



# The President Who Burned Kenya's Heritage, Humiliated Little Girls and Elderly Women

By Sultan Somjee



I will remember Moi as the president who burned material culture, and humiliated little girls and elderly women. He carried the dreaded club considered a weapon among many cultural groups, and had a red rose bud of Love, Peace and Unity, pinned to his lapel. That's the image of him I have. He who did not age in the photograph that was everywhere — in schools, bars, government offices, shops, you name it. The fatherly look in those light brown eyes — patronizing, caring, saintly.

But the image of his sculpted hand wielding his favourite weapon over Mt. Kenya showed otherwise. I looked at his sculpted hand bursting out of Mt. Kenya like a volcano as I drove by Uhuru Park and tried to think about the meaning behind it. The mountain is a sacred shrine to many. Elders still face Mt. Kenya for blessings as the freedom fighters did at dawn. Mt. Kenya is Kenya's national symbol that has appeared on stamps, bank notes and wall paintings in rural eateries. Armed resistance against the colonial power was centred around the mountain and was protected by it for many years. What was the reason behind the design that obviously showed one man's power over a mountain that is the country's highest point and a symbol of Kenya? Was it a show of conquest over the *uthamaki*? I could not find an explanation in any text or from any person. We ought to look again at the statues of tyrants in this year of toppling monuments and take a moment to reflect on what and for whom they are there.

I hold other images. My first encounter with President Moi humiliating the pastoralists was in late 1970s. I was in the field in the vicinity of Kapedo (Turkana County) among the Turkana when his motorcade appeared on the hot desert road like a dust storm. There was a lot of excitement to see the spectacle and welcome the new president who was from one of Kenya's smaller tribes. Moi was one of them unlike the previous president, an avaricious agriculturalist, whose kinsfolk were encroaching on their land and mineral resources albeit in cahoots with the local politicians. But the local politicians were brothers and sons and that did not matter. Only the agriculturists were the *madoadoa* demon settlers.

President Moi held a huge *baraza* at Kapedo where the steaming hot waters of the river fall over a rock. Truly a sight to behold. After some welcoming speeches, it was time for the much-awaited presidential address. I was aghast to see what followed. The president called a shy teenage Turkana girl to the stage where he was seated in his usual austere manner, clutching his club. The people must have at once understood that the club was a weapon. The president elicited fear rather than peace, love and unity in the audience. In most Kenyan cultural groups, a club is a symbol of violence to knock an enemy on the skull. The symbol of authority and respect is a flywhisk or a peace staff that is also often used as a walking stick by community elders. There was an obvious contradiction between the new president's words and the symbol that he lifted over his head as if to strike.

We ought to look again at the statues of tyrants in this year of toppling statues and take a moment to reflect on what and for whom they are there.

The teenage girl was wearing traditional Turkana dress and ethnic beads that proudly spoke of her identity and of who she was. She was dressed exquisitely for she was meeting the president. Then, the president called another girl. She was wearing a neat school uniform; you would think she came from an English public school. She was also Turkana. Pointing to the girl in the beautiful calfskin clothes with his club, the president put on a noticeable frown on his fatherly face that was gleaming in the strong Kapedo sunshine. The Father of the Nation, *Baba wa Taifa* as we called him, said he did not want to see "this" meaning the Turkana dress. His following words were spiked with references to backwardness and the civilization that his presidency was bringing to them. He said it was time for the Turkana to join the *maendeleo* path like other Kenyans.

From 1963 onwards, the word *maendeleo* had evolved to mean not just development in Kenya but also becoming "civilized"; it connoted becoming westernized and perhaps Christianized as well. Then he pointed to the other girl who was in a neat school uniform, a white shirt and blue skirt. The president's face brightened into a smile; this is what he wanted to see. That was the path to *maendeleo*, leaving primitiveness behind. These may not have been his exact words but that's what they meant. I write from the images, emotions and memories from over forty years ago that have lived on in my mind.

My heart sank. I wondered what the teenage girl must have felt being humiliated in public by the president of her country. What her parents must have felt. What the Turkana elders, the custodians of their culture, must have thought. What the community was thinking as they listened to the president in utter silence. The Turkana people, like everyone else, take pride in their dress and their culture. Now they were being insulted on their own territory by the new president of Kenya. Their culture is what has sustained them in the harsh semi-desert scrubland and given them a sense of identity and community.

I had been working on Turkana material culture, especially on their animal skin clothing which interested me because of the unique cut and the stitched lines that patterned their long skirts which

were suited to the semi-desert scrubland. How they quilted different colours of cowhide to create amazing patterned clothes. It is an ingeniously designed garment weighted with flattened hoofs so that it does not flare out in the desert wind or get ripped at the bottom. The skirt is worn long because of the Turkanas' respect for the female body and local cultural etiquette. It is carefully cut down the side of the leg for the air to circulate in the hot desert climate and to accommodate movement while running after animals when herding or walking long distances to fetch water and firewood. I wanted to include the Turkana dress in the material culture curriculum for schools that I was writing at the time and as an example of Kenya's indigenous dress that is suited to the environment and vernacular design in the book that I was working on. The president was ignorant of Kenya's culture.

Back in Nairobi, I was shocked to see the picture of the president and the two girls on the front page of the newspaper. I don't remember which one, probably the *Daily Nation*. It was as if in Nyayo's onward march to *maendeleo*, the humiliation of a proud culture was being celebrated. I tried to talk about this incident in the staffroom at the University of Nairobi where I worked, but I met blank, if not surprised, looks. "The Asian is talking about primitive tribes again", I read on their faces. I worked, put up exhibitions and often talked about the material culture of Kenya as a heritage to be cherished like the mother tongue; both were looked down upon as obstacles to development by a segment of the intellectual class. An academic at the University of Nairobi once told me to my face that I was taking Africans backwards. In the tone of his comment was an allusion to the racist Asian stereotype that I had become used to on campus. Then as now, the president had his followers within the intellectual community.

The teenage girl was wearing traditional Turkana dress and ethnic beads that proudly spoke of her identity and of who she was.

My second encounter with President Moi was in Orwa in the Pokot region. I came to the area soon after the president had been there on his "civilizing the natives" mission that reminded me of the infamous colonial Pacification Expeditions. I was stunned to see a pile of ashes and burned items of material culture at the Orwa airfield, a makeshift strip of cleared bush for small aircraft. The elders told me while spitting bitterness how *Jeshi la Nyayo* had forcefully stripped them of their valued skin garments and beads. I gathered *Jeshi la Nyayo* were the dreaded General Service Unit. I had seen them at work at the University of Nairobi and had fled from their batons. The Pokot material culture was thrown in a heap on the airstrip and made into a bonfire. My heart wept for I was collecting the precious material culture of the Pokot at the time, especially what they wore; how they celebrated their identity with their clothing and beads; their embodiment of *utu*, their humanity and, most important, how they made reconciliation through their art, how important material culture was in their lives. I was collecting material culture for preservation for posterity and here I find my president burning the nation's cultural archive, the resources for the school curriculum on indigenous art and knowledge that would one day be taught if ever the authorities decolonized their minds sufficiently to look in the mirror and see who they are.

Among the items stripped from the bodies of the Pokot was the *leketyo*. The *leketyo* is a sacred symbol of peace for the community. In fact, the metaphor used for peace is *leketyo*, and for some like the Marakwet, Keiyo and Pokot, the word for greeting is "*Leketyo!*" — very much like Shalom and Salaam. What is *leketyo*? A *leketyo* is a leather belt decorated with lines of coloured beads and cowry shells. Expectant mothers wear it around the waist to avoid miscarrying the foetus. Women walk long distances for water and firewood; they herd goats and build houses. Their strenuous work in the harsh climate easily leads to miscarriages. The *leketyo* has become a sacred and a respected object for it saves life. I have seen how fighting, that is physical fighting, using weapons, comes to an

abrupt halt when a mother removes her *leketyo* and throws it down between the belligerent warriors.

The *leketyo* may be laid down by any mother passing by and all the warriors will respect it for in communal societies, one mother represents everyone's mother in her son's age group and she calls them "my sons". As any Kalenjin would know, the *leketyo* is revered in the community for it represents protection of the womb. Like the *mutilina* of the Akamba and the *enkitati* of the Maasai, it is a symbol of motherhood, love and nourishment that prevents violence and maintains peace in the community. It is also a symbol of the feminine God-given gift of procreation, and of family and community well-being. In other words, women's waist belts are symbols of peace used as metaphors in speech and song.

When I heard the songs of Pokot mothers, concealed from the ears of the local special branch, bemoaning the loss of their *leketyo*, I felt their pain. The humiliated mothers sang about the beauty of their lost *leketyo* while cursing the president in the same verse. Yes, during the oppressive regimes of Jomo Kenyatta and Daniel Toroitich arap Moi, they had developed clandestine oral literature expressing outrage at those who stole their land and visited brutality and humiliation on them.

There was a parallel between the clandestine oral literature of rural Kenya and the underground papers like *Pambana* that I read in the city. The difference was that the pastoralists' secret literature was oral, in poetry and songs, using idioms, metaphors and double meanings that those who did not know the culture and did not understand the language — like most of the local administration, the police and the GSU — could not understand. They were masked like the Mau revolutionary songs that sounded like hymns to the outsider. The underground literature in the city did not mask the message; it openly condemned the despotic presidents and called for change. Unfortunately, the two did not connect.

The Pokot also erected secret memorials invisible to the outside eye in memory of those who were killed by *Nyayo*. One such memorial that I visited near the Kenya-Uganda border in the West Pokot region was made of gigantic white marble-like slabs. One would need to persuade the local oral artist to hear the full narrative of the cultural oppression, the humiliation and the brutality of the punitive military expeditions of the *Nyayo* era. These are the monuments erected by the people that we need to celebrate and care for. They speak of a people's resilience in the face of oppression.

An academic at the University of Nairobi once told me to my face that I was taking Africans backwards.

It baffled me why the president humiliated the Pokot women and Turkana girls who were closer to his cultural roots than, say, Wangari Maathai whom he also insulted and humiliated. The professor and environmentalist was protecting our trees, our natural heritage that the president was decimating for profit.

But then, in 1992, what happened at Uhuru Park was shocking. In my novel *Home Between Crossings*, I put together what I saw, read and heard to write about the assault on the mothers of the detainees. Putting it in print a way of releasing the emotions locked in my memory and telling the story so that it is not forgotten. Though based on real events, the writing came from my creativity and imagination.

The next day women gather in groups to talk about the incident at Uhuru Park. There is horror in their eyes. Anxiety in the air. We had all seen the *Daily Nation* photographs of the riot police

hounding old women. Some had watched the news on the TV. I tell them I was there and what I saw. They come closer to me. Even those I don't usually talk to come to listen to me. They listen in silence and shock. But what horrified them was how President Moi treated the mothers protesting in the park.

"Does he not have a mother?" asked one.

"Would he have treated his mother like that?" asked another.

"What if he were detained without trial, would his mother not have come to Uhuru Park to ask for his release?" asked the third...

Later in the evening, I look at the photographs on the front page of the *Daily Nation*. "MOTHERS OF DETAINED PRISONERS WITHOUT TRIAL FLEE." Yesterday comes back in my eyes. I see them. They flee before the brutal charge of the riot squad and the paramilitary. Helmeted, armed and shielded in metal, the machine-like army of young men assail the old mothers in cotton dresses and head scarfs. Putting the newspaper pictures together with what I saw yesterday was like bringing two pieces of a torn photograph together. First, the women herded together like trapped animals, hugging each other in one tight embrace. A combined hug in unison out of fear. Of comfort. Of courage. Of unity. Of solidarity of mothers. I felt I was in that circle of human embrace. Some whimper for mercy, others sing hymns. Aged mothers thought the President would listen to them, for he had a mother too. Then one of them stepped forward before the contingent of young armed men and she began tearing clothes off her body. In Africa, it is a taboo to see a woman, who is the age of your mother, so distressed that she unclothes herself surrendering her dignity to a young man the age of her son who, by custom, is her son, too. It's a gesture of wounded motherhood that many do not understand. A gesture showing there is no more *utu* or humanity left in society. Of showing self-inflicted humiliation that says it's not worth being your mother. It's the humiliation of sacredhood of the womb, meaning the giver of life. Shame and sin would fill the eyes of the onlookers. In Africa, I repeat, to see your mother's nudity is shame and a curse. Everyone knows that it pains the land when the mother forfeits her honour to her sons' gaze. More mothers come forward, ripping clothes off their shrivelled frames, spitting curses and disgust, tearing away headscarves, casting away mother-love for rage and forfeiting the dignity bequeathed to them by nature when they gave birth. They were surrendering in defiance to the rape by their sons. They sing hymns in unison daring the armed men to come, touch them and dishonour their mothers until they feel satisfied. What more had they to lose when they have lost all, meaning their self-respect? Some policemen cover their eyes, others turn back and yet there are some who advance without shame. They would say they had orders. Or they are not of the same tribe so the curse would not harm them or that they are Christians now. That these are not their mothers. They don't believe in superstitions and primitive customs. Never before, not even under the English, not even during the girls' circumcision unrest at Mt Kenya, were the mothers of Africa reduced to such humiliation as under the black government of Nyayo.

### **Chapter: Humiliation of disowning motherhood in Home Between Crossings (2014)**

I write about my encounters with *Nyayoism* in the hope that we can retain the memories of how one in whom the nation had placed its trust, shamed its girls and mothers. It is as though this has become an accepted part of the Kenyan culture as is graphically [described](#) by April Zhu writing in *The Elephant* about the defiance of Mama Victor and the Mathare Social Justice Centre co-founder Juliet Wanjiru Wanjira.

Misogyny is like a cancer that flows from the highest office in the land to the lower cadres of state institutions. Insulting women has become a global phenomenon as explained by Joane Nagel in

[Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender and sexuality in the making of nations](#). Daniel arap Moi had just come to power and he had to show he was a man. All the incidents I speak about were reported in the media albeit from angles different from how I viewed them as an ethnographer. The accounts and photographs can be found in newspapers archives.

What I came to know during my work on the cultural aspects of Peace and Conflict Resolution was that humiliation played a significant role in conflicts. Humiliation breeds *chuki*, the hard hate that festers in the community. And *chuki* breeds revenge. Cultural humiliation has more often than not been the undertone of political campaigning. It becomes a widespread epidemic during elections, making somebody *unlike me*, making them *the Other* of the nation and hence not quite worthy of the highest office in the land. Sometimes it turns into jeering and nasty behaviour; I once watched a shirtless young man running through the streets of Nairobi holding up his pants because his belt had been pulled out, looking helpless and terrified as a jubilant mob shouted, "Circumcise him!" This was in late 2002 when campaigning between the circumcised and uncircumcised contenders was at its peak. It was a direct result of cultural humiliation instigated from the top to diminish the *Other* as not worthy to rule.

Humiliation breeds *chuki*, the hard hate that festers within the community.

More often than not, epidemics of cultural hate and humiliation are started by politicians and even by the president as I have seen during my forty years working in the field in Kenya. We know how *cultural chuki* was spread through the radio in Rwanda to galvanize the population to commit a genocide. I have sometimes wondered in frustration whether Moi's [humiliation of Wangari Maathai and the market women of Nairobi](#) was patriarchy embedded in nationalism or whether it was a personality trait that sought pleasure in humiliating whomever while singing "mindfulness" in public broadcasts.

To understand humiliation, it is best to think in an African language. Nelson Mandela once said, "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart."

In Swahili, for example, humiliation has several shades. We say *tia aibu* meaning put shame. Or *tia uchungu*, put pain and *vunja heshima* meaning break self-respect, and also break the heart, *vunja moyo*. Humiliation is to make the other feel she/he is not human, *si binadamu*. Then the humiliated is filled with *chuki* (hatred) and looks for revenge to reclaim his/her or the community's honour, *kisasi cha aibu ya staha*. This can lead to killings.

Humiliation is one face of governance by repression. In societies where identities are collective, one killing or one rape is considered humiliation of the entire community. Consequently, it calls the people to rise and avenge the spilled blood of a kinsman or the dishonour of a mother, wife or daughter of a fellow kinsman. Humiliation is communal, and like trauma, it is generational in that the responsibility of the unavenged wrong falls to the youth. Hence, ethnic conflicts become cyclic. Whenever the suppressed rage of humiliation comes to the fore, the outcome is horrendous. [Evelin Lindner](#), who is among the foremost thinkers and writers on humiliation and violence, says:

Rage turned outward can express itself in violence, even in mass violence when leaders are available to forge narratives of group humiliation.

We know that power and wealth breed arrogance. This is neither new nor particular to Africa's presidents and politicians. But how can we create awareness of what we do to each other and thus stop or at least lessen this especially with the looming elections?

One way could be to make the 25th of February *Kenya's National Day of Shame*, the day in 1992 when Kenyan mothers, our mothers, were forced to undress in front of armed young men of the age of their detained sons. It will be a day to reflect on what shame our leaders have placed upon us, and the consequences that the ordinary person has had to bear, as we so often see during elections. Keeping and refreshing our memories would remind us to be watchful of politicians who divide Kenya along gender and cultural lines. Students will ask, "Why are we remembering this day?" The media will report and commentaries will expand on the history of humiliation from the colonial days to the present-day dictatorships led by brutal capitalism, nationalism and cronyism. One bright Kenyan may choose to write her PhD on the History of Humiliation in Kenya from Colonialism to the Present.

When we choose to be silent, we are erasing the lessons of history from our memory. We become complicit in the propagation of the propaganda of the state and politicians. As a result, violence is passed on from one generation to the next among cultural groups and becomes systemic in governmental and institutional hierarchies.

-

*This article was first published by [AwaaZ Magazine](#) Issue 1 , 2021.*

---

*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](#).*

