



Moi and the Simplification of the Kenyan Mind

By Wandia Njoya



I have always had a tortured relationship with Daniel arap Moi, the second president of Kenya. I was in primary school when I first became conscious of him – because of the milk that we drank in school, which was provided for free by his government. As I became a teenager, I was aware of the world my parents lived in, trying to forge a better Kenya, and Moi using the leadership of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) to persecute them.

But there was still a sense in which I was distanced from the cause of my parents' struggles. When I was in Form 2 or Form 3 (I can't remember), Moi visited our school and I asked him for an autograph. He was gracious and wrote that he wished me a bright future. The next Monday, our headmistress blasted the entire school about our lack of respect for an elderly statesman.

With all the abuse and violence typical of schools, there was one thing I appreciated about school: meeting Kenyans from different ethnic groups, whom I might have never met (and anyone who knows PCEA knows what I'm talking about). I loved finding out about Kenya from different people, and singing folk songs from other communities. And I knew that was Moi's work because I heard people complain that Moi had degraded education with the "quota system". I used to repeat that argument, until one of our family friends who worked in the Ministry of Education explained to me the importance of addressing educational inequality. Now I'm the one who shouts myself hoarse

about inequality in education.

Granted, I have since understood that Moi's intentions for diversifying the education system were not based on egalitarianism. Rather, he wanted to create a Kalenjin elite built in the same model which the British used in the 1950s to mould Kikuyu loyalists into an elite. But I was a teenager; I wouldn't have known that history then.

Moi was president for literally my entire educational life. My experience, especially of music education, for which I have fought for the last ten years, was influenced by his commissioning of music in praise of himself. It was his era that made me musically conscious, even though my fight now is for a more diverse Kenyan soundtrack.

Moi left office when I was a PhD student. I remember the euphoria as clearly as yesterday. It was beautiful. The day Mwai Kibaki was sworn in as the third president, a load was lifted off our shoulders. We smiled again. Kenya was a land of possibilities. We could do things differently. We could listen to Kalamashaka's "Tafsiri hii," laugh at Redikyulass imitating Moi, and read our own stories in *Kwani?* It felt like Kenya was going to soon be able to conquer her demons.

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Everything in Kenya is extremely regulated. In education, my professional field, the government has become so intrusive with its new vocational system, popularly known as CBC, in which it now dictates class activities teachers must use, including asking kids to jump and to carry out an analysis of their jumping. The Commission of University Education is now proposing that academics go through an extensive licensing process before they are allowed to collaborate with academics abroad. Acquiring licences for film making in Kenya has been turned into an obstacle race, with film makers being asked to translate scripts and being required to re-apply for licences if they so much as alter a sentence in the script. The clergy have been coopted in supporting this clampdown on artistic freedom by being promised that it will help the church entrench morality.

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It is clear that the one thing the current government will not allow us to do is to be intellectually and artistically creative. And to seal the deal, the politicians are now proposing in the Bridging Bridges Initiative (BBI) to write a "[definitive history of Kenya](#)", to appoint an Official Historian under the Office of the President, and to rearrange the management of our national archives. It can only mean one thing: Kenyatta's son Uhuru wants us to return our minds to era where they were kept on the straight and narrow.

The moulding of the Kenyan intellect

A [brilliant work](#) by Michael Kithinji demonstrates that the fundamental contradiction of the Moi era was the widening of educational opportunities to previously excluded communities (which was almost everybody except the GEMA communities), while at the same time crushing creative thought.

By the time Moi became president, Kenya had only one university because Jomo Kenyatta wanted it that way. In Kenyatta's view, universities were for training bureaucrats for government. Since most

bureaucrats were Kikuyu, then one university was enough because it catered for Kikuyu bureaucrats. And so through bureaucratic measures, Kenyatta stifled the growth of the University of Nairobi, and at his death, Kenya still had only one university.

But the precedent of starving education in order to create an ethnic elite had already been set by the colonial government. When the Mau Mau struggle broke out, the British government accompanied its military counter-offensive with an economic one. It rewarded loyalists with land confiscated from the Mau Mau, and with government jobs, especially in the notorious provincial administration that controlled Kenyan rural life. The thinking was that a Kikuyu bourgeoisie would split the political loyalties of the peasantry and starve the Mau Mau of sympathy and supplies.

Education was therefore tied to ethnic-class division as a strategy for divide-and-rule. Children from families and communities thought to be sympathetic to the Mau Mau were denied access to education. The missionary educators, like Carey Francis at Alliance High School, actively discouraged his African students from developing nationalist ideas, and even from joining professional careers.

But before this policy was activated by Mau Mau revolt, the white settlers had been the driving force for preventing access to higher education for Africans. As Kithinji informs us, the settlers were successful in lobbying against education for Africans, so that when the conversation about a university for East Africa began, the colonial Kenya government sent the least financial support and the least number of students to the technical college that would later become Makerere.

That policy only changed with the Mau Mau war because the British metropole government switched its sympathies. It decided to throw the settlers under the bus and prop up a Kikuyu elite. And to do so, they needed to provide some Africans with higher education.

This entire approach to education as a system to sustain the state is illustrated in Mbiyu Koinange, one of Kenya's first university graduates who would become a major pillar of the first Kenyatta government. Mbiyu was the son of a chief whose name is still carried by a girls' high school. He went through the elite pipeline of Alliance High School in Kenya, Columbia University in the US and Cambridge University in the UK. His siblings also had access to an elite education that was rare among African Kenyans at the time.

But it was not only education which the colonial government sought to control; the colonialists engaged in active pursuit of any space in which nationalist ideas thrived. For example, it banned political parties in rural areas (or what they called reserves) and later denied registration to political parties unless they were explicitly tribal. During the emergency, and as the metropole government accepted that independence for Kenya was more profitable for the UK, the colonial administration also used arrests and detentions to weed nationalists out of the unions and political parties.

By the time politicians were going to negotiate independence in Lancaster House just before independence, the British had essentially created an echo chamber. And Moi was part of that chamber.

By the time Moi became president, he knew how the system worked. If he was to maintain control of the state, he had to create a Kalenjin elite, the way the British created the Kikuyu elite that maintained Jomo Kenyatta in power. So he had to open the corridors of the universities and schools to more Kenyans of more ethnic backgrounds.

But like the colonialists, and Kenyatta before him, Moi was to soon discover that education is a double-edged sword. As you provide it, you cannot control what people think. So with expanded

education came expanded cruelty, in order to ensure that people with degrees thought only in the way he wanted them to think.

That is why Moi remains, and will remain, historically notorious for his fight against Kenyan intellectual and artistic life. When Moi became president, the humanities, especially philosophy, literature and political science, were shunned as irrelevant to development. Literature only mattered if it was studied under education. And later, several scholars in those fields – Micere Mugo, ES Atieno Odhiambo, Korwa Adar, Micere Mugo, Apollo Njonjo and Ngugi wa Thiong’o, just to name a few – were arrested, tortured, detained and exiled. University students were raped, shot dead, sent to prison (where some, like Tito Adungosi died) and exiled. Torture in the evil Nyayo House basement sounded like a page out of apartheid South Africa and Britain’s gulags during the Emergency: living for days in flooded cells, and cruel violence directed at the genitals of both men and women.

The attack on the academy was part of a larger one on intellectual spaces with the potential for mass mobilisation and imagination of alternative visions of Kenya. It included censorship of theatre arts, detention and imprisonment of journalists such as Wahome Mutahi, David Makali, Bedan Mbugua and Gitobu Imanyara, and the banning of newspapers and magazines. Music praising Moi enjoyed special privileges in terms of radio airplay. Any other Kenyan music had to compete with Congolese, South African and American pop music.

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Kenyans were not allowed to meet without a permit from the police, which they would never get. Moi was so vicious in crushing ideas that his forces invaded churches where they beat clergy and entered mosques with their boots on.

Despite this cruelty, which words will never adequately capture, it would be misleading to divorce it from the larger logic of the colonial enterprise from 1895. The exploitative Kenyan state cannot exist without crushing the Kenyan imagination. Without a tribal elite handed over to him like the one handed over to Kenyatta, Moi crushed alternative spaces of imagination in the same way his predecessors had done, but with more cruelty. As the saying goes, every time history repeats itself, the price goes up.

The ideology of order

The word “order” should send shivers down everybody’s spine. Order was the motto of the colonial government, and it made the administrators violent. As Bruce Berman tells us in [his extensive study](#) of the colonial civil service, the colonial administrators were mainly Oxbridge elites fed on a steady dose of imperial ideology, but with very limited exposure to the cultures of the African people they were going to rule over. Humanistic knowledge, the British government said, was “theory” and was irrelevant. The best learning was from experience on the ground. The point was not to serve, but to “protect” the natives and to ensure that they remained orderly enough to facilitate the exploitation of their own land and labour.

This was an intensely bureaucratic arrangement, managed by the infiltration of the colonial administration in the daily lives of Africans in the reserves. The network would then evolve into the provincial administration during the first two presidents and remain the County Commissioners after the 2010 constitution. The tribal police who helped crush the Mau Mau remain in place as the

Administration Police.

But reliance on bureaucracy necessarily means ignoring problems until they can no longer be ignored by bluffing one's way through crises, and by employing extreme violence against people who make the administrators nervous. The colonial government employed the Punjabi principle which, Berman says, held that "a shot in time saves nine", indicating that any idea with the potential to grow into a political space must be crushed while it is still budding.

That was the ideology that was passed on to African civil servants during the highly engineered transition between British and African rule in Kenya. The government had contempt for knowledge. Education was only for training civil servants.

Kenya had to be kept orderly at any cost, even if it meant assassinations, massacres, torture, exile and a cowed down people who had to look around when they so much as coughed. Moi used violence to affirm what Atieno-Odhiambo famously called the "ideology of order" where the state manages the tension between people's freedom and the ruling elites' need for the state to maintain power and amass wealth.

In the first years of independence, politicians such as Martin Shikuku, Jean-Marie Seroney and J K Mulwa repeatedly observed that the civil servants of Kenyatta I's government exercised immense power using the provincial administration, a colonial arm of government which KADU had unsuccessfully tried to dismantle. Was the Government of Kenya not a political organ subject to the will of the people, or was it run by bureaucrats? they persistently asked. In 1966, it was Moi who defended the Kenyatta I regime by stating that "even if it's a political Government, it is an orderly Government, it is not a Government of disorder."

The economy of order

This is why the most chilling aspect of the revisionism of Moi's history is the playing down of the atrocities Kenyans suffered during the 24 years during which Moi ruled. However, what is more dangerous than diminishing the human suffering is the argument that Moi had to maintain order. In the past few days, many of the on-the-fence observers or the outright supporters of Moi have said that Kenya is a special country with too many competing ideas or opinions, and the only way to run the Kenyan state is by enforcing order.

And the reason Kenyans are not pushing back on this narrative is because we believe it. And we believe it because the Moi regime did not allow intellectuals enough time to sufficiently tease out the fundamental problems of the Kenyan state. At the height of my public engagement in the new education system, most people who wanted to shut me up basically expressed fatigue with the noise. "Why can't we just accept and correct later?" they would ask. They are asking the same question about BBI.

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Freedom in Kenya is work, and work is what Kenyans do not want to do. We have been well trained by a century of brutality. Getting out of line means violence. So when children die in school, when women are killed, even in broad daylight, when young men are shot dead by police, when elections are rigged, the narrative that follows the line of order is: "Let's keep peace. Let's protect lives and

property. When are we going to continue with business? Let's forgive and forget. If someone asked for forgiveness, it means we should forget."

Kenya has become so toxic that we cannot even give innocent compliments. Instead of saying "you look nice," we ask "kwani where are you going today?" If we want people to carry out a certain function, we manipulate them into doing it. We who want the action don't have to think it through because, after all, thinking is theory and theory is not practical. So we don't rationalise policy or plans, or explain them to people. Instead, we pretend that the decision is not cast in stone, and then present people with a fait accompli that they are forced to manage by working backwards.

A Kenyan humorously explained this phenomenon on twitter:

- They ask why you haven't done what they were "suggesting" previously. Everyone's doing it, so why not you?
- You explain yourself. "Si it was voluntary? I'm not interested."
- They attack, using the compliant ones as their examples, and as their enforcers.

— Kiko Enjani (@KikoEnjani) [January 25, 2020](#)

However, Kenyans believe the ideology of order because the intellectuals were crushed before they could refine their ideas, and explain or teach them to the next generation in order to further refine them. Atieno-Odhiambo, whose insight into Kenyan history was simply brilliant, also had to go into exile after persecution from Moi.

As Godwin Murunga and Shadrack Nasongo said [in a preface](#) that is a blues for the Kenyan academy and Kenyan intellectual thought, the upcoming generations of Kenyans were left orphaned with no one to mentor them. This heritage made us unable to really dissect and understand the ideas for which the intellectuals were persecuted. The proponents were not in Kenyan classrooms or academic forums where we students could ask them questions that would help the proponents refine the ideas. The intellectuals were cut off from the geographical and cultural setting that birthed the ideas. And with such suffering, it was difficult for us upcoming students to point out the blind spots of their ideas because we did not want to appear disrespectful of their suffering.

And that is why some of the ideas for which Kenyan intellectuals were persecuted have failed to withstand the test of time. It is also why we see some of the intellectuals who were persecuted during Moi's reign throw their weight behind Kibaki and even Kenyatta II. Some who enter government sometimes support policy which Kenyans did not expect those politicians to support.

But if our heroes of yesterday do not seem to see the continuity of the struggle in today's Kenya, we cannot blame them. The problem is structural, and it predates Moi to 1895 when Kenya was created as a market whose natural resources and labour of diverse peoples who did not know they had been included in Kenya could be exploited.

The simplistic Kenyan mind

The Kenyan mind is spectacularly unable to deal with contradiction or complexity. Pointing out that Moi's violence was systemic, or that the ideas that attracted the wrath of the state have still not nailed the core problem we are faced with, or that some of those who ended up as victims of assassinations and detentions were part of the privileged and wealthy elite, elicits violent and moralistic questions.

We are asked: “Who are you to question those who suffered?” “Are you saying the people who suffered were wrong?” “Are you blaming them for their own suffering? Are you sanitising the government’s atrocities?”

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The questions go both ways. From the pro-government side, we are asked “Are you saying Moi was all bad and did nothing good? Who are you to judge? Have you never done anything wrong?”

But this moralising goes beyond discussions of Moi. We are told that discussing history is blaming colonialists and refusing to take responsibility for our own actions. That discussing ethnic privilege and patronage is attacking every single member of that ethnic group. That discussing patriarchy is blaming men. That explaining systemic causes of problems is explaining away or excusing those problems. Every public conversation in Kenya is a war against complex thinking.

We have reached the point where Kenyan public conversations are pervaded by this system of intellectual simplification.

Area	Symptoms of intellectual simplification
Language	Inability to read symbolic language and constant rebuttals on literary interpretations of words. The most infamous is the reading the mention of groups as a comment on every single individual member of that group (hence a constant complaint about the “not all brigade”).
Morality	The belief that everything in the world is about right and wrong, rather than about justice. Inability to deal with contradictions in people’s personal choices.
World	The inability to see people as existing in a universe with complex individual, social and cosmic dimensions, hence every human action is judged on the basis of fault rather than on the process of making decisions or environmental and systemic factors influencing that decision.
Responsibility and Freedom	Obsession with anonymity and group think, evading making decisions or exercising discretion, refusal to ascribe responsibility for fear of “judging” others.
Logic	Linearity, every event that precedes another is necessarily a cause; there’s no room for contextualisation or competing forces, Conversation is characterized by obsession with avoiding or assigning responsibility
Materiality	Ideas are useless if they are not directly linked to implementable tangibles. There is therefore always pressure to act, even when the proposed action is flawed and is predictably harmful.

Apart from our inability to think in complex ways, the ideology of order has also made us averse to

reading, especially if there is no material benefit to it. So for those who have persevered reading to this point, this is the point I am making: Kenya's dictatorships are part of a continuum of the ideology of order. Violence and autocracy are essential pillars of the Kenyan state in the current arrangement.

And that ideology is what makes BBI dangerous. Unlike Moi, who used physical violence to enforce "order," BBI is using public spectacle such as rallies and documents to entrench the same intellectual control. We must mourn and cry out about the atrocities of the state and insist on public memorialisation of the victims through the implementation of the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission (TJRC)'s report.

We must also break the ideology of order in the same way Samson put his hands on the pillars of the temple and brought the temple down. Because if we don't, history will repeat itself, and will do so at a higher price than we have already paid with the Kenyatta-Ruto government.

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