



# End of Uthamaki? The Disillusioned Kikuyus

By Dauti Kahura



Early this month, the burial of the mother of a businessman who operates in the famous Nyamakima area in downtown Nairobi took place in south Kinangop. Businessmen who have a strong association with and loyalty to each other turned out in large numbers to financially and morally support their colleague. Many of the traders present - mostly millennials - deal in electronic and hardware goods. For many of them, travelling to Guangzhou in China to haul back 40-foot containers full of varied consignments to Kenya has become second nature.

After the burial, the businessmen drove in their four-wheel Prados and double-cabin pick-up Toyotas to Naivasha town to "shake down the dust" and have "one for the road to clear their eyesight" for the 100-kilometre journey back to Nairobi. Settling down to juicy and sizzling nyama choma (roasted goat meat), a favourite delicacy among many Kikuyu middle class men, the traders could not wait to bitterly excoriate and fume against President Uhuru Kenyatta's presidency and his second-term politics, and to process and reevaluate their collective *Uthamaki* (the notion that the Kikuyu are and should remain the ruling class) position as they contemplated the future of the Kikuyu nation.

Washing down the goats' ribs with beer, brandy and whiskies, the traders said that if they could get hold of President Uhuru, they would give him a thorough whipping until they drew blood. "He has not only collapsed our businesses, they are now being taken over by the Chinese," said a visibly angry trader. "Including the cereals and grains businesses, traditionally done by our mothers (the term mother here being used loosely), are gradually being taken over."

During President Mwai Kibaki's reign (2002-2012), when many of the traders expanded and grew their businesses, their trade enjoyed a great boom and flourished immensely. They made loads of money, built stone houses in their ancestral homes, bought tracts of land, invested in real estate, rode fancy and powerful SUVs, and generally lived large. Many of them could even afford the upkeep of a concubine.

What hurt most, said the mourners, was that they had staked their lot with Uhuru's re-election, and had collected funds for his campaign, especially in 2017, in the hope of continuing to reap big time, just like they had done in Kibaki's time. Between 2013 and 2017, they noticed that their lucrative businesses had slackened somewhat. But they rationalised this by saying it was President Uhuru's first time as president and it had taken longer than necessary for him to settle down.

During President Mwai Kibaki's reign (2002-2012), when many of the traders expanded and grew their businesses, their trade enjoyed a great boom and flourished immensely. They made loads of money, built stone houses in their ancestral homes, bought tracts of land, invested in real estate, rode fancy and powerful SUVs, and generally lived large.

"Business was still thriving," said Jason Mwangi, an importer of hardware tools, electronics equipment and strobe lights, "but mega corruption was beginning to get out of control and was affecting our trading." As it was Uhuru's second and last term - also viewed as his legacy term - the trader told me, the businessmen had hoped that the president would rein in runaway graft, institute measures to curb it and even order the arrest of the said looters.

"He had nothing to lose, he could afford to be firm and brook no nonsense," reasoned the traders. So, in 2017, they had sealed the entire Nyamakima area to dance and dine and wine and revel in his victory. And now this...barely two years into his legacy term, the traders were gritting their teeth, their businesses were collapsing faster than they had taken the time to build them.

Peter Macharia, who deals in solar lights and panels and energy-saving light bulbs, told me that for the last couple of months he has just been paying his rent for his premises without any discernible income in hand. "Business is so bad. I'm just hanging in there...I don't know what to do, we have really been screwed...Since President Uhuru's re-election, he has been spinning the tale that it's [William] Ruto to blame for all the corruption, hence the wobbly economy. Did we elect Uhuru as president or we elected Ruto?"

"If indeed all the theft in government has been perpetrated by Ruto, what has the president done about it?" said a visibly agitated trader. "*Gutiri muici na mucuthereria.*" There is no difference between a thief and his onlooker. "In fact, the onlooker in this case is even worse than the thief because he knowingly abetted the theft. Just when did President Uhuru realise that his deputy was apparently pilfering the state coffers?" the traders argued, "Because of President Uhuru's gross incompetence and wanton carelessness, it was just a matter of time before they were exposed."

"If you are a farmer who keeps animals and you employ a shepherd to care for the animals, but instead of doing that, he slaughters your very animals from time to time, would you continue keeping him, would you continue trusting him with your flock?" asked one trader. "For Ruto to presumably engage in all that state theft, the president must also have been part of it. How else do you explain the fact that you're the president but you don't know what's happening in your backyard? And when you finally wake up from your slumber, you demolish people's property in the guise of fighting corruption."

The traders were thoroughly peeved about the president's directive late last year to destroy certain

properties to prove to Kenyans that he was indeed fighting state corruption. “Who was he fooling? That was an unnecessary distraction because as he was destroying the properties, he was clamping down on our consignment.

“If indeed all the theft in government has been perpetrated by Ruto, what has the president done about it?” said a visibly agitated trader. “*Gutiri muici na mucuthereria.*” There is no difference between a thief and his onlooker.

My goods were confiscated for six months,” said Macharia. “At the Embakasi government go-downs and by the time the president was pretending to come to our rescue, I’d given up on the goods - I couldn’t afford to pay the charges. I lost a lot of money.”

The traders noted that for the longest time the Kikuyu electorate had excused President Uhuru’s drinking habits. “We said it didn’t matter...what mattered was his performance and the fact that he was one of us. We were dead wrong.” they said. “Ruto is focused and steady because he is always sober,” observed the traders. “He also has his faults but because he is a teetotaler he is disciplined, hardworking and organised. This talk that it’s Ruto who had depleted the state’s cash is hogwash...Let Uhuru fight Ruto if he must, but let him not tell us the economy has tanked because Ruto collapsed it.”

### **Giving up on “The Family”**

Among the Kikuyu, the Kenyatta family has always remained a taboo subject: the family is treated like royalty, immune from criticism. Not anymore. The traders said many Kikuyus are waking up to the realisation that the Kenyatta family was only interested in advancing the larger family’s interests and expanding its business empire. “The family has been using the Kikuyu people as a stepping stone to enrich itself to the detriment of the community. It doesn’t care whether our children are starving or not, whether they go to school or not, whether they have jobs or not...all they’re interested in is ensuring this plantation serves their purpose.”

Yet, “the plantation” is now showing signs of dying: the Kikuyu electorate is dazed, disillusioned, and restless. “We’ll never vote again” has become an increasingly repeated mantra among the electorate. Or “We are going to vote for Ruto because he is available and generous.”

The “Kikuyu plantation” is also withering because its people - especially the young - are planning to run away from the country to far-off lands to escape the crippling economic conditions.

Dennis Kimani, aka Denno, a Bachelor of Commerce graduate from the University of Nairobi, has thrown in the towel as far as job hunting is concerned. Even though he is from a fairly stable middle class family, his family connections have refused to come through. “I’ve given up,” said Denno when we recently met. “I cannot take it anymore.”

He has been looking to migrate to Qatar in the hope of getting a job - any job “because at 28, the clock is ticking away...*na riuu ritietagirira muthamaki.*” The sun does not wait even for a king. “I am not growing younger.”

Among the Kikuyu, the Kenyatta family has always remained a taboo subject: the family is treated like royalty, immune from criticism. Not anymore.

Denno told me an unfortunate story: “When I was in primary school, my closest friend was Clifford Omondi. We lived in the same estate, went to the same school and shared many things. We were happy. One night my father came home late at night. We were all asleep but he woke us [children] up to eat the nyama choma he had brought. But he hadn’t woken us to eat the meat – he had woken us to tell me about my friend Omondi. ‘Listen my son, I want you to cease your friendship with that boy...those people are not good, they are not cultured, they have odious beliefs, they like destroying people’s property so they have no respect for anything. If by chance they were left to lead this country, they would run our country down completely...Have you heard what I’ve told you?’”

Denno never spoke to his friend again, but what his father told him many years back haunts him to date. He wonders why since President Uhuru’s presidency in 2013 the country has been gripped by massive state corruption, and by 2018, after two controversial presidential elections, things have apparently spiraled out of control. Even his more reticent father on matters politics is looking troubled. “What I have been itching to ask my father is why the country’s economy is in shambles and yet we have a Kikuyu for president.”

After coming back from United Arab Emirates (UAE), where she had lived for 10 years, Florence Wambui came back home to Nairobi for good to start a business that she had always dreamed of starting: running a shoe company. In Dubai, she had worked for five years as a manager in a big shoe boutique. “I had the know-how, the experience and some money I’d saved to start the business. But the Kenya I’d left behind in July 2008 wasn’t the Kenya I returned to in January 2018 just after President Uhuru had been sworn-in for his second term,” said a less than inspired Wambui.

In just less than a year, she was already thinking of relocating to Canada. “I could not see my future here...everything seemed to be in a tumble down.”

But as luck would have it, people like Dennis began approaching her for advice on the procedures for migrating to the Middle East, a region she had come know very well after a 10-year stint there. “I halted my own migration to Canada to run a bureau for Middle East-bound Kenyans, many of them Kikuyus, who seem to be literally escaping from their country.”

Steve Karanja, 27, an IT technician, is in the same predicament as Denno. Unable to find a steady job, he has reconciled with the fact that the only way for him to find work is if he leaves this country. With a contact in the United Kingdom, Steve has been working to save some cash for the expensive visa processing as he also thinks of how to beef up his meagre bank accounts. “Brexit Britain is better than a troubled country called Kenya,” Steve said to me. “Anytime.”

## **Lost children of Mau Mau**

But nothing prepared for me the impending Uthamaki meltdown like a video clip that was sent to me several weeks ago. It is of a Kikuyu millennial man who claims to have a messianic message for a tribe that apparently has lost its way. It is a cry of anguish, and of introspection. The message is a call to the tribe’s long gone forefathers to come to its rescue and intercede on behalf of a community captured by the capriciousness of fate, and by a single powerful family that has enslaved the community for the last half a century.

“Let’s come and reason together people of my tribe,” reads the young man from a long well-crafted missive read from a mobile phone. It is an impassioned plea:

*Nyumba, ndirari gathafari ndiratumetwo ni mwene nyaga na arajeria kundu kuria mwigaga ukirini, ndiracemania na ngomi, maithe maitu, ngomi citu acio makomire tene na ruo runene na ti akenu...eeeh ti akenu. Kiria maruagera ni munaga gikihuthirwo uru ni aria matekeruire. Kuma*

*riria Kenya yagiire wiyathi, gutire mu Mau Mau uri wagunika, bururi uyu, kana ciana ciao igeteithekera kuo. Athini aria athini bio bururi uyu ni Mau Mau na ciana ciao. Aria matari migunda ni Mau Mau na ciana ciao, aria mururaga umuthenya magicaria wira ni ciana cia Mau Mau. Aria maturaga magicaria tite deed cia tubloti twao ni Mau Mau na ciana ciao. Aria maturaga manegenaga ni kahuwa na macani na iria no Mau Mau na ciana ciao. Aria maturaga mururaga na maratathi magicaria wira bururi-ini uyu, no ciana cia Mau Mau. Airetu aria makomagwo nao ni itonga nigetha mandikwo wira ni ciana cia Mau Mau...Ni nyumba imwe tu ya twenjeiri irima riri eria yehokirwo ni maithe maitu, igicoka ikimagaruruka na riu no indu nyumba iyo iracokaniriria, nigetha iture ya thaga ciana cia Mau Mau na ciana cia cio...icio kimi... Andu aitu hingokai maitho...kirumi kia Mau Mau una riu ki mwoyo...kirumi kia Mau Mau una riu ki mwoyo...*

My people, I was away at a little safari that I'd been sent to by our God (of the mountains), and he took me to a place you call *ukirini* where I met our ancestors, our forefathers that that are long dead, who died with a lot of pain, and they are not happy...yes, they not happy. They are unsettled because what they fought for is being misused by those who did not fight for it. Since Kenya attained independence, no Mau Mau has ever benefitted in this country, not even their children. The poorest of the poorest in this country are the Mau Mau and their children. Those who do not have land, those who loiter every day looking for job opportunities, are the children of Mau Mau. Those that have been chasing title deeds for their little plot of lands, are Mau Mau and their children. The people who have perpetually complained of their coffee, tea and milk productions are Mau Mau and their children. Those people who have been moving from one corner in this country to another with testimonials, in search of work, are the children of Mau Mau. Those innocent lasses who are prostituted by the rich [Kikuyu men] for job favours are the daughters of Mau Mau...It is just one family that has dug this abyss for us, a family that had been trusted by our forefathers, but which turned against them. Since then, that family has just been accumulating abundant riches, all in the name of continuing to enslave and oppress the descendants of the descendants of Mau Mau...You all know the family I am talking about...(The narrator does not mention the name of the said family, but leaves his listeners with absolutely no doubt which family he is referring to: the Kenyatta family).

The narrator closes his call to action to the Kikuyu people by imploring: "Our people, open your eyes to [the true realities of your lives]...the curse of the Mau Mau is still alive...the curse of the Mau Mau still lives."

This is an excerpt of a much longer soliloquy in which the narrator reminds the Kikuyu people: "*Gikuyu kiugaga thire utarihwo no worogi...haria bururi weigereire na kirumi...Kenya yagurirwo na thakame ni maithe maitu magekua meendeire ni getha matucariria wiyathi...wiyathi uyu weteaga na ngati...*" The Kikuyu people say the only debt one cannot pay is that of witchcraft...this country has set itself on a cursed path...Kenya was liberated by our forefathers who willingly died so that we, their descendants, could enjoy the freedom that they so gallantly fought for...freedom which the home guards and collaborators seized, and which they continue to mock us with.

A couple of weeks ago, I was taking a reality check in the central business district (some Nairobians now call it the central bad district) and by pure coincidence I walked next to the statue of the freedom fighter Dedan Kimathi situated on the junction of Kimathi Street and Mama Ngina Street. This was before the National Museum of Kenya (NMK) ring-fenced the statue's area for renovations.

It was late in the evening and dusk was setting in. As I approached the statue, I could hear the noises of a man grovelling in acute pain. On closer look, I saw a young man, possibly no more than 30 years old, cuddled in a foetal position besides the statue, beseeching Dedan Kimathi, son of Wachiuri, to intercede on behalf of the crying Kikuyu people and liberate them from the yoke of modern day slavery and oppression.

The Kikuyu people say the only debt one cannot pay is that of witchcraft...this country has set itself on a cursed path...

“Why are we suffering so and yet you fought very bravely against the white man so we could have jobs and enjoy life,” pleaded the man. Shaking like a mulberry tree in dry winter, the man wailed about how nobody cares about the downtrodden sons of the peasant and poor Kikuyu families. “For how long will the children of the house of Mumbi continue to suffer so,” implored the man. “Tell us.”

The man then engaged Kimathi. “When will we ever be liberated from the shackles of poverty and enjoy the fruits of the promised land which you and our forefathers promised us?”

As I stood there watching the man writhe in pure pain and pleasure – the pleasure of communing with his ancestors – I realised that the Uthamaki Kingdom was staring at a meltdown: The people are crying, the people are confused, the people are cornered, yet their Muthamaki seems unbothered.

---

*Published by the good folks at [The Elephant](#).*

*The Elephant is a platform for engaging citizens to reflect, re-member and re-envision their society by interrogating the past, the present, to fashion a future.*

*Follow us on [Twitter](#).*

