



Millennials II: Speaking up in the Silences

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“Kenya’s official languages are English, Kiswahili, and Silence.” ~ Yvonne Owuor

It is always interesting to see the confusion in our parents and older generations with Millennials. It is a clash of cultural values. They may have raised us, but we occupy a place in a global and information culture that they never imagined possible. I see them struggling to understand.

I was born in the 1980s, when the attempted coup was still fresh in people’s minds, and the screws of repression were increasingly tightening. I was too young to know about the agitation for multi-party elections and only later read about it from my grandfather’s collection of *The Weekly Review* magazine, one of the few publications at the time that was consistently speaking truth to power.

In the 1990s came the liberalisation of the airwaves, and my generation was exposed to much more music, television programmes and movies than our parents were aware of. I remember for the longest time wanting an FM radio so I could listen to Capital FM and later Kiss FM. My evenings from school were often spent shifting between doing homework, and dancing to the music on *Rastrut*, *Jam-a-delic* and other weekly music shows. This was a time when African American culture had a kind of golden age on TV. The shows we watched were everything from *Sesame Street* to *In Living Color*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Family Matters*, *Renegade*, *Sarafina*, *The Bold and Beautiful* and so many more. Today, if someone my age who grew up in the urban spaces that I did starts a discussion on our childhood, we have many common memories and attachments through

these experiences, even though we might have disparate upbringings in other ways. Even from many miles away, we were part of that collective cultural moment, and social media now unites us with our peers across the world, over both the mundane and serious. While we too have many points of differences there is a unique connection to each other from the global and local exposure we have.

It was a time when Kenyan art, and especially music, was starting to find its identity. Hip-hop, comedy and poetry were on the forefront of this shift. A strong emphasis of the art being created at the time was questioning of the status quo, extra judicial killings, and the dysfunction of the political state. It created a healthy skepticism in authority and authority figures. Some of my earliest ideas and understanding of another Kenyan narrative from the streets and the grassroots came from hip hop artists like Ukoo Flani, Kalamashaka, Mashifta and others. The comedy trio Reddykyulas was hugely influential too, allowing us to see ourselves, and critique who we had become as a people, without fear.

On the other hand, our parents grew up in a fractured culture straddling the traditional cultures and the colonial ethnocentrism that despised and looked down on traditional culture. Kenya is 55 years old and still grappling with what colonialists did to us, whether we realise it or not. The colonisers subscribed to notion of Social Darwinism that believed that the closer a culture was to European (and in our case British) culture, the more advanced it was. Given that African culture was completely different, we were seen as uncivilised, despite the fact that we had lived and thrived for centuries before.

Colonialism systematically destroyed our families and destabilised all aspects of society that had functioned until then. Colonial tax obligations pushed people into the cash economy, creating a migrant labour market, and thus separating families. They confiscated land, leading to a large, landless class of laborers who traveled from place to place in search of work. Breaking communities up like this was certainly an easier and more secure way of obtaining money for taxes and for selling goods to them. This economic subjugation still continues in various forms today, with insecure land tenure systems, and families still vulnerable to eviction, land grabbing, and cartels.

The colonisers employed violence against grown men and women if they were not only obedient but also sufficiently deferential. Alyse Simpson recalled whites in 1920's Kenya: "They boxed their own and their neighbours' servants' ears if they failed to be servile enough, which in their childlike simplicity they sometimes forgot to be." That notion of Africans having 'childlike simplicity' was not a benign one. It means that we were assumed to be incompetent in our own governance. It upended the structure of society where adults were adults, and were worthy of making decisions. It is highly likely that the violence visited on them resulted in powerless frustration that was then transferred onto the next generation.

Despite being supposedly 'independent' since 1963, we never really sat to examine what had happened to our society and technically just exchanged one ruler for another. You see it in the way we casually infantilise grown men and women by assuming the state will make better decisions than they ever could for themselves. We do it too in our families to our poorer relatives or those who dare deviate from the norm.

I sense that our parents were brought up to obey unquestioningly, a result of the kind of violence and censure that defiance would bring upon them. My generation however learned to ask questions, perhaps as a result of the global culture we were exposed to, and so we do. Even though we may not have been as inquisitive in the open as we were in private - we are still our parents' children, after all, and we were taught to behave in public - the Internet and social media have recreated a quasi-private space that allowed us to continue to question the status quo.

Traditionally Africans had structures for bringing up children and teaching them how to handle themselves as adults. We would learn to cook, herd animals, care for children, find herbs that could cure diseases, prepare for seasons, and so on. This all happened within a certain social context, where an older person would teach a younger one. With colonisation, and especially the disrupted social ties that urbanisation brought, these teaching moments fell away. Those lucky enough to live around aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents learned a lot from the community. Those who didn't have these structures simply ended up learning from older siblings who may not have always had the right information. More than that we learned from each other, from our neighbours, our classmates and other peers around us.

Teaching requires a voice. But many of our parents had lost their voice and hope, perhaps without knowing. Maybe it was the difficult economic conditions, the secret police and the threat of torture chambers that hung ominously over their heads. Confronting their own situations and the loss of their dreams at the hands of a powerful and corrupt government that killed many who stood up to it must have been an impossible task then. With time I believe the silence grew to encompass even more of their lives and who they were. I wonder if we will ever truly understand what they went through. Facing up to this anguish and loss was avoided by just forging ahead in some ways and at other times acting out in the private family arenas. It has become the 'norm' of Kenyan social conditioning for people to turn social media as a space for confessions and on FM station talk shows. Those who could leave Kenya emigrated to Western capitals, those who chose to stay and fight became pariahs, and the rest kept their head down to avoid trouble in a sense of learned helplessness. For those who accepted the status quo it meant a constant adjusting to the changes, a constant policing of their own behaviour and of those they loved to save them from the state sanctions of the day.

Many of our Kenyan notions of respectability can be traced to British colonialism. As long as the orange is waxed, shiny and orange on the outside it does not matter if the inside is rotten and full of worms. In Kenya a person's importance is often based on what they do, which family they come from or which influential person they are close to, who their spouse is and finally how wealthy or famous they are. It often does not matter what vileness they have been part of, the wealth and fame become like a sanctifying agent. No wonder folks say *pesa ni sabuni* (*Money is like soap*).

The breakdown of traditional African society and the public accountability that came with it was replaced with a desire to be respected according to colonial values. For many of our parents a sense of worth was built on how others saw them and spoke of them. Their children were often extensions of this. Many times our own personal choices, even as adults, were not seen in the light of the people we are but as active antagonistic choices against them and the reputations they hold so dearly. Our personhood is not known to them no matter how hard we try to show them.

This is a journey I see many of my peers going through. We are still trying to understand who we are and how our society got here, and in doing so we reject the mantra of 'accept and move on' or 'don't rock the boat' like many of our parents embodied. There will be a generational clash, but maybe it is necessary, so we can redefine ourselves, redefine family, and redefine Kenya.

When many of my peers sit and talk to recall our childhood very few of us had good childhoods or teenage years. The truth that our parents did not want to face was that one can only keep up appearances for so long - it always happened that glass of respectability shattered at one point, destroying everything in its vicinity. It would be in the discovery of infidelity in one or both parents, or that there were other entire families who called your father dad. It was in finding out about a secret child your mother had before but kept hidden. It was financial ruin, domestic abuse, rumours of witchcraft in families, evil in-laws, or unexplained absences of parents for years, all hidden under a veneer of respectability.

Discovering any of these for a child or a teenager is traumatic; it's even worse so if there is no reliable adult to help them talk through these things and make sense of them. But it's impossible to talk about anything when respectability is the constant demand. *What will people think* is the first, and the most powerful reprimand. Many times we were told that voicing these concerns is tantamount to publicly humiliating your family. Very often the child/teenager/young adult attempting to talk will be castigated even more than the adult who caused the incident or trauma. Instead of protecting our children from the trauma of past actions, we force them to pretend all is well, never bothering about their emotional and psychological state. All these affect the adult this child grows up to become. Many times the alcoholism, drug and sex addictions are ways of dealing with internal pain, not to mention depression, anxiety and panic attacks and other mental health illnesses.

Growing up without my primary parent for 20 years nearly destroyed me. I went through depression, abandonment, homelessness and a myriad of other situations before I finally was able to find my way out. My larger extended family still does not understand why I am this way because I went to "good schools". But a boarding school does not make child or create a home for them. Neither is it a place to show you that you are loved and worthy, that's what a family is for. There are those who definitely did try, but the truth is, parenting is a constant effort and not a peek-a-boo performance where one appears and disappears at will. The unfortunate bit is as a society we have been unable to diagnose, discuss and fix the political and economic issues that create these conditionings. We often don't see the larger governance issues causing them. Why did so many of our fathers have secret families? Why were we constantly battling financial ruin? Why the silence, why the abuse, why the trauma? What was going on in Kenya to make our lives so painful?

The person I credit most for helping me find my way out and holding my hand and parenting is an aunt who I only got to know well after high school. She truly listened to me and asked me questions, offered advice and even when I didn't heed it she would still be there for me. Her acceptance was total. That was what made the difference and helped set me off on a long journey of self-searching, healing and forging a new path for myself. It has not been easy but it has led me to a path of peace and a better life than I could have imagined for myself.

I see my peers talking about their trauma, depression and discontent both anonymously and publicly, on Facebook groups and Twitter, finding in each other kindred souls to encourage and advice. I see an increased acceptance of therapy and psychological counseling. The ability to be vulnerable or see someone you admire be vulnerable is what gives us the courage to keep going. The culture of silence is slowly being dealt with in many spaces. Still, there are many who are unable to process things, and drown in various addictions like alcoholism and drugs. They need to understand that what we are facing is not a result of individual failure but as a result of a collective failing to deal with our problems in a holistic way, which will continue to claim our people in different ways. Others who haven't faced the same trauma and pressure do not easily understand the weight of the burden Millennials carry. The only way we move forward is if we start being honest about what is going on with us.

My peers are incredibly resilient in difficult situations. They are also incredibly creative, hardworking and daring. Not a week goes by when I don't see someone trying to do something amazing. We are our own people. We dare to dream and we dare to live our dreams and over 'respectable' professions such as law, engineering and others. We forge ahead, fuelled by a heady mix of invincibility, fear, daring, anxiety and hope. We own our decisions the good, the bad and the sometimes stupid. We realise you can live an entire life trying to please people and still fail spectacularly.

What has failed us are the systems, society, and the continual bashing because we refuse to fall in line. Our parents' formula of silence and moving on doesn't work in our world at all. Just being

educated doesn't guarantee you a job. Having a job doesn't mean you can afford to be sick. Being an entrepreneur isn't always the path to a comfortable life. Being on a salary doesn't always mean you can afford a mortgage. Being wealthy doesn't mean you are protected.

We will continue asking questions, we will continue pushing the dial, we will continue creating, we will continue until we find our personal and collective freedom.

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