



Red Earth: The Killing of Carilton David Maina

By Bulimu Chole



Red earth is blood, Red earth is life, Red earth is what takes and keeps safe the lives we lose.

Friday the 21st of December 2018, around four in the afternoon, mother and son sit for lunch at their house in Soweto Phase 3 estate, Kibera. The meal does not have much of a conversation and both of them proceed to their own activities soon after. The son is just days away from clocking another year in his life. When the new year comes he will be turning twenty-three, and he's going to spoil his family, he'll throw a birthday celebration party. The young man leaves, but calls his mum a few moments later about some money meant for the party which he wanted to send by phone; his mum says she wanted to receive it personally from him since there were still issues they needed to discuss. They could not meet at that time, the son must have been busy in his movie shop or doing something involving football. He loves football, and this love for football, at least according to the mum's memory wasn't always there, she had never thought of his little 'softie' boy as a sportsman until his late teenage years when he started playing football. At one point she remembers him coming home with application papers for Gor Mahia FC's under 21 team. Now he's a goalkeeper for his university football team in the UK, and for the last three months Jinamori FC at Kenyatta. It only made sense to let him be till the next day, after all, isn't tomorrow another day?

The young man joins his mates in a video hall for football, it's Liverpool against Wolves. He is not a

red, neither a wolf, he's an Arsenal fan, a gunner. So what brings him here? Allison Becker of Liverpool, the best goalkeeper in the world. He has watched every throw, every catch, every move. He wants to be just like Becker.

On Thursday the 27th of December, I see a post on Facebook about a student shot and killed in Kibera by police. The video shows a group of protesters walking along Mbagathi Way, Ngong' Road and a section of Kenyatta Avenue. At the front of the procession is a banner with a familiar face. The protesters are almost at GPO roundabout when police teargas the crowd, forcing each of them to scatter in different directions.

As I share the story, I'm sitting on a wall that would have separated Nairobi dam and Highrise estate if it were complete. A few metres away behind me is a small settlement along the complete section of the wall, I am tempted to walk this line that traces the start of a place I do not want to be associated with, a place I do not like mentioning in conversations, a place I'm careful not to be seen at, lest I be mistaken to come from there. I cannot set foot in this place unless it's a job project that requires interaction with the population here, this is a place I won't think about on terms other than projects and humanitarian benevolence, giving back to society which I'm unable to do till I become rich, only then will I be able to walk the path of a poor person and still remain removed from the poverty. I figure it won't be that bad going round the slum side of the wall, I have earphones, at least the music will remind me I do not come from this place.

That same Thursday night, the 9 o'clock news shows the full story. It's the same one I've been sharing online, but with some new information. The shooting happened in Soweto Phase Three estate, and the house where the young man lived is just four doors away from where I used to live. Now the jigsaw ends are fitting themselves together, I know that house with the green walls and a black door.

I was once accused of having a bad ear for music, and whoever lived in that green-walled, black-doored house had a bad ear too, Indie and Alternative rock would be playing whenever they were in. I wanted to know who this person was, that played the same music I did.

One Sunday morning I find someone washing their shoes just outside the house. He has looks apprehensive as I approach, but breaks into a smile after hearing what I have to say. "I love the music you play," I tell him. The few times we met after that there was always a fist bump, at least a nod of acknowledgement, to remind ourselves that although we do not know each other well, we both recognize our existence, and bad ears for music.

My new friend and I would become separated the time I moved out of the estate. The last time I meet him was at a neighbour's shop. He had tried to catch my attention a few times before I recognised him. This time an attempt at knowing each other was made.

"Bulimu?"

"Yes, Bulimu."

"Carlson, Carlton?"

"No, Carilton." he corrects, and smiles as he steps aside.

We would probably have been good friends or might have just remained acquaintances. But all that was all that was. We will never know.

Later on that Friday night, the young man and a few other football fans are headed home, they have just finished watching the game that ended two goals to none in favour of Liverpool. The young man must have been impressed by his hero Becker, he must have picked up a few tricks he will test on his next game. A policeman they know passes them.

The gate to Soweto Phase 3 is only a few metres ahead. The police officer they had met earlier now appears with a colleague and commands everyone to lie down. They all do as asked. A shot, maybe two, is fired and everyone scatters, who doesn't know what bullets do? The young man is on his heels too, running towards the gate, he must be promising himself to never again walk at this time of the night, to always run whenever he sees a cop. Perhaps the only thing on his mind might have just been how to get home. Whatever his thoughts were, a pain in his leg tells him that he has been hit, but he's lucky the bullet didn't touch any vital organ.

He is now hiding in one of the stalls next to the gate. The beasts find their prey by the smell of blood, his isn't much, but this is not enough protection. He needs to keep his breathing down, the beasts also find their prey by fear, they feel it from your beating heart.

One of the ways to get rid of fear, almost any other feeling too, is removing yourself from the current situation and going somewhere far away, the young man must have travelled to his past. To his childhood.

He might have been thinking of when he got transferred to Archbishop Gitari boarding school from Mbagathi Primary at Class Four, when he got admitted to Maseno School after scoring 419 in KCPE. Not bad for a kid from Kibera. He must have loved the rocks of Bunyore, he might have had trouble with the monkeys in his school, he must have felt good winning the East Africa Essay Writing competition in high school, he must have worked hard for his 84 points in KCSE. When he got the scholarship with the Northern Consortium of United Kingdom Universities at Brookhouse, he must have remembered how close he came to studying actuarial science at the University of Nairobi. And when he joined Leeds University for Engineering and Electronic Communication, he must have made a promise to make himself great, for his people, for his home.

A man in government uniform wielding an assault rifle looks into the eyes of the young man struggling to stand still because of a wound in his leg. He sees the fear, the beast is excited at this; he feels his blood rush in his veins.

The young man's head is rushing with ideas of the things he has heard before about the beasts and people like him at this time of the night, sometimes in the day, the things he's heard about corners, about people forced to kneel and lie down.

"You know me, *hata ukiulizia watu huku*, they know me; they know I'm not a thief. Why are you doing this to me? Why?!" Neighbours hear a desperate voice pleading. But the sky cracks open and a rain of bullets follows.

The young man is now lying on the ground, three holes in his chest, a scratch tells of how he missed the bullet to his head.

Our vehicle leaves the station two hours late from my intended travel time, most of the first hour

was spent walking down River road in search of matatu shuttles to Murang'a. As we pass by Thika town I cannot help but notice the earth. Red clean earth, and the trees. These two things that make the wind outside whisper the word V-I-L-L-A-G-E through the half open window into my left ear, my right ear is searching for a hint of Kangema in the Gikuyu conversation the driver is having with my seatmate, though I'm quite sure this is the right vehicle. It's my first journey to this side of the country, destination, somewhere around Kangema High School in Kangema, Murang'a county. I took only two people's contacts in the vigil on the previous night, both of their phones are busy, and now my arrival is pegged on three things. The directions "*Upande magari za kuenda Kangema, ukifika town panda boda hadi Kangema High alafu ulizia kwenye matanga iko,*" the ability of a random villager to know where the funeral is and my own instincts, after a crosscheck with the driver at every town centre we pass. The wind still whispering words into my left ear...

T-H-E V-I-L-L-A-G-E N-E-V-E-R F-O-R-G-E-T-S

One of my contacts finally picks up after missing three calls. We have just got to Kangema, but he tells me the burial is over and advises me to return to Nairobi because there really was nothing left for me to do there. Sure, there was nothing left to do, but there was a lot left to see.

I take a motorcycle taxi to the home I was told to ask for. We find a few people around who lead me to the gravesite. On that slopy land lies a mound of red earth, red clean earth, with a crown of red roses on top and a wooden cross in front.

CARILTON DAVID MAINA

BORN: 1ST JANUARY 1996

DIED: 22ND DECEMBER 2018

What was left to see was already seen, and indeed there was nothing left to do, only one more thing needed to be done. I dig my hand into the earth on the side and let the red earth slip through to the mound...

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...I buried him too. And I talked to him, through the red earth, and he spoke back to me. He said he was safe here now, he asked me to look around, he asked me to visit his mother and see how much work he still had to do, he said the city may forget but the village never forgets. I remember my lips fashioned to these words but a different voice spoke, it was his voice, Maina's voice. Not just his voice but thousands of other voices forced into silence, they spoke.

The young man's name is Carilton David Maina, and ever since his killing he has never stopped dying. The mother's pain will never end. Mama Maina is a heartbroken woman. Her life was changed abruptly by the loss of her son, and what hurts her the most is the taking. It was not an act of God, it was never the course of nature, what it was can only be described as a deliberate act of violence against the young man who is her son, and she grieves every single day as different reports emerge about how her son's life was taken.

Kilimani OCPD Michael Muchiri publicly stated that they could not investigate a case against one of their own, after apologizing for the death of Maina. This was in a forum organized by Amnesty Kenya to try and reconcile the community with the police who are here seen to be reaching out to the people they have hurt. This here is what Paulo Freire describes as false generosity, injustice

followed by generosity, and this false generosity in turn facilitates the perpetuation of injustice by the oppressor. The police themselves are an oppressed lot, treated like dogs in their canteen kennels, forced to play fetch to fifty shilling notes on roadsides. And so to restore their human status they prey on the most vulnerable. Looting, maiming and taking innocent lives, the brutes find power in the oppression of another oppressed, since they can't vent their frustrations and insecurities on the superiors they turn to a group they perceive inferior to them. The policeman who killed Mama Maina's son knew him, a beast drunk in the power of a rifle.

The police are instruments used by the state to repress the people, in the times before independence they were African collaborators helping the coloniser conquer fellow Africans. Any attempt at resisting, questioning or asserting your freedom would earn you the title terrorist. More than half a century after independence the police still operate on the same colonial principles, they are still working for a black-skin-masked white man. "We do not negotiate with terrorists," sounds familiar? The police said Maina was 'a suspect', "part of a gang that had been terrorizing residents."

I hear someone saying, "But not all police are bad." My response to this is: not every young man from the ghetto is a criminal.

We're living in an unequal society, and our privileges may lead us into thinking of this as the natural order of things, that the poor are poor because they are lazy or that's just the way things are, and the rich are so because they worked hard and have been blessed by God. Maina worked hard, he read his books well and was recognised for it, he achieved honours most rich people genuinely haven't, the young man did a TED talk! The young man dreamed and was making his dreams a reality, but he wasn't allowed to live.

My walk through the settlement behind the complete wall revived my consciousness of one thing, privilege. The fact that I could slide in and take a tour freely in the ghetto without an agenda when not everyone from the ghetto could do the same where I live showed relatively just how much of choosing I could do. I could opt out whenever I wanted to. Privilege is what makes us unfamiliar with places like these, situations like these where most would say "Couldn't he just have avoided the night, couldn't he just have avoided talking to some people?" Privilege is what denies us knowledge of the people we meet, privilege is comfort, we do not lack, we do not require help so we do not need to know anyone. Privilege is failing in empathy. And privilege puts us at the same level as the oppressor because every form of violence against those we do not know goes unnoticed. This specific violence is against young men and families living in neighbourhoods no one wants to go to.

Kalundi Serumaga describes poverty as the worst form of violence and at its worst, is a form of slow genocide. There is a genocide going on in the ghetto, the victims young men just starting out in life. The Herods of our times have been hearing rumours about these young men, who are showing signs of a bright future, these young men with brains they would never match in their lifetimes, these young men who threaten to save their people from poverty. The Herods affect their hysteria on their loyal servants who themselves have an already existing inferiority complex, who want no one to rise above them, and they have a special dislike for smart people. Hence when the Herods of Nairobi commend and gift them for killing youth in Dandora and Mathare, they look for that kid who thinks they're smart in Kibera, eliminate him with the statement "he was part of a gang terrorising residents." The beasts ended his life to ensure that family stays in the ghetto. And they do it every day, every single week they kill a dream and no one cares, no one remembers, except the earth, the red earth that takes and keeps the lives we lose. And the village, the village they return to in boxes never forgets.

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