



IN THE PURSUIT OF MEANING: The Millennial Calling

By Kingwa Kamencu



Generational conflict is perennial. Everywhere, young people shoulder the blame of everything wrong with the world. In recent years, the world has been moaning over the millennial generation what Kenyans have dubbed the 'xaxaxema' generation. This is in reference to the *swagariffic* (a millennial 'thing') spelling that they have adapted for use on text messaging and social media platforms, worlds they were born into. Most recently, the entire country was apoplectic over a series of highly sexualized photographs of young people, making the rounds on Twitter under the hashtag #IfikieWazazi.

Born in 1983, I fall somewhere at the borderline of the millennials (said to have been born between 1982 and 2004) and the older generations. This affords me the advantage of being able to bad mouth my generation-mates when in the mood for it, and also identify completely with them on matters the older and stodgy folk do not understand. In truth, if I examine my life honestly, I am more a child of the millennial age than I would like to admit; I swing between the extremities of its bad and good sides.

I am 34 and not married. I have quit good jobs because they completely lacked in meaningfulness and fulfillment. I do not subscribe to a prescribed God figure and organized religion. My views and practices on femininity are drastically different from views held by my mothers and aunts. I am open

to and accept different orientations of family and sexuality. I have no children. I am enthralled by the philosophy of disruption, the tearing apart of a system to put together a much better one. I do not police anyone or waste my time judging them. Yes, in a way I am all about Me, Me, Me (as the 2013 [Time magazine](#) cover story put it). My friends are for the most part similar. Some take it a step further and still live with their parents yet are in their mid-thirties.

Perhaps the two major areas that I have seen myself differ from my own parents is in the orientation and understanding of relationships and work. My mother married straight out of college, with no dithering about who or what or where. I think they were open to marrying the first person that turned up, because marriage as an end to itself was the goal. My friends and I on the other hand, have gone to the other extreme, we theorize marriage, we examine it, we seek to understand its essence, and we do this while kissing all the frogs in the pond. But we have been doing it so long that we have ended up where we started! We have observed bad, violent and ugly marriages and probably unconsciously vowed to wait until we find partners that we have genuine resonance and purpose with.

The word purpose comes up again in the pursuit of our careers. My father worked all his life as a civil servant, starting from a junior ranking administrator to a top civil servant, a span of time that took more than 30 years with the same employer. He observes me jumping from project to project, doing my consultancies and chasing my seemingly outlandish pursuits and wonders what gene pool I emerged from. But it is the search for purpose that really explains millennials, more than accusations of indiscipline, laziness or entitlement. Our search for purpose and reaching for the mundane goes hand in hand with the refusal to settle for the first thing that comes our way, simply because mummy or daddy or pastor or teacher said so.

We are not shallow or vapid, we are immensely smart and inquisitive and given to higher musings and goals. We want things that make sense and matter strongly to us, even if they do not matter to the majority of the population. We are as idealistic as fu*k and we make no apologies for it. To the older generation that elevates family life and financial stability as ends to themselves, our ventures easily come across as whimsical. They are not traditionally 'sensible' and 'stable'.

Our parents, directly in the frontlines of Westernization during colonialism and in the new independent state (my parents were taught by the white missionaries) never had the luxury of looking for this thing called purpose. They were the first generation to partake of the new social, political and economic system. Because their lives depended on how well they mastered it, they took it up with reverence and earnest. Everything the missionaries told them was packaged as truth, they were not encouraged to question a thing. Western religion and culture were deemed the only options to save them from their innate African savagery and it makes sense that they would cling on with such fervor and not have any doubts about the rich traditional world view they were throwing away.

And then we came along. While our parents attempted to force on us these same 'truths' and view of life and reality as fixed and sacrosanct, we were lucky to have some distance from the original purveyors of this foreign culture. This, the passing of time, and the opportunity to travel to other lands, enabled us to see the contradictions within it. We were able to heed the advice of the forgotten prophets who told us that our traditional ways were rich and meaningful. We were able to understand that the brainwashing and mental colonization was not conducive to us. We were able to see the cracks in the perfection of Western religion, education, lifestyle, economics, democracy and marriage that was handed down to us. And so as children of this generation, we have had the opportunity to critique and examine what was passed down to us as we sought out new models for how to live our own lives.

And so, we have become the generation that has been taking up the cultural decolonizing mission

with zeal. We are the generation swagging up our *vitenge's* into cool and funky styles; we are the generation that realized that making music in sheng was cooler than solemn English. We are the generation for whom natural hair is everything; that is dropping its English names; that is teaching our children (when we design to have them) vernacular languages; that will only eat traditional African foods (sausages and refined cereal cause cancer). We will even grow these traditional foods in our back yard. The generation that steals inspiration from every and all sources, cobbles together the incongruous and puts it forward as works of art and styles of living; post-modernism par excellence.

While our parents hungrily chugged down Westernization, we have been gleefully putting our fingers down our throats and throwing it up. And so we are less shocked or astounded by what Christian morality would call deviance, we seem to celebrate it and even like it more. We are decolonizing the material culture and some of its values and will soon be a force to reckon with in the political realm. Time and chance, grows all movements.

The 'problem' of the millennial in Kenya, therefore, is not really the problem of the millennial. The millennial is more of a solution to a problem they inherited. If the older generation accepted a dehumanizing cultural system, the millennial is on a quest to rework it and make it something healthier for the Kenyan body, mind and spirit. Colonialism and Christianity told us that everything about us was bad, and we have been on a lifelong mission to reclaim ourselves as a people. In this way therefore, millennials are the unwitting foot soldiers marching the country out of its crisis. What we call the *xaxaxema* problem in Kenya is the journey of a generation on a quest to actualization. The things that naturally thrilled our parents (status, wealth as an end to itself, class stratification, authority, moral order) are not the things that make our souls sing.

And this is why we should desist from dismissing millennials as disobedient, rule breakers, but as the country's first mass-movement of philosophers. They question everything. They ponder and muse over and critique everything given to them, weighing and evaluating its weight and worth, something their parents' generation never did. Their parents simply swallowed all that was force fed to them as truth.

We must keep in mind that even while we talk about millennials, not everyone, even if of this age, has had the opportunity (or lack of) to occupy such a headspace. Much as it is a title of disparagement and disrepute, it is also a space of privilege. Many in this mental space are children of fairly affluent or at least comfortable economic backgrounds, where with basic and social needs met, they can cast their minds to the higher (or frivolous) things of life. The question of purpose is a question of self-actualization, the top category outlined by Abraham Maslow in his Hierarchy of Needs.

But this is where the other side of the coin of the term millennial rears its head. Being a millennial is not just about a way of being but about the world we find ourselves in. For many, the delay in committing to the markers of adult life (family, career, investing) are caused by socio-economic conditions such as lack of jobs. We as a generation are different, the world itself is different, opportunities have shrunk, survival is a much more vicious task. This is especially the case in Africa where formal safety-nets for those at the bottom of the ladder do not exist.

While my mother had three jobs lined up waiting for her after university, now getting a job even for a person with a master's degree is the equivalent of getting a chance to participate in the Olympics. In my parent's time, university was not just free, their allowances 'boom' enabled them to take care of their relatives in the village. And then living expenses have risen, the landlord awaits at the end of the month, taxation is at an all time high, not to mention the public debt that every child born finds themselves rudely welcomed into. Without a job or favorable economic prospects, how can you

invest, let alone get married? In a sense this can explain a large amount of the epidemic of single-motherhood today. Young men so disempowered that they flee from the very families they should be caring for and protecting.

The Gikuyu community has something called *itwika* where the young generation overthrow the old and take over as the community leaders when things get untenable. For millennials who have been pushed to the corner, unable to marry (or even have sex), killed by the police in slums where youth has become criminalized, lacking jobs or worthwhile futures, mothering babies alone in the absence of their fathers, living in precarious economic conditions with no social safety nets, this is what they should be organizing on and rebelling against.

Time is ripe for a new *itwika*.

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