



THE BATTLE FOR KENYA'S SOUL: Will history absolve them?

By Owaahh



Perhaps the timing was wrong. Or just right. Soon after the Miguna Miguna arrest-and-deportation circus began, I opened an autobiography I had just been gifted. The book, *Walking in Kenyatta's Struggles*, by Duncan Ndegwa, came highly recommended. Little did I know what I was in for.

Duncan Ndegwa was Kenya's first Head of Civil Service and its second Central Bank Governor. He was in the *sanctum sanctorum* in those early years. His story promised to be insightful, if not tantalising, revealing the many struggles Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta, faced. But it made me angry.

I wasn't sure why I got angrier and angrier after I got past the diversionary chapters on culture. But I did. Eventually, I scanned through my notes and scribbled them in pencil on one of the blank pages at the back of the book. Then it all made sense. I was reading the past while it was happening in my present. If the past was ever a prologue, Kenya in 2018 is it. We are stuck in a destructive cycle.

Quick, try placing these two statements in the last five decades of Kenya's history:

1. *He openly warned the media against misusing press freedom to "misinform the public".*
2. *He was charged with treason, which was later changed to the lesser crime of incitement.*

The first entry is from a speech by Tom Mboya in 1962, but those words have been used many times since. They could as well have been said by Argwings Kodhek, or his boss Jomo. Or in 1979, when newspapers were ordered not to publish an opinion poll. Or by Kalonzo Musyoka in 1990, when he filed a motion to ban a newspaper from covering Parliament proceedings. They could even be taken from John Michuki's infamous "if you rattle a snake" retort.

The second statement refers to the short-lived treason charge against Maina Kamanda in 2001. He had said that President Daniel arap Moi should be shot in bed if he tried to extend his term. The charge of treason, the crime of betraying one's country, has been a constant threat against outspoken opposition MPs since independence. Whether applied in 1971 or in 2018, this weighty threat is still firmly in place.

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You've heard both phrases lately, and you will hear them again. These are what the academic Joyce Nyairo calls "the grammar of the state". The way the state speaks with those it governs has barely evolved over the last six decades. That's because although the faces have changed, the essence of the state hasn't; it hasn't even kept up with those it governs.

Tyranny of the accursed

In many ways, the last decade has felt like a marathon through the first 30 years after independence. The son wants to eradicate the same things that his father promised to focus on 55 years ago. Detention without trial is back. We have launched wars on human rights, a new constitution, devolution, and Somalia. The concerted effort to reset to the KANU code is in full gear. We are back to essentially a one-party state with a growing greed and hold on all arms of government. We have the makings of a Sun King who can do no wrong, and in whose wisdom and undying love for our wellbeing we must trust.

There's a tough-talking Interior Cabinet Minister with a disdain for the law and basic decency. Our maize scandals are now an annual thing and pilfering from the state is now a legitimate way to join the upper ranks of society. A fake political rivalry continues to eclipse real social and economic issues. Politics has become entertainment in all but name, an expensive escape from realities. We are now numb to theft of land, taxes, and even borrowed money, in this dark comedy.

This reality is not accidental; it was the entire purpose of the creation of the Kenyan state. [In his treatise on this](#), Darius Okolla says that this founding ethos of the colony never went away. In fact, in the last sixty years and four presidents later, it is even more entrenched. Now as then, the needs of a few appear as the needs of the many, as do their problems. "Personal problems" are not the same as the "you" in "security starts with you".

Of the many adjectives Okolla uses to describe the Kenyan elite, the one that sticks out the most, is "zombie". The image of the undead it conjures is a reminder that while elites may try to extricate themselves from the society they actively ruin, they cannot detach themselves from it. The problem is their myopic view of what the Kenyan state could be, as becomes clear in Ndegwa's memoirs. The men around Jomo deified him, and even when he was senile and dying, shielded him like one would a monarch. It wasn't Jomo the man, or the icon, that they worshipped, but the head of this zombie elite. He wasn't just actively refusing to build a formidable Kenyan state; he was leading the way in destroying it.

A constant argument I've heard is that it was important for Jomo and Moi to rule as they did because they had inherited a traumatised society. The argument is that such a society is fragile and needs a firm hand to guide it through the healing process. It is the dangerous justification for "benevolent dictatorship". That firmer hand promised repeatedly by Jubilee mandarins before and after the last election is a slippery slope. It is the same one with which the opposition handles its internal elections. This argument is back in our news diet, based on the same laws and ideals. What's missing from it is that this "firmer hand" traumatised society in more ways than the colonial unit had, more so because the black aristocracy had no direction or plan beyond acquisition.

Publicly, and in such personal records as memoirs, this elite class continuously pretends it worked for the good of the country. But it turns out that our definition of country differs. For them it was a running plantation that requires little or no input, where a slave working class is either a vote, a weapon, a taxpayer, or all three. To keep this intact, the greatest inheritance Uhuru's fathers left him was an assortment of oppressive colonial laws. They retained that same colonial attitude to dissent, peasant revolutions, and oaths. Laws on treason, sedition and secession remained untouched. Some were even shored up and legitimised as necessary, such as the Emergency laws.

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Inherited from a monarchy, these laws were designed to protect and deify the throne. They protected their perceived God-given right to rule, and fenced off the rituals, like oathing, that even attempted to challenge this. For example, the law used to arrest Miguna Miguna was passed in 1955 to fight the peasant irredentism that was the Mau Mau. Another interesting fight in the last five years was whether governors could fly official flags on their cars. In a pseudo-monarchy, the symbols of power, such as flags and oaths, must be protected to legitimise the power of the few, even among themselves. Yet that legitimacy remains shaky at best.

The identity problem

Two significant events will take place between now and 2020. The first is a census, in 2019, that will no doubt be assessed more for its political meaning than its socio-economic importance. We will be on the upper layers of 51 million people by the end of this year, with a net gain of one person every 25 seconds. Most of this population is under 25, and with a life expectancy of 62 years, is not even halfway through its lifespan.

Yet, given our deliberate and structured apathy to the destructive parts of our history, it will not be a surprise if the same conversations are still around in 40 years. Then, on June 11, 2020, most of mainland Kenya will mark a century since it was carved out as a colony. The 12-mile coastal strip will follow two months later, and the north five years after that. With that, the entire patchwork that is the Kenyan state will be a century-old. But the Kenyans within this boardroom experiment will still be struggling with what exactly it means to be Kenyan. Kenyanness is still a weapon, as shown by the cases of Ernsteine Kiano, Sheikh Khalid Balala, Miguna Miguna and Mohammed Sirat. All four found themselves "unKenyanded" for their personal and political stands, as if being born in a particular place (or married in, in the case of Ernsteine) should not be the foundation of all rights and inheritances.

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fighters steal newspaper acreage from the people. It is not just about publicity; it is part of their innate desire to live forever, to be “remembered well” even when they have done bad things. It is a blood relative who, after years of self-imposed exile, returns to the family fold when he’s diagnosed with a terminal disease. His reason? Because he needs his people to bury him.

In Ndegwa’s book, there’s a way he talks about the Shifta War that is both condescending and revealing. First, the state of emergency that allowed Jomo and Moi to rule the North-East by decree was illegal. Ndegwa says as much, but cheekily defends it as a necessary breach of the law. Second, there is an appalling distance in the way he talks about an attempt to deport all Somalis from Eastleigh, and his failure to follow an order from his boss in a related event. The worst thing about this “othering” is that it is not unique to him or to the Jomo administration; it is a tool used by politicians even today.

The future of the Kenyan experiment

There is no Kenyan identity to reclaim. It has never existed, and there’s a possibility it might never exist. There are layers, yes, between officialdom and what we actually are and want to be.

I encountered this properly when I wrote “[Nicholas Biwott was Not a Good Man](#)” in response to the flurry of hagiographies that followed his death. The things in that obituary were common knowledge, but they were missing from the most read obituaries. My article was followed by statements like “Africans don’t speak ill of the dead”, which is a lie. My subject had himself been obsessed with his legacy, probably being the first among Kenya’s elite who paid to have the Internet scrub off any bad stories about him. If anything, Biwott epitomised the murk of the zombie elite. For him, the problem wasn’t that he wasn’t contrite about the lives he had ruined in his quest for wealth and power, but how history remembered him. He escalated (and demanded) the official silence we somehow now believe was a precolonial thing. We collectively censor “bad” stories about public figures, in much the same way that sexual predators roamed Hollywood for decades, unpunished.

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But the problem is that when official histories are written, people like him will get away with their contribution to the stagnation of the Kenyan state. Their concerted efforts to keep our identity in stasis, by both feeding off the land and actively trying to shape how such stories survive, will be lost in the threads of history. The elite of the day will actually promote this, not because of any other reason but a desire to sustain this destructive form of memory. It will still permeate through our social networks as if death, by itself the only certainty, somehow cleanses one of all the evil one has done.

In *The Burden of History*, American historian Hayden V. White wrote that “...we require a history that will educate us to discontinuity more than ever before; for discontinuity, disruption, and chaos is our lot.” There’s nothing like an objective history, White argued, because while historical facts are scientifically verifiable, stories are not. And societies are built on stories. If you control a society’s stories, whether through censorship, tyranny, litigation or official narratives, you control its future.

Here, the resurgence of the KANU state is not as scary as it should be because we are eternal optimists. Because in the way stories are distilled, present-day problems are new and the solutions for them haven’t been tried before. Our institutionalised amnesia is not accidental, and neither is our

official silence. But in our homes, and in bars and next to church noticeboards, we whisper to each other about the true state of the nation. We have learnt to accept the dichotomy between what makes it to official history, which includes media and eulogies, and what we discuss outside of it. This allows us to live double lives, and to drive our society further up the pedestal from which it will eventually collapse.

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In a discussion I had about Ndegwa's memoirs, an acquaintance told me I was being harsh on the old man. I offered that the purpose of memoirs is not just to tell one's story for one's legacy, but to fit it in a slot in the sands of time. Its purpose is to invite us into a journey that is not our own, to see and experience a different life. It is not just that we might learn something about the author, but that we might also learn something about ourselves. What I learnt about us from that book is that we are stuck in a cycle that can't be sustained.

That was primarily why *Walking in Kenyatta's Struggles* pissed me off so much. In Ndegwa's boastful stories about how he and others deliberately undermined devolution, subverted the constitution and ostracised entire regions, I saw the men and women around Uhuru Kenyatta today. When they are aging and obsessed about their legacy, they will try to justify turning Kenya into the tyranny it is swiftly becoming. Memoirs will speak of the common good that is national security, and why ignoring court orders was the only choice. They will celebrate the handshakes and the failed projects. People who are actively destroying this society today will become "statesmen" and "stateswomen".

And the taxpayers in this *jua kali* nation will let this be. In the coming years, they might even replace them in the list of great nation builders.

But will history absolve them?

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