



Love, Death, Sponsors and Taxes: A Survivor's Manifesto

By Rasna Warah



"Hum apse beimani thodi karenge". (Translation: I cannot be dishonest with you/I cannot betray you.) This is what a disabled hawker in New Delhi's Connaught Place told me when he handed me the correct change for a Buddha sculpture I had just bought from him. Unlike a typical Delhi resident, I had not haggled with him about the price of the sculpture - on the contrary, he had himself volunteered to give me a discount. As I was walking away after making the purchase, he stopped me, saying that he had not given me the correct change and that he was not the type of person who could be dishonest.

I thought about this incident later and wondered what might have prompted a poor hawker to say these words to me. Why was it important for him to establish his honesty? The change he handed over to me was worth about \$4, hardly an amount that I would have missed. So why did giving the money back to me matter to him? (It's good when Kenyans travel abroad - they get to see how other people go about their daily business.)

It's possible that this hawker was not particularly honest and that I had paid much more for the sculpture than it was actually worth, and so he was creating the perception that, in fact, I had got a bargain. It's possible that in the Indian entrepreneurial tradition of establishing trust when conducting business, he saw in me a potential future customer, and therefore, wanted to confirm to

me that he could be relied upon to be honest. It's also possible that he was just a con artist who used nice words to make his customers feel good.

Upon further reflection I realised that this particular hawker was operating within a context and culture that valued integrity - if not in everyday practice (India is, after all, one of the most corrupt countries in the world) then at least in intention. People want to feel trusted and want to be able to trust other people, and this trust is what makes all kinds of transactions - both personal and in business - possible. The announcement by a hawker who I will probably never meet again that he cannot betray me reflects a culture where relationships are held together by an implicit or explicit understanding that trust should not be broken.

I have been thinking a lot about trust and betrayal in the wake of the Sharon Otieno murder case, which has generated knee-jerk reactions from Kenyans, ranging from "She was an immoral woman whose actions led to her death" to "She is a victim of a patriarchal culture that exploits young women". While salacious details of her affair with the Migori governor, Okoth Obado, were being published in the daily newspapers (which seem to have borrowed a leaf from the UK's sleazy tabloids), no one seemed interested in asking why it has become acceptable in our society for young women to have "sponsors" in the first place. Al Jazeera and BBC did programmes on this phenomenon, but the local media seem to have accepted it as a way of life. One Kenyan newspaper even went as far as interviewing "sponsees" whose rags-to-riches stories were probably a source of inspiration to thousands of other young struggling women. One female politician had the audacity to say that it is perfectly okay for young women to look for wealthy older men to pay for their lifestyles because life is difficult and a woman has to do what a woman has to do to survive. So much for women's empowerment!

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We live in the "Magical Kenya" that Christine Mungai describes so well in [a recent article](#). Sharon Otieno and Okoth Obado epitomise this Kenya where betrayal and dishonesty have come to define relationships, where all human activity is reduced, in Mungai's words, to "a form of economic calculation, dismissing love, empathy and care as powerful but unfortunate delusions". This is not a Kenya where a hawker will give back money to a customer because his integrity matters to him more than the extra money he might obtain through deception. It is a country where a governor calls a press conference with his wife and grown-up children in tow and admits to an illicit affair without feeling an iota of shame or guilt. It is a country where a young woman who has three children with another man feels that she can extort money from her new rich lover (also known as "sponsor" in Kenyan parlance) even while claiming that he is the father of her unborn child.

The media's obsessive focus on the murder itself and not on the society that created a Sharon Otieno and an Okoth Obado also leaves a lot to be desired. The public reaction to the murder and the subsequent arrest of the Migori governor - a suspect in the case - have left many perplexed. For instance, Migori residents protested against their governor's arrest, even after it was revealed that he and his wife might have siphoned millions of shillings from Migori County's budget for their personal use. Kenyans clearly suffer from Stockholm Syndrome, a condition that causes hostages to develop emotional alliances with their captors (a term that was coined in 1973 when four hostages taken by bank robbers in Stockholm defended those who had held them captive and refused to testify against them.) Kenyans identify with their oppressors to the point where they can no longer

see what is in their best interest.

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The debate on the ridiculously punitive taxes being imposed on Kenyans also reflects a society that has become completely captive to politicians. MPs from both sides of the political divide (that is, assuming that we still have two political sides in a post-handshake era) were making the most asinine arguments in favour of the raised taxes, which generally followed this argument: “We have to tighten our belts to pay for development.” I am no economist but even I know that when you suck money out of the economy, individuals and businesses have less money for purchasing goods or for investing. Businesses close down, people lose jobs, and in the end there is less “development” because there are less people who are paying taxes.

In addition, these austerity measures are being imposed at a time when Kenyans are being sold an ambitious and expensive “Big Four” infrastructure and development agenda. Who is the government kidding? There was no discussion or debate (public participation) on how Kenya got to a place where the government is imposing austerity measures on a people who are already over-burdened by the high cost of living and who are already being over-taxed for everything from electricity to books, which were previously zero-rated. Few ask why Kenyan taxpayers have to pay for the irresponsible massive borrowing – from Eurobond to SGR – that the government indulged in the last five years and which has brought us to a place where the government has us by the throat and there is nothing we can do about it.

I recently had a discussion with someone on the comatose state of Kenya’s citizens. When did we stop feeling anything? When did we shut down? Why is it that people in other countries appear more animated and alive? Was it when we realised in 2007/2008 that we were capable of committing mass murder and rape in the name of politicians? Or was it in 2013 when Kenyans decided that people indicted for crimes against humanity should lead us? Or maybe it was in March this year when the man in whose name so many people have been killed decided that shaking hands with his opponent was in his personal, rather than the national, interest? Or when Eva Msando, the wife of murdered IEBC official Chris Msando, was appointed on the EPZ board by a government that may have had a hand in the killing of her husband? Or when known crooks in the opposition were given plum jobs in parastatals as a reward for the “handshake”. Or when soldiers deployed to the Westgate mall on 21 September 2013 to handle an Al Shabaab terrorism situation and to save lives ended up looting the mall’s shops instead? Or when Miguna Miguna was denied entry into the country, forced to board a plane and deported like a common criminal? Or when a man who was photographed eating *githeri* while waiting to vote for President Uhuru Kenyatta last year was given a state award but world-renowned Kenyan athletes who make the country proud were robbed of their allowances and sports gear by government officials during the Rio Olympics? Or maybe it was that time long ago when Kamlesh Pattni, the leading architect of Kenya’s economic decline in the 1990s, was treated like a rock star at a public inquiry, with people even asking him for autographs? (Most of these people, I might add, are avid church- or mosque-goers.) Stockholm syndrome? Dead men and women walking?

It is easy to shut down in Kenya – if we didn’t, we’d go stark raving mad. Blogger Owaahh says Kenyans suffer from unprocessed trauma – because we have not confronted our trauma, we are still not healed. The trauma of the 2007 election and its violent aftermath, the trauma of being led by people who have acquired or inherited wealth through stolen public resources, the trauma of not

knowing which bizarre or tragic situation we may have to confront next, the trauma of knowing that many of your friends and family died psychologically and spiritually a long time ago yet no one came to their funeral or wrote an obituary. And because they are emotionally dead or numb, they cannot function like normal human beings.

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But how does one confront trauma when we cannot - and are not even allowed to - name it as such? When we are told at every opportunity that this is how life is, grin and bear it. When a preventable tragedy or a corruption scandal elicits a few tweets but does not change society. When a story stating that most of the food we consume in Kenya might be contaminated or poisonous because corrupt cartels allowed it into the country barely makes it to Page 17 of a newspaper but the story of a politician donating millions of ill-gotten shillings to a church makes front-page news.

Joe Khamisi calls us a nation of "looters and grabbers". In his most recent book by this title, the US-based Kenyan author explains how 50 years of corruption and plunder have made wanton greed and deception the hallmarks of Kenyan political, economic and social life. Those who question this state of affairs are quickly sidelined, made to feel mad, stupid, naïve, irrational, unpatriotic, deranged, losing it.

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But as Jack Kerouac, author of the semi-autobiographical 1950s novel *On the Road* wrote: *"The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes 'Awww'."*

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It is time for Kenyans to get mad, really mad.

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