



Erased: That Farm in Africa, at the Foot of the Ngong Hills

By Lutivini Majanja



My paternal grandfather, James Liyai, was born in 1907, and worked as a cook in the houses of colonial administrators who were based in Western Kenya. By the time I was born, Kenya was an independent nation, most of the administrators had gone, and my grandfather had retired from this job. Even though I never witnessed it, I knew that he could bake cakes and even knew how to make rice pudding. Until his death in 2008, he was especially picky about the food that he was served - the type of food, its quality, and presentation.

I never thought about how this experience shaped our lives. I wasn't close to my grandfather; I rarely saw him, and even when I did visit him upcountry there was always a distance between us created by a past that I was not familiar with, and my Nairobiness. My grandfather spoke to us in Lwisukha, he read the Kiswahili newspaper *Taifa Leo* regularly, but there were times, when agitated, he blurted insults in English. This was jarring.

My grandfather named his son, who was born during World War II, Hitler. When this son started school, his teachers insisted on a name change but this name stuck in the family. I imagine that this was my grandfather's resistance to whatever he had experienced in those colonial houses.

Watching the British period drama *Downton Abbey*, I recognised that my grandfather's experiences

in the houses he worked in couldn't even have come close to those of the servants portrayed in that television series. How was life like for an African servant in a colonised country who worked for people who were not anywhere as wealthy? Did his employers view him as human?

So this year, when I went to the Karen Blixen Museum, I wanted to see the kitchen.

An estimated 700 workers lived and worked on this "farm in Africa, at the foot of the Ngong Hills". They worked here along with their spouses and children, and they should have been grateful because they were allocated some space to live in within the 4,500-acre farm land. No matter that they were probably there because they had been displaced from that very land. Some of these workers had left their homes to work on farms like this one because of the colonial government [had imposed](#) a Hut and Poll Tax in 1901 that was increased in 1915 and 1920. They had to pay. The Kipande, an identity card and passbook, was introduced in 1915, prohibiting Africans from moving freely. They were stuck there.

They were called natives, squatters, houseboys and kitchen *totos*. They were required to call Karen Blixen, the new owner of their land, *memsahib* or *msabu*. These workers were considered fortunate because the *memsahib* built a school for their children to attend while their parents worked.

Meanwhile, Blixen and other white settlers often left for hunting expeditions and long trips, with servants doing all the heavy lifting, confident that the workers left behind were tending to their properties.

After Blixen left Kenya in 1931, the vast parcel of land was turned into a residential area, with the Karen Country Club as an anchor intended to entice the wealthy (European) Nairobi residents to move there. The house that Blixen lived in is now a museum that gives a glimpse into daily life in colonial Kenya. The museum [is a popular](#) tourist destination.

However, less attention is given to the other aspects of this story and time period.

On its website, the National Museums of Kenya states: "NMK is a multi-disciplinary institution whose role is to collect, preserve, study, document and present Kenya's past and present cultural and natural heritage. This is for the purposes of enhancing knowledge, appreciation, respect..."

If the museum is a place we visit to learn, to enhance knowledge and to appreciate our various histories, what does the set-up and the tour of the Karen Blixen Museum say about what is valued?

The museum was established after Blixen's book *Out of Africa* was made into a movie with the same title. In the 1980s, Kamande wa Gature, Blixen's former employee, was called in to assist in reconstructing the house interior as it had been when Blixen lived there. Some of the items displayed in the house were recreated for the 1985 film set and later donated to the museum. When you visit the museum, you are assigned guides who brief you with the backstory - Blixen's past prior to coming to Kenya, her life and loves in Kenya, and her entanglements, both social and business-related.

The workers on Blixen's farm tended to the house, to the coffee farm, to other crop plantations, and to the livestock on the farm. We know that the workers built, they planted, they cooked, they cleaned, they cared for her pets, and even protected her. Here, aside from the posed painted portraits and her photos in a peaceful and rested state, there are few markers of the presence of these people; there are only painted portraits and photographs of a group of house staff - Farah Aden, Abdulahi, Farah's nephew, Ireri the Elder, Kamande wa Gature, Njeeri from Dagoretti. The

gift shop at the museum sells postcards and bookmarks with these people's faces on them as souvenirs.

When the guide tells us that Blixen's family purchased the farm from Imperial British East Africa Company, it is as if the land was just there, available to be purchased and occupied. It is as if the people living there miraculously transformed themselves into squatters and availed themselves to be cooks, porters, gun bearers and houseboys. Whereas detailed background information leading up to Blixen's travel to Kenya is provided, it appears that even now this place's living memory is predicated on Blixen's arrival in 1917. How did the land owners become squatters? What was cleared from this site to make space for coffee trees?

The museum guide mentions that the bathroom had two exits so that a worker could empty the chamber pot, drain the dirty bath water and clean the bathroom without entering through the house. In the kitchen, utensils are arranged as they would have appeared on a regular day. The dining table is laid out with cutlery and crockery as they would have been when Blixen lived there. A menu showing what was served for a famous guest is displayed as evidence. Some floors have animal hides as carpets. What were the work routines? Did the workers get time off? What did they earn?

In 2011, I attended a friend's baby shower in Nairobi. Among the things discussed was the task of finding a nanny for the child. I lost my temper when a guest suggested that a Luhya woman was best suited for this role. Others echoed this sentiment. All my explaining about the wrongness of this statement didn't seem to get through. I stopped because I was ruining the party. I was being too sensitive. It was just a suggestion.

In 2014, my father took me and my sister to see a house in Milimani, Kakamega, where our grandfather had once worked. We couldn't access the property but could see the old house from the road. My father told us that some of his uncles and cousins also started working there as kitchen *totos* and *mshika kamba*. A kitchen *toto* was basically the errand boy of the house, who worked as the cook's servant, doing tasks that are better done by small hands, as well as easing the burden of the adults. And from my parent's telling, a *mshika kamba* (literally, holder of the rope) was a child who helped to hold animals, to lift things or to hold the big sufuria for the person stirring the pot. I thought about the stereotypes that we are still shaking off close to a century later - that we Luhyas make good cooks and good domestic workers.

One imagines how much work goes into maintaining Karen Blixen's house, which is now a museum that is open every day, including public holidays and weekends. What is the effect on museum workers who clean, polish, and fix these artefacts daily? What does repeating the story in the particular format of "the natives, the squatters, the houseboys..." for the benefit of the tourist do to the narrator?

When will we remember them as people, as women, men and children?

In the book *Out of Africa*, Blixen [talks about](#) reducing her white staff, likely due to financial constraints. It is not stated that at the time an apartheid system was enforced throughout the Kenya colony. [In this system](#), European labour was most highly valued and received the highest pay while the pay scale for Africans was the lowest. Even among Africans, the pay was further segmented based on ethnic identity. Thus, it was good business to have workers from different ethnic groups assigned to different tasks, thus enforcing ethnic stereotypes.

Blixen provides a detailed account of seven-year-old Kabero, who was employed as a kitchen *toto*,

and who accidentally shot two agemates while playing with a gun. One of the children, Wamae, died. Kabero, before running away because of his crime, returned to pay the one rupee he owed his master for an old pair of shorts. What is the terror that made a seven-year-old child prioritise paying for a pair of old shorts before running away? I wonder about the horror of a place that claims to tell the story of “Kenya’s past and present cultural and natural heritage” while continuously minimising and even erasing the 700 African workers and their families from it.

After Blixen’s departure in 1931, the farm was sold. What happened to all the workers and their families, left without an income and a home, when a farm was sold off in colonial Kenya? Is there a place for them in this museum tour? Do they deserve their own museum? Do we even need a museum to tell us about them?

Nostalgia for that era lives beyond this museum. A short distance away is the Hemingways Hotel, which has a wall inscribed with writings from explorers and writers like David Livingstone, Henry Morton Stanley, Elspeth Huxley, Ernest Hemingway, and one black exception, Jomo Kenyatta. Another wall has posters from the movies like *White Mischief*, *Born Free*, *I Dreamed of Africa* and *Out of Africa*. All these have in common the central white protagonist experiencing Africa with Africans as a backdrop in their adventures. Why are we still doing this in 2019? Is it possible to remember, preserve and tell the history of Kenya without repeating the violent language of that past? Is it necessary to keep propping up these images for the tourists?

And then – how different is this nostalgia for the colonial invader from the urban Kenyan’s 2019 dream to have something similar to that farm in Africa? A place where they wake up and see crops growing and livestock thriving, where they count off acres and workers. An aura of self-sufficiency, knowing that there is a worker on another side of the country tending to the land – never mind how it was acquired, who was displaced, or the pittance that is the daily farm worker’s wages. Isn’t this what progress looks like?

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