



# THE BIBLE OR THE BULLET: Reclaiming My Redemption Song

By Renee Ngamau



## Won't You Help To Sing?

The young man grabbed the microphone with relish and held onto it so hard, I thought he would break it. Then he said,

*“Ukikatia dem na umefanya every effort ka gentleman, alafu akatae, and you are in a senior position let's say at work or even you are stronger than her, lazima ujue vile utafungua iyo server.”*

His friends cheered, some of the women in the room laughed. Other young men looked down as though in shame but said nothing. I saw the tears well up in one woman's eyes, before she quickly threw her head back and blinked rapidly, violently trying to push them back.

I was moderating a Gender Forum at the University of Nairobi, Lower Kabete campus. The year was 2018. This year. The month. May. We had just celebrated Mother's Day - a day that brings so much pain to so many women in a country where rapists can walk away from their children, but women must pay for life, with life, the physical evidence of their violation. The young man who was speaking comes from a long line of rape apologists. But he is not even aware of this. His history class did not teach him that rape has been a form of subjugation used to break nations, men and horses since

colonization, slavery and before. He is only following his master's footsteps blindly, playing a record that has been played repeatedly in time and space and that was used against his own people. The young man punched the air triumphantly as he sat down. "Comrades, TIBIM!" "Boychild POWER!!"

### **Old Pirate Ship They Rob I...**

This is the country I live in. A country where might is right and if you are the victim, it is because you did not "*jipanga, mtu wangu.*" I am a child of conflicting definitions. [My mother spent three harrowing years in British concentration camps and gulags in Kenya](#) between the ages of 10-13. She does not talk about that time but whenever we put on a movie about the Second World War, she tenses and her body becomes rigid. She was a victim of colonial crimes because she came from the Rift Valley and her parents were registered as Kikuyu.

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My father was raised in the Central Kenyan county of Nyeri. His father was a teacher. A harsh cold forbidding man by every description that I have ever heard. His food was never cooked in the same pot or served with that of his wife and children.

My father died when I was too young to know him, a light skinned silhouette of a shadow, never quite there, never quite not. Those who knew him or his family of origin would often comment on how I took his shade, in the right light and with the right make up, I could pass for mixed race. That, apparently makes me beautiful. As a child, I always worried. My mother had often told me how, when she was growing up, if you were a clever, studious or beautiful girl, you were in constant danger of being raped. She and her sisters never walked alone. Until I met my paternal grandmother, I always wondered if my father was the offspring of "British style civilization".

My mother is the beautiful one. Even in her seventies, you can see why she and her sisters received a special pass from the colonial District Commissioner exempting them from cutting their hair like other natives. The District Commissioner, no less! They also got a pass to allow them to wear shoes on Sundays! Somehow, this was a privilege only given to natives on merit. I love shoes and I long to own many many shoes. I grow then cut my hair every 8 years, shaving locks that usually grow down to my waist. Perhaps, it is my residual, subconscious defiance, to a long gone violation that we believe ceased to exist. But has it?

### **From The Bottomless Pit...**

I was born after Flower Power and Love had given way to bell bottoms and brief skirts. When I showed up, Black Panther was a movement, not a movie and the country I was born to was so powerful, so endowed, so focused that countries such as Singapore and Malaysia benchmarked themselves against mine. Their presidents and politicians took long trips to come find out how they could trade with us and how we could assist them to develop. What they, and we, had not contemplated was that what we had on paper, we did not believe in our hearts. That we are worthy of our own resources.

The crisis in our country is not a crisis of action, it is a crisis of the mind. Having been born to colonized minds that never quite undid their own colonization, it was inevitable that the values of the colonizer would become the values of the colonized in a twisted form of generational Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. After all, their most dominant reference of power and leadership is looting, stealing, extrajudicial killings, and amassing by whatever means necessary as witnessed in the killings, displacements, lootings and rape in 1993, 1997, 2008, 2017. Atrocities are followed each time by an apology and a handshake. As though a hug can resurrect the dead, or heal the wounded, or restore

the property and dignity of once self-reliant IDPs told to lie low like an envelope.

The bizarre thing is that we seem to make the same mistake over and over, not understanding what Carter G. Woodson unwittingly wrote of the mindset that operates as the Kenyan voter's does, when he penned, in the *Miseducation of the Negro*,

*"When you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his 'proper place' and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary."*

— [Carter G. Woodson, \*The Mis-Education of the Negro\*](#)

Maybe that book should be on the compulsory reading list for primary schools.

### **Have No Fear Of Atomic Energy...**

My mother was Christian by choice, her parents' "choice". The choice had been very simple. The Bible or the Bullet. One of her aunts, my great aunt Wanjiru, had chosen the bullet version. Everyone knew the consequences of the wrong choice.

My mother grew up in Kijabe, a little mission town nestled in the folds of the East African Rift Valley escarpment. Until the 1990s, the sale or consumption of cigarettes and alcohol were strictly prohibited and you could be expelled from your home in the village if you beat your wife. Mum worked for a series of church organizations. I saw her bum pinched by men in collars, I heard her prepositioned for sexual favors and casually informed that her "thing" would rot if she did not give it up. To this day, I have a healthy distrust of any man of the cloth. Mum is a constant seeker. She introduced my brother and I to the Qu'ran when I was 12. We read all the books by Eric von Daniken we could get our hands on and we regularly discussed the color of God's skin. In all the bible story books, Sunday school sketches and bible study books, he was always white. Jesus was always blond or a light brunette even though he came from the Middle East, and the holy spirit was a white dove. Suspiciously, the devil was black and red.

I constantly questioned the Bible. Why would God discriminate against some of the people when he created all of them? Why would the apostle Paul tell Timothy never to take care of young widows as they would soon get married. Obviously I had both a vested interest in the treatment of widows by the church. Why would God allow one people to enslave another on the basis of colour? Mum, having grown in the Bible Belt, warned me not to ask these questions outside of our home.

*"People will judge you and they can be vicious if you question the Bible. They will say you are questioning God."*

In my naïve youth, I would retort, "Mum, how can questioning the Bible question God?" But I was obedient in this one way. One day though, in frustration, my 13 year old self turned to my grandfather, my hero and an evangelist during the colonial times. I said, "Guka, why did you agree to sell out when you knew their god was meaner and crueller than your god?" He looked at me with those big black soft pools of sadness that looked out to the world from behind curtain length lashes and said softly, "Because, Mami, there is a level of beating you can be beaten and it will break you like a horse. And you will do your master's bidding."

Years later I read Frederick Douglas and a discourse dubbed the 1712 Willie Lynch letter to the Virginia slave owner. I cried like a baby. My grandfather had been strung up and whipped in front of my grandmother and my mother, aunties and uncles. As the story goes, the young white soldier ordered the black "gatti" home guards, who were beating him to get a bigger bullwhip. My

grandmother in distress, broke free of the *gatti* who was holding her, ran up to the white soldier and grabbed him by the throat and screamed in her broken English,

*"Beat him!! I kill you!! They kill me!! We die!!"*

Startled by the wild look in her eye and the clearly suicidal act by this diminutive woman who dared to touch him, he choked and spluttered an order to cut my grandfather down from the tree he was strung up.

### **While We Stand Aside And Look...**

I must have been in my early teens when I had the very first experience of celebrating thieves in the church. We were at our local church in the village where we had gone for a special service in celebration of the Passover. In the middle of the service, a well-known public figure walked in, loudly, noisily, with a small entourage of young men in sunglasses. The congregants murmured, *"Thief", "Grabber", "Overlord of thieves"*, as our local *"Master Thief"* walked into church. The main pastor, not to be confused with the more lower ranked preacher, hastened to the lectern at the front of the church, grabbed the microphone from the preacher and announced,

*"Could all our regular attendees who are seated in the front of the church please move to the back of the church to allow for our important guest to sit at the front."*

There was a little shuffling but no one moved. The pastor repeated, *"Could all those seated at the front of the church, move towards the back of the church now, so our honorable guest can sit at the front."* The congregants began to arise and move.

One old lady obstinately refusing to move, said loudly, *"I am not moving for a thief. Tell him to go to the altar and confess where my cow went."* The congregants burst into laughter. The pastor hastily whispered to the preacher who was standing next to him. The preacher and one of the altar boys walked quickly towards the old woman, our newly discovered Rosa Parks and stood over her, one holding each of her forearms, ostensibly to assist her to stand up. She acquiesced and raised herself, grumbling. As she walked past him on the aisle, she said loudly, *"Bring back my cow."* He smiled condescendingly and wafted past her, his arrogance apparent in his gait.

When the *"guest"* sat down, the preacher announced that we would not be reading the passage from the Gospel of John 2:13-17 as earlier planned. Instead, we would be reading from John 3:16. Jesus whipping merchants at the temple did not please the *"guest"*. God's redemptive Son was safer. I was not sure for whom it was safer - the pastor or the thief. After the sermon, the *"guest"* was asked to address the congregation. He immediately launched into a monologue on his greatness, followed by the removal of a large wad of money which he handed to the pastor - towards a project of the pastor's choice. Pre-Lutheran indulgences for sin at work in post-colonial Kenya. Praise god!

### **None But Ourselves Can Free Our Mind...**

In the late 1980s, the government of Kenya announced that it was moving from the 7-4-2 system of education, to the 8-4-4 system of education. I was in that pioneering class. One day we were studying Kenya's colonial history, as interpreted by Malkiat Singh, a prolific writer and publisher of school books. The next day, the books were replaced by the study of early man. While the earliest human remains were found in Africa, all indications of early man in Europe included fire, wheels, hunting tools, fur coats, things their African contemporaries did not seem to have mastered. Even amongst our monkey-like ancestors, there was a marked difference in development and *"civilization"* levels.

The history lessons continued in that vein into high school. Cromwell was examinable. Kismayo was not. Auschwitz was an exact figure. Hola was an “indeterminable number of rebellious natives”. I knew more about World War II coming out of high school than I knew about the war for independence [I call it a war, but you will note that even that is downgraded to an “uprising” or a “rebellion” as though a people fighting for over 10 years for their country’s liberation at the official cost to the colonial government, of a whopping UK Pounds 55 million in 1950s money, can be equated to a school riot].

Is it a wonder then, that I would empathize with the Jews held in Sobibór and not with the Kenyans massacred in Manyani, whipped and beaten for hours and hours until, screaming and cowering, with flesh torn open by bullwhips and hanging off their bones, they died for a country that does not remember their names?

I saw the pictures of the Jews, read their stories, crammed dates and numbers and figures. I know more about Hitler and Goebbels than of Tom Askwith and the euphemistically named Swynnerton Plan, or how many Kenyan lives the Embakasi airport cost. I can speak with greater authority of the experiences of Ann Frank, a little Jewish girl who died in a German concentration camp, than of Wanjiku Mirye, a little Kikuyu girl who survived Molo and Gilgil concentration camps – and who is my own mother. Is it a wonder that I and millions of post-independence children including the millennials we birth, identify with a people other than our own or those like us? We don’t know ourselves. We are not the authors of our own stories. Yet.

### **We’ve Got To Fulfill The Book...**

It matters that we know our history. It is important to know that Kenyans lived in close proximity and intermingled villages, tribe being of no consequence. It is important to know that colonial administration used sequestration and segregation as a form of subjugation. It is vital to know that rape and tribalism and segregation were part of a Final Plan To Quell The Mau Mau and people were rewarded to turn in on their fellow Kenyans. It is important because that knowledge informs the pernicious aftermath of the vexatious tribal narrative perpetrated by politicians, the press and the pulpit in an unholy triumvirate.

Maybe, if that young man at the University of Nairobi had read this history, had met my mother, had heard of the concentration camps and the enforced villages and the *gatti*...maybe if he had met my grandfather and listened to him tell his story of the day my grandmother choked a white man, maybe he would not be so hasty to advocate for the “justifiable” rape he so gleefully spoke of. Maybe he could be part of the writing of a new book. Our book. The Book Of Us By Us To Us.

Maybe we could change our destiny as Kenyans and not just play to a narrative that is not ours by right. Maybe Redemption would cease to be a disjointed broken song that begins with “*mkoloni*” and “*tulipigania uhuru*” as a refrain to drown cries of “*Thief*”, when we discover Goldenberg and Chickengate and NYS scandals.

Maybe Redemption would not only be a red covered hymnbook of English 1950s hymns.

Redemption would be our song. In our words. *Lugha yetu. Sauti yetu. Rangi yetu. Sisi wote.*

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