



WHAT WE NEVER SPEAK OF: Reflections of a Britain's gulag survivor

By Cucu Wanjiku Mirye



We are all born into the world of humanity at an ordained moment in time and space with a spiritual ordained mission yet we are the creators of our destiny. The world I came to was full of turmoil. My parents and their parents had been uprooted from their own homes to go serve settlers under very harsh conditions in the white highlands. I was born just before the end of the Second World War in Kamara, in Mau Summit. My father, who went to Sudan and afterwards Mozambique, told me that when he returned from World War II, he found a beautiful little girl born in his absence. The short sojourn between Sudan and Mozambique must have brought my conception. During her pregnancy, my mother felt like she was going to have a baby boy since she felt a boy in her womb. But instead of the boy she expected, I showed up. Before I was born, she had had five children, both male and female.

The End Of Childhood

With the aftermath of World War II, the battle for Kenya's independence was now underway. My uncle Waweru, who was very involved in that battle was captured by the Brits and was sent to Manyani concentration camp, a death hole. He once told me that the beginning of the freedom war took place many years prior in the form of a secret movement. In the early forties, he was one of the organisers of "*rika ria forty*", a very secretive oath taking movement. The movement comprised of

young men and women who had sworn to take back their land which had been stolen by the white colonisers.

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He was also a teacher trained by the African Inland Mission in Kijabe but opted to go and teach in Gikuyu Independent Schools under the system "*Gikuyu Karin`ga*". These schools had their own curriculum system based on African nationalism, religion, history and agriculture. I attended "*Kiai Kia Ng`ondu*" (nursery school) for two weeks where I learnt the history of my people. I learnt that I was an African and a Kikuyu girl. Soon after I started school, the British colonial government closed all the Gikuyu Karing'a schools and arrested and detained everyone who was involved in that education system and threw them into concentration camps. I still maintain that the reason they were closed was that the schools were teaching children how to liberate their minds from slavery and were developing their dignity as humans. I often wonder why after independence this type of education was not incorporated into the present day education system. We would have been better-oriented African Kenyan citizens for it, with that kind of self-knowledge based education.

From Heil Hitler To Hell

Originally, the area we lived in comprised of people from all parts of the country. There were Luos, Luhyas, Masaai, Kalenjin, some Ugandans, even a man from somewhere in the Coast. Soon after the closing of the schools, Kikuyu families were isolated from the other tribes. The Gikuyu were apportioned a separate piece of land to build their houses, far from the other tribes.

My father was an evangelist with the Africa Inland Mission posted in Kamara, before I was born. Because of that privilege, my older siblings got admission to a boarding school in Kijabe. One morning, after my mother and the other women had gone to fetch water, many trucks arrived. There were boarded trucks and flatbed open trucks lined up for half a mile. The soldiers jumped off the trucks, ran towards us and started whipping people and herding them towards the trucks. There was fear and pandemonium as we got onto the trucks. They took us to Molo concentration camp. My father had already left that day for his evangelical work hence he was not there when the trucks arrived and for years, we would not know where he was or what had happened to him. My older siblings were in school thus they were saved from the fate that beget the rest of us. My immediate older sister, my younger sister, and my baby infant sister only a few weeks old and I were in the truck with my mother. I was not yet 12 and already I was a detainee.

Of Auschwitz, Dachau And Molo

The Concentration camps were typically built in a clinical style. It was a field enclosed by mesh fences about 10 metres high. On the outside of the camp were a series of razor wires, each about a metre high. On the inside of the fence was another layer of razor wire, about a metre high. After the razor wire was a barbed wire fence, about ten metres high. After the barbed wire were 1-metre high poles. On those poles, there was a wire interlinking them. At given intervals on the poles were signboard warnings - if you touch or pass the wire that is towards the fences you will be shot. There was a watchtower with an armed soldier and floodlights at intervals. The pit latrines were open roofed and near the watchtower so the guards would monitor us so we would not be tempted to dig escape tunnels under the latrines.

There were also U shaped dorms built on the inner perimeter of the fence. At the centre was an open field, which had two purposes: it was where lorries dropped the incoming detainees and also where the head count was conducted on everyone in the camp, including children and the sick. After the head count, the detainees had to go through another gate to the stores for the food ration of maize

meal and beans. For years, that is all we ate. Maizemeal and beans.

We went every day to get our rations after the headcount. If one missed going through they would not eat that day. The adults were sent to labour while the children were left at the camp. Many people and even more children died from disease and malnourishment. I was so traumatised that I was constantly sick and frequently hospitalised.

When I had the opportunity to watch the 1987 British television film - Escape From Sobibór - about the German concentration camps during WWII, I could not see the difference of those German camps and the British concentration camps in Kenya.

We stayed in Molo for more than a year then one day we were hauled in trucks and we were moved to an even worse concentration camp in Gilgil town. It was situated where the present police station is. We were there for another year or so.

More deaths occurred. The body count of children grew. More torture, more punishment, more men and women died. Death was constant. It was every day and it was all around. It had become our new normal. My baby sister learned to walk in a concentration camp. My mother did what she could to keep us alive, but it was often no more than a narrow escape from an ever-present death.

The African Inland Mission Eldama Ravine had informed the Kijabe headquarters of our detention and the mission sent a search party to look for its evangelists and their families. They finally received word that we were in Gilgil. They made the necessary interventions so that we could be released into their care. We began what was known as a screening process. The screening was designed to repatriate people to their homelands. We were on the move again, from one screening post to another, ending in Shura, Kiambu, now just a village before the Kikuyu bypass. From there, we were transported to the Kijabe mission station.

We Are Together Again, Just Praising The Lord

The missionaries and colonial government were two arms of one body. Education of the African was designed to prepare Africans to serve the white man. My father told me he was lured to Thogoto Church Missionary Society School as a young man. There were promises of education and more. When he finished at Thogoto, he was sent to Jinn School by the Thogoto (Scottish) missionaries (where the site of the now Mary Leakey School for Girls is) in Lower Kabete to learn how to bake and work in a kitchen. He had no choice. You got what you were informed you got. After completing his course, my father went on to the African Inland Mission in Kijabe, in order to continue his education. It was the Kijabe missionaries who had posted the newly trained evangelist to the Hemphill estate in Mau Summit. His task was to evangelise and to serve his master.

My father was a head chef at the Hemphill estate which must have been thousands of acres, a sub-county. There were well over 100 homesteads of workers each with wives and children. He and his fellow workers used to bake a lot of bread, cakes and other wheat items, especially at Christmas time. You cannot believe how much milk, butter, cream, wheat, hay and meat used to be sent to Britain. Whey (*mathaci/machache*) from milk was taken to the farm workers every evening. There were over 100 homesteads of workers each with children. I would collect about 2 litres of whey every evening when it was my turn to collect it. We liked it - it was very nice with ugali. At this point in time of course, those days were a distant memory of another lifetime. The Concentration camp experience had ended that.

We were released on Christmas day in 1954. Those who met us settled us and generously gave beds, bedding, clothes, food and utensils to my mother and her four little girls including my baby sister

who was now just under three years old. We were happy to find our older siblings alive and together. We were almost complete but not quite.

We still did not know where our father was. We were worried because when the coloniser took men away, they rarely ever came back. Our mother settled us as much as she could, but it was not easy. A few months after our arrival in Kijabe, my mother was called by the head of the mission station and was told that they have found out which concentration camp her husband was taken. What remained was to fill documents so that he could be handed over to the mission since they had sent him to evangelise at the A W Hemphill estate. Our father was home by Christmas 1955. He never spoke of where he had been or his experiences.

Someni Vijana, Muongeze Pia Bidii

In Kijabe, the family was together and we all went back to school. I joined class one at Kijabe primary school in 1955. That gap of not going to school had created a hunger and a purpose studying hard through the twelve years of that British system. The system comprised of four years before common entrance examinations, another 4 years before the Kenya African Primary Education Certificate, another four years before the Cambridge school certificate, two years for the higher certificate and then, for those lucky and rich enough, college or vocational training. Then it was teaching or nursing. We walked to school barefoot, carrying a stone slate mounted on a wooden frame, with a special pen. One had to have a special permit to wear shoes and even with the permit; shoes were too rare, too expensive and too precious to wear to school.

We sat on long wooden benches and stored our lunch in a corner of the stone classroom. The education system was designed to eliminate young Africans. The grading system involved a forced curve grading which meant that in the years where students had passed well, their marks were regraded so fewer would progress. I did not repeat a grade and always got one of the few passes available. We had experienced so many traumas that we held on to one another with a true feeling of belonging and worked extra hard.

Free At Last...

I remember the time Kenya got her independence. I was so happy. Whenever I see the clip of the British flag being brought down and the Kenyan flag being hoisted, I still well up with tears of joy. It was overwhelming. This is a whole story on its own, but I can tell you, it was like reaching the Promised Land. I remembered the camps, the children who died, the men and women who were killed and starved and tortured to give us Uhuru.

My greatest moment was when independence was declared as it abolished forced curve grading, shoe licences and the need to get a pass to visit my sister, who lived far away. I had had the chance to visit her in Murang'a, during colonial times after obtaining a special passbook in order to see her. We even needed a passbook to leave the Kijabe mission station even if it was to go to the nearest shops in Kimende town, 8 km away.

My parents both lived to see independence and to see their grandchildren. My mother passed away in her eighties around 1979 but our father stayed on until he was one hundred and seven in 2003. All of his contemporaries and younger siblings had long left the world of humanity before he did.

To My Grandchildren

My country is perfect. It is all right. There is nothing wrong with it. My country is beautiful, it is resourceful. It is only occupied by people who are brainwashed by a foreign colonial ideology.

When I see the ethnic conflict in the present, it makes me sad because of the knowledge that this is a devil planted in our country by the coloniser with the aim of making Africans hate one another for power and material gain. Then it was the white coloniser, today it is our brothers who have occupied the role of the coloniser. Do not be surprised by our people who still send our country's resources to the west to fulfil the desire of that demon whose power Kenyans are yet to overcome to date. Why? Because the Kenyan society has avoided addressing the psychological effects of colonisation.

The poorest families in our land are those whose parents fought in the war of independence or those who had no opportunity to take on senior offices or political positions. *Jua Kali* inventions in our land are thrown out of the window so that we can import instead of encouraging and nurturing our young inventors. Did the coloniser bewitch us? How can you steal national wealth and give it to the very entity that diminishes your existence as a human? Many of our leaders and administrators have been to the west and seen how they treat blackness, like trash! Until we begin believing in God, who is the Innovator, the all-Knowing and respect our ancestry, we shall remain where we are - food for the enemy. *Lazima tuheshimu our Africanism*, Our Creator and our ancestors who left us soil, forest and unsurpassable wildlife. For those who empty the national coffers and send it to your evil master coloniser, for Kenya to remain in a pathetic economic state of affairs, this is your warning: You will die leaving an evil legacy to your lineage. Truthfully, it is sad that I live in a beautiful Kenya with this kind of mentality.

I wish we would realise our worth as Africans, which is not less than other races on the planet. My prayer and desire is that we would wake up and claim the glory of who we are. We have bottled this evil in our hearts long enough. It needs to be addressed in a therapeutic manner, recapitulation.

My children, realise that you are Africans. Not less than any other human being on the planet. What my fellow Kenyans are missing is respect for themselves as themselves. Know that you are a wonderful creation with great abilities. That whatever you desire will be yours, as long as you create it in loving kindness to benefit all humanity. Rise up Kenyans who love this nation of ours, God will bless your efforts.

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