



# 'I Will Crush You': The November 18 Kampala Massacre

By A. K. Kaiza



"If I can't have you  
I'll go out of my mind"  
-Whitesnake

Just how serious the moment was comes to you afterwards. Caught in the centre of the riot, the adrenaline high, the gauntlet of fire, smoke, tear gas and gunfire raging around you, you are shielded from the knowledge that this could be the day they kill you.

Afterwards, when you have escaped the bullet and the gas, and have made it home, and the adrenaline has worn out, the pain begins. What if I was among those that died?

It is the evening of trauma, the time for unanswerable questions. You look at the images coming in and think, a week ago, I stood by this mall searching for twine. I was at the same spot the retired lecturer, 71-year old John Kittobe, was cut down. How about the 15-year-old Amos Segawa, bleeding to death, killed on Kafumbe Mukasa Road where there are things I always need to buy?

There is more. The videos keep coming in. Where the yellow, sporty hatchback with the president's poster drove into a crowd (Charlottesville-style) you too had wedged your way out between a Mercedes Benz trailer and an Isuzu Bighorn. At each Christmas, you regularly drive past the town

the church laity Richard Mutyaba was killed in. And the sunny-faced Onesmus Kansiime was shot in a place I went past just a month earlier.

Is there a formula to empirically plot these events? How did the angels of death that roamed this bit of earth in mid-November bearing AK-47s look at a figure and decide that that body, that young man, that woman will die today?

Then comes the impossible matrix: what can I do to not be killed? Should I not raise a defiant voice, not write this article? But then none of those killed were rabble-rousers.

### **Talk, you die; keep quiet, you die**

So why was it them and not me? Why did the shooting happen this week instead of last week when I was right there?

Then, survivor's guilt: I should have been there holding the hand of that boy whose legs were crushed to smithereens. What right do I have to remain alive when they are all gone?

Perhaps this comes closest to answering these wearied questions: a sheer coincidence of missed appointments and of a malfunctioning carburetor that kept you parked by the roadside, you realise, was all that stopped you standing at the spot where the bullet went through Mr Kittobe.

Those that were killed led quiet, unprotesting lives. Talk, you die; keep quiet, you die. How about the rest of us noise makers, who write articles like this, the makers of music, the poets and activists who are frequently warned, "There is a plan for you". Every day, you walk past your designated killer and even say good morning to him. "Your time will come. Be careful."

You realise there is a bullet out there with your name on it. They just haven't fired it yet.

### **The bridge**

The hand of fate had me and a writer friend drive a few kilometers north of the city centre. Hard rain in the morning had kept me an hour behind my intended time of arrival. There were a couple of things I needed - and still need - in the downtown area that bore the brunt of the violence. But the rain had ruined my day so I cut the city centre out of my planned schedule.

Meeting done, and as the two of us were approaching the overpass at Bwaise at precisely 3 p.m, it was reported that Mr. Kittobe had been shot dead.

Every day, you walk past your designated killer and even say good morning to him.  
"Your time will come. Be careful."

The pillars of black smoke rising everywhere did not yet register. A group of young men were running across the road hurriedly. But they do that in Kalerwe, no? A couple of police officers in heavy riot gear were waving their arms in command. That too has been standard in the last 20 years.

But past the gentle curving section that takes you from the Kalerwe-Mpererwe junction, the pile of burning tyres is ominous. Before we get there, there comes the smell of tear gas and a single shot. Burning tyres, tear gas and gunshots - the macabre trinity.

We remember the news of the arrest of Bobi Wine and understand it fully.

The overpass raises the ground underneath us but we will never make it past it. We slow down. A young man shouts in urgent Luganda. We press on. At the top of the bridge, we see his point. Down beyond the overpass, the hundreds of unmoving vehicles are jammed. To our left, clogged up on Sir Apollo Kagwa Road, even more vehicles. To our right there is the actual event, the crackle of gunshots interspersed with shouts of heightened emotions. The only clear route out of this is behind us and it is filling up fast. We need to act.

Gunshots, and that eerie clarity when you know they are shooting to kill.

Now that we are fully aware, we start to notice, in every movement, an affirmation that the Museveni regime had not given up.

Something is building up, like an approaching storm. We must get out. We make the U-turn.

We never made it across the bridge. Below, a maelstrom. The uncrossed bridge, the bridge of burning tyres and missing phones.

### **Cassava, potato and banana gardens**

The old Bwaise road is blocked by a massive, burning barricade. We swerve right in time to avoid the gridlock. I wrack my brain to remember the muddy, potholed backyards of Makerere Kavule, where I grew up in the 1990s. Lord, let it not be too far ahead. Just ahead, the biggest burning barricade we will see all day, in Makerere Kavule. The Lord is kind. We find the easy-to-miss byway.

*"Enkuubo enfu"*. The road is bad, a young man warns us.

"I know this place," I reassure the poet and press on.

### **U-turns**

Lesson learned: keep away from big, smooth roads. Cling to byways and earth ruts. You clamour up the back of Makerere hill on number one and number two, there with the ugly cassava and lianna side, with the burrs and forget-me-nots, the side of its hill that Makerere does not put on its admission prospectus. We intended to slingshot across the city westwards. But the Kikoni-Kasubi districts, from the ridge overlooking Makerere West, was a disturbed beehive of burning barricades and military and zero vehicular traffic.

An afternoon of U-turns. Rapidly back up, head directly south and at the Sir Apollo Kagwa Road (in Kampala you can't escape Sir Apollo Kagwa, a relentless, tyrannical memory of the seminal betrayer of Uganda) and Makerere Hill junction, a sharp turn west. Cars rapidly going uphill on third gear, as quickly as they can before the inescapable Nakulabye junction is shut. And just in time to catch youths tearing the pavements, a troop of riot gear- and gun-wielding soldiers steadily pacing in their direction. The clash is inevitable. But the distraction buys us a few seconds. We shield behind a blanket of raging tyre fire and smoke, and leap onto Namirembe district.

From Sir Apollo Kagwa Road to Namirembe Cathedral, we have been in the open air of modern roads too long. Time again to dive out of sight on back roads.

In the backwaters of the Nateete-Mackway suburb, the air seems the most riotous - the giant barricades, youths clutching shirts, running, soldiers and police alert and trigger-happy. A quick left, and at the early Martyrs Church, searching an option route out west. It is more cassava, banana and potato fields and villagers watching curiously this unscheduled invasion of town cars in their shambas. But there are barricades even this deep. The difference is that there are no soldiers or

police, so it's a civilised pleading with the motorists - don't cheat us poor people; don't take our land.

The realisation comes that when the big moment of history approaches, there is no out of sight to fall into.

It is at the top of the ridge, just before Busega, when we feel out of the danger zone, that I realise how much trouble we had escaped.

After nearly an hour hunting through the sidelines of banana, yam and cassava fields for a way out of the city, a black Toyota Harrier stood thrumming ahead of us, not moving.

"Get out," he yells.

### **'Mr Bobi Wine I arrest you because you do this so many times'**

In the days that follow, when all the headlines have been scanned and radio analyses have been listened to, and the unwatchable videos have been watched and re-watched, we all know what we have always known: We Ugandans are being punished for falling in love with Bobi Wine rather than with the other one who considers himself the more attractive suitor. Has this not been the story for four decades now? That Mr. Yoweri Museveni, having failed to win at the ballot box, has lashed out in violence?

It is said that the most deadly thing that Milton Obote ever wielded was a microphone. And in 1980, it is said, his listeners never stood a chance when faced with his killer tongue.

Kizza Besigye is like that. He stands up and moves a hand. Not a word said but already there are tears streaming down faces. He speaks and something moves in the crowd, an almost metaphysical, transcendental transformation.

It is different at Mr. Museveni's rallies. At your kindest, you might call him a policy wonk, a man who likes to string off measures, deliverables, reasons and figures. He does not speak to the heart. Without the military reining the crowds in, as happened on the day Daniel arap Moi stepped down in Nairobi, he will move his listeners to jeer and boo him. He does not have the words that will make people feel warm inside. He has a pathological fear of elections. Thoroughly wooden, his best pick-up line is, "I will crush you."

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At Besigye's rallies, they jostle, push forward, slip and fall for the privilege of handing him some money, or a chicken. He makes them believe in something. But Museveni had him tear-gassed, beaten and blinded - to disfigure the face they found irresistible.

In Shakespeare's play, *Othello*, the hatred-blinded Iago, unaccepting of the fact that someone he considers dark, ugly, without substance, and full of pompous emptiness can be attractive to someone else, says venomously:

*He hath a daily beauty in his life that makes me ugly*

But take Obote and Besigye and add them up. The combination is Bobi Wine, a man young enough to be Mr. Museveni's grandson. Still the fear returns. The reaction of Mr. Museveni remains the same as it was when he faced off against Obote and Besigye. The deeply fear that they will speak and win.

On 18 November 2020, the insecurities of the past welled up in a bloody bout of peacetime carnage that Kampala will not wish to remember. (Just in case we forget, at the end of 2016, [scores were massacred](#) in the West town of Kasese, the likely site of the coming pogrom should Uganda break down.)

## **Kiwaani**

I have never taken the time to stream Bobi Wine's music. After November 18 and 19, I wanted to find out just what it is that endears a country to him and so hurts the other man.

As good a track to begin with is *Kiwaani*. Upbeat and sad, delightful and morose, it was Bobi Wine's breakout hit in 2009-2010. You start to see that Bobi Wine, unbeknownst to us who did not pay closer attention at the beginning, but who was already sealing the love deal. Whilst Museveni basked in his 2006 triumph and prepared for another "Rap" in 2009-10, Bobi Wine was already placing the winning hand.

It remains perhaps his quintessential song, an address that spoke to Ugandans in ways we had not been spoken to since Philly Bongole Lutaaya and Okot P'Bitek before him (an inheritor then of poet laureate burdens). Dulcet, rising, in pathos, long-suffering, there was a song telling us what we were feeling. Back then, lines in it were quoted repeatedly to explain why things were unbearable. Kampala, it declared, was the place of failure.

A deceptively laid-back track, *Kiwaani* opens in classic *Kadongo Kamu* (one-man guitar) melody, seemingly to hark back to a bygone age. This is followed by rapid, brief strings. Then comes the rescuing poetry.

A melody taken off a slum kid's chant of *sowaani* (the plate at feeding time), repurposed to say Kampala wears sheds, Bobi Wine put it to good effect. And there he is, in his element, seductive, laying it on thick, simplifying and pre-digesting inaccessible lyrics, a distillation of critical discourse - postcoloniality, duality, deconstruction, neoliberal philanthropy. It is all there. There is just enough straight Luganda to make you get it. For the rest, you just have to speak ghetto to get it.

His coming of age mood was dense, chewy, accessible, personable. He might have played nothing more beyond *Kiwaani* and stayed forever as the defining describer of Kampala. After you listened to that track, you could not take your eyes away from the dreadlocked lark.

A decade later, the melody is still haunting.

## **Mr. Money**

Then there was the author of *Mr. Money*, at one time the undisputed anthem of Kampala. And you asked again, how did I not know how to put it into words what I see daily in this city? As if knowing what would become of him in later years, the young, twenty-something Bobi Wine had sung these lines:

*Those who pursue me find me far ahead  
Rich and poor, let this music touch you*

Before he was a political prisoner, he was a prisoner of conscience, and he quotes his tormentors:

*'Mr Bobi Wine I arrest you because you do this so many times  
I arrest you and take you to SPC and charge you with idle and disorderly'*

*Mr. Money* is in many ways, the song that really tells it as it is. He is in his element. But it is still safe territory. He is belting out the *Kadongo Kamu* man's craft, telling stories, not the mash and splash postmodernity of *Kiwaani*.

But the essential Bobi Wine is there, as he always had been, and would be in later years – rousing, exhilarating, musical, leading from the front.

*I say man made money, money made man mad*

He could have stopped at *Mr. Money* and been great.

### **Carolyn**

He could even have stopped at *Carolyn*, and still been great. One of those required evergreen melodies no songster must go out without, *Carolyn* is a happy song, a party staple, like *What A Wonderful World*, or *Here Comes the Sun*, or the tenderest, caressing ballad of Tabu Ley's *Mireille Mwana*. He is not only happy, he is doing happiness. There is Bobi Wine, happy, letting it rip; he is enjoying it, letting the melody run, run, run. A love song. A recollection of high school sweetheart nostalgia. A celebration.

But is he not channeling the late Kafeero with his slim, scanty-bearded, straw hat-wearing mien? What is he doing with the adungu, harp and rattle troupe? 1997 was a wonderful year.

*She used to call me Master Bio because I used to handle money-o.*

This man made beautiful songs. They love him for it. Before he stood for them, he serenaded them.

### **Kyarenga**

The earlier joie de vivre expressed in *Carolyn* is resurrected in perhaps the most ambitious of Bobi Wine's songs, *Kyarenga*, the eponymous song of the album for which the notorious crackdown of the 2018 launch cemented what would be the position of government going forward. *Kyarenga* is set as a love song. The strapping youth who has the village belle's heart is challenged by variegated powerful and moneyed suitors. But he has the belle's heart. The belle has eyes only for him.

This man made beautiful songs. They love him for it. Before he stood for them, he serenaded them.

The song, and the video (by this point Ugandan music videographers had come into their own), is a thinly disguised allegory of the moment, of the songster who has a nation's heartbeat but is attacked and harassed by the powerful who think their position and money entitles them to love. Why force the nation to love you when who they want is me?

But does that explain this unhinged violent fear of voters choosing someone who steals their hearts?

### **Paradiso**

The heavier, Mtukuzi-sampling opening, but Kiswahili-lyrics *Paradiso* pays homage to a different Uganda, Uganda, the East African country. A track with a kick, perhaps the lowest depth of Bobi

Wine pathos. It speaks to the generation disinherited by neoliberalism, scattered in the face of the earth to look for fortunes, and returning, in the words of T.S. Eliot, to find alien people clutching strange gods.

## **Situka**

The politically overt Bobi Wine comes out clear in 2015/2016. He releases *Situka* and declares,

*When leaders become misleaders  
And mentors become tormentors  
When freedom of expression becomes target of suppression  
Opposition becomes our position*

If he was speaking to Mr. Museveni, he was also speaking to Mr. Obote, Idi Amin and the grandest of all Ugandan tyrants, Sir. Apollo Kagwa. And this is a point lost in the heat of the moment. The fight that has raised Bobi Wine was a century in the making. Mr. Museveni need not feel it is directed at him. When he is gone, that war will still rage on. The things we need Bobi Wine for are not the things we require Mr. Museveni for.

He is the Ugandan musician who broke through his art into the public consciousness. But also, in this era, he is *music* breaking beyond the point Bob Marley left it. We can hardly think of a musician, anywhere, in recent times, who has caused such a stir in an uncertain, frightened world.

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