electoral integrity in Kenya be any different?

Luo Lives Matter is a slogan that was popularised on the Internet. The Government of Kenya, through its spokesperson Eric Kiraithe, claims that the slogan is part of a larger devilish conspiracy meant to instill fear amongst the Luos and to generate hatred towards the police. But as a Luo, I do not need the help of a slogan to instill fear in me. I am already afraid. I have seen body bags sent to my hometown of Kisumu days before elections, and I have seen bodies fished out of Lake Victoria weeks after elections. I have organised a peaceful protest in which we did nothing but cry for help and we were still beaten. I have read my history and I cannot forget how former President Jomo Kenyatta ordered the opening of fire onto a crowd, killing at least eleven people. And now my tribesmen are being butchered by the police, and I watch helplessly as the police say that I am hallucinating.

I do not need anyone to make me fear the Kenyan police; it is a default setting.

As the cold milkshake eases into his mouth and down his throat, George wonders just how many more people need to die for this to become a problem. The killings are a deterrent, yes, but only for so long. You can only oppress a group of people for so long before they decide that they have had enough. For now, he logs onto Facebook and likes yet another profile picture of a person posting about *Luo Lives Matter*. They do. He matters. It is such a shame that some people think *Luo Lives Matter* means that the lives of Luos are the only ones that matter. It simply means that *Luo Lives Matter as well*.

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He wonders how many Luo men have lied to their mothers. When their mothers ask how they are doing and they say fine simply because it is a formality and not a real representation of how they are actually doing.

He is not fine. He has not been for a while. It is such a horrible feeling, dreading the moment your mother will find out how you are really doing - because you are tired of telling lies.

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