



# Jaramogi Oginga Odinga: The Man Kenya Can Never Forget

By Dauti Kahura and Bethuel Oduo



If Thomas Joseph (TJ) Mboya was the young man that Kenya wanted to forget, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga is the grand old man who Kenya can never forget. Jaramogi and Tom Mboya were both were nationalists of great distinction from the Luo community who as seasoned politicians posed a threat to the founding president Jomo Kenyatta's autocratic national designs. Tom Mboya died young, by an assassin's bullet, on July 5, 1969. Jaramogi died an old man, a mzee, at the age of 82 years on January 20, 1994, after having been tormented by both Kenyatta and Daniel arap Moi regimes effectively from 1969 after his fall out with Kenyatta and through the 80s and 90s during iron-fisted Moi's reign. Jaramogi Oginga Odinga death anniversary on January 20<sup>th</sup>, twenty-five years since his passing, was marked quietly in a manner that diminishes his immense contribution to the Kenyan national project.

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No history book on Kenya would be complete without his mention. Jaramogi was the vice president of the nationalist party Kanu when Kenya African Union (Kau) merged with Kenya Independent Movement to form Kanu on May 14, 1960. He was later to become the country's first Vice President,

after Kanu won the 1963 general elections under Kenyatta. When his friend Pio Gama Pinto was killed in 1965, Jaramogi knew he was a targeted man because of his ideological position. Pinto, then was a nominated MP and an avowed communist who was Jaramogi's confidante. Jaramogi would form the socialist party, Kenya People's Union in 1966, banned in 1969 leading to his detention under house arrest by his former ally Jomo Kenyatta.

I first set my eyes on Jaramogi on November 16, 1991. Bethuel Oduo my collaborator on this writing project and my senior, had met Jaramogi much earlier, but this day in November, remains fresh in our memories. It was the first licensed political rally organized by the Forum for the Restoration of Democracy (Ford), the fledging opposition movement led by Jaramogi as the interim chair. Oduo and I attended the meeting held at the symbolic Kamukunji Grounds, a historic public space that hosted a number of significant nationalistic political rallies during Kenya's pre-independent agitation struggles for freedom in the late 50s and early 60s.

This was my first time I was attending a political rally as an impressionable young man in my twenties. I had never seen such a mass of people in such diversity, gathered in one place for a common cause. The atmosphere was electrifying. I could feel the palpitations, as throngs of humanity waited anxiously for the address by the opposition leaders. 1991 was the year that Kenya restored political pluralism after being a de facto one party state since 1969. The old Kenya Lancaster negotiated constitution, previously criminalized a meeting of more than 10 people through Public Order Act 56, which was repealed, just like Section 2A, that proclaimed Kenya to be one party state.

I gathered that many people, young and old, had come specifically to see the legend Jaramogi, a man who had borne so much in the tumultuous and vicious climate of politics in Kenya. "I last saw and heard Jaramogi in 1969," a man next to me said, "I wonder what he looks like today, but he's going to talk to us today...what a great feeling."

A group of emerging opposition politicians, christened the "Young Turks", among them James Orengo, Paul Muite, Prof Anyang Nyong'o, Raila Odinga, Gitobu Imanyara banded together with veteran politicians Martin Shikuku, Masinde Muliro among others in what was threatening to be an unprecedented opposition coalition set to end Moi's dictatorial 14 year rule. The force behind this movement was the enigmatic Oginga Odinga and the man of the moment.

Jaramogi was about to address his first meeting after 22 years of state imposed political isolation. Jaramogi spoke in a shrill voice. The microphone held by Prof Ouma Muga, one of the masters of ceremony for the event. The other master of ceremony was Kimani Wanyoike. Jaramogi seemed to voice my thoughts.

"I have never seen so many people gather in my lifetime," said Jaramogi "This is the first time most of you are attending a political meeting out of your choice." It felt like he was talking directly to me and he had my full attention as he launched into a 45 minute address.

"Why is Kenneth Matiba not with us today? Why is George Anyona, Edward Oyugi, (Augustine) Njeru Kathangu, Rumba Kinuthia, Koigi wa Wamwere, Ngotho Kariuki and many other freedom fighters not with us?"

"Why are our sons and daughters still in exile? Why are brilliant people who can teach in our universities wasting their lives overseas? Why was Robert Ouko murdered? Was he murdered for speaking about corruption? Was he murdered for speaking his mind in the cabinet? Why was (Alexander) Muge murdered? Was it because he exercised his freedom to preach the word of God to condemn sin and corruption?" He had captured the mood in the country in distress and the masses

of people were beyond ecstatic.

Of the six Ford movement founder members, Jaramogi Oginga, Philip Gachoka, Ahmed Bahmariz, Martin Shikuku, Masinde Muliro and George Nthenge, only Nthenge is alive today. George Nthenge who became Kamukunji constituency MP in the first multiparty elections in 1992 recalls the moment. "Jaramogi was an old man and he knew that if he brought nine other elders together, the government would not risk international condemnation by arresting us. This is how Masinde Muliro and Martin Shikuku were sent to recruit me. Ahmed Bahmariz was also recruited, but we could not get three other elders to bring the total to nine." Today Nthenge still runs his curio shop at the City Market, a shop he has maintained for well over four decades.

Jaramogi was not only the doyen of opposition politics in Kenya. He was a noted Pan Africanist and his credentials remain unquestionable. In January 1992 during an interview with the Nairobi Law Monthly magazine, Jaramogi spoke of his relationships with people like Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and Nelson Mandela, who had just been released from prison in 1990. "Kwame lived before his time. He had seen Africa through and through. And he lived as if Africa was one country. He was very diligent, hardworking and a person that one could admire. He was instrumental in dedicating me to struggle for Kenya. He told me: 'you fight in your own country for Kenyatta, Kenyatta is in London, but he is a nationalist of the first order'".

Although exiled in Guinea in 1966, Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's former President was very close to Jaramogi to the extent that he still found time to pen a foreword to his book *Not Yet Uhuru*, Kenya best political treatise to date.

On Nyerere, Jaramogi had this to say: "I know Nyerere as a very intelligent person and great nationalist. He refused a big salary and lived on the minimum that he could...Nyerere actually considered public opinion important." Jaramogi himself would later talk of how he could not justify earning a salary, (making reference his role as VP in the independence cabinet) while his duties had been distributed to other cabinet ministers, in a bid to punish and tame him. So he quit government.

Jaramogi considered many global leaders and Pan Africanists as close friends. The list included Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister of India, Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Milton Obote, President of Uganda, Ahmed Sekou Toure of Guinea, Ahmed Ben Bella former Prime Minister of Algeria and Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia.

In the Nairobi Law monthly interview, Jaramogi also spoke on the icy relationship that had existed between him and Tom Mboya before his violent death. "Mboya was for the West and had a liking for America. On my part, I had been to the Soviet Union, China and Japan and generally the East to find out what went on there. People took this to mean I was the 'good boy' of the East and Mboya of the West." The politics of the Cold War, the confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union had ramifications on Kenyan politics.

Jaramogi was detained at Hola detention camp, a remote town on river Tana, Tana River county between 1970-1972. Former chief justice Willy Mutunga who spent a stint in Hola after the abortive (August 1<sup>st</sup>) 82 coup, remembers occupying the same cell as Jaramogi. "Jaramogi was a selfless nationalist, who was never interested in self-aggrandizement and Pan Africanist, who truly loved his country and continent," observed the former chief justice.

After his release from detention in Hola, Jaramogi remained under house arrest in Kisumu until Kenyatta's death in 1978. President Moi on assuming the power attempted to rehabilitate Jaramogi by appointing him the chairman of the Cotton Lint and Seed Marketing Board in 1979. It was a way of telling him to revive the cotton farming, which had collapsed after his disagreement with

Kenyatta. Jaramogi said as much in the Nairobi Law Monthly interview: “The cotton industry had really gone down and Moi needed somebody to bring it up. I did my best and people actually saw that the cotton industry was coming up.”

But as fate would have it, in April 1981, Jaramogi’s tongue ‘slipped’ during a fundraiser in Mombasa when he sensationally claimed Kenyatta had been a land grabber and that is why they had differed with him. Subsequently, Moi relieved Jaramogi of his position. It is rumoured that the inner circle of Moi’s cabinet that included the powerful attorney general Charles Njonjo engineered the sacking. A retired politician from that era who requested anonymity recalls Njonjo allegedly telling Moi. “If indeed it’s true you are following the footsteps of Kenyatta, is Odinga saying therefore, you are also a land grabber?” When Moi took over from Kenyatta, after his demise on August 22, 1978, he broadly proclaimed ‘*Mimi nitafuata nyayo za Mzee*, (I will follow in the footsteps of Mzee Kenyatta) and in a sense he had to save political face. That sacking essentially meant that Jaramogi was back into “political Siberia.”

In 1981, the then MP for Bondo, Jonas Ochieng Ougo suddenly tendered his resignation, occasioning a by-election. The truth of the matter was that he was hoping to pave way for Jaramogi, to be elected as the next MP. The Siaya Kanu sub-branch on orders from Moi effectively barred Jaramogi from contesting and that is how William Odongo Omamo aka *Kaliech* found his way back as the MP for Bondo. Ougo had been Jaramogi’s student at Maseno who would later teach Raila Odinga at Maranda School before moving on to become the head teacher at Friends school Kamusinga, in Kaimosi, Bungoma county.

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The idea to form another party came to Jaramogi after his attempts to re-enter parliament had hit a brick wall. The following year in 1982, teaming up with George Anyona, the firebrand politician from Gusii land, Jaramogi and Anyona walked to Sheria House and asked the registrar of political parties to register their party, the Kenya African Socialist Alliance (KASA). John Khaminwa had written Kasa’s constitution. This would mark the genesis of Khaminwa’s reputation as the lawyer for detained Kenyans; become a marked man by Moi’s regime. Indeed after the August 1982 abortive coup de ‘tat, he was detained alongside politicians and university dons, considered rebels by Moi. Jaramogi’s son Raila would also begin his long spell of detention for his role in the coup but also as many believed for the sins of his father who Moi could not detain.

Always a paranoid man, Moi could not fathom another party rivaling KANU. It was the fear of Kasa that drove Moi to ask Parliament to pass one afternoon a bill that later become law stating that changed Kenya from a *de facto* to a *de jure* one party state.

With the return to plural politics in December 1992, Jaramogi was elected the MP for Bondo constituency in Siaya, while his son Raila was elected the MP for Langata constituency in Nairobi. For the first time, a father and son were both elected MPs. A year later, Jaramogi was dead and his first-born son Oburu Odinga replaced him. The two Odinga brothers were duly elected MPs of the August House.

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When the Luo people migrated from Uganda and Sudan and landed on the other side of Lake Victoria in the 15th century, they were led by one Ramogi Ajwang, who is believed to be the patriarch of the Kenyan branch of the Luo. That is how Oginga Odinga acquired the name 'Ja-Ramogi'. 'Ja' is a prefix which means 'he who belongs to.'

In his life time, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga came to assume a persona that was larger than life and sometimes stranger than fiction. Mzee Odungi Randa, Jaramogi's former handyman told us in Kisumu.

"Jaramogi was labelled many things by his detractors," "Communist, dissident, rebel, tribalist, trouble shooter, rogue element, yet he remained firm and resilient and focused on his nationalist ambitions." Although wealthy by all standards, he never flaunted it and throughout his life, he embodied the philosophy of egalitarianism, said Randa.

By the mid 1940s Jaramogi had formed Bondo Thrift and Trading Corporation. As the company grew, he toyed with several names to rename the expanding corporation. In 1947, he settled for Luo Thrift and Trading Corporation (LUTATCO). Jaramogi said he named the company Luo Thrift, because he wanted the Luo people to feel the company was part of them, hence proud of it.

"Kenya People Union was formed after Jaramogi felt those who risked their lives for Kenya to attain independence had been short changed and sidelined by the very same people they had fought colonialists together," observed Randa. "It was the case of the Mau Mau freedom fighters versus the home guards that was repeating itself."

In Nairobi, we went looking for Jaramogi's one time neighbour at his Jerusalem estate houses in Eastlands. Thomas Onyango Daniel, now his late 40s, grew up in the same block that his family shared with Jaramogi. He remembers a quiet old man with an aura of wisdom. "It was not easy to see him leave or come to the flat," recalls Onyango. "He remained an elusive figure to my mind until 1990, when the clamour for multiparty started in earnest. All of a sudden, Jaramogi's house became a beehive of important people coming to see him". Despite his elusive character, Onyango remembers Jaramogi as a kind man. "When he was around, he would invite us children to the house to drink brown *uji* (porridge).

Jaramogi had two houses near Jerusalem shopping centre: one on the ground floor and the other up the stairs. "When around, he spent most of the times in the upstairs one, that is where he would meet and entertain his guests," said Onyango. "I remember him always dressed in a khaki shorts and his signature trademark, the *akala* (rubber sandals made out of motor vehicle tyre) shoes. All the time he was there, there was a constant stream of people flocking to see him." To date, the matatu stage near his houses is referred to as Kwa Jaramogi.

Thomas Odoyo 65, from Agoro Nyakach recalled the year 1966 when there was a heated campaign rally in Pap Onditi, as two contestants went for each other's neck. "Yusto Nyamolo Okal was running against Jaramogi's candidate Ondiek Chilo. At the rally, fracas ensued between Okal's supporters and Jaramogi's youth wing led by Ndolo Ayah." Odoyo described Ayah as Jaramogi's ardent supporter. He could not stand Tom Mboya whom he had fundamental personal differences with."

Interestingly, Ayah had been a student at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda in the early 60s. Together with him was Pamela Odede, the daughter of Walter Odede, the late freedom fighter and member of the Legislative Council (Legco). Ayah and Pamela were an item in college. On the invitation of the Makerere Students Guild, Tom Mboya, went to give a talk at the university campus.

Pamela, who attended the inaugural lecture, was smitten with the young flamboyant politician from Kenya. TJ persuaded her to abandon her studies at Makerere, to become one of the pioneers of the 1961 airlift which TJ had organized. In her group, were Wangari Muta Mathai, Ojwang K'Ombudo, Muthoni Muthiga, Beth Mugo and Nicholas Mugo. Nicholas married Beth and Tom married Pamela and Ayah never forgave TJ.

It is at the Pap-Onditi rally that Jaramogi's mystical powers came to light. "When the two opposing crowds became really hostile Jaramogi pointed at Nyamolo Okal with his left hand and told him in Dholuo, *"Nyamolo Okal in ema iketho bucha kamae, wanane ka nine od bura?"* (Nyamolo Okal, you are the one who is messing up my rally, we shall see whether you will see Parliament). After the confrontation, the rally aborted and people dispersed cursing the 'spoilers.' Nyamolo became a marked man in Jaramogi's political terrain. Nyamolo was the first Kenyan to head Kakamega High School after graduating from Makerere.

"For being anti-Jaramogi Okal acquired Equatorial Printing Press located in Nairobi's Industrial Area. The business was the first African owned commercial printing facility. He was rewarded by being single sourced to supply books and stationery to the then Kenya School Equipment Scheme," said Odoyo. And true to Jaramogi's word Nyamolo never saw the gates of Parliament. "He unsuccessfully contested the Nyakach constituency seat in 1966, 1969 and 1974. After the assassination of Mboya, things started going south for Nyamolo Okal. His business empire collapsed and he eventually died a poor desolate soul." According to Odoyo, Jaramogi's curse 'his left hand' had come to pass.

"Yes it is true that Jaramogi's left hand was shorter than the right one, but really, did it have extraordinary powers to condemn people to political oblivion?" posed Mark Otieno. Otieno narrated a story about Jaramogi and his political son James Orengo. "One day in the mid-1980s, Jaramogi was in a good mood, so Ajimmy (as he referred to Orengo) asked Jaramogi whether it was true his left hand had magical powers and if he pointed at anyone with that hand, he would remain cursed. Jaramogi laughed sarcastically and replied *'Mano ji ema wacho ok an'* (It is hearsay and not from me)." "During this period, both Jaramogi and Orengo were constant victims of state humiliation.

"Orengo took his frustrations to Jaramogi: *'Ka en adieri, kare Moi machandowani ok isieme gilwetino chieng'moro owere kodwa.'* (If it is true about (Jaramogi's hand), why then don't you use it on Moi, who is giving us trouble, so that he can leave us alone?) Jaramogi ended that discussion by stating, *'Piny nonene nyasaye ema ong'eyo'*. The world (in reference to Moi) will deal with him...it is God who knows.)" Otieno said that was vintage Jaramogi: people tendered to build mystery around his personality. "Just like his son Raila, he was considered an enigma of sorts and invisible. Many of his staunch followers believed it was not easy to harm him in any way."

Orengo was Jaramogi's legal adviser and Jaramogi treated Orengo like his real son. Jaramogi knew Orengo's dad, Apollo Orengo Onunga, who was a police inspector. That is why Orengo, being a son of a cop has on numerous times said he does not fear the police, because he grew up in a cop's homestead. Still, Jaramogi's dotted on Orengo because of his sharp legal mind.

"At the age of 29, Jaramogi made Orengo an MP for Ugenya constituency," narrated Otieno nostalgically. "Jaramogi one day during the campaigns came to Ugenya, he didn't get out of his car, but people gathered around it. He told them: 'you know I'm not allowed to speak, so I was just passing by, but, by the way, when you see that son of Apollo, please pass my regards.' The people quickly understood what Jaramogi had told them. Orengo was voted in overwhelmingly. His son Raila, somehow took over that mantle and whenever he endorses you, consider yourself elected."

Mzee Solomon Owino told us that Jaramogi would deliberately give nicknames to some of his

political friends and loyalists. "He coined names like *Ondiek'Chilo'Miguda*, *Okuto Bala* (the former ambassador to Russia), *Achieng 'Nyakech'Oneko*. *Ondiek* is the Luo word for hyena, *okuto* is salty rock and *nyakech* is an antelope or a gazelle. He nicknamed Oneko *nyakech*, because of his tall slender body frame. Jaramogi said some of his supporters in their great support for him were like the vicious hyenas. They would stop at nothing in his defense."

Among the Young Turks, Jaramogi also had a special nickname for Paul Kibugi Muite: *Obiero* -the true son of the home. But the literal translation of Obiero in English language is placenta. "Jaramogi was fond of Muite because he would tell him he had the dark complexion of a Luo man," opined Mzee Owino. Jaramogi surrounded himself with emerging young and versatile oppositionist politicians, who were quickly given the moniker Young Turks by the Kenyan mainstream media. They included, Gitobu Manyara, James Orengo, Kiraitu Murungi, Mukhisa Kituyi, Paul Kibuge Muite, Prof Ayang' Nyong'o and Prof Ouma Muga.

Achieng Oneko was a bosom buddy of Jaramogi. It is Achieng Oneko who introduced him to Jomo Kenyatta in 1952 in Kisumu for the first time before he was detained. They had a closed meeting at Maseno Store, a big shop that was part of LUTATCO initiative.

Elated by Kenyatta's visit to Maseno Jaramogi would later write him a "thank you" note in his book *Not Yet Uhuru*.

"You can't imagine the happiness I derive from your one day visit to Maseno on Tuesday. I really enjoyed your company heartily and hope we will have more moments like this in the coming days of our self-government. In this, I am your disciple to the hilt. You were so much at home and felt so very native to the house, as if Maseno had been your home Kikuyuni. I will never forget that memorable day...when you return again to us in August as you have promised to do. I hope to attend many meeting with you and give you as much assistance as will be possible from nationalist and businessman.

I remain, always,

Your disciple in nationalism."

That meeting could possibly have been the first where the Luo-Kikuyu unity was mooted. In that meeting, Kenyatta told Jaramogi: "We must get to know one another. The Kikuyu must know the Luo thoroughly. The Luo should select 12 influential elders to tour Kikuyu country, to travel as far as Mombasa and that 12 influential Kikuyu elders would travel to Luo country. The conclusion of the two delegations would be inevitable; that we are Africans, one and the same. United, we would be formidable. I have lived with these people (whites) in Great Britain, I know they fear unity."

Scholar David Odemba from Kaksingri in Mbita believes the silent but often times open rivalry between Tom Mboya and Jaramogicould have been a blessing in disguise. "The divergent ideological approaches helped advance academic achievement among the Lake people. Both the protagonists were competing to send as many students as possible to Europe and America," pointed out Odemba. "The airlifts to the East and West were the foundation upon which the latter Luo youth found role models whom to date they emulate. Mboya and Jaramogi emphasized the need to acquire higher education as a form of social security. They saw the gift of formal education as the future community's insurance in its sustainability. They are both credited with the deliberate glorification of academia in Luoland."

Newspaper vendor Okungu Kerry of Kisumu, remembers Jaramogi fondly: "Jaramogi saved the Nyanza sugarbelt area from being grabbed by outsiders. The areas around Koru, Songhor,

Muhoroni, Chemelil and Miwani were once occupied by Indian sugar cane farmers or white settlers. Through legislation on resettlement of landless Africans, Jaramogi ensured victims of floods from Kano plains were given first priority after Kenya's first El-Nino rains of 1961. My grandfather was settled in Kibigori after their home was destroyed by the same floods."

Many of his Jaramogi's followers believe his political persecution led to the 'Luo' cash crops being targeted and profiled for destruction. "Either by design or default, cash crops grown in Luo land became political crops. Because of this the Luo farmer suffered greatly. This was a deliberate, quiet and systematic dispossession of their only source of livelihood. Cotton which was the agricultural mainstay of the Luo was the first to be wiped off. All the ginneries closed down and farmers were rendered paupers. Sugar remained the crop the people could rely on. Sisal had earlier succumbed to global technological changes that brought in synthetic fibre,"

Many Luo people believe that according to their ethnic epistemology, only one person can inherit a father's strong genes and possibly mystical powers. There is a stark difference between the two surviving Jaramogi sons, Oburu Oginga and Raila Odinga. The first born Oburu is a colourless and uninspiring politician. "Oburu has never persuaded anyone that he is his own man," said an observer of the Jaramogi dynasty. "One wonders whether he could ever survive politically without his younger brother Raila." Plucked from a civil service job as a provincial planning officer and living in a humble Mosque estate in house in Kisumu, Oburu has remained in Raila's shadow since 1994, when he replaced Jaramogi as MP for Bondo.

Jaramogi's legacy will continue to be felt for a very long time especially in Nyanza where several iconic institutions have taken up his name. Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga Referral Hospital and Oginga Odinga Road are just some of the main landmarks that will forever keep his name alive.

Like his father Jaramogi, Raila has developed own his international networks making him known beyond Kenya. Twenty five years down the road, many of Jaramogi's believers said his political fervour and determinism has been kept alight by his son Raila Odinga.

Jaramogi and Raila are political enigmas that very often defy easy classification and political analysis. Each personality comes with his own nickname. Jaramogi was initially named Obadiah Adonijah. In *Not Yet Uhuru* he says "I never liked the names. I never used them though in those days it was important to be known if you were Christian by your baptismal name". He instead adopted Ajuma Oginga Odinga but the first name 'Ajuma' also fizzled out with time leaving the double 'O' intact. Raila is variously known by his nicknames like Agwambo, Tinga and RAO.

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Whether the spirit of Jomo Kenyatta and Jaramogi has influenced the current working relationship between President Uhuru Kenyatta and Raila, their respective sons is a story for another day.

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