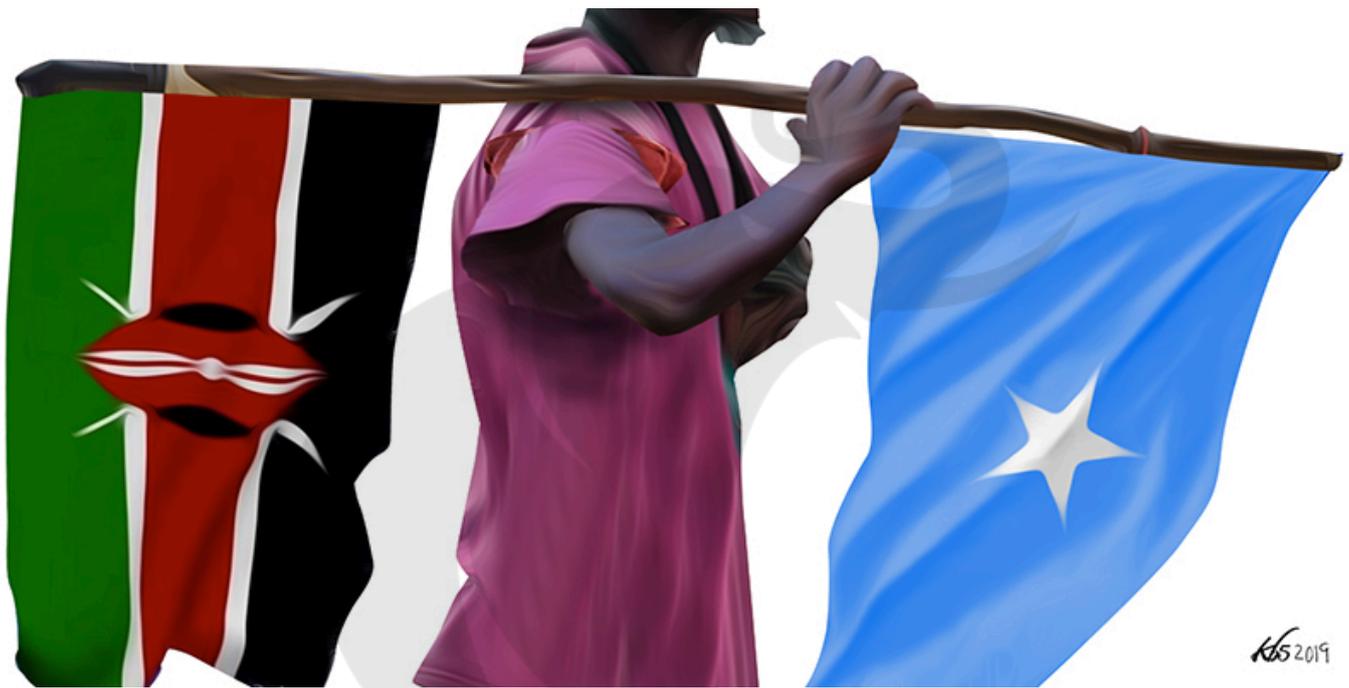




# Area of Darkness? Media Frames of Northern Kenya

By Dalle Abraham



*“The North is by far the largest of the seven kingdoms, and can fit the other six inside it - not that the others care. Cold and damp, that’s how the southerners see the North. But without the cold, a man cannot appreciate the fire in his hearth. Without the rain, a man cannot appreciate the roof over his head. Let the South have its sun, flowers and affectations, we Northerners have home.” - John Snow, Game of Thrones.*

Media coverage of Northern Kenya is an invisible and very destructive war. A quick analysis of this coverages reveals how the war is being fought. The focus of the story is similar: sometimes the story is of an enchanting landscape but an unruly people; other times it is of prevailing peace shattered by an underlying atavistic impulse; in other cases, it is how it “almost” attained modern ambition but was in flux because of tribal conflict. Stories of narrow escapes, unexplained and barbaric murders and massacres. Its only variant is the story of a hidden gem in an unruly world.

The narrative comes with its own conventions. Television feature stories are almost always apocalyptic and mysterious: a collage of skulls, crows, clouds, gunshots, parched earth, blood, carcasses, freshly dug graves, a mound of an old grave, a woman crying or a child dying. Their tone, the unsteady camera shots, a reporter seated in the front of a 4X4 land cruiser on a rough road, turning back to the camera in the back seat, feigning surprise, or sympathy, or a reporter emerging

from behind a traditional hut or the 4X4 land cruiser. The reporter as commando, camera stand on shoulders, propped like an AK47 in sync with the theme of violence. The soundtrack of suspense and text in blood sets the tone of these feature TV documentaries.

Think about these titles: [Desert of Death](#), [Death in the Desert](#), [Oasis of Death](#), [Road of Death and Terror](#), [Manyattas of Death](#), [Death Merchants](#), [Turkana: Living by the Gun](#), [Sun and Guns](#), [Marsabit: Where Guns Rule](#), [Turkana Killings](#), [Uwanja wa Maafa Turkana na Pokot Mashariki](#), [Wajir Mourns, Bleeds and Burns](#), [Mkongoto wa Bunduki](#), [Inside the Killing Fields of Marsabit](#), [The Kapedo Slaughter Field](#), [The Killing Fields of Kapedo](#), [Wajir](#), [Marakwet](#), [Valley of Death](#).

You can create new versions of this. Any takers? *Desert of Terror?* *Terror and Death in the Desert?* *Njia ya Mauti?* These have appeared on NTV, Citizen, BBC, the Guardian, KTN, Capital FM, Daily Nation, Standard, K24 and many other media houses. These are the titles of media feature stories over the last ten years covering state oppression, diseases, terrorism, ethnic conflict and resource competition in Northern Kenya. NGOs, government policies, comedic clichés and media frames have produced and reinforced a flattened image of Northern Kenya as a place of misery, rebels, guns, deaths, and deserts.

In *Desert of Death*, a KTN feature story on cancer, Dennis Onsarigo, one of Kenya's leading investigative reporters, describes the landscape as "an amazing piece of art" with great touristic potential. Onsarigo reminds us that the people are constantly moving in search of water and pasture and rarely have the time to sample the beauty and splendour since something else is hunting them down. His first story in 2013 is titled [THE INSIDE STORY: Desert of Death - The Mysterious Silent Killer in Mandera County](#), even though the coverage is of a village in Marsabit County.

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In 2015, Miles Warde of the BBC did a podcast titled [The Road of Terror and Death](#). Warde or the BBC borrowed this title with a slight iteration from a Kenyan reporter who in the podcast introduces us to the Isiolo-Moyale road.

*"My name is Judy Kaberia, a reporter working with Capital FM. In 2012, I had a traumatic experience on this road. We call it the road of terror or the road of death, that's how it felt, from every corner, you could smell death. There was a lot of noise and gunshots and at that time I started realising there was trouble, these are the bandits, we call them shiftas, and I said Oh My God...the shiftas are coming...very young energetic men ...for me. I thought we were going to die...we will never get out of that place...there was no communication...you can't call anybody...you can't text anybody....that place is very dry...very hot...very dusty...and very rocky...we were really moving very slowly and it was really scary, just praying that we don't get a puncture because a puncture meant death! We came across a lorry and the driver of the lorry was dead and hanging to the ground..."*

We first meet Judy Kaberia in her 2012 feature aired on Capital FM under the title *Marsabit Road of Death and Terror*. In the feature story, Judy says "Capital FM news is just lucky to have escaped the attack that lasted about 15 minutes". She informs us that the 120 kilometers of untarmacked road between Merille and Marsabit was very rough and in a pathetic condition and that "a person walking was faster than the one driving".

She speaks of meeting an Administration Police officer who told her that "in a single day, not less than two people are killed on that road", which another local had informed her was a "death trap". The officer and the nameless informant sounded so much like the Swahili-speaking passenger we meet in [The Guardian](#) who had told Paul Thoreau, "No, they don't want your life - they want your

shoes.”

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In the 2015 BBC podcast, they enact a somewhat familiar setting, a narration interspersed by Somali, Borana and Samburu women singing in the background. It is in this Northern scene that we meet Michael Kaloki, who had helped set up the trip for Miles Warde. We gather that Kaloki is an eccentric man with hobbies like ice carving. He speaks in the polished English often deployed by educated Kenyan city sophisticates. He references the changing vibes as one nears Isiolo and the waning perceptions of belonging. He likens Isiolo to outer space – “a town whereby you’ve reached the edge of...some have called it, maybe I am stretching it, but an edge of civilization in some way and you are moving on to an unknown world...”

When the two men, Kaloki and the white man Miles Warde, arrive in Isiolo, they get surrounded by “an interesting collection of people”. A man in the crowd asks: “What is the value of this information that you are taking from us as a marginalised community who have been under mistreatment for such a long time? What is the value of this to us?”

Kaloki, the ice carver, answers: “We want to show people what life is like in Isiolo. People always talk about Nairobi, people never come out to Isiolo, so we decided, let’s come out and hear the people of Isiolo”. (Kaloki’s good intentions are lost in the unoriginal title of the podcast.)

Something more lies in the cavalier tone that expresses the exaggerated lies of walking being faster than driving in this area, or of two people dying every day, or a car puncture leading to death. All of these stories have a familiar arc. A departure from this kind of misery-filled narrative does pop up occasionally, but even then these stories reiterate the same old clichés: an enchanting landscape of godly splendour, cue Lake Paradise, the salt gem of Chalbi, Mt. Ololokwe or the praises of a cruising road trip.

Or it is the promise of immense potential: LAPSSET and Northern Kenya as the future of Kenya; Northern Kenya as the land of culture. The narratives oscillate between extremes of negativity and of positivity. Old narratives packaged in a new case labelled “Use with Caution”. The positive vibe is cautionary: Beware that this wasn’t possible a few years ago, beware that this joy is temporary, is new, is possible only because of LAPSSET, or because the fighters have gone for a short break.

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Culture and the Environment and the story of triumph over FGM. Escape from early marriage is an appealing departure but its sentimentalism, its repeated tropes, its throwback feel, its revisionism, is still a confirmation of preconceived notions. There is nothing markedly different in any of these coverages; when the timelines are removed, it is hard to say when the featured events had

happened.

The media portrays the North as a featureless place with a cartographic sameness. In her novel, *Dust*, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, Kenya's best contemporary writer, describes it as "...massive canvas of glowing, rocky, heated earth upon which anything could and did happen." In this context, particularities seem unnecessary and often the media invents non-existent communities to populate the place as *The Star* did in July, 2019 by claiming that Marsabit is inhabited by [amongst others, the "Gendile" and the "Rajuni" besides Gabra, Burji, Rendile, and Borana](#). Another non-existent community called "Bingi" is often copy-pasted from one site to another ([here](#), and [here](#)). This invention is part of the "anything can happen" storyline. With this imagination, Mandera's plight is projected as Wajir's and Garissa's fears are projected as Marsabit's.

### **The cost of this violence**

At the Pastoralist Leadership Summit held in Garissa in March 2019, Ali Korane, the Governor of Garissa County, stood up and spoke about how while Northern Kenya shared the threats of violent extremism with the rest of the country, for Northern Kenya there was also:

*"A more serious concern of not only the real threats but also of perception. While the rest of Kenya only suffers when there is an attack, we (Northern Kenya) are always under pressure to fight perceptions of threat even where there is no insecurity. Anyone who hears about the North of this country will feel an element of fear that those areas are not safe and secure for investment, for travel, for tourism, for trade. We have these perceptions which haunt us day and night."*

Ali Roba, the Governor for Mandera County, was blunt with his disappointments.

*"There are more people dying in Nairobi, Kisumu, Nakuru, Eldoret from other criminal activities than there are people dying in Isiolo, Marsabit, Moyale, Mandera from terror-related activities but the same approach as applied to Northern Kenya is not being used. Proclamations of closing the border, removing all the teachers, asking all the doctors to leave never happens wherever terror attacks happens anywhere but it will only in Northern Kenya because of poor policies of government directed towards pastoral communities."*

This perceptual threat has been at work for a long time. In 2015, [specialist doctors turned down job offers in Marsabit](#), citing insecurity, even when the county government told them, "We are ready to pay a salary of up to Sh500,000 and provide decent housing." The then-Governor, Ukur Yatani, spoke about how "wrong perceptions about insecurity in Northern Kenya are to blame for the lack of interest".

But these threats go further. The media simplification of stories on ethnic conflicts and their ignorance about who the players are and what the issues in contest are, has meant that reporters use simplified explanations that often favour their informants' political needs.

Bilinda Straight, in her paper "[Making sense of violence in the "Badlands" of Kenya](#)" points out the effects of media effacements and media marginalisation that "contributes to what is effectively a war (however unintended), not on poverty, but on the poor and marginalized". In this paper she discusses the media in relation to violence in Northern Kenya where "media representations tend to focus on cultural stereotypes that tacitly legitimate ongoing violence by explaining it away as timeless and cultural." Bilinda points out features that wave away violence in Northern Kenya as routine, acceptable, dismissible, and forgettable.

In *The Forgotten People*, a 1999 Kenya Human Rights Commission report, various media misdemeanors were pointed out. Many examples were curated on how media houses and journalists intentionally twist the truth, how acronyms are muddled, how place names are misplaced, how names of people are frequently misspelled. An example from the *Daily Nation's* "Watchman" column of 26 July 1999 illustrates this.

*"And still on matters media, Sam Akhwale points out the following variations on the name of our Foreign Minister, all of which have appeared at some time or another: Boyana Godana, Boyana Gonada, Bonaya Gonada, Bonada Goyana, Bonana Godaya, Boyada Gonana, Bodaye Gonaria, Bodana Gonaya, Bodana Goyana, Bonada Gonaya, Bonaiia Goyada. Remember colleagues everywhere, it's Bonaya Godana."*

The report concludes that these inexcusable errors "indicate not only unfamiliarity with the areas but also disinterest, if not downright contempt".

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If in the 1990s poor transport and communication networks were accepted as passable excuses, now, with fairly developed infrastructure, one can call people on the ground and even google to confirm details about places, names and concrete details. The persistence of the same mistakes indicates disinterest and deliberate simplification. All along there has been something more at play; disinterest and contempt are definitely in the mix, but the region has been flattened out and its complexity reduced.

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The foundation of this narrative lies in the British colonial era in Kenya. The British had fenced off the Northern Frontier District (NFD) and sat on it with no concrete vision of what they wanted. Gunther Schlee, in his book *Identities on the Move*, writes that the British wanted nothing "...but they did not want to leave this nothing to anybody else".

NFD, which comprised six districts, was conceived as a buffer zone against Emperor Menelik's expansionism and later to fascist Italy's occupation of Ethiopia. NFD kept hostile imperial powers "at a distance of a few hundred miles of semi-desert away from the White Highlands, the Brooke Bond tea plantations and the Uganda railway".

In post-colonial Kenya, NFD has grown beyond *terra incognita* into a mysterious place which Parselelo Kantai, in a book review for *Chimurenga Chronic*, says is "... an outer darkness that generates the ultimate fear: absolute alienation."

The North has never escaped nor transcended this otherness. A permanent narrative has emerged over the years to keep it where it was. In school texts, the Arabic names beloved by the Muslim Northerners became synonymous with various misdemeanors that Kenyan children were taught to avoid. "These people, we were taught from the earliest days of primary school, were backward, primitive," writes Kantai.

Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of the country who had dismissed the residents as "herders by day and shifta by night" had authorised the military to unleash terror to tame the unruly people. Military

operations defined Northern Kenya's relationship with the state's core. The post-colonial state gave *carte blanche* powers to rogue officers who supervised mass murders through state-ordained military operations. They gunned down camels, raped women and forced "villagilisation" during the anti-shifita operations. Pastoral nomadism, the engine of the region's economy, was curtailed. The vestiges of this plunder continues to haunt places like Isiolo where slums - *Bulas* - around the urban centre house stories of destitution.

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The Kenyan media, it seems from these stories, do not have any moral regrets. Such media practices as fidelity to authenticity, corroborations, timing, and context are disregarded with no professional consequences. The only fidelity they uphold is to the government and to the narrative. The combined assault on the already battered image of the North continues unabated.

Even where communication has improved and roads have "opened up" hitherto unreachable areas like Moyale and Marsabit, the narrative persists, emerging again and again from the remission it occasional sinks into. Conflicts are seasons of rehashing clichés, of harvesting stereotypes, a season that gives one an opportunity to engrave the narrative, adding a personal voice to a script that is passed from one hand to another.

These stories are repeatable props necessary to illustrate and embellish officialdom. These are the justifications to continue with draconian ways to continue vetting Northerners, to continue making it impossibly hard for Northern Kenya to progress in the country Kenya. Fodder that reduces people to second-hand subjects and often objects of state pity. The region is a canvas devoid of complexity, events are inflated out of proportion in keeping with the narrative sustaining the tradition.

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The new post-colonial elite have also inherited the colonialists' fear about the place. A conflicting complexity has led to the adoption of a meta-narrative that, according to Emery Roe "...is, in short, the candidate for a new policy narrative that underwrites and stabilizes the assumptions for decision making on an issue whose current policy narratives are so conflicting as to paralyze decision making."

Sessional Paper No. 10 was thus adopted as a safe gamble that allowed for Northern Kenya to be branded the land of the shifita where adverse government policy and propaganda were marshalled to justify the state's oppressive marginalisation of the people. These ideas were sold on radios and in National Assembly chambers. These ideas have become the default and attendant discourse on Northern Kenya.

Meanwhile, the Kenyan media has continuously pilloried the North through freeze-framing it as a region where nothing good can or does happen.

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