

# A Judas Moment: Betrayal in Nyamakima

*The most painful state of being is remembering the future, particularly the one you'll never have.* — Søren Kierkegaard

About a month before the 8 August 2017 general elections, the business community of the famous Nyamakima area in downtown Nairobi sealed the lower (southern side) of Charles Rubia Road that connects with Kumasi Road and part of the lower side of River Lane for a private function. All the people who conduct their business in this area were asked to close their premises as a gesture of goodwill, and primarily because they were all invited guests at the function.

The private function was a pre-presidential election party held in honour of Uhuru Muigai Kenyatta, the presidential candidate of the Jubilee Party who was going to face Raila Amolo Odinga aka Baba, the nominee for the opposition outfit, the National Super Alliance (Nasa).

Goats had been slaughtered and crates of “Ruaraka Waters” aka East African Breweries Limited (EABL) beer had been carted there and flowed in plenty. Those who preferred brandy and whisky were also taken care of. The afternoon weather was super, the participants were ecstatic – lots of cheer and laughter rented the air as the Kikuyus – both men and women – danced and waltzed to *mugithi* and one-man guitar lyrics. The bash went on till late into the night.

*“Nimekumenya ni mahoya na ti urogi.”* They will know its prayers and not sorcery, shouted the crowd. The revellers were prepping themselves for a second stab at Uhuru’s presidential two-term uncontested win. *“Nimekumenya matioi.”* They will know, they hardly know. They were referring to Raila’s fervent supporters and Raila himself. *“Reke Uhuru aingere...tugutonga mamake,”* Kamwea, one of the younger businessman, was later to excitedly tell me. Let Uhuru bounce back into State House...we’ll really grow rich, we’re going to astound them. To prove their loyalty to and undying support for Uhuru Kenyatta, the businessmen and women had come together and collected money for the Jubilee Party presidential kitty worthy of Nyamakima’s name and fame.

Later, when jolted by the Supreme Court of Kenya's "adverse" ruling on 1 September 2017, which revoked Uhuru's win (which they viewed as a temporary setback) they doubled their efforts: they printed loud banners and hung them mostly on roads in downtown Nairobi. "*Nyamakima Business Community supports Uhuru Kenyatta,*" read one banner.... "*Gaberone Road Business People supports Jubilee Party's President Uhuru Muigai Kenyatta,*" read another. Still, *Du Bois Road Business Community Says Tano Tena.*

The Supreme Court set the second fresh presidential election for 26 October 2017, a date that fell on President Uhuru's birthday. "*Kai atari Jehova...muthamaki aumaga kuri ngai.*" It's the workings of the Almighty God, they mused. (How else could you explain this coincidence?) A king is anointed by God.

Befuddled and shaken by the Supreme Court's unprecedented decision, the Nyamakima business community nonetheless rallied - now more assiduously than ever before - for Uhuru's second presidential cause, which they took personally to be their own. "*Ngai ndatiganagiria andu ake.*" The good Lord doesn't forsake his people, they consoled themselves.

"*Nikumera ta thuraku,*" (this time around) we must come out like safari ants, the Nyamakima traders exhorted the Kikuyu traders and every other Kikuyu. "*Tano Tena*" five more, hollered the business people moving around with loudspeakers in downtown Nairobi, like possessed preacher men. In the intervening period between 1 September 1 and 26 October, *Tano Tena* become the standard greeting of the Kikuyu people in Nyamakima and practically everywhere else they lived. High-fiving in the air on the streets of downtown Nairobi became the norm.

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Nyamakima traders are not averse to holding bashes: in January 1988, on hearing that Kariuki Chotara, the combustible Nakuru Kanu politician, had died, they

momentarily closed their businesses, stormed into pubs, drank themselves silly and toasted to his death. They reminded each other, "*gutiri utuko utakiaga*", which meaning every night has its dawn.

But what the Nyamakima Kikuyus (as indeed Kikuyus in Naivasha and Nakuru, where they also celebrated Chotara's death) were observing is that nothing lasts forever. If Chotara thought he could torment his fellow kinsmen forever, he had another thought coming. Chotara had been the Nakuru District Kanu chairman, who took over from Kihika Kimani, a man who had tormented Vice President Daniel Toroitich arap Moi in the 1970s. Chotara, who became President Moi's political courtier and a court jester, was much loathed by Kikuyus countrywide.

## **Little Murang'a**

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Hence, Nyamakima, over and above everything else, is famously and popularly known for these Murang'a women whose specialty for the last 60-plus years has been trading in cereals. Today, those cereals come all the way from the border of Malawi and Tanzania, in the Mbeya region and Kabale, Soroti and Tororo regions of Uganda. In the 1950s, the women thrived in business because they were too old to be arrested, unlike their sons, many of whom were arraigned and harassed by the colonial police. When the emergency ended, the young men joined the old ladies to do what they knew best: engage in trading hardware businesses.

The Murang'a folks were not generally interested in land per se, but in commodities' businesses. That is why their women came to Nairobi and would buy the merchandise, then as now, from wherever they could get them. Likewise, the Murang'a young men have been socialised to believe in business and not so much in acquiring land or even advancing or excelling in academic and formal education, unlike their counterparts from Nyeri and Kiambu. That is why so many

of the electronic and hardware shops in Nyamakima are run by Murang'a lads.

Nyamakima also become a famous and popular stage for Kikuyus from South Kinangop because many of them who were settled in the area hailed from the greater Murang'a area. The only place they knew in Nairobi was Nyamakima because that is where their kith and kin lived and worked. So, when visiting their families and friends in Nairobi, they would ask to be dropped at Nyamakima. To date, Nyamakima is the terminus for people travelling to Kinangop, Molo, Naivasha, Ng'arua, Njoro, Nyahururu, Nakuru, Narok and Sopili.

It is a wonder that Charles Rubia Road was not named after Kenneth Stanley Njindo Matiba. Although both were great friends and both came from the then greater Murang'a District, it is the mercurial Matiba, the better known of the two politicians, who used to frequent Nyamakima (the bastion of his political support in Nairobi) just after the country returned to multiparty politics in 1991. He even used to get his hair cut in a barbershop at Nyamakima area, which was called "Little Murang'a".

### **No more Tano Tena**

Last week I visited Nyamakima, where I walked the length and breadth of Charles Rubia Road, ending up at River Lane, where I ate *kamuchere na tuchahi* (rice and turtle beans) at Wa-Michelle's ramshackle joint. "*Nii ndiuwe tukurora nako.*" I tell you I don't know where we're headed, Wa-Michelle told me. "*Biashara ni gukua ira kua...tarori kutire andu akuria irio.*" Businesses are slowly dying off...look, for example, there are no people to eat my food.

It was lunchtime but there were only two customers (including me) at Wa-Michelle's place. "Barely two years ago, by 3.00 pm, I'd sell all these food and more and I'd be out of here to go and engage in another business...Now I make little food, because I can't afford to make losses," said the food seller. "The price of foodstuff has gone up: I used to buy white flour for ugali at Sh80, now it's Sh120, Wheat flour at Sh110, now it's Sh130. The price of grains such as white and yellow beans have equally gone up. When I pushed some of the burden to the customers, they didn't like it, but what could I do? That's also why some of them stopped coming. I don't fault them."

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I asked her what had been happening to the famous Nyamakima businesses. “We don’t know...we don’t know...business premises are just closing down...didn’t you walk up River Lane to see for yourself traders who have closed shop and vacated the premises?” (I had.) Once thriving electronic business premises have closed shop and now all one can see is white paper notices plastered on the grill doors announcing premises for letting out and “no goodwill asked”.

Nineteen months after the second presidential election that handed Uhuru Kenyatta the presidency with even less votes, the *Tano Tena* mantra has been reduced to a whimper, a sob story. For most of the Nyamakima traders on Charles Rubia Road and River Lane, businesses having gone south. It is a far cry from the scene of the “*Uthamaki ni witu*” (political leadership is ours [Kikuyus’] bash, where the traders dined and wined liberally, wiggling their bottoms in unbridled ecstasy.

Two years ago, it would have been unheard of that a Nyamakima business premise - whether on the ground floor or inside a building - was being rented out and that the landlord did not demand goodwill. But the traders have fallen on hard times; they can no longer afford the rents which are between Sh80,000 and Sh100,000 per month for strategically located premises, mostly on the ground floor. If by happenstance a renting trader was vacating a premise, the owner of the premise would ask the next tenant for a goodwill fee ranging between Sh1 million and 3 million and the place would be snapped up like a hot cake.

“*Thuraku cia itererio maguta ma tawa,*” (after we voted for the second time), the safari ants met their calamity, Wa-Michelle said to me half in jest, half in sadness. “*Uhuru arateng’eria aici aa njugu agatiga aa ruwa.*” President Uhuru is apparently busy chasing petty thieves, while the real thieves are walking scot-free. Wa-Michelle spoke to me in idioms. Metaphorically, she was saying that the president had resorted to harassing Nyamakima traders who dealt in small-time businesses, while neglecting to deal with the real corrupt Kenyans who were pilfering the state coffers.

In Kikuyu culture, a person who stole *ruwa* (animal skin), as opposed to the one who stole *njugu* (grains), was considered a more dangerous and vicious thief

because he was stealing your entire livelihood. A grains thief most likely stole your grains because he or his family was hungry and therefore did not steal to spite you.

The shops owners whose shops had wound up, said Wa-Michelle, belonged to young Kikuyu men, who basically dealt in electronic goods imported from China. Now the goods were being confiscated by the Kenya Revenue Authority (KRA), ostensibly, because they were considered counterfeits. "Realising there was a loophole to make a killing, the KRA officials had turned to blackmailing and preying on the electronic goods' traders," opined Wa-Michelle. "They have been haunting the traders to pay up humungous bribes, failure to which, they raid your shops." Prayers had turned into witchcraft, the anointed one had turned to tormenting his people and it has turned out that, in fact, it is the Kikuyu people who actually did not know that they indeed did not know.

### **'How can Uhuru do this to us?'**

I looked for Mwangi, who has been a trader for many years in Nyamakima. For many years, he ran a hardware shop but around 15 years ago, he also started importing electronic stuff from Guangzhou, China. His story sounded both bitter and confused. "I've been in this business for long, possibly longer than many of the traders in this area, but I'll tell you this, I don't remember business being so difficult and so down," he said.

"As we speak, my goods have been detained at the government's Embakasi warehouses, because KRA alleges they are counterfeit," bemoaned Mwangi. "The goods are in a 40-foot container and it has been at the warehouses since December 2018. I don't know when it's going to be released, if it's going to be released at all. Everyday the goods spend a night at the warehouse and I'm surcharged \$40 (Sh4,000). My clearing agent has been telling me that the KRA officials have been sending mixed signals about the release of the goods, which he tells me, he can't clearly interpret." Mwangi said that there are about 2,000 40-foot containers of 70 cubic meters volume detained at the warehouses.

He admitted that he was among those businessmen who had contributed money to the Jubilee Party, but President Uhuru's second term was turning out to be a nightmare for the Nyamakima traders. "I frankly don't know what's happening, we are at a loss. How can Uhuru do this to us?" Mwangi thought aloud as I spoke

to him outside his shop. It was a clear testament that business was doing so badly that he could even afford to find time to speak to me. "My friend had business been flowing the way it did two years back, trust me, I'd not have found time to talk to you. Look, how many customers have you seen coming to the shop since we stood here talking?"

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"President Uhuru's government is telling us traders that we are importing counterfeits as well as contraband," said Mwangi angrily. "Hell knows we've been importing these goods from China all these years. Yes, it true, the goods we import are cheap and not of great quality - they are meant for *mwananchi*. But this new government story that the goods are counterfeit is boggling our minds." Mwangi said that by the time traders were importing the goods, the government was aware because the declaration form they fill indicates all the types of goods they are bringing into the country.

"If the government doesn't want us to be importing goods from China, it should set up its own factories. We're always ready to do business, because that's our life," pointed out the businessman. "These goods are also used by the Chinese people...but it seems to the government...what's good for the gander is not good for the goose. We've been asking ourselves how and when the government decided the goods are fake. It cannot be that the government has just woken up to the fact that we've been bringing in substandard goods for all these years. Why it has decided to punish us we're yet to comprehend."

The businessman said that the irony of this government exercise is that if after one year your goods remain uncollected at the warehouses, it can auction the goods to interested bidders. "On the one hand, the government says the goods are fake, but on the other, to offset the charges and create room at the warehouses, it offloads the goods to a willing buyer - to do what with them?" Many traders unable to pay the mounting KRA fees waited for the auction to take place, in order to buy back their goods, said Mwangi. It was an irony, but one that the businessmen have to contend with.

The more he talked about their plight the more Mwangi was getting furious. "This

is a government that is telling us not to import goods from China, yet it is borrowing from the same country...Why is President Uhuru very quick to receive Chinese money, but won't allow us to import their goods? President Uhuru has been talking about Agenda Four; he seems to be consumed with an imaginary legacy than working for the people. Who, for example, told him we want to be built houses?"

The businessman observed that "the government had now come up with a scheme that nobody understood what it was all about. This Huduma Namba is very suspicious: the government has already messed up with our businesses, now it wants to mess up with our privacy. Why does Uhuru want to know about our private details? So that he can create more avenues to eke out more money from us?"

Mwangi, just like Wa-Michelle, had confided to me that many Nyamakima traders had kept off the Huduma Namba registration. "We've got more urgent matters to attend to than be preoccupied by insidious people who want to mine our personal and secretive details for their use."

Kamau, a property owner in the Nyamakima area and a staunch supporter of President Uhuru, has been suffering panic attacks off and on: He simply cannot believe that his beloved President is killing their businesses. During President Mwai Kibaki's tenure, he acquired three buildings, did some clever renovations and soon he was in good business. He could afford to service his bank loans and business life looked very promising. In the past one and half years, he confessed to me that his real estate business has never received such a beating. "Traders have been vacating my premises because they simply cannot afford the rents because their goods have been confiscated and so they also have nothing to sell." He said if he doesn't regularly service his loans, the banks would come for him.

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Both Mwangi and Kamau could not bring themselves to lay the blame squarely on President Uhuru: "It is the people surrounding him that are advising him wrongly," they both separately said to me. It was an argument with its obvious



weak strand that explained the true dilemma of many Uthamaki believers - they will not be openly caught criticising President Uhuru. To do that is to go against the grain; it is to accept that they made a wrong choice in their voting; it is to repudiate the cardinal rule of their tribal teaching on electoral voting: you must always vote for one of your own - irrespective. But more significantly, is it not true that a *muthamaki* is chosen for the people by God? Is this not what their Christian faith teaches them? Is this not what they have been repeatedly taught by their church leaders? If they criticise *muthamaki*, would they not, by extension, be finding fault with the almighty God?

One businesswoman told me that Kikuyus are of the view that they would rather suffer under a brutal leader who is their tribesman rather than be ruled by a good leader who is not of their ethnic group. It is God who gave them that leader - it is also the same God who will know how to deal with him, they argue. "We leave everything to God, in the meantime. Ours is to pray and ask God to not forsake us," said the businesswoman. Wa-Michelle told me Kikuyus could be suffering (even after twice voting for their man) because they had turned their back to God. "We've really sinned and come short of the glory of the Lord. We've forgotten that we live and prosper because of his dutiful mercies. It is incumbent we rediscover God."

Mwangi said Nyamakima and the downtown Kikuyu businesspeople in general are planning to demonstrate and protest against President Uhuru's draconian measures against their businesses. "President Uhuru seems only to understand the language of protest. Last year, we organised ourselves and marched to Harambee House and the Office of the Deputy President and presented them with our memoranda of grievances. For some time, the harassment eased off, but not for long."

In the meantime, the businesses in Nyamakima will continue to suffer losses.