



Democracy Unleashed

By Renee Ngamau



My friend “Derrick” has reason to be very concerned, scared even. He is a single father to three mixed race children of mixed ethnicity. And he is a Luo living in Pangani, a working-class suburb of Nairobi that borders some of the most expensive real estate in Africa. It should not matter that he is Luo or that he lives in Pangani - his home for over 6 years. But it does.

We have been friends since childhood and have a lot more history than I do with most of my blood relations. We chat on Whatsapp almost every day. We talk about anything and everything. Single parenting can get very lonely. Tonight, it is more than lonely.

Thursday 19:54 WhatsApp

[Derrick] “Have you heard anything?”

The elections are in two weeks and he is surrounded by Kikuyus, members of an ethnic group supporting a party other than that predominantly supported by many of his community. He is concerned.

Violence is not new to Derrick. He was once confronted and accused of kidnapping by a rowdy mob of young men and matatu touts in downtown Nairobi. His offense was walking with three very young, clearly mixed race boys - his sons.

I have not heard anything. We chat about politics a little then go onto more pressing stuff. Teenage boys, what to do about slipping school grades, an idea for a show, the hustle of dating. We sign off.

Sunday 20:19 Whatsapp

[Derrick] "What do you know that I may need to know?"

[Me] "???" "Like?"

[Derrick] "I feel like a sitting duck, I told u..." (sic)

Violence is not new to Derrick. He was once confronted and accused of kidnapping by a rowdy mob of young men and matatu touts in downtown Nairobi. His offense was walking with three very young, clearly mixed race boys – his sons. The mob screamed at him, shoving and kicking him. They called him Deya [after the infamous Kenyan self-styled "miracle babies" pastor]. It took the intervention of his three terrified boys who, when dragged a little distance away from him as he was held down, confirmed that he is indeed their dad, despite their "light skin", more chiseled facial features and the fact that one of his boys carries a Kikuyu name.

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In 2008, he had "shipped" his wife and children to the City of Peace, Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania. Their twin income could afford them the trip then. She was alive then. Today, he is a single father of three, scared in the run up to what should be a peaceful election. Already, the threats have begun.

I ask my sources. They reassure me. There will be no chaos. Government has put in place, measures to ensure a swift crackdown if there are pockets of violence. The intelligence service is on the case. Be easy. We are safe. I pass the message to him.

Monday 16:32

[Derrick] "Chic, is there anything you know that you are not telling me?"

[Me] "No. Honestly."

[Derrick] "If there was, would you tell me?"

I don't know what to say. I have never thought he would even think that I would ever put him or the kids in danger. We are blood. Aren't we?

It is this kind of suspicion and mistrust that the systematic promotion of tribalism in Kenya does. It pervades even the most innocent of friendships and corrupts them. It forces people to relate with each other with suspicion, then uses that same suspicion to justify the need to promote and preserve itself.

Do we ever ask, or care, about the effect of making 11-year olds, 15-year olds, choose a parent or disown another based on tribe? Who are we raising when young children are routinely separated from their families, friends and environment "until the election is over"?

The problem in the case of a parent with mixed ethnicity/race children is that they belong always to the “enemy”, the “weaker side”. When narrating the story of the Rwandan genocide, the highlight is very often on the millions of Tutsis killed by their Hutu neighbours. What is not often addressed is the number of Rwandans of mixed ethnicity who were killed by their relatives because they belonged to “the other side”. Derrick knows that his children are easy targets. And that his friends or neighbours could sell him out if chaos erupted. His question is not without context.

I have a riddle for you.

What is the difference between a tribal based campaign, apartheid’s so-called justification or the Nazi superior race argument? The answer is none.

The Nazis believed that they were entitled to expand territorially, that they were under threat from “inferior” races and they were divinely appointed. Proponents of apartheid believed in the superiority of their race, their divine right, the threat by the inferior races and the need for purity. The tribe argument... well, you can see the trend now.

If you are mixed, whether ethnic or race, you are impure, belong to no one and, therefore a justifiable target for attack by everyone. This is a problem particularly in urban Kenya where, increasingly, many children are born of mixed ethnicity and those who are not, very often do not know enough of their own mother tongue to be identified by language.

Tribalism. Nazism. Racism. They all play the same tune. The lyrics are simple. We are superior. They are inferior.

I tell Derrick to send his children away for the election period and go spend the week in a safer neighbourhood. It is more prudent to separate him from them. He, their own father, is a liability because of his physical features. Sound familiar? Trevor Noah, the famous South African comedian, often had to walk across the street from his own father, and pretend that his mother was his nanny just so they would not get into trouble for having birthed him during the apartheid era.

Do we ever ask, or care, about the effect of making 11-year olds, 15-year olds, choose a parent or disown another based on tribe? Who are we raising when young children are routinely separated from their families, friends and environment “until the election is over”?

Or do we not care? Does it not matter?

The tribal card is deliberately played up by political manipulators at election time, to shore up their feudal egos with no regard to the consequences. When one national leader calls for the expulsion of “foreigners” -people not of a particular tribe- from an area; when another, also a national leader speaks exclusively in a language understood only by the ethnic group from which he comes; they are deliberately playing up the tribal sentiments and creating well calculated tension. Their “tribesmen” are not “their people”. They are their vassals – available for use, abuse and if need be, disposal, as they watch and pronounce utterances from their gilded castles behind armies of bodyguards deployed to ensure their own safety.

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“They are the villains. We are the victims.” [Insert historical distortions here. *Remember when “they” stoned our president? Remember how “they” stole our presidency?*]

"It is God's Will. He chose us to lead." [Insert scoff here. Only a god who does not know the pain of birth, or the sacrifice of rearing an offspring can afford to play favourites.]

They will overrun us if we do not put in place measures to save ourselves from them." [Insert appropriate call to arms under the guise of "safeguarding democracy". Remember 2008? *No Raila, no rail! Uthamaki ni witu!* And suchlike. Be sure to dish out money "ya kutoa panga kwa nyumba" (to bring the machete out of the house)]

And the chorus?

Altogether now regardless of political divide,

"It's us or them. There is no room for both. Our time has come. God is on our side."

There is no room for logic then. It is all about survival. No one remembers that we have coexisted for eons, or that tribe as a negative, is a construct by those who were once a common enemy to both.

Once the lords get what they want, they will remind their vassals that the vassals once lived together in harmony. That violence solves nothing. That Kenya is a peace-loving island in a sea of unrest.

The political overlords are happy. Their troops are ready. And those who are hesitant either flee to safer areas or arm themselves in anticipation that they may have to "retaliate in self defence".

Once the lords get what they want, they will remind their vassals that the vassals once lived together in harmony. That violence solves nothing. That Kenya is a peace-loving island in a sea of unrest. They will point to Somalia and South Sudan as they wave from large wooden dais draped in blood-red coloured carpets. The vassals must now live cheek by jowl. Forgive. Forget. Bible and Koran quoted in equal measure as piety replaces provocative pronouncements. Live and let live to both rapists and raped. Murderers and the families of those murdered. The children, the "future generations" in whose name the "aluta" must "continue", the children watch and learn that elections mean separation, hate, rape and death.

At a mid-morning meeting in May 2017, a 23 year old journalist scoffed at me when I asked her where she was going to vote.

"Me? Vote? You are so funny!" she said, laughing in bemusement.

"Why?" I asked.

She laughed again, a little sadder, shaking her head.

"In 2008, I had just finished Standard 8. One night when the violence broke out in our area, the farmer next door brought a tractor and trailer to our house at night. Mum told us to lie down on the floor of the trailer. They put planks of wood supported by building blocks on top of us then piled the trailer high with hay. We slept there the whole night. The next morning, our neighbour set off with the truck. Along the way, he kept getting stopped. The guys were asking the farmer, "What is in the trailer?" as they stabbed the hay with spears and pangas. "Nyasi ya ng'ombe tu [only some hay for the cows]", he would reply. One group of young men threatened to set the hay on fire, convinced he was smuggling people. He responded angrily in the local language and they walked away, voices fading out of earshot. When he finally brought us to a safe town he waited until night and pulled us

from under the hay by our feet then told my mum to run. We never went back home. Till today, I have never even gone back to visit. I never went to my high school of choice. Even though my elder sister had finished her school there. It is in an area where we would have been killed if 2008 happened again. I will never, ever, ever, vote. To vote is to choose sides and no matter which side you choose, someone has to die or be displaced or be raped."

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Unsurprisingly, millennials, young people who experienced the horrific events of 2008 as teenagers, are increasingly choosing not to vote. They are referred to as "lazy, spoilt, selfish". It is easier than hearing their stories and healing their wounds.

A week after the election, a colleague, "Owino", resident of Kangemi, calls me on Whatsapp in the middle of the night. I pick the call. He does not say a thing. He just holds the phone to his window. I hear the screams that tear into the night and rip my heart. Then he hangs up and texts that he is fine. It is "his guys" "peacefully demonstrating" tonight. It's "the other guys" in trouble. "Our guys".

The overlords sleep on, undisturbed. Tomorrow, they will call for more peace. More demonstrations. But tonight, well, tonight, democracy expresses itself in bludgeoned babies and gang rapes.

"F@#k Government!!" translates to "Drag young men and women from their homes, sodomize, rape and assault them!".

"Let peace prevail" is buried in the pieces of shattered skulls and torn flesh in children too young to spell the word "democracy".

Democracy. The will of the people, By the people, To the People, For The People.

Democracy. I win. You lose.

Democracy. Majority rules. Or is it, muscle rules.

Democracy. Power by the powerful. "Pole sana" to the weak.

Democracy. A struggle in which the common people function more like pawns rather than any kind of sovereign authority.[\[i\]](#)

Democracy: a concept attributed to Greek era men with arms or power jostling for position.

Maybe, to paraphrase Hadeel Ibrahim of the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, when she spoke at the Women Advancing Africa Conference in Dar Es Salaam, maybe we need to dream a new dream. A dream where everyone wins. A dream where a few men with power and arms do not "democratize" the rest.

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Maybe it is time for us to emancipate ourselves from Greek history. Maybe it is time to create a new

form of leadership called Inclusivity. Where every voice counts and leadership is more than democratic.

Until then, democracy will be raped into more men and women, shot into more children and crushed into more babies' skulls.

Wikipedia referencing [i]Bailkey, 1967, pp. 1211-1236

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