



# The Making of a Fatherless Nation

By Oyunga Pala



The Mathare Social Justice Centre (MSJC) office is located off Juja road in Nairobi's Eastlands. It is situated in a single-storeyed building planted right at the edge of Mathare Valley. The building stands out in contrast to the sea of tightly packed shanty dwellings with rusty brown tin roofs dissected into two parts by the congested Mau Mau road running through the bottom of the valley. Dark grey smoke rises from the valley depths and one catches a glimpse of the murky waters of the Mathare river flowing parallel to the busy thoroughway. Visitors are primed to see ruins and deprecation, but residents speak of its beauty. A Rastafarian man named Jah Driver told me to think of Mathare as a chocolate city, and in a phrase, that captured the essence of Mathare's complex sensory qualities.

On this Saturday morning, I had joined a group of resident ecological justice activists behind the Mathare Green Movement for a reflection session at the MSJC office. The group comprised of young men in their 20s. The discussion revolved around the colonial roots of Kenya's environmental segregation policy that rendered low income neighbourhoods like Mathare deprived of tree cover.

In an attempt to share context using my personal experience living in rural Kenya, I started talking about the role of my father in grounding my environmental consciousness. I then picked on one member of the group to share his experience of the same. "I don't have a father," he retorted. His delivery was deadpan. "Never knew him, never met him". His tone forced me to quickly check my assumptions and I asked around room, "How many of you have fathers living at home? We are in a

safe space, just put up your hands.” Hesitantly, starting with a single hand, a third of the room of about 30 people raised their hands, as if ashamed of the privilege of knowing a father. It was a sobering moment.

Wangui Kimari, the participatory action research coordinator for MJSC, described Mathare to me as a “ghetto of women”. The centrality of the mother in Mathare is undisputable, in fact single mothers have sustained Mathare for over eight decades of its existence. It is the mothers who run Mathare, and their sons sing praises to the resilience of their mothers. In the quest for social justice and dignity, Mathare’s mothers continue to lead from the front, determined to keep their boys alive in a social system that normalizes extrajudicial executions of young men in the poorer sections of Nairobi.

There is no shortage of men in Mathare, but rarely do we ever hear any reference to the fathers of Mathare, or any collective of men that is organized around the principle aim of fathering in the manner that distinguishes the mothers of Mathare.

Having a father present through most of my early years was a privilege I took for granted. Not only that - my biological father was a father to many others. Even though he passed on when I was a teenager, he had done enough to shape my outlook. He was committed to his family, career and life journey, living with absolute purpose in his role as a caregiver and provider. I do not remember a single conversation about what it meant to be a man, or what I had to do to prove I was a man. He just led, kept his word and lived up to his obligations the best he could. During my father’s funeral in 1989, fathering stood out as the true measure of his success - towering above his career accomplishments and material possessions. It is the greatest inheritance he left behind for his six children.

Nearly three decades since his passing, I still have a mental picture of the functions of fatherhood - and it is everything my father embodied. I had assumed this was the norm until I started meeting adults who had never known what it was to have a father who was present; this was by no means limited to neighbourhoods like Mathare. Many, from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, only had the one mama called the baby’s daddy, the sperm donor, or at best their mother’s husband. In 1999, I embarked on a career as a newspaper columnist for the Saturday magazine of the Daily Nation, penning a column titled “Mantalk”, that focused on the subject of evolving African masculinities. I maintained the column for a decade and the topic of responsible fatherhood kept recurring, juxtaposed against the rising prominence of single mother households. I was fixated on the nuclear family as an ideal and it informed many of my biases. The men who did not show up for their children, I dismissed as spineless for failing to grasp the importance of fatherhood. The mothers who insisted on living without a father in their children’s lives were misguided, I concluded.

Even after getting acquainted with scores of people who only knew of absent, emotionally removed, or abusive fathers, I still blamed the victim for allowing themselves to be defined by their past. This was the late 1990s, as powerful external agencies pushed neoliberalism and corporatisation of the local economy across Kenya. During this period, we also witnessed a frontal assault on patriarchy by the third wave of feminism that celebrated individualism and sought to dismantle gender role stereotypes. Men felt under attack, caricatured as beneficiaries of a power structure in society that granted them control over women. The debates on shifting gender roles became a fixture of popular culture and trickled down to the individual level.

My generation, the Xers born between the mid-60s and early 80s had morphed into the first generation of men to be confused about their roles in society. We had been socialised into pre-colonial African culture and religiously assigned gender roles, but many of us found ourselves at odds with the emerging feminist consciousness. Women’s autonomy and participation in the

workplace had upset the gender status quo, challenging the patriarchal logics of control and separation by men. The main misunderstanding stemmed from the inability to see the patriarchy system as distinct from individuals living within it, and so the issues collapsed into conversations about individual choices and solutions.

The cultural marital obligations gradually succumbed to modern Western ideals of romanticism. Short-lived marriage unions characterised by displays of opulence followed by divorce became common. But the structural issues at play – obscure to many – was that the tough economic conditions post-Structural Adjustment Programmes, meant a significant portion of working-class and even professional men could no longer secure positions of authority based purely on their ability to meet the financial obligations of the family. The perceived crisis of masculinity was blamed on radical feminism driven by the proliferation of women empowerment programmes. In hindsight, it was also the failure of neo-liberalism to deliver jobs for a growing population, mismanagement of the political economy locally and the global financial crisis that all converged to have adverse effects on the family unit, and this exaggerated social constraints.

A culture of checking out and abandoning responsibility became normalised, showing up in the rise of deadbeat fathers. They were no societal consequences for absent fathers in urban individualised spaces. This phenomenon graduated into a full-blown lad culture that continues to arrest grown men into extended adolescence, refusing to live up to the obligations of fatherhood.

Today, we often hear about the frustrations of ‘the boy child’ as a reaction to the empowerment of ‘the girl child’, but little about the crisis of fatherlessness. Worldwide statistics state that the absence of fathers has a profound effect on the psychological development of boys. The question of fatherhood has received extensive attention in North America and Western Europe. Three American presidents – Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama – recognised fatherhood as a serious social problem and addressed it as a matter of policy.

The memoir *Dreams of My Father* by former US President Barack Obama tackles the search for acceptance and identity that many men seek today. The young Obama traveled from Chicago to his biological father’s village in Nyangoma, Kogelo in search of answers. He would find resolution standing over his father’s grave in tears, overwhelmed by the intensity of the moment. He writes about finally realising who he was at that moment, and how his entire life trajectory, his struggles and birthright, were connected to a small plot of earth where his father hailed from. In finding closure, he found emotional release, and vowed to break the cycle of his own past to become a better man.

Obama’s legacy of a post-racial society as America’s first black president failed. Nonetheless, Obama’s most underrated legacy as president has been as father-in-chief. His own experience informed his choices and his exceptionalism is measured in the public devotion and commitment to raising his two daughters in the White House. Obama was not afraid to speak about the issues driving Black America’s alarming fatherhood crisis and became a model father figure embraced by the world.

According to the US Census Bureau, children who grow up without fathers are five times more likely to live in poverty and commit crime, nine times more likely to drop out of school and 20 times more likely to be jailed. They are likely to run away from home, become teenage parents, suffer abuse, drop out of school, use drugs or get divorced. This correlation of absent fathers and youth delinquency does not necessarily imply causation – indeed, racism and structural inequality could explain both family breakdown and the glaring social problems of crime, drug abuse and the like.

Even though these are statistics from the US, that reality lives with us in Kenya. The [Kenya Demographic and Health Survey \(KDHS\) report](#) in 2014 stated that nearly half (45 per cent) of all

children in Kenya do not live with both biological parents. The death of father accounts for only 5.3 per cent of households; 22 per cent of children in Kenya live with their mothers while their fathers are alive and live elsewhere.

A widely quoted pan-African study in 2012 by Canadian sociologists Prof Shelly Clark of McGill University and Dana Hamplova from Prague's Charles University and Institute of Sociology reported a 60 per cent probability of a single motherhood for a Kenyan woman by the age of 45. The factors attributed to birth outside marriage and the break up of the marriage union. Kenya has one of the highest levels of children living without their fathers in the home in Africa. The evidence of this on the incidence of crime, poverty drug abuse, teenage pregnancy and school drop-outs is less clearcut than in the US - a recent World Bank working paper actually showed that poverty was [falling fastest](#) in Africa in female-headed households. But this perception certainly provoked conversation on the same - I chronicled all this in the Mantalk column and the discussions it stirred up, both in the newspaper pages and in the wider society.

The trend in the public discourse is to blame the victims, the abandoned children and shame the single mothers who struggle to raise them by weighing them on a morality scale. Fatherhood is still not a social policy issue in Kenya. President Uhuru Kenyatta has taken no public positions on responsible fatherhood. We hear talk about teenage pregnancy and the crisis of single parent homes without putting the spotlight on a father who absconded his responsibility, and how this contributes to recurring social problems. No taskforce has been created to advocate responsible fatherhood and non-profit-organisations disproportionately dwell on women empowerment programmes. The advocacy vacuum has been filled by a growing number church-based men's programs. The Man Enough programme founded by Nairobi pastor Simon Mbevi is one such programme tackling the contemporary masculinity crisis of identity through mentorship programmes grounded in Christian values. The Kenyan Anglican Men's Association (KAMA) is another attempt to spur male leadership in community life in keeping with a biblical mandate.

But the spread of such programs is often undermined by the credibility of the church leadership, and on a particular view of divine fatherhood that complicates, rather than empowers, responsible earthly fatherhood - and that abets political dysfunction. Kenyan politics has traditionally enjoyed a marriage of convenience with religion. Hiding behind church mandate, savvy politicians exploit the reverence of the father figure in Kenya's socio-religious psyche for political expediency. Father is a title used to refer to God in Christian theology, hence God the Father.

In several Kenyan churches, the politician usurps the father figure characterization as the material provider. The colonial missionary fathers arrived as god-ordained and usurped the role of societal fathers. Christian missionaries exercised power over a community of converts and effectively curtailed the influence of existing traditional leadership structure in the Kenyan colony. Monotheists modelled god as the male parent, and therefore the father of the family becomes the divine representative on earth - and the right extends to the paternal ruler of the modern state.

The principle of the Father of the Nation thus exploits Christian metaphors of the All Mighty, All Knowing, God The Father, who rules over his underlings. The political positioning of heads of state as Fathers of a Nation is a tool of statecraft. Nations are founded by a confederation of leaders, but the state can only allow the glorification of the singular, visionary great leader.

Using this same religio-political maneuvering, the Kenyan presidency has made a case for the head of state to be revered as the exalted father of a nation. If Kenya's first President Jomo Kenyatta was the Father, then Uhuru Kenyatta becomes his begotten son Kamwana. President Moi was Baba wa Taifa (Father of the Nation) and an entire generation grew up consuming his well-crafted veneer of holiness, and living in complete denial of the contradictions and excesses of his 24 year reign.

Former Prime Minister Raila Odinga's designation as "Baba" reverberates divine destiny with the biblical reference of Joshua's conquest of Canaan during the 2017 presidential campaigns.

We are socialized to obey our fathers without question, and by the same token, we must obey our leaders who by the order of societal hierarchy become the father of fathers. The citizens must submit to God the father and his earthly representatives - our political fathers - and remain beholden to the sovereign leader in his human form.

In a majority Christian nation of Kenya, the Bible enjoys more social legitimacy than the constitution, and the political godfather who wields Scripture becomes part of the extended narrative of the heavenly revelation. After all, leaders are "chosen by God". The function of faith, in this context, is not to question the deific authority, and this thinking reinforces the myth of the father (divine, political, and domestic).

In reality, the Fathers of our Nation are more often than not tragic hero figures consumed by hubris, drunk on power, and entrapped by personality flaws. The result is the persistent violence and brutalization of a nation of children who might dare to challenge their legitimacy. The State as the Father in Kenya has effectively been absent and abusive. The figure of fatherhood in our society has been defined by fragility of the masculine head, determined to retain symbolic political power and status at the expense of the family unit.

These tensions at the individual level play out on a national stage in form of leadership at a complete loss with the functions of fatherhood. They demand rights but shun the responsibilities that come with that right. The greed for power without accountability is behind the social, political and economic despondency that marks Kenyan life. Fatherhood is not respected but rather feared as a personification of oppression of innocents under their jurisdiction.

The children of this nation have therefore had to come to terms with the father as a fantasy figure surrounded by myth, and are fated to bear the generational burden of the sins committed by their fathers.

The late Myles Munroe, Bahamian evangelist and author, preached that fatherhood is the ultimate work of men. This is a truth that cuts across all spiritual traditions. Our nation can no longer ignore the social dynamite of fatherlessness, and the reconstruction of a broken society rests on the value men place on fathering.

It is time for a national discourse on the value of fatherhood.

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