



A Wake-up Call to Youth, Kenya's Most Important 'Tribe'

By Chief Nyamweya



Nanjala Nyabola, author of *Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics*, points out that Kenya's first digital election in 2017 was the most expensive election in world history, at \$28 per capita, more than four times higher than that of India's \$6. (That was on the first round alone.) This gargantuan deployment of resources can be attributed to the evolution of elections into a massive transnational profit-making industry that is amoral in its misappropriation of digital assets, data mining and brokerage. Thus the irony that Jubilee's 2013 campaign strategy to frame the International Criminal Court (ICC) process as a foreign attack on Kenyan sovereignty was in fact the brainchild of a foreign corporation - the Anglo-American political consultancy Cambridge Analytica - that was based on a covert survey of 47,000 Kenyans.

Misinformation has always been critical to the survival of the colonial state. No economic caste system in the world has ever survived without the tacit approval of the majority of its serfs because from the perspective of power, it is much more costly to impose rule over an overwhelmingly antagonistic population than over one that participates willingly in its own exploitation. So it is not surprising that Kenya's ruling oligarchy would engage firms that specialise in misinformation for profit. Their product is a personalised fiction tailored to the emotional vulnerabilities of unsuspecting citizens.

Unlike broadcast media, digital media allows private messaging below the radar of law enforcement or opposition monitors, thus making it a favourite medium for hate speech. This threat of unfettered Western capital influencing elections has no borders. Digital colonialism, as this business model has come to be known, was incubated in Kenya where “nobody was paying attention” and has since been repatriated to effectively disrupt referenda and elections around the world, including most flamboyantly in the election of Donald Trump in the United States.

Nyabola’s book begs the urgent question: *If information, rather than misinformation, was our goal, how else might we have invested a hundred and forty billion shillings?*

The 77%

A wonderful usage of \$28 per capita would be to cultivate a new identity that subverts the destructive logic of tribal politics in a way that benefits the majority of Kenyan citizens. There happens to be a “tribe” to which all of us must belong for a time, and that is the tribe of young people. Africa is the youngest continent in the world, but her colonial states are ill-suited to harness the potential of their most productive citizens, leaving thousands to decay as economic migrants in Libyan slave markets or at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea. While African bodies are denied free movement, African capital and resources move freely out of the continent in the form of debt interest repayment, Chinese infrastructure payments, and most significantly, the massive misallocation of capital through corruption.

Kenyans under the age of 35 years are the most vulnerable to the shocks of systemic corruption, unemployment, lack of maternity care, ecological destruction, forced migration and the education gap. If Kenyans under the age of 35 comprised a single “tribe”, they would be 77% of the population. Using the logic of adherents of the *tyranny of numbers* doctrine of tribal supremacy, the 77% should currently be dictating government policy as a democratic imperative.

If the 77% were to become politically self-aware, its representation in the cabinet would be so overwhelming that it would be taken for granted. An absurd institution, such as the Ministry of ICT, Innovation and Youth Affairs, would not exist because no president would be allowed to get away with insulting the 77% by giving them half a ministry. More than an insult, it would be considered profoundly undemocratic to reduce the ecological, economic and political concerns of this majority to their utility in the ICT sector. What a politically self-aware 77% would demand instead is representation at the heart of decision-making institutions in every single arm of government – regardless of whether or not ICT is involved.

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Technology and innovation are no doubt important to the 77%, but so is defending our constitution and our environment from wanton abuse of power. The 77% would resoundingly assert, *“We do not wish to become Dubai or Singapore, however much you dynastic dinosaurs would wish to bribe us with that fantasy. We are a constitutional democracy and we will never trade democracy for the sake of your so-called ‘development’.”*

The goal of this thought experiment is not in any way to endorse our normalised tribalism as a legitimate mode of governance, but rather to push the limits of our collective imagination. This in my estimation would do infinitely more to strengthen our public institutions without expensive bridges to nowhere. If our public policy was informed by the interests of the 77%, there would be no need

for private initiatives between boardroom brothers.

Yet because private bedroom initiatives are the favourite ruling format of Kenya's fraudulent elite, the primary function of the billions in campaign spending is to make sure that the 77% never ever becomes politically self-aware by splintering it into toothless sub-categories. Only through such fragmentation is it possible for thinking human beings to willfully vote against their own economic interests and uphold a system that concentrates power and wealth in the hands of a fraction of a percentage of the population. This is the enduring triumph of colonialism that has proved far more insidious and resilient than the freedom fighters could have ever anticipated. It has proved much harder to remove the crony capitalist ideology brought by the coloniser than it was to remove his flags because his ideology now speaks our language - very fluently.



For the tyranny of numbers ideology to function in practice, it requires more than simply state violence, plentiful though that is. It requires the erosion of public institutions supported by a massive cultural project of misinformation and fraud that turns the 77% into either slack-jawed consumers of propaganda, or alienated and apathetic gamblers. Only through this social engineering does systemic abuse of power not trigger the sort of rage that could bring our house of cards raining down.

This social engineering includes the imposition of punitive fines and defamation laws against the media, and the narrowing of the spectrum of ideas that can be freely expressed with the aim of reducing journalists to stenographers. A good example of this is how over the past month critical questions of rule of law, human rights and citizenship were effectively trivialised into a binary question of whether or not we approve of Miguna Miguna's manners - as if our rights are contingent on good manners.

But perhaps the most crucial lever of social engineering is an education policy that eliminates creative education from its curricula with the aim of graduating a docile workforce that does not ask those in power critical questions. For the few creative professionals that do survive the education

system, they still have to contend with a philistine environment that has driven many promising young artists to suicide.

As numerous contemporary educators, including myself, have pointed out, eliminating creative education is a disastrous misstep for Kenya at a time when creative thinkers are needed more than ever before. The *tyranny of numbers* fundamentalists have no response to our most pressing contemporary challenges – ecological destruction, systemic corruption, a debt crisis and technological unemployment – except to warn us of a repeat of the 2007/8 violence if we do not give them what they want. That is, state jobs, chase cars and overpriced initiatives, ostensibly for our sake.

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As the 77% hangs onto dignity by its fingernails, a confrontation with these dynastic dinosaurs that rule Kenya is inevitable. Under the weight of economic mismanagement, fissures of discontent are beginning to crack our social fabric. As young workers struggle to support their elderly relatives, business-as-usual politicians will spend billions on divisive campaigns to preserve their cherished tyranny of numbers doctrine, adding the risk of unrest to our already mounting challenges. Kenya's rulers have already demonstrated a willingness to encourage violence among a splintered 77% for the sake of power. The only way to avoid the grave that they are digging for us with the aid of mercenary capital is for the 77% to become politically self-conscious.

Our minds are the battleground for the survival of the dream that is Kenya. With our labour, will we pay the price for the largest debt accumulation this country has ever seen. If we are to avert catastrophe, we have no choice but to wake up from our millennial slumber and own our power. Democracy is strong when the powerful fear the citizens and not when the citizens fear the powerful. This is a form of tribalism to which I will happily subscribe long after my membership inevitably expires.

Creative education

As the most dynamic segment of the population, young people are the most capable of adapting to change if only their education facilitates this innate ability. As one of the youngest countries on earth, Kenya should be reaping huge rewards from its youth bulge. Instead, we are squandering our precious resources on everything except young people and undercutting what little support they have. Where public playgrounds once sat, huge private hotels and apartments are illegally erected, complete with barbed wire fences and *NO IDLING* signs. Whereas once children were encouraged to love learning, now they receive the relentless message from the state that the arts and humanities in general are economically useless and therefore not worth pursuing. The thinking (or lack of) behind scrapping humanities such as art, history and literature from our public school curricula is that in our quest to become rich like Dubai or Singapore, we must prioritise science, technology and mathematics (STEM) at the expense of all other fields.

This worldview assumes that Kenya in 2020 can follow the same industrialisation path of Singapore in 1950 by making Kenya an attractive destination for labour-intensive industries that can absorb its millions of unemployed youth. That is a dangerous assumption to make in 2020 and is woefully uninformed by recent trends in digital technology, which are more likely to generate jobless

“growth” and enrich a tiny fraction of our population, as is already occurring.

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In this decade, numbers such as GDP that purport to describe our lives are completely divorced from the reality of ordinary Kenyans. Capitalism powered by exponential technology has finally evolved to the point where a handful of individuals can own billions worth of shares in decentralised autonomous organizations (DAOs) that operate without human supervision.

Without a creative lens with which to evaluate our current reality, our education system will continue to lock the minds of the 77% into a hapless cycle of reactivity to the changes happening around us rather than proactively harnessing the winds change for the benefit of society at large, including our elders who depend on us for support. Moreover, the STEM prescription is rarely applied to the wealthy politicians who can afford to take their children to private schools that offer art and literature. Rather, the evidence suggests that the STEM prescription is motivated by the desire to standardise and commodify public education for the benefit of a few foreign edutech corporations marketing “scalable” solutions. Educators have tried in vain to warn against selling out the 77% to these corporations, but their money talks louder than Kenyan teachers.

Creative education, on the other hand, shows us that unlike digital information, we humans inhabit an analog planet which we must learn to see, sense and cultivate if we are to survive in it. Our growing population and finite resources such as freshwater cannot sustain the same exponential rate of growth as capital accumulation. This is an irreconcilable difference between the natural world and the digital world.

A digital sound recording can only approximate the totality of information contained in a sound wave from an actual musical instrument or a singer’s vocal chords. A digital image, no matter how dense its pixels per inch, still remains constrained by the eyesight of the viewer. No matter how much content we can upload to video platforms such as YouTube, the amount of attention we have available to spend remains constrained by our competing need for sleep. Only by appreciating the richness of the living systems that sustain human life can we hope to become architects of a digital layer that improves our wellbeing rather than harming us.

Creative education works by combining our innate passion to an external learning goal to create *motivated learning*. Motivated learning is the difference between studying physics in the middle of the night so that you can realise your childhood dream of building a computer game, versus studying physics in the middle of the night so that you can pass an exam in the hope of someday finding a job. In this example, the learning goal is the same - to learn physics - but the outcomes are vastly different.

Motivated learning leads to mastery and meaning, whereas *coercive learning* yields disengagement and alienation. Furthermore, from a social perspective, most people prefer to work with motivated peers rather than with uninspired peers, regardless of their skill level. If we are sincere in our Singaporean ambitions, creative education should become our number one priority.

Unleashing a cultural renaissance

When I was a little boy, I recall shuddering at the mention of the word “culture”. It was often spoken

with an ominous air of religious obligation that conjured in my mind images of strict discipline and painful circumcision. If we wanted to find “culture”, the place we were instructed to look was in the past. The more distant that past, the better.

It was not until fairly recently that I began to develop a much more nuanced understanding of what Culture - with a big C - is. Culture is not a frozen relic of the past that we can display neatly in a rectangular museum. Culture is an evolving system of ideas, language and technologies that set the parameters for our interaction with the world. Most importantly, I learned that we have agency in setting these parameters. Most of our agrarian ancestors lived in a relatively unchanging geographic and technological context where most of their relatives lived within two days on camel-back. In this context, the most important reservoirs of knowledge were those who had lived the longest.

The same is not true today. Understanding the most culturally transformative technologies of our age is now the province of teenagers. This does not mean rewriting cherished norms, such as respect for elders, but it does, however, demand that we develop a relationship of mutual respect with our youngest citizens.

After the president congratulated himself on his “inclusivity” after appointing two twenty-something-year-olds to his cabinet this month, he urged them to “*learn from your more experienced elders*”. What he failed to make clear was exactly what these youth are expected to learn from elders who have presided over the worst economic mismanagement in our history and reversed our progress towards democracy.

Brothers and sisters of the 77%, if we have any self-respect, we must refuse such tokens of false friendship and instead advise the “elder” to learn from us. Until this president and his boardroom brothers are subject to the same law that is inflicted on the young people selling chapatis on the wrong side of the road, we can only be doubtful of his claims of solidarity with us. Our survival demands that we bring about a cultural renaissance. It is a collective project that no one individual can bring about alone, but one that all of us can influence by abstaining from consuming the idiocy that is sold to us in the name of “culture”. Let us create our own culture by tearing down the walls of the silos that were erected around our minds.

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