



# Moi and the Erasure of Memory

By Patrick Gathara



Kenya has always struggled with the place of memory. It is very much a country built on the premise that the past is an expendable inconvenience. The colonials who built it erased and gerrymandered the past of those they found. The local tyrants who took their place after 1963 had a similar policy - opting to bend the facts of history to fit the mould of their oppression.

One of these local tyrants, Daniel Toroitich arap Moi, died in a private hospital in Nairobi on Tuesday and ironically became the subject of historical doctoring. In the wake of his demise, a furious battle is raging over how he is to be remembered, pitting what Mwai Kibaki once described as the Old Establishment against younger upstarts who are unwilling to play fast and loose with the truth any longer.

Undeterred, the Old Establishment has deployed government mandarins, politicians and the mainstream media in a determined effort to erase the memory of Moi's brutal 24-year [kleptocracy](#) that terrorised, murdered and tortured thousands and impoverished millions. Instead, the official narrative seeks to portray him as a gentle old man who did his best to hold the country together and was only forced into a few well-meaning errors. Gone from the official version are any references to the looting that he presided over, the virtual collapse of the economy, the documented massacres, the "tribal clashes", the torture chambers and the terrible human rights abuses.

## The Nyayo Error

Moi's tenure is referred to by many Kenyans as the Nyayo Error, a reference to his promise to follow in his predecessor Jomo Kenyatta's footsteps. And he was true to his word: he utilised the resources of the state to vastly enrich himself, his family and his cronies, while at the same time ruthlessly crushing any opposition to his rule. His approach to government was encapsulated [in a famous declaration](#) he made to his cabinet ministers in 1984:

*"I call on all ministers, assistant ministers and every other person to sing like parrots. During the Mzee Kenyatta period, I persistently sang the Kenyatta tune ... If I had sung another song, do you think Kenyatta would have left me alone? Therefore, you ought to sing the song I sing. If I put a full stop, you should put a full stop. This is how the country will move forward. The day you become a big person, you will have the liberty to sing your own song and everybody will sing it too."*

Today, in death, the former dictator has not only escaped justice but has left behind a country that still sings his song. More than 17 years after he was forced out of office, Kenya remains a country where power is primarily exercised for the benefit of those who wield it rather than for the sake of its citizens. It is a nation of nearly 50 million disposable people where the richest 1% (the vast majority either politicians or closely linked to them) may control anything from [half to two-thirds](#) of the country's wealth. It is a country where a Member of Parliament, who is [among the highest paid](#) in the world, can brazenly [shoot a citizen](#) in a nightclub.

Despite this, the Kenyan state stubbornly clings to its myths. This is not new. In death, Kenyan politicians are instantly forgiven for earthly sins and elevated to the status of national heroes, joining the mythical pantheon that bequeathed uhuru, peace, and relative - if somewhat skewed - prosperity to the population. Speaking ill of the dead, Kenyans are reminded, in un-African. Yet the resources put to sanitising the past speak to different motives.

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The result is a cognitive dissonance at the heart of the national memory as Kenyans are bullied into celebrating the lives of the very people responsible for consigning them to seemingly perpetual poverty and indignity; persons who openly subverted their dreams in the service of ambition and greed and who had no qualms about using inordinate violence to crush dissent using the same methods their colonial forerunners had employed to crush the Mau Mau rebellion. These are people whose accomplishments - such as they were - rarely outlived their time in office; who lived and died in luxury while their countrymen languished in penury.

## National amnesia

Kenya is a country that at times appears to suffer from Stockholm Syndrome, a form of traumatic bonding that causes victims to develop strong emotional ties with those who intermittently harass, beat, threaten, abuse, and intimidate them. In the cemetery that is the collective memory, the tended graves and monuments are reserved for the powerful, the corrupt and the wicked. Their records - purged of indiscretion - are presented as examples to emulate. Meanwhile, the ordinary Kenyans who bore the brunt of their violence, both physical and economic, rest unlamented in unmarked graves.

Facts, however, are stubborn things and there is some resistance to this call to national amnesia. Many Kenyans on social media are refusing to dance to the official tune. They are choosing instead to remember the Nyayo Error as it actually was – a benighted period characterised by fear and pain and death.

[According to the World Bank](#), the decade and a half between 1985 and 2000, which coincided with the worst years of Moi's rule, average life expectancy for newborns plummeted by 8 years. Gross national income per capita dropped from \$450 in 1980 to \$380 and only resumed an upward trend after he left office. (It has nearly quadrupled in the years since.) [One researcher](#) noted that “much like his predecessor, Moi enacted educational policies [like the free milk programme and the 8-4-4 system] that were politically popular but of questionable value for long-term national development”. Another, Professor Claire Robertson, has [pointed out](#) that “Moi expanded dramatically a series of punitive policies begun by the British colonial government against thousands of Nairobi street traders (especially women)... [because] they stood in the way of Moi's approach to economic development (and enrichment of himself and other elites through corruption)”.

At the root of the struggle over how to remember Moi and his compatriots is the country's ambivalence over how to deal with the past. One school of thought is best expressed by the Swahili proverb, *yaliyopita si ndwele, tugange yajayo*, which roughly translates to “let us not dwell on the past, let us deal with the future”. The idea is that the past is not something to be remembered; rather it is something to be instrumentalised, or better yet, reinvented to fit the needs of the present and the future. But it neatly avoids the question of whose needs are being addressed, the inconvenient answer being that it is always the needs of the powerful. Power, after all, has been defined as “the ability to define reality and have other people respond to your definition as if it were their own”.

In modern Kenya, the roots of this thinking can be traced back to the colonial experience when the British engaged in [systematic inventions](#) of the identities, cultures and traditions of their native subjects to suit the requirements of the colonial enterprise.

As Prof. Robertson writes, “The colonisers were concerned about dividing and conquering. They engaged in both creating ‘tribes’ and dividing them from each other using population control policies. Around Nairobi, for instance, an ethnically mixed area of impermanent settlement before colonialism, white settlers came to take up rich highland territory for their homes and farms. They converted its Kikuyu inhabitants to labor, turning them into farmers. In contrast, the British defined the Maasai as being herders and consigned them to different reservations, or reserves.” For the British, pre-colonial memory was a threat and so they worked to erase it and to replace it with a more pliable version.

### **“Forgive and forget”**

Those who took over from them at independence had a similar motive. The nation-building and “development” mantras have at their heart the suppression of public memory and a manufacturing of the past. The political elite of the 1960s and 1970s actively promoted the myth that “we all fought for freedom”, conveniently erasing the fact that many of its members had been part of the repressive colonial apparatus. This project was abetted by the [theft, destruction and concealment](#) of colonial era records. Jomo Kenyatta, who in 1962 had declared in Githunguri that “Mau Mau was a disease which had been eradicated, and must never be remembered again”, was reinvented as the leader of the rebellion. “Forgive and forget” became the official motto and has remained so ever since.

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when the British engaged in systematic inventions of the identities, cultures and traditions of their native subjects to suit the requirements of the colonial enterprise.

A contending school, however, believes that it is this very suppression and manipulation of memory that lies at the heart of Kenya's problems today. It is clear that "forgive and forget" has not worked as Kenyans are as deeply divided as they were under colonialism. As Dr Lotte Hughes [wrote](#) in 2011, "Kenya has not recovered from decades of state suppression of public memories".

It is this school that is vocally represented by the Kenyans loudly protesting the sanitisation of Moi. The continuing attempt by the political class to gerrymander history can only have the same effect that it has had for more than a century - to render the people [incapable of effectively resisting](#) the predation of the colonial state.

The erasure of memory has instead created fertile ground for the political class to continue to reinvent itself as the saviour rather the oppressor of the public. It has masked the continuation of colonial looting and generated a vicious cycle where colonial policies and institutions, such as the much-reviled Provincial Administration, are simply repackaged and presented anew as harbingers of change. It is the reason why President Uhuru Kenyatta and Raila Odinga can propose a recreation of the despised 2008 *nusu mkate* coalition government under the guise of building bridges, when they had spent the better part of the 2017 election campaigns denigrating that very possibility.

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As Dr Wandia Njoya [notes](#), the Building Bridges Initiative is an attempt to institutionalise the state and the political class as the custodians of memory by providing a "thorough and definitive" history of Kenya supervised by a presidentially appointed "Official Historian". "These proposals are typical of governmentality," she writes. "Rather than use violence to control the people, governmentality seeks to bend our ideas, our identity and our emotions to the service of the state...The goal is to change our soul and to change who we are. That means that the interest of the political elite is not, as it claims, to change the status quo. The goal is to change the people to accept the status quo as not just natural, but also as moral, if not godly."

It is within this context that the fight over how to remember Moi should be understood. It is about what the past means but also about the future, for it is by manufacturing history that the Old Establishment has managed to perpetuate itself and resist social change. If Kenya is to free itself, it must begin by rejecting the official histories and by striving to remember.

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