



Dear Millennials

By Mary Serumaga



Reading recent submissions to The Elephant by Millennials, one gets the impression that there is a generational battle going on in Kenya. It is portrayed as the Millennials beating back their elders who, having sold out first to the Colonialists and then to kleptocracy, now persist in accusing this generation of narcissism for rejecting colonial precepts of success and progress. The most astonishing assertion in this verbal deluge was made by [Kingwa Kamencu](#).

“[Millennials] 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.”

The evidence suggests otherwise and we shall return to the work of our parents. First the musings of the youth. Walking behind a trio of Ugandan youths one day I overheard this snatch of conversation;

“...I told my Mzee - No, I expect something more expensive than that for my birthday...” They were not ten years old, closer to twenty. The other two listened while the first explained that he had rejected a first offer of a birthday present and was waiting to see what his father would turn up with at the end of the day.

There was another one who would not leave my bank manager’s office until his father (the manager) had promised to ‘see about’ a car.

They didn't strike me as being part of the "mass-movement of philosophers" that Kamencu claims the youth are, just frankly brats with a heightened sense of entitlement. But to judge all young people by the actions of a few would not be helpful in grappling with the existential issues at hand. Admittedly Kamencu states she speaks for the affluent whose concerns are 'the higher things of life.'

In defense of Generation X-ers and earlier generations

Our forebears were just as much victims of colonialism as are the present generation. The difference is our forebears had to find a way to survive the immediate physical and economic barriers to their advancement. It was a time when the entire population of Kenya was diagnosed as being genetically backward. It was said that if the African was not colonized and made to labour, s/he would become extinct and so they were flogged and starved in to submission. And yet they survived and prospered mainly through their physical labour as farmers.

They survived the onslaught by a combination of diplomacy, subterfuge and open defiance. Apart from one chieftom in West Africa that was traded for a consignment of alcohol, there is no record of our ancestors voluntarily giving up their sovereignty.

Without judging the choices of any one cohort, it is necessary to point out that the most defiant did not live to tell the tale. Neither did their communities.

King Jaja, of Opobo in today's Nigerian Rivers State had been trading in the area since 1869 (Meredith, 2014). Jaja had developed a monopoly, by fair means and foul, and was a successful exporter of palm-oil. He managed to by-pass local merchants and sell directly to ports in Britain. So successful was he that he could afford to have his children educated in Scotland. The National Africa Company obtained a royal charter in 1886 to encroach on Jaja's territory. He resisted. In to this scene stepped Harry Johnston, the British botanist who invited Jaja to a meeting on his ship with the assurance that he would be free to leave whether or not he accepted British proposals. Jaja never set foot on Opobo soil again but was transported first to England where, bizarrely he met Queen Victoria, and was then exiled to the West Indies (Cookey, 2005). The Royal Niger Company went on to develop its own monopoly of palm-oil for many miles along the River Niger.

Sultan Abdullah of Perak (now part of Malaysia) spent seventeen years in exile in the Seychelles from 1877. His was a rout - thirty-seven others were exiled with him. Also exiled were Ghana's Yaa Asantewaa, queen mother of Ejisu of the Ashanti Empire and her son King Perempeh. Sultan Sayyid Khalid bin Barghash Al-Busaid of Zanzibar was exiled there in 1916.

After protracted guerilla warfare Kings Kabalega and Mwanga of what are now kingdoms within Uganda, were exiled to the Seychelles in 1897 where they met with fellow exiles of the British.

Possibly the best example of the Imperial take-no-prisoners approach is the ancient and extinct Kingdom of Benin. Benin was a sophisticated, prosperous and powerful kingdom. It remained independent until the nineteenth century despite increasing pressure from the British to form a trade alliance (and become a Protectorate). In the seventeenth century it was [described](#) as follows;

"The King of Benin can in a single day make 20,000 men ready for war, and, if need be, 180,000, and because of this he has great influence among all the surrounding peoples... His authority stretches over many cities, towns and villages. There is no King thereabouts who, in the possession of so many beautiful cities and towns, is his equal."

British pressure mounted leading to two Benin soldiers opening fire on British troops. After the Benin Punitive Expedition in 1897, all that remains of the Kingdom of the Benin is its artefacts, themselves the property of Western museums.

Kings and chiefs attempting to resist the annihilation of their Kingdoms and way of life; were deposed either by the British government itself or by their commercial agents, the Chartered Companies, other examples are; Dizinkulu and Lobengula. The aftermath of the Maji Maji and Hehe Rebellions, the Matabele and Mashona wars, the Mau Mau Uprising was not victory for the African. What can be said is that they established a tradition of defiance. This would not have been possible had each been focused on his/her own navel. To interpret their predicament as 'chugging down Westernization' as Kamencu does is simply childish.

More recently Albert Luthuli, Robert Sobukwe, Bantu Steven Biko, Nomzamo Winnie Mandela and Madiba, Albertina and Walter Sisulu, Oliver Thambo, Samora Machel, Amilcar Cabral, Kwame Nkrumah, Patrice Lumumba, the children of the Soweto Uprising and Thomas Sankara questioned everything. To these add Achebe, Ngugi, p'Bitek, Neogy, Abrahams et al and those who read and constantly re-read them.

Each of these represented and was largely supported by her/his generation. Progress was made, but the cost was always high. It was only made possible by cultivating 'old-fashioned' values such as forbearance, longsuffering, community spirit. Ubuntu.

It is just as glib to say such and such an age cohort is lazy as it is to say, "Our parents, directly in the frontlines of Westernization during colonialism and in the new independent state ... never had the luxury of looking for this thing called purpose." The pursuit of political and economic freedom was their purpose. The work is not yet complete.

They had their faults and personal failings from which I am sure Millennials do not suffer. But they were prescient too, listen to [Biko's interview on Black Consciousness](#). His discourse on the exploitative economic structures of South Africa sounds as though he was being interviewed last week. Biko was thirty-one by the time he predicted that post-Colonial freedom not accompanied by redistribution of wealth would result in a black ruling class and a [persistently] poor Black majority. This has come to pass.

In South Africa the missionary education Africans received enabled them to side-step the subversive apartheid Bantu school system and develop the skills to form and commit their thoughts to paper using conventional language, spellings and grammar accessible to the wider population, which is why we have them today. They were able to communicate with allies outside their own ethnic and generational groups and beyond their own borders to spearhead the anti-apartheid and independence movements. Had the elders rejected wholesale all that their forebears and the missionaries represented, Millennials would be labouring on corporate plantations and only philosophizing during their lunch-break if any.

Speaking of which, what is the philosophy of the Millennial?

Per Kamencu- We wear, do, say what we want. Nothing new there. Biko famously said, "I write what I like." He was killed for it.

- We sing in Sheng and not English, she pouts, supposing new ground is being broken. But before Sheng there was popular music in Swahili, Luo, Luganda, there was mbaqanga, Lingala...almost as many languages as there are ethnic groups. In any case, Sheng is an X-er thing, the term was in use at least as early as 1993.

Kamencu then claims wearing vitenge as a new form of decolonisation along with natural hair. Of course *vitenge*, tie-dye, corn-rows (Kiswahili in Luganda), Ghanaian *wuzi* (natural hair styled with cotton thread) and naturals or afros made their first appearance as symbols of Black Power in the

1960s during the struggle for Independence and American civil rights.

This lack of awareness of our liberation history is worrying. What hope is there in an awareness of Imperialism in camouflage? Can we look to Millennials for solutions to neo-colonialism – now called state-capture or subimperialism– and to unsustainable debt? What about Foreign Direct Investors carrying on from where chartered companies left off?

Many privileged Millennials, enjoying hard won racial equality – do not minimize the importance of racial equality – and enjoying all the advantages of the education, healthcare and transport facilities their forebears worked and paid for, and many beneficiaries of post-Independence crony capitalism, have yet to go beyond pointing out the shortcomings of everybody around them, to suggest some viable answers to the questions of the day.

It is only at the end of her discourse that Kamencu mentions the socio-economic issues: unemployment and the lack of a social safety-net. There is no acknowledgement that precarity is partly a result of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) and has forced Millennials to make certain life choices. No recognition that precarity exists in colonizing countries as well as among the colonized or among the elderly whose pensions and savings have been demolished by mandatory currency devaluation and other international monetary interventions. No understanding of the role of capital in all of this.

It is not only Millennials that have valid grievances. Many Boomers and Generation X-ers moved on to middle-age and retirement to find that the social support systems they paid in to and that their forebears enjoyed in that phase of life are absent, such as; real pensions, affordable housing, reliable public transport and affordable health-care – to which, arguably, they are entitled. In many countries, Uganda being one, the fifth ‘marker of adulthood’ – saving for the future – was rendered meaningless by currency devaluation.

In defense of the Millennial

More encouragingly, [Joe Kobuthi's](#) analysis of Kenya's post-Independence (post-Moi) history supported by facts and figures is the first coherent, contextualized description of the challenges of African Millennial life this writer has seen. It also makes clear that the privileged (whether in fact or in attitude) are a tiny minority of society.

[Darius Okolla](#) is similarly engaged in a factual analysis of the individual phenomena of modern living' in their socio-economic context, the famous five 'failures' in 'adulthood. He is strongest when he challenges the assumption that an age-cluster is necessarily a homogeneous or bonded entity. Okolla argues that Gen X-ers were interrupted in their 'bonding' by the disruptive effect of the SAP. Many of them he rightly points out, elected to buy in to short-termist economic policies that did not build for the future. (One could go further, looting the State is not even an economic policy properly so-called. It is theft.)

Perhaps this is where the fundamental error lies, equating arithmetical age-groups to cohorts that come of age together in the structured, time-honoured and accepted rituals of the past, rituals symbolizing and founded on a common outlook: the Kikuyu *Mariika* or the *Inkajijik* for example.

It may be a conflation of the two that leads Okolla to the staggering assertion, without his characteristic presentation of evidence, that the SAP “*united [Gen X] in sedative leisure of booze, longing for emigration abroad, sex and despondency.*”

Perhaps it is a Kenya-specific thing. Ugandan survivors of the same period will find the particularly painful.

Western generational clustering is not helpful in defining the parameters of the struggle for economic liberation. Any struggle should encompass the entire population facing uncertainty – the Precariat – regardless of age or nationality.

Lessons need to be learned from past mistakes because there is no guarantee that the young would be immune from tendencies to corruption, self-indulgence and consequent poor governance (come the revolution) by which they stereotype the older generations. Remember, the authors of state-capture were once freedom fighters.

We have heard too this week, about [Mathare Futurism](#) an initiative of the youth of Mathare to begin imagining a better future. Interestingly, the founder Wyban Mwangi is not a child of privilege preaching divisiveness but someone who out of necessity was taught to beg on the street before he learned the alphabet. It is he who proposes the beginnings of a solution.

The Mathare Futurists have started a green movement to provide nourishment and medicinal plants as well as trees to make Mathare beautiful, more liveable. Importantly, the initiative involves a healing process in which trees are planted in remembrance of those who died at the hands of the State.

The healing needs to extend to those who have ‘folded in to themselves’ as [Troy Onyango](#) puts it. The depression he (and one imagines others) suffered seems to be related to a phenomenon Frantz Fanon observed among Algerian victims of French oppression and described in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon’s patients had succumbed to an apathy accompanied by a mysterious physical paralysis, losing the ability to function. There was no visible cause and they recovered when removed temporarily from the hostile environment.

[Onyango](#) recognizes that when elephants fight it is the grass that suffers. He affirms the contribution made by earlier generations even as he deplors their intolerance of the necessary choices the younger generation has to make.

We are not far off agreeing that the local agents of foreign capital, Fanon’s ‘native elite’ do not represent the interests or intentions of their generations. Patrick Bond describes them as “a global-scale buffer elite emerging which the imperial powers generally find useful in terms of legitimation, financial subsidisation and deputy-sheriff duty.”

We are all victims of these men.

It is true, as [Joe Kobuthi](#) says, we lack an ‘organizing theory’ around which to rally. [Amilcar Cabral](#) found the same in the 1960s,

“[...]The ideological deficiency, not to say the total lack of ideology, within the national liberation movements — which is basically due to ignorance of the historical reality which these movements claim to transform — constitutes one of the greatest weaknesses of our struggle against imperialism, if not the greatest weakness of all.”

If X-ers were allowed to make a contribution, I would suggest we work towards planting a tree to symbolize the search for what [Kobuthi](#) calls new concepts and the new wo/man.

As in the days of old when communities gathered under communal trees to diagnose and discuss their problems, we need to come together to heal, for each generation to show empathy for the others, to confirm our common interest in a better, less precarious future and to identify and organize against those who would deprive us of it.

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