



UTHAMAKI, GOD AND THE ECONOMY: 'Tano Tena' fails to deliver the Kingdom of Prosperity

By Dauti Kahura



1 October 2018 was a market Monday just like any other that has come and gone at the Githurai fruits and vegetables market, one of the busiest markets in Nairobi that is located 10 km from the central business district. Githurai Market is busy because its catchment area spreads all the way to Thika town and its environs. Although the older and more famous Wakulima Market, aka Marigiti, located in Nairobi's CBD, could be busier, its market reach is not as widespread and does not go as deep into the hinterland as Githurai Market does. But, just like Marigiti, Githurai's produce is transported from as far as Mbeya in southern Tanzania and Soroti in eastern Uganda.

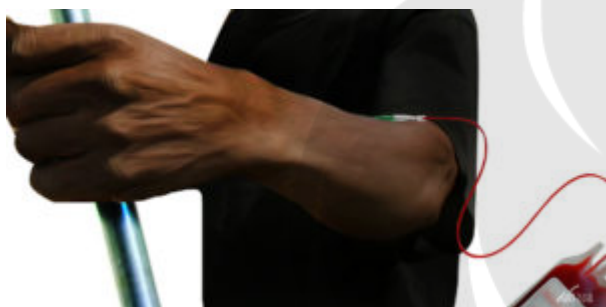
This year has been one of the toughest years that the market women at Githurai Market have faced in recent times. Six out of every ten traders at Githurai Market are women. The market is largely run by resilient and seasoned female fruit-and-vegetable sellers, all of whom are Kikuyus and who in the true sense of the word, are entrepreneurs, whose grasp of the trade encapsulates the dictum: What they did not teach you at Harvard (or Yale) School of Business.

It was not the first time I was going to Githurai Market; this year alone, I have made enough trips there to get to grips with what makes the market tick, [engaging with the women traders](#), sharing

lots of cups of tea and chapatis, as well as listening to their stories about the funnier side of the market's shenanigans.

That the market women had great faith that the economy would improve and eventually stabilise had become a point of sore contention between them and me. I often asked them what miracle they expected President Uhuru Kenyatta to perform to wish away their economic woes.

All of this year, the market women have kept telling me how bad business has been. But strong-willed and tough-spirited as they are, they have held on to their undying optimism and belief that matters will eventually even out; in the long run, the economy will be fine and everything will flow smoothly. Their optimism is not pegged on any economic principle or the variables of fresh produce market dynamics, but on the presumption of a shared political-cum-tribal commonality through imagined ties with the ruling Kikuyu elite (referred to as *Uthamaki*). Hence, their presumed political correctness and unquestioned and unparalleled loyalty; in their minds, their Kikuyu tribe ought to serve as an economic shield, especially in tough economic times. "*Uhuru ndangerika tuone uru. Kai twamucaguraga wake?*" (Uhuru cannot let us suffer. That is not the reason we elected him.) The women's unshaken faith in President Uhuru Kenyatta, in the face of very obvious economic turbulence, is truly puzzling, but also admirable.



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That the market women had great faith that the economy would improve and eventually stabilise had become a point of sore contention between them and me. I often asked them what miracle they expected President Uhuru Kenyatta to perform to wish away their economic woes. The country had mounting debts that ran into trillions of shillings, runaway theft that had crippled the state coffers in his first term and a Standard Gauge Railway project that had turned into a white elephant was gobbling [Sh750 million in losses every month](#). Their chorus answer was always: "We should not keep saying the economy is bad. God is on our side and He will protect us." It was a curt answer to a painful situation that threatened to fester indefinitely and which they were not prepared to talk about openly and publicly.

Sometime in July, when I told them that the government would impose Value Added Tax (VAT) on fuel come September, they outright rebuked me: "*Aaah Uhuru ndangetikira.*" (Nah, Uhuru will not consent to such an arrangement.) The VAT came and Kenyans immediately started experiencing the impact of the harsh tax. Matatu Saccos hiked fares overnight and kerosene prices shot up.

Meanwhile, the Githurai Market women's optimism and faith in the person of President Uhuru was

getting blurred and confusing. On this Monday, their spirits were beginning to break. It was 10.30am and the market was dull, inactive and quiet. The hustle and bustle had disappeared. The brisk business that used to be a permanent feature at the market throughout the week had whittled away. Something was just not working right, the unswerving belief in President Kenyatta's "political abracadabra" and perpetual trust in the eternal Almighty notwithstanding.

To kill time as they waited for customers, the market women spontaneously formed a quasi-baraza and delved into the politics of the day. "Nitwarie caruruku," said one woman, meaning "Let us brutally and honestly talk with one another other". "Ithue nio ahari aa rua, no one riu uria turaria thina" (We are the people who do the lowest of the menial jobs, but look how now we are suffering). The Kikuyu idiom she used describes men who scrub and treat animal skins for a living. It is considered the lowliest job that any man could do.

"We supported Uhuru to the hilt but look at what he is doing to us now," said one of the women. The trader said that President Uhuru had annoyed them so much that they did not want to have anything to do with him. It is obvious that it took a lot of courage to be publicly emotional about President Uhuru, a sacrosanct subject among Uthamaki loyalists, but the fact of the matter is that the market women are hurting financially and the prevailing political climate is anything but reassuring.



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"Ni gaitu ga gweciarira" (It is our very own son) had been the rallying call for the market women to come out in large numbers and vote for President Uhuru in the August 8 and repeat October 26 elections. In this ethnic logic, their son had let them down terribly and now they had their back against the wall: First, the VAT on fuel had increased the transport expenditure of many of the traders who bring in fresh produce from within and across the county's boundaries by more than Sh5,000 per trip, per truck. Second, the economic hardship was slowly resuscitating the proscribed Mungiki gang.

The nefarious activities of the Mungiki was another taboo topic: in public, they defended the youth, arguing that as their sons, they offered protection to them at the market, ensuring it was not invaded by intruders. During the repeat presidential election on October 26, many of the so-called Nairobi Business Community (a pseudonym for Mungiki) ferried to the CBD were from Githurai. "If we didn't have these youth, who would have protected the Kikuyu businesses in the city centre?" the women challenged me. But in private, the women dreaded "their sons". The Mungiki blackmailed and extorted money from them. In the words of one market woman, "They reap where they do not sow."

Githurai Market is completely under the control of Mungiki godfathers who live in the sprawling Githurai neighbourhoods, especially those bordering the railway. All the trucks that offload fresh

produce pay protection fees to their agents. The police and the community are aware of these activities, but at Githurai Market and its environs, nobody mentions the M word; when the youth come to collect money, no banter is exchanged. The communication rules are very clearly spelt out – have the loot ready for the young man to pick up and no delays or asking unsolicited questions. “Now,” said one trader to me in low tones, “the godfathers are demanding cash from not only the trucks, but they have sent word that the traders should now start paying ‘Mungiki Tax’”. The traders know what will befall them if they refuse to pay up. “Mungiki don’t blackmail Luos, they don’t chop Luo heads, it’s our sons that they will start killing.”

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At the Githurai roundabout, Mungiki youth had erected a banner that read: **Githurai Chapter of Nairobi Business Community supports Uhuru Kenyatta**. A month ago, their *vibandas* (sheds) mounted on the Thika superhighway’s shoulders were demolished by a combined force of regular police, Administration Police (AP) and city askaris. “Why is Uhuru so careless and merciless?” asked a woman trader in total confusion. “Why is he demolishing businesses run by these youths? Does he know what he is doing? The trader said President Uhuru in just one swoop had unleashed Mungiki youth on them. “*Turihetukagira ku riu?*” (Where will we be passing now?)

The market women, in their ingenuity, had come up with a super idea: summon all these youth and give them fresh produce, mostly fruits, on credit to sell on the roadsides. Whatever they could not sell, they could return. It was a win-win solution for the youth and the women traders. Now even that idea had been undone by President Uhuru: The Mungiki youth who had been conscripted by the Jubilee Party to ostensibly “protect” Kikuyu businesses in the city centre were about to turn on their own, as they always do when faced with economic hardship.



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The women now questioned the utilitarian value of President Uhuru’s presidency to them, specifically as members of the House of Mumbi. “*Uthamaki wa Uhuru ututeithetie na ke?*” (How has President Uhuru’s presidency helped us?) “*Tungethura kihii riu ritigethua?*” (If we elect an uncircumcised man (to be the president), will the sun not set?) The reference to circumcision was directed at Raila Odinga, President Uhuru’s chief rival during the election.

Still, after releasing all their frustrations and anger against their *muthamaki* (king/ruler), the traders

were agreed in unison that *"Mwathani nii ngutukinyaniria"* (The Lord will protect us). Then they broke into the chorus of a famous Kikuyu song: *Onei! Ni Wendo Utarii Atia* - Look! What Great Love without Measure.

*Hutia ria keru Ngai wakwa
Ndige kuona marundurundu
Niigetha nyone wega Baba
Bururi uria ndi riragitira.*

Touch me twice My Lord
That I stop seeing darkness
So that I can see clearly my Father
The promised country I desire.

That weekend, I had attended a graduation party in one of Nairobi's leafy suburbs, and although it was an opportunity to make merry while the sun shone, the prevailing religious undertones of the gathering could not be missed: three evangelical pastors - two men and a woman - had been invited to offer up an abundance of prayers for the Bachelor of Arts graduate.

When each of the pastors stood to administer The Word, it quickly became obvious that the prayer-warriors' messages were not exactly geared towards the celebration of a degree in a time of austerity and tough economic times; they were meant to reassure the people assembled there - all Kikuyus - that although it was clearly evident that there was an air of political confusion and economic uncertainty a year into President Uhuru Kenyatta's second and final term, this was not a time to despair or lose hope, but rather a time to recommit and rededicate oneself to God.

"We're going through the hardest economic times in recent times and many of the businesses are doing terribly badly, some are even collapsing," said the first pastor who was invited to speak by the master of ceremony. "But we cannot give up because we know the good God is watching over us." The pastor said it was at times like this that the people ought to rediscover their relationship with God.

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"The Lord Almighty must have a good reason for allowing us to undergo these trials and tribulations," reaffirmed the pastor to a crowd that looked like it was hanging to his every word. "We're a special people, anointed by God, to be an example to other communities, of our fearfulness to Him," said the preacher man, pausing momentarily and peering into the peoples' eyes to let the message sink in. "We are fearfully made, unlike the gentiles, who, we know, have been always setting traps for us. But all their tricks will come to naught."

Speaking like he was now in a holy sanctuary, the pastor promised the gathering that the blood of the lamb was with them and Jesus Christ had thrown a protection ring around them. "We know, Lord Jesus Christ, you're going to fight our battles on our behalf, even as you shame our mortal enemies." Reminding the crowd that it should always be aware that it is surrounded by adversaries, he proclaimed that they were a chosen people and, therefore, they had nothing to fear.

“Always take comfort that the Lord’s people have never been admired or liked. Has anybody ever liked the Jews?” wondered the pastor, his deliberate comparison of the Kikuyus to the Jews slipped in for effect. “We’re going to triumph - but it’s incumbent upon us to be steadfast, because our Lord Jesus Christ is seated at the throne. I know many are beginning to question the reason why we now seem to suffer so, but this is not the time to question the Lord.” As he went to take his seat, he asked the people to sing with him the following chorus:

*Nii ni gwenda Ngai umenyage ningenaga muno niwe
Tondu niujikaga wega na ukanyenda hingo ciothe
Irio ciothe iria ndiaga, mai maria nyuaga
Ona nguo cia kwihumba ciothe nowee uheaga
Muoyo naguo niwe waheire, niwe ugiragia ngue
Ungetheingia hinya waku, ndingiikara gathaa kamwe.*

Lord, I want you to know that I’m much pleased by you
Because you take good care of me and love me so always
All the food I eat, the water that quenches my thirst
Even the clothes that I wear, it is you who has always provided
You gave me life and you protect me from dying
If you ever removed your almighty power, I wouldn’t last even for a second.

The second pastor, unlike the first, was more circumspect. “We’ve fundamental problems in Mt Kenya region,” boomed the pastor-cum-university don. “And if we don’t solve these issues decisively and promptly, it’s not going to augur well for the community. The Kikuyu people have a problem with money: “*Kwina gathina haha Central...nitukwenda twicirie uhoro wa handu hau...na ndigutenderia muno.*” (We’ve have a problem here in Central [Kenya]...and it’s incumbent on us to ponder over that issue...and I will not rub it in.)

The pastor observed that the Kikuyus had abnegated everything else for money. They only think of making more and more money, said the pastor. “It’s a problem the community must come to terms with, as it also tackles the other socio-cultural norms that the community has negated. As it is, things are not good now and the businessmen seated here know what I’m talking about: the economy is going south, state theft in the government has become the order of the day and you know what, a lot of that theft has been perpetrated by our very own people.

“Today our children are graduating from universities, every year in big numbers, but we don’t have anywhere to take them. Employment opportunities are shrinking by the day and doing business in this country has become extremely difficult, much worse than it was several years ago. But we cannot give up, because we must never allow the devil to triumph. Yet, we as the Kikuyu people, should, as a matter of urgency, ponder very seriously over these legitimate and pertinent issues that are afflicting the community - now and in the years to come - which we are afraid of talking about them openly and publicly.”

As he sat down he invited the crowd to sing along with him, the hymnal lyrical chorus that to many Kikuyus comes naturally to their lips, just like the Lord’s Prayer.

*Ngukinyukia oo kahora
Njerekeire ya matuini
Naninjui ningakinya
Ngahuruke na mwathani
Niwega Ngai muhonokia
Nake Jesu ni mugate,*

*Roho waku munyotokia
Nii ndikahuta, kana nyote*

Step by step
Heaven bound
I know I'll reach
To rest with my Lord
Thank you God, my saviour
And Lord Jesus is my bread,
You holiness is a blessing
I'll never go hungry or thirsty.

"In times of socio-economic and political distress, Kikuyus rediscover their prayerfulness and religiosity to numb their political confusion and mitigate their hard economic times with endless beseeching prayers. Every *igogona* (socio-cultural ceremony) is an opportunity to unearth and sing select religious songs to presumably comfort them," an Anglican Church of Kenya elder from Waithaka parish recently pointed out to me.

As the graduation bash was coming to end, a businessman who has operated in downtown Nairobi for 28 years, and who I have known for 20 of those years, pulled me aside to moan about the economic meltdown that was taking place on Gaberone Road, Kirinyaga Road, Kombo Munyiri Road, Munyu Road, Nyamakima area, Ngariama Road and River Road, the strongholds of Kikuyu business.

"Businesses are shutting down in real time as we watch. What the heck is going on? Why is Uhuru doing this to us?" This was a lamentation from an Uthamaki fundamentalist who barely a year before had dismissed my economic projections as the musings of a person who did not have a proper grasp of national politics and the economic underpinnings of a country like Kenya that was supposedly led by a businessman.



Podcast: The Ideology of Uthamaki

"For the very first time, in all my years as a businessman, I'm seeing tenants unable to pay shop rents," he said. "*Ona igitunyuo mwana, ni ikagirio mungu,*" he proclaimed to me. The literal translation of this Kikuyu saying is that if you snatch a baby from an ape, the least you can do is throw a pumpkin at it to assuage its loss. Figuratively, the businessman was telling me that while they were not expecting saintly treatment from President Uhuru, the least he should have done is shielded them from the faltering economy so that their businesses would not collapse, and they would not be run out of town.

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Businesses worst hit by the sudden tax collection regime are the hundreds of electronics shops at Nyamakima area south-east of River Road, said my business friend. Completely colonised by Kikuyu businessmen and women, it is famous for its trade in cereals pioneered by brazen Kikuyu women, who in a single day are known to collect hundreds of thousands of shillings. In the last twenty years or so, there has been an explosion of miniature electronics outlets lining the alleyways of Nyamakima, which have made scores of young men, especially from Murang'a County, rich.

"I know electronic shops that have been run out of town, unable to pay monthly rent and unable to import any more goods. In fact, many of my friends' goods have been stuck at the Mombasa port because of being slapped with a sudden humungous tax," said the businessman. "To complicate matters for the electronics businessmen, many of them have been accused of importing counterfeit goods from China. Has the government just discovered they have been importing contraband? Because of this, their goods have been impounded, and many have lost hundreds of millions of shillings."

None of the businessmen can afford to import enough goods from China single-handedly, so they usually come together as a group and buy goods that can fill a 40-foot container. "So, it is very possible that some businessmen import substandard goods, but the government has never given them a catalogue of specifications of the types of electronics that they should bring into the country." The businessman said four of his friends had shut their shops. "Today walk down River Road and Kirinyaga Road and Munyu Road, you will see prime business premises empty, their tenants having vacated them."

After the nullification of the August 8, 2017 presidential election, businesspeople from downtown Nairobi came out in the open to show their undying support for Uhuru Kenyatta. They hung banners across the roads that read: **Munyu Road Business Community Supports President Uhuru Kenyatta** and **Nyamakima Business Community Supports Uhuru Muigai Kenyatta**. Others read: **Ni Kumira Kumira, Wembe in ule ule**.

"Just 12 months down the line, businessmen are gnashing their teeth," said the entrepreneur. "The banners have since been pulled down and now they have printed new banners such as, **Traders & Importers Association - Stop Killing Our Businesses**."

A scene in Muigai wa Njoroge's video of his popular song, *Mbari ya Kimeendero* (The Oppressors' Clan), shows some people carrying a banner reading: **Matunda ya Tano Tena ni #Gutee...Stop Harassing Our Businesses** (The Fruits of Five More [a rallying call for support for Uhuru Kenyatta's second term] was a waste [of time])." The popular singer reminds his listeners (and the President) that "the Nyamakima businessmen community celebrated your Tano Tena (five more [years]) victory by slaughtering many goats...now their goods have been razed down and declared fake...The person who bewitched us (Kikuyus) must have been paid real well," concludes the lyricist.

As the preacher woman at the graduation ceremony concluded her prayers, she called on the people to join her in the chorus:

*Thutha wa magirio ma thii enu
Jesu niakajoya anyinukie
Jesu wakwa hiiha mbara enu ni nene*

After all the trials and tribulations of this world
Jesus (Christ) will take me home
My Lord Jesus, please come quickly,
the battle before me is big.

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