



Magical Kenya: Where the Fantastic Blends With the Mundane to Produce the Unbelievable

By Christine Mungai



“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness in this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.” - Ephesians 6:12

The first episode of the popular Netflix series [Narcos](#) opens with the title card: “Magical realism is defined as what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe. There is a reason magical realism was born in Colombia.”

Magical realism as a literary genre presents the supernatural and the fantastic in an otherwise mundane, ordinary real-life setting. These magical elements are presented in the story in a matter-of-fact way, without explanation or even being remarked upon. It is not quite science fiction, or straight-up fantasy writing. The writer does not create a fictional universe to set the story. It is something more subtle, more murky. It is the integration of the supernatural with the ordinary, like

the ghosts in Gabriel García Márquez's [One Hundred Years of Solitude](#), or Toni Morrison's [Beloved](#), who visit the real world without being haunting or terrifying like they would be in a classic horror movie. The reader, therefore, accepts the marvellous as normal and common.

Now in its third season, *Narcos*' story arc of notorious druglord Pablo Escobar places [his fantastic wealth and opulence](#) in the realm of magical realism – at one point Escobar offered to pay off Colombia's entire national debt of \$10 billion from his own pocket. His criminal enterprise was spending \$2,500 a month just on rubber bands to wrap bank notes from the proceeds of drug trafficking, and at one point was losing 10% of its income – always stashed in cash – to rats and mould. When Escobar's family was hiding from the police in a mountainside farmhouse, his daughter became ill and hypothermic, so he burned \$2million of currency notes to keep her warm.

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WTF?!

The problem with explaining Escobar as magical is that it obscures the very real-life political processes, historical context and foreign policy strategies that make an Escobar possible. The notorious Colombian druglord comes on the scene during the Cold War, in the midst of a civil war in his country. The right-wing factions of that war have had US/CIA support almost uninterruptedly. The US/CIA supports the drug trade when it suits their political and foreign policy interests. (See the [Iran/Nicaragua Contra affair](#).) Most of the profits from the drug trade went to the United States as illegal money to be laundered in CIA-linked banks.

Kidnappings, murders, and fantastic wealth are not things that “just happen” in a magical place south of Miami. [For a wonderfully insightful long read on why *Narcos* is not magical realism, see [this blog post](#) by Diana Méndez]. Still, it is difficult for most of us to grasp political processes that produce death, destruction and destitution. We see the effects, but we can't really explain what has happened. They are too big or abstract for us to grasp, and too nefarious and diabolical for us to believe.

So some turn to magical realism, an artistic attempt to capture the unbelievable in a setting where these things happen frequently. Magical realism expresses a “‘Third World’ consciousness,” Salman Rushdie [once said](#), societies where “the impossibly old struggles against the appallingly new, in which public corruptions and private anguishes are somehow more garish and extreme than they ever get in the so-called ‘North’ where centuries of wealth and power have formed thick layers over the surface of what's really going on”. Rushdie pointed out that in the works of Márquez, as in the world he describes, “impossible things happen constantly, and quite plausibly, out in the open under the midday sun”.

I never read Emmanuel Eni's *Delivered from the Powers of Darkness* when I was a child, but it was a hugely influential part of my Christian discourse and formation in the late 1980s and 1990s. In Christian Union meetings, in youth group discussions, in passionate sermons and testimonies, the Nigerian evangelist's influence was everywhere.

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The plot can be summarised thus: An adolescent Eni, orphaned and insecure, is introduced into satanism by a former schoolmate who is in her twenties and improbably wealthy. The friend confesses that it is her interaction with the occult that has got her to her present status, and she introduces him to the occult congregation, many of whom are intellectuals.

Then impossible things happen – human sacrifice, teleportation, bloody rituals, shape-shifts into animal form, descending to the bottom of the sea on a staircase to meet the “Queen of the Coast”, a beautiful woman with whom he seals a contract that would guarantee him riches, and so on. (Eni constantly reminds the reader that these were real events, happening in his physical form.)

The second half of the book deals with his conversion: He meets Jesus Christ himself –who he describes as a beautiful man. After the powers of darkness have been exorcised, he becomes an active member of the Assemblies of God church.

I recently conducted a very unscientific survey on Twitter, asking followers what they remembered about the book; what it felt like to read and talk about it. “Scary”, “chilling”, “terrifying”, came up again and again.

Others said: “I’m still haunted by it”; “stayed up all night afraid of the darkness”; “so confused...it took me a long time to recover”. “It was one of those books that was passed around in class. Hastily read in rounds during preps,” KiproKimutai (@Tiboron) tweeted.

But this wasn’t the kind of fear one feels in a fictional horror film, which can nervously be laughed away once the credits start rolling. The real terror of the stories of satanic riches – of which Eni’s tale was just one of an entire genre of books, movies, sermons and devotionals – was in the way the supernatural and the quotidian were colliding in a way that was fantastic yet...plausible. For most people who read the tale, there was something you just couldn’t shake off.

The narratives of satanic riches are plausible for two reasons. First, the fact that they are confessional actually adds to their credibility – if one confesses to doing despicable deeds which no one would ever like to be accused of, that makes the confession very credible. “For anyone who admits to having killed others by witchcraft or done harm to people must indeed be telling the truth. Since Eni admits to having killed, the rest of the story is taken at face value,” researcher Birgit Meyer [argues](#).

But second is the fact that a crucial element of the stories of satanic riches was the sacrificing of one’s reproductive capacity (the devil would make one barren in exchange for riches) or sacrificing of actual loved ones, such as a spouse, child or relative. The crux of the story is that money is never obtained for nothing, but always in exchange for a human being, preferably a blood relative or spouse, or a future offspring.

In the context of a collapsing economy and dilapidation of social services – as was happening in most of Africa at that time in the 1980s and 1990s – the family is the only meaningful social safety net for most people. Therefore, it is not a huge imaginative leap to argue that the only way one could become rich in that context is by neglecting one’s loved ones, by ignoring pleas for help from poorer relatives, by meanness and avarice. Only an individual who has become atomised and who is disconnected from the wider community is willing to sacrifice other people’s lives for wealth; everyone else is likely to be drained by the competing demands of spouses, children and extended relations. Magical realism tells us that whether that sacrifice is literal or metaphorical is not the

point; the point is that something is off; something doesn't add up, *some evil is at work here*.

People can sense the dehumanising logic of capitalism that discards real human lives with alarming indifference. It is the logic that allows an accident victim to die a wholly preventable death because a cash deposit has not been paid for a bed in ICU. It is the logic that makes it okay to have a country where pastoralists are ejected from their own land because they are not “contributing to the economy”, as was [once said](#) of the pastoralists in Laikipia. It is the logic that produces a Kenya [where less than](#) 0.1% of the population (8,300 people) owns more wealth than the bottom 99.9% (more than 44 million people). It is the logic that reduces all human activity to a form of economic calculation, dismissing love, empathy and care as powerful but unfortunate delusions. It is a form of creating that actually destroys creation, in the words of Prof. Willie J. Jennings of Yale University. “This is not the logic of breaking eggs to make omelettes. The horror here is distorting the bodies of chickens to maximise egg production unto death. This logic drives creation towards death.” By keeping track of the trail of blood that taints every exploitative capitalistic success story, the stories of satanic riches are, in a way, a site of resistance.

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In 1994, the then President Daniel arap Moi established the Devil Worship Commission following a sustained campaign by the church, supported by the media, that the existence and extent of devil worship in Kenya should be investigated. The devil worship inquiry was triggered by a claim by the head of the Anglican Church that educational institutions in Kenya were in danger of being taken over by devil worshippers and that parents should be wary of which schools they take their children to.

On 21st August 1993, the Minister for Education issued a directive to expel all devil-worshipping children from public schools. The following day, in reaction to the minister's directive, the *Daily Nation*, in an editorial, stated that parents needed to be told more about devil worship so that they could avoid taking their children to schools where it is practised.

The momentum had begun. A few months later, the *Standard*, citing an education official, said that devil worship was rampant in Western Kenyan schools, and another official said the same about schools in Taita Taveta district. Eventually, the issue made it to the floor of Parliament when two MPs called on the Minister of Education to institute a probe into devil worship, which was “threatening public schools”.

The following day, the *Daily Nation* joined in and, in an editorial, claimed that “time seems to have come for a serious inquiry into the whole diabolical business, if only for peace of mind of many parents.” Vice President George Saitoti reiterated the same two days later, decrying the rise in devil worship in Kenya. Church leaders, members of parliament, and ordinary Kenyans – sometimes through angry letters to the editor – continued to pile on the pressure.

On 20th October 1994, President Moi announced that a commission of inquiry would be formed to look into the matter of devil worship in Kenya. He noted the ongoing public discourse on devil worship and said, “If these reports are true, then this obnoxious and ungodly practice must be

checked.”

The *Daily Nation* carried in its editorial the headline, “Here is a most welcome probe”, in reference to the Commission. The editorial claimed that the setting up of an official inquiry was the right thing “given the emotive nature surrounding the issue of Satanism”. It added that the inquiry “is welcome as its aim is to remove the murkiness that has surrounded allegations of existence of this practice and the fear it has generated among parents, church leaders and ordinary people”.

It is not a coincidence that this fear-mongering was happening in Moi’s Kenya. Magical realism was happening in real life at that time, the fantastic and the mundane existing side-by-side. A 25-year-old named Kamlesh Pattni somehow contrived an audacious financial buccaneering scheme that promptly drained Kenya of 10% of its Gross Domestic Product. The scheme, dubbed the Goldenberg Scandal, began in 1991, almost immediately after the Kenya government, following directions from the IMF, introduced measures to reform the economy and increase international trade and investment.

Precisely how they did it – by manipulating regulations on export compensation in an economy strapped for hard currency – is complicated to explain (See this [wonderfully detailed article](#) by Peter Warutere, one of the leading financial journalists who covered the too-crazy-to-believe scandal as it unfolded.) By all accounts, Goldenberg was a high-level conspiracy “by senior officials of the Moi administration, together with local and international wheeler-dealers who ostensibly capitalised on the government’s desperation for foreign exchange and the greed of Moi’s cronies. These cronies displayed an insatiable appetite for plundering the economy even when it was flat on its back,” wrote Warutere.

The effects of the scam – even though it is difficult to explain how it had happened – were obvious to everyone. Interest rates rose to a stunning 80% per annum. Goldenberg tore through Kenya’s political, economic and social fabric, plunging Kenya into a decade of recession and decay. By one estimate, [it will take three generations](#) for Kenya to fully recover from the effects of the scheme.

When you have a generation of parents who cannot adequately explain why they are unable to afford their children a better life than they had, the discourse of “generational curses” gains power. It must be the devil, and in a way, they are right.

“The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God...” **2 Corinthians 10:4**

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In today’s Kenya, we are constantly bombarded with the fantastic and the unbelievable, but delivered to us in the implausibly dry and composed tones of the evening news. Everything seems normal – the lights; the blue, orange or brown set; the TV station logo in the corner of the screen; the scrolling ticker tape of news highlights at the bottom.

But the words being spoken are in the realm of the absolutely fantastic: billions of shillings being [carted away](#) in sacks in broad daylight; poisoned sugar that [may or may not be](#) on your table right

now; a man eating *githeri* [getting](#) a Head of State Commendation; horrible sexual abuse of children, babies, grandmothers; murders of wives, husbands, entire families; a probably unlicensed, collapsed dam that [sweeps nearly 50 people](#) to their death, just like that. On and on.

No one flinches. No one's voice breaks. No Kanye West blurting out "George Bush doesn't care about black people!" No one seems on the edge of tears. Perhaps that's the truly amazing thing - the objectivity and professionalism with which we are calmly reporting our own death and destruction.

Theologian Emilie Townes describes the fantastic as [living] in those moments of uncertainty when it is not clear if what we perceive or experience is an illusion of the senses (which makes it a product of the imagination and the laws of the world remain intact), and when we detect that the event has actually taken place but laws unknown to us control reality.

Yet the fantastic is much more; it is also being comfortable with the supernatural or what may seem supernatural to others. In other words, the fantastic may be the everyday for those who *live in it*. They may not find the presence of ghosts or shifted realities unusual.

For me, the fantastic - and especially those obscure, real-world processes that produce suffering and evil - can be distilled into the notion of strongholds, powers and principalities that the New Testament talks about in 2 Corinthians 10 and in Ephesians 6.

Structures of domination and oppression that are too big and too nefarious for us to grasp, the ones that make the unbelievable frequently invade our daily lives, are those powers and principalities talked about "in high and low places". They reproduce evil with alarming regularity, sometimes even without the malicious participation of those involved.

Here are some examples. The Brand Kenya master plan describes Kenya as "an exotic destination that is surprisingly familiar, where people and nature live in harmony alongside ambitious economic developments". Wandia Njoya [has critiqued](#) this racist, self-loathing logic that makes Kenyans see their own country as an investment destination for foreigners first, and the needs of Kenyan citizens way down the priority list - after all, they are just living "alongside" economic developments. Which is why a minister can be more concerned about what foreign tourists will think about us than that mercury in sugar that might be poisoning Kenyans.

Rasna Warah [has written](#) about Nairobi as a city where "contempt for the resident is everywhere apparent", where more than 80% of trips are made on foot, bicycle or by public transport, yet the lack of adequate pavements and bicycle paths has resulted in unnecessary deaths of pedestrians and cyclists; in fact, cycling and walking are considered among the most dangerous forms of transport in Kenya.

Darius Okolla [has argued](#) that social mobility in Kenya is a figment of our imagination - less than half a million Kenyans are middle class, in a population of more than 44 million, and 85% of Kenyans will remain in the social class they were born in. Yes, there is always the anecdotal and inspirational rags-to-riches story, of the charcoal to gold variety, but the vast, vast majority of poor people will remain poor, as a result of a non-existent and dysfunctional public sector.

I could go on and on.

There are forces at work here that make us hate ourselves and each other, that make us express more sympathy for buildings than for human beings, as Kiambu governor Ferdinand Waititu did recently when he pleaded that buildings built on riparian land be spared from demolitions and that the rivers be moved instead. Yet he expressed no such sympathy for the thousands of human beings being evicted from their homes in Kibera at the crack of dawn to make way for a road, against a

court order and against all sense of human decency. This is not normal.

Destroying arguments that seem sensible but keep people in oppression is part of the work of imagining freedom. Shining a hard, unrelenting light on structures of domination should be the work of writers, journalists, artists and preachers in this moment, because the work of domination happens in that uncanny place where the imaginary and the real collide - to deadly effect.

However, the acts of controlling and manipulating human lives through processes of domination and subordination are not inevitable or unanswerable, just as the diabolical deeds of Pablo Escobar were not magical. They were aided and abetted by an intersection of history, politics, market forces, technology and foreign policies. Complex, yes. But not magical.

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We need to deconstruct that “fantastic hegemonic imagination”, in the words of Emilie Townes, which reproduces structural evil in our society. It will take deconstructing and probably destroying the institutions that are founded on colonial, capitalist logics. As Wandia Njoya [says](#), Kenyans will have to go through a national mental re-engineering that heals us of our inferiority complex and deals with our historical wounds, and then write an affirmation of dignity as human beings. Only then can we be delivered from the powers of darkness.

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