



REMEMBERING KOLBIYOW: A requiem service for a young Kenyan soldier

By Leonard Wanyama



~In memory of Senior Private Antonio Centenio Kaseyani~

[In the previous instalment of [Remembering Kolbiyow: When a village loses a son](#), the funeral service of Senior Private Antonio Centenio Kaseyani began early and the celebration of his last funeral rites and mass are about to be conducted by Father Makau, the Army Chaplain.]

Unfortunately, the public address system started giving way. The electricity interruptions signalled an imminent power blackout, going by how the speakers were sputtering. However, the choir's singing, together with the congregation's clapping, saved the situation.

Father Makau, the army chaplain, had been walking about but I only realised who he was when he donned his uniform. My initial impression was this was some top army brass here to ensure the send-off for this young man went according to script. I assumed he would probably be giving orders for crowd control if the villagers decided to riot.

My reading of him was partially right. Once mass began and the initial rituals were done, he demanded that the selfie types and photographers should stop taking pictures out of respect for the deceased.

Leaders were urged to be responsible and to stop dividing people. Soldiers were presented as peacemakers, *wapatanishi*, and the young folk were being persuaded to join up.

While it was peculiar in this village to see combat fatigues under those robes, it was that limp in the chaplain's stride that betrayed a story he soon revealed. He too had served in Somalia for six years and had been shot three times. He said he would go again if he was called to serve.

Father Makau spoke of how we are witnesses of our times; he tackled the fatalism of our ways; he humorously juggled the tribal questions we face. His Kamba accent allowed him to weave through these themes seamlessly with ethnic jokes.

"In Giriama land there is a story of two dogs that were given ugali dipped in soup but they decided to fight over it. Meanwhile a cockerel that passed by ate it all up as they scuffled." Being a soldier who was obviously politically neutral, I think that was the only way he could criticise the politicians and their provocative *fitina*, gossip.

Leaders were urged to be responsible and to stop dividing people. Soldiers were presented as peacemakers, *wapatanishi*, and the young folk were being persuaded to join up. Tony's sub-unit commander was asked to stand up for all to have a look at him in his khaki officers' uniform. There was something of a swashbuckler in him because of the way he carried the ceremonial sword appended to his waist.

My thoughts had again drifted; I was thinking of the *Daily Nation* report of one soldier who had single-handedly shot at an oncoming vehicle filled with explosives driven by a suicide bomber, with an 84mm anti-tank gun...

Throughout the ceremony, the crowds grew; some of the mourners kept trampling on the wires of the electrical system, which interrupted the priest's sermon. "People ask me, Father have you killed anyone in Somalia. I tell them I trained to use a gun and shoot but it's the bullets that kill not me."

We learned that Tony became Gunner class 3 following a course taken in the military and that he had served for three years and one month. From the corner of my eye, I noticed a soldier attending to the coffin, spraying on the wooden box and cautiously stamping his foot around it to make the ground flat. The soil had become a bit uneven following light showers and cows had left behind hoof prints as they plodded around the compound.

A wailing baby whipped emotions as the ceremony was coming to a conclusion. We were then warned by the priest that pregnant women, children or those with ailments like heart disease or high blood pressure should stand at a safe distance because the loud firing sound from the gun salute could affect them.

My thoughts had again drifted; I was thinking of the *Daily Nation* report of one soldier who had "single-handedly shot at an oncoming vehicle filled with explosives driven by a suicide bomber, with an 84mm anti-tank gun. According to survivors, the soldier risked his life as he shot at the driver of the vehicle with the bomb, which exploded after breaching the perimeter."

I wondered if this was Tony.

I walked towards two elderly gentlemen to avoid the surging crowds moving towards the grave to

watch Tony lowered into his grave and witness the military razzmatazz. The old men were very clearly not from around here. I welcomed them and discovered that one of them was Rispah's father and the other an uncle.

Trotting along the village road back to the bridge that I needed to cross to get back home, I met a Somali-looking fellow in army uniform walking up towards the family homestead.

We mused over how the school children, who had come to console their teacher, would definitely fall off the rock where they were perched once the guns blasted. A bugle tune, followed by three shots. Suddenly a young man, who I later presumed was either Rispah's cousin or brother, rushed towards us saying she was unconscious. She had fainted and they needed to rush her to the nearest health centre.

A lady offered to direct them as they bundled Rispah into a bus driven by her father. I prayed they wouldn't get the normal lethargic service offered at the health centre but the strike was still on so one would really know. I headed off home. Trotting along the village road back to the bridge that I needed to cross to get back home, I met a Somali-looking fellow in army uniform walking up towards the family homestead. I said hello, the normal *Karibu* greetings. He did the characteristic "Aye" Somali greetings and thanked us for the hospitality. At that moment I noted how far he was from his own home in Kenya's northeastern region.

I figured he had found a spot to say his Friday prayers. If someone had exercised some quick thinking, he would have been directed to our local mosque.

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