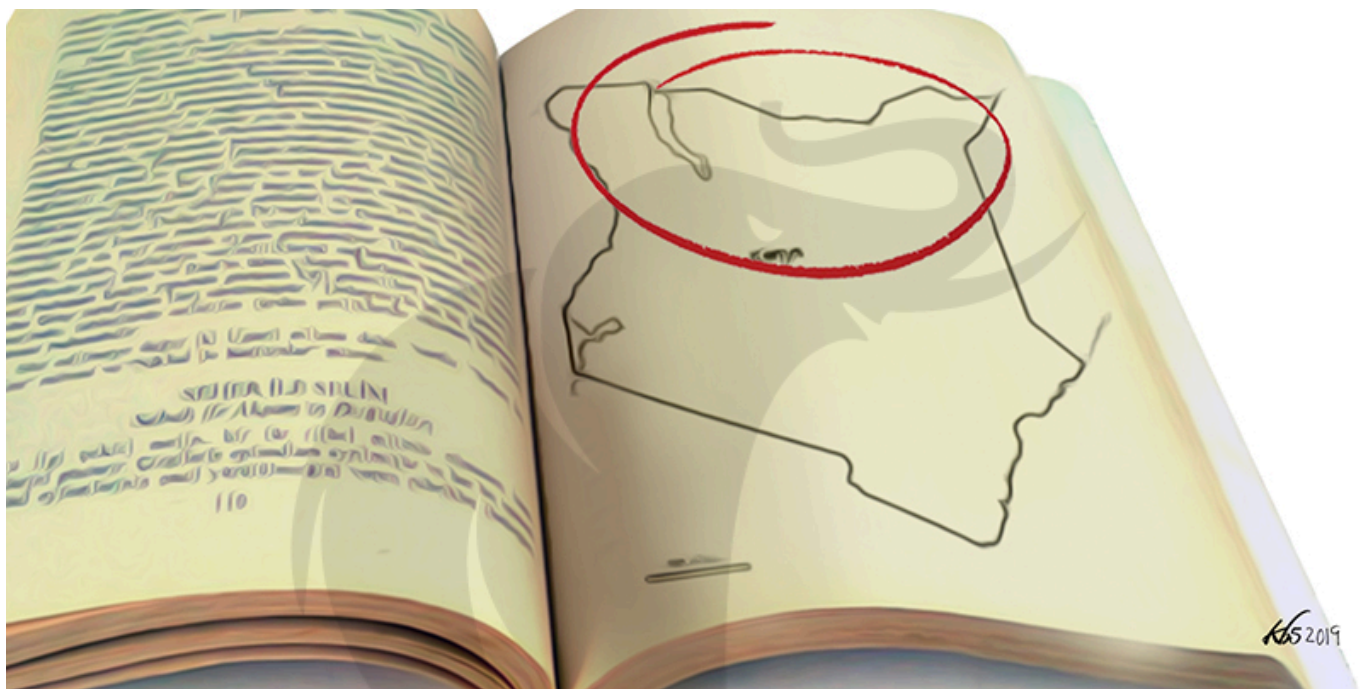




The New Frontier for Development and the Politics of Negation in Northern Kenya

By Dalle Abraham



“Literary critic Tom Odhiambo regards the NFD as a metaphor of negation, a liminal space where collective ‘Kenyan’ fears and anxieties are at once deposited and from whence they emerge”- Parselelo Kantai.

It’s Marsabit late in 2013. Nomadic girls dressed in evening dresses and cultural attires do clumsy catwalks with feet unused to high heels. They strut on a makeshift runway in front of the Catholic Church hall. The occasion is a glitzy second Miss Marsabit County beauty pageant. Kenya’s foremost stand-up comedian, Walter Mongare, aka Nyambane, whose parody of the banal cadence of Kenyan officialdom has become standard comedic practice in Kenya, is the MC. (Nyambane was part of the Redykulass comedy group. In this role, he had managed to fashion a remarkable Moi parody; he could talk, walk and even look like Moi.) He cracks jokes on walking styles and tribal clichés. A curious moment passes unnoticed when he declares that *“Kenya mpya iko hapa!!”* The new Kenya is here.

The beauty pageant, like LAPSET (the Lamu Port and South Sudan - Ethiopia Transport corridor) was a pitiful attempt to “open up” a closed-up region. This preposterous idea is not any different from the “metaphor of negation” that it sought to transform. To borrow from Chinua Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah*, Nkem Osodi’s analogy suffices: equate Northern Kenya to Eve in the Old

Testament who is blamed for man's woes in the Garden of Eden, rescue this image of a suffering Eve and redeem it in the New Testament through Mary, elevate her as the mother of God, and tuck her away in a nice corner of heaven where she is irrelevant.

How is the metaphor of negation now the glitzy developmental jewel?

A pervasive narrative defines Northern Kenya's relationship with Southern Kenya. Northern Kenya is viewed as a land of misery, of death and of terror where Kenya's hardships go to school – an area of darkness, this Kenyan “apocalypse” is by some ingenious design almost always shadowed by “potential”. But when detached from this base, the narrative alters its shape and the region transforms into a treasure trove of unexplored potential and immense opportunity waiting to be exploited.

Recall that in 1965 capital concentration was to be centred around the former “White Highlands”, as articulated in Sessional Paper No. 10: African Socialism and its Application to Planning. However, today the country is making a clean 180-degree about-turn. President Uhuru Kenyatta has visited Marsabit County five different times in the past six years. Foreign envoys have warmed up greatly to Northern Kenya. Just last month, [twelve European Union ambassadors](#) were in Marsabit. This new attention and the grand nature of the new mega infrastructure developmental craze seems like “Kenya” is atoning for all its past sins. The initial excitement resulting from this new attention is, however, wearing off fast.

Positive policy steps have been taken. But Sessional Paper No. 10 of 1965 and The Special Districts Act of 1934 repealed 63 years later in 1997 were bad policies that had created an official attitude. In this new testament, the policy environment has changed. [Sessional Paper No. 10 of 1965](#) was replaced 47 years later by [Sessional Paper No. 8 of 2012](#), which was made by a special ministry for Northern Kenya Development, obvious in its intentions of affirmative action and “Releasing Our Full Potential”. These policy changes have been supported by Kenya's Vision 2030, which lays out the country's development blueprint on transforming the “special circumstances of previously marginalised communities” and “in this respect it offers a chance to turn history on its head”.

But have the negative attitudes towards the North been overcome?

The language of the old and new policies, when juxtaposed, are fundamentally different. But development plans, visions or policies can, on their own accord, turn “history on its head” and clean the stained slate of nationhood. Still, in their implementation, the North is witnessing the callous ways – informed by colonial perceptions and attitudes – in which development can exclude and alienate. Hidden in the folds of this grand development vision of LAPSSET is exploitation, oppression and dismissal of the North. The exclusionary tendencies bear the hallmarks of how history and tradition continue to define what and how things get done in Kenya.

The urgency of the national government in this experimental and magical “spatial fix” was a heady affair. The government introduced new projects: roads, airports, wind farms and resort cities – an investor's paradise emerging out of the wasteland. How amazing, how great, this story of transformation was. But this idea of opening up the north is a cryptic code that has changed shape and form over the years. Spatial fixes as anywhere in the world are often wishful make-believes.

In an illustrative [animated film shared by NEPAD](#), we are told that LAPSSET will encompass “international airports, resort cities, special economic zones, industrial parks, mineral exploration, and free trade areas which will generate and harness economic and business activities for the corridor”. LAPSSET, we learn from the video, is “an investor's dream, backed by governments in the three countries and embedded in Kenya's Vision 2030, a crucial de-risking step for investors” where

“land acquisition and investments are secured not only by governments but also by the enthusiasm of the populations”. Viewed through this lens, “Kenya estimates that the core LAPSSET projects will generate and inject up to 2% to 3% of the GDP into the economy and 8% to 10% of the country’s GDP”.

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At the macro level, the vision was generous, and its beneficiaries were spread across Eastern Africa. For South Sudan, LAPSSET was projected to “consolidate the peace process in the country and build a sound foundation for sustainable growth”. For Ethiopia, “LAPSSET will enhance the current bold political and economic reforms in the country”. For the whole continent, LAPSSET will fulfill the African Union’s dream of “a peaceful, prosperous and fully integrated continent by 2063”.

This grand vision is replete with ambiguities, a pastiche of grand and micro intentions. At the macro level, Kenya wants to send a statement on the continent but at home LAPSSET is articulated as a plan to open up Northern Kenya as a way to tap the resources in the North. So far the conviction has made it look like the “opening up” of the hitherto “closed” Northern Kenya is a seamless and accepted undertaking. Even the old acronym, NFD, has been repurposed to reflect the new possibilities; Northern Frontier District (NFD) has become the New Frontier of Development, and its caustic version, the Northern Forgotten Districts, has effectively been forgotten.

This plan of “opening up” has come with some apprehension for people from Northern Kenya. Fear and economic anxiety are some of the markers of this ambivalence. The new impatience and anxieties in the region are discernible. The actual LAPSSET projects being implemented are coming to a place and a people who have certainly been waiting for and dreaming about development, hoping for all the new attention.

But when “development” began, it did so in lofty ways, not as the locals had conceived it. Instead of hospitals, classrooms, clinics and water points, fiber optic lines, international airports, oil pipelines, mineral licensing, huge electric pylons, wind power projects of reputable grandeur and plans for resort cities with world class golf courses and massive trains were erected.

Meanwhile, the leaders from the area are like antelopes caught in the headlights of an oncoming train. In the bulas scattered around Isiolo town, in little double-roomed wooden houses, there were talks of the place’s immense economic potential and of the coming opportunity, of employment, of land prices going up, of corporate social responsibility, of foreign scholarships, and of new investors coming. In neighboring Marsabit County, *The Cradle* carried a front-page splash of an artistic 3D impression of a future city envisioned for Moyale, which in Uhuru’s words, will be “the future Dubai”. The grandness and generosity of this vision can only be equated to Dubai, which has slowly become Africa’s developmental true north and the template of transformational ambitions. Dubai had turned “history on its head”.

Development for whom?

The gist of all these interventions lies in the intent. The “unpeopled wasteland” needed to be roped into the Kenyan political economy. These interventions, if distilled down to their bare essentials, were asking, nay, forcing Northern Kenya to take up the duties and dynamics of a key player in the regional political economy without the necessary participation of its leaders and/or the consideration of its people’s needs. This vision was not an organic one; it was not of the people and for the people.

Its conception was not arrived at slowly and imperfectly. The plan to “open up” Northern Kenya was not preceded by years of activism and it was not an affirmative response to the cries of Northern Kenya’s leaders on marginalisation. Its origin lay elsewhere.

Kenya’s “new frontier of development” was radically unmoored from the reality of the Northern Frontier Districts. When viewed through Northern Kenya’s old image, the sound and conviction of its single-minded believers was heartening. LAPSSET, and its language of “new”, “development”, “opening up”, “opportunity”, “investors”, “markets”, and “mega infrastructure” felt like a dream come true. Its springboard was the depressive narrative of death, misery and terror that had seeped into the collective Kenyan psyche. While the thing that we were laughed at in Kenya was some kind of social dislocation, now we were being praised and made to feel important in a different interventionist way. The misery, the deaths, history itself can be supplanted by LAPSSET.

The tone of hope and conviction had a faint ring to the cavalier tones that created the old Northern Kenya’s dominant image of an “apocalypse”. In time the apocalypse and now the “utopia” spoke not of the place as it was; one simplified and flattened the place while the other elevated and embellished its complex socio-political and economic dynamics.

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The quixotic idea and process of transforming Northern Kenya into a developmental utopia happened with some level of internal conflict. The government and its agents tried to make these dreamy interventions important by downplaying the underlying issues. The technical nature of the project’s large ambition also further obscured any meaningful contributions from Northern Kenya’s leaders who spoke of land, employment, scholarships, corporate social responsibility and compensation. Sometimes, their voices were unanimous that there was no participation but in other instances the leaders spoke as people warming up to and fully acquiesced to the LAPSSET perks. They spoke in the inductive tone of “opportunity” of “potential”, and in those instances, pastoral nomadism as a lifestyle seemed a distant idea.

These inductive tones were forgotten and anger took its place, as was the case earlier this year at the Pastoralist Leadership Summit when the elected leaders resolved, amongst other things, to stop all land acquisition for LAPSSET until all community land is registered. They were a little too late. A gazette notice for LAPSSET’s land acquisition was already in circulation as they made their resolution.

An old anxiety

This developmental frenzy and its attendant worry reminds me of a past cautionary tale of Israelis wanting to buy the fertile soil around Mt. Marsabit. When I heard this in the early 2000s, I wondered why anyone would want to buy soil.

Then this rumour changed shape and became scarier. The Israelis would be given a 99-year lease to start farming in Northern Kenya. When we heard this, we were at once regaled and worried. Back then, I wondered how this mass resettlement will be undertaken, and kept asking myself where we shall all go.

But this story of Israelis, which could not be corroborated, was an inchoate articulation of a deeply

ingrained fear in the psyche of the pastoralists in Kenya - that their land will be taken. An anxiety that was always within reach. Seen in history and in the present, from the 20,000 Maasais forcefully resettled twice from their ancestral land to pave way for colonial settlers in the early 20th century to the over 607 km² land acquired for the Lake Turkana wind power project, which sits on only 162 km² of the land acquired. From the oil blocks in Turkana, [the mineral prospecting blocks](#) across the North to the four [military bases](#) that sit on huge tracts of land in Isiolo and [wildlife conservancies](#) supported by well-funded NGOs, there was an encore of fear and anxieties that continue to give the Northerners sleepless nights.

LAPSSET amplified and gave currency to this old anxiety. The Errant Native movement that spoke of imperial demands and of deeply hatched plans was a deeper articulation of this old fear. The curious and distant anxiety of my childhood informed by rumours of Israelis was now an immediate fear. Land for LAPSSET, land for conservation, threats to rangelands, destroyed pasturelands. The ever-present anticipation of some kind of invasion was now turning depressive. This fear gave us enough reasons to believe that anyone who purported to improve or invest in our land was suspect. All this attention without giving the locals a chance to have their views heard was scarier than the promised joy of development "goodies".

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LAPSSET's initial steps and projects have revealed a wide gap between the intention and its consequences. The projects that came never compensated the communities whose land was acquired for its expansion, such as the airport in Isiolo that kicked out squatters living and farming in that area for the past 60 years. The manner in which land acquisition was being undertaken, the ugly site of extraction, the dust, the vibrations and blasts, the gaping holes in grazing lands, these consequences of development were unknown. Ridyukulass comedy turns to a question...*Na hiyo ni maendeleo?*

Commitment beyond optics

Evidently, changes to whole regions like Northern Kenya come based on commitments. The problems in Northern Kenya are a result of negligence. Government interventions are almost always reactionary. Even the new capital being thrown into the region, as my friend puts it, is "superficial cosmetics" without any meaningful benefits to the people. It is called economic exploitation.

The pipeline from Lokichar drained the oil wells to the port at Lamu. The huge electric pillars traversed 400 kilometers of unelectrified lands to join the national grid at Suswa. Northern Kenya's dissatisfactions and the only visible effort to try and reclaim and possibly reinvent the manner of the intervention has often been hijacked or met with serious rebuke. Turkana County Governor [Josephat Nanok's verbal exchange](#) at a public function in Lodwar expressed his dissatisfaction with how the oil revenue was being manipulated. "We oppose the reduction of the [Lokichar oil] revenue percentage to be allocated to the county, which has been capped from trillions to 22 billion, and even the benefit to the community from 10% to 5% then capped to 3 billion, that's my problem." Nanok's sentiments and request to Uhuru "to help us to oversee these resources and save it for the future...and if you help us do that, you will be listened to."

The president's reactions to Governor Nanok was illustrative of the tone that had put Northern

Kenya where it had always been. *“Mtu akisimama hapa aseme Uhuru ana haja na mafuta ya wengine.....ashindwe na shetani Mshenzi.....alafu mjinga anakuja kusema ni mimi nafanya mambo ya.....eh! hiyo siwezi...”* If someone stands up to say Uhuru has interest in other people’s oil...devil...uncouth...stupid person says I am doing...I can’t...

Insulting a respected leader in front of his own people by calling him *“shetani” “mshenzi”* and *“mjinga”* does not foster trust in the government. Moreover, Uhuru failed to understand that Nanok’s dissatisfaction was not mere apprehension; his words drew their credence from a collective discontent in Northern Kenya. But Nanok’s insistence for higher perks was in Uhuru’s indecorous riposte received as an atypical expectation; it went against the narrative of what the government expected from the Northerners. It was markedly different from the assurances that the government was giving to investors through LAPSSET.

More indignities are probably in the pipeline. The centre doesn’t respect these people who are now asking to be consulted. *“Tuwaulize nyinyi kama nani?”* is the tone of the government. This is Kenya.

Nanok’s request and the court case from the community at Sarima over the land acquisition for the Lake Turkana wind power project are demands for a certain type of visibility in Kenya. This fight for visibility is often expressed in bitter tones. The protracted legal battle is again indicative of how unrelated the projects are to people’s needs.

On the ground, the articulation on LAPSSET has taken the same tone of bitterness. What the communities in Northern Kenya want is simple recognition – that they are a people and anything to be done on their land has to be through them. It is a simple enough request; to be heard, to be listened to, to be respected and be duly compensated for any disruption in their livelihood.

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The numerous cases presented at the National Environmental Tribunal (NET) speak of this need for participation. But the government’s attitude can be seen in the three-judge bench that [recused](#) itself from the ongoing case on the Lake Turkana land acquisition. The government is buying time but the people are patient, even as key witnesses are dying.

This agitation and the fight for land in Kenya is everywhere. The Maasai case in Laikipia, the MRC Pwani si Kenya campaigns and land agitations in the Rift Valley areas speak of a familiar Kenya. Parselelo Kantai, in his paper *“In the grip of the vampire state”*, says, “The Maasai campaign speaks of the State’s failure to institute a new constitutional order. It was born of a realisation that the State whether in its colonial or its postcolonial phase was not just unwilling to address the community’s grievances, but had an active interest in perpetuating them.”

Despair

I have been to forums on LAPSSET in which the overriding sentiments of the community reflect impatience, anxiety, fear and resignation. Protest against LAPSSET component projects is registered in one of these shades of despair. In a protest that had blocked road construction two years ago along the A2 road in Marsabit, an elder had spoken about how the Isiolo-Marsabit-Moyale road had destroyed water pipes and denied his village members access roads to their residences, and about the excessive dust and noise at night. The village elder had told me that they had had seven

meetings with the county commissioner and the district commissioner about the matter and that they were now very tired. He said, “We shall see if the government will put all of us in the same mortar and pound us.”

This same emotion is witnessed among squatter groups kicked out of the Isiolo airport. This despair is often articulated as the loss of traditional culture or heritage. Whenever I think about this despair, the image that comes to mind is that of a Maasai moran seated on a narrow path, his head bowed, his hope and pride gone, the carcasses of his dead cows strewn across the path, cows that were [shot dead](#) by the Kenyan police for “invading” private ranches.

This shooting of livestock was for a long time legal in Kenya. Before it was repealed in 1997, the Special District Act stated that “an administrative officer, police officer or tribal police officer in charge of a party or patrol may destroy or order the destruction of any cattle seized, detained or taken in charge by that party or patrol if, in the opinion of that officer, and after exercising all reasonable diligence for the safeguarding of the cattle, it would endanger the party or patrol, or any member thereof, to attempt to retain the cattle alive.”.

Who benefits?

The vision for LAPSSET comes from a specific place and history. Unless it confronts that history without wishing to turn it on “its head”, it will always be problematic. No matter how gorgeous the stories sound and how glamorous the pictures coming out of the North are, the fact remains that the primary beneficiaries of these “developments” are the elites in Nairobi. Marsabit, while sending 310MW of clean energy to Nairobi, uses diesel-powered and rationed electricity. There are all the hallmarks of exploitative development: oil from Lokichar, wind power from Marsabit, and an airport in Isiolo for miraa and meat exports.

A retired major in Isiolo, who I have had conversations with on land, the Northern Rangeland Trust’s conservancy model, and LAPSSET gets visibly angry with the idea of “opening up” the North for investors. “Who said the investors have to come from outside? Have we been taking care of these lands for others to now come in to take over without consulting us?”

This anger lies simmering just below the surface. Ideas about foreigners coming to “to play golf in our pasturelands” and of “our men becoming watchmen and cleaners in the big hotels” speak about bigger unaddressed questions. This vision of development was sold incoherently to the people.

I have been attending almost all the meetings on environmental impact assessment studies and seen how the LAPSSET vision and strategy were unfamiliar to the residents. The worries and anxieties about LAPSSET were couched in the language of despair and sometimes came out as threats. The answers the local communities received have been elusive. Questions about benefits accruing to the communities have not been adequately addressed. No one speaks about corporate social responsibility.

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LAPSSET is an unfair construct. Its exploitative details and tendencies is structured in such a way that the communities affected won’t benefit and their expectations won’t be met. The multinational investors who arrive in this “investors’ paradise” know this very well and are known to throw a few

millions shillings to the community as diversionary measures through highly publicised corporate social responsibility projects. The inchoate articulation couched in the request for “corporate social responsibility” calls for allies. Leaders, NGOs, the media, activists, policy makers and even academics need to move with the community into a more inclusive thought process, which is necessary for the conception of development of the North, a process that recognises and respects different socio-economic lifestyles.

Organised resistance

Past political resistance in Northern Kenya has been crushed by an overbearing centre and that experience continues to mark the relationship between the North and the central government. The trauma of the Shifta wars and of the Wagalla and other massacres is within living memory.

Even so, communities, when resisting this imposed development, speak about culture and heritage. But through writing complaint letters, public protests and filing their dissatisfaction with the heavy-handed manner and the back-handed dismissal of their concerns, an environment for an organised resistance is being cultivated.

Between Prof. Lonyangapuo saying, “Never ever make decisions while swinging in your armchair while seated in Nairobi” and the village elder in Marsabit invoking mortar and pestle as metaphors of state power, something needs to be registered.

That the government is investing in such mega infrastructure without a proper buy-in from the communities is a recipe for future disaster. Those investments are easy targets for expressing dissatisfaction with the government for the economic exploitation that is being undertaken in the name of development and of opening up. The fire next time is a matter of conjecture. All the elements are slowly falling into place. A time will come when the people will be angry and willing enough to face the mortar and pestle of state violence.

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