



# These Things Remain: Torture at Maseno School

By Kweli Jaoko



I graduated high school 16 years ago and I have been having nightmares about that period ever since.

My nightmares all take the same form: I am a student at Maseno School and for one reason or another I have gotten in trouble. My punishment—in the form of caning or even a full-on gang-beating by all the teachers at the staff room—is impending. Sometimes I am able to wake myself up before the beating starts; most times I can't and I have to suffer through it again.

Either way I always wake up panicking and I often have trouble falling back asleep, because these nightmares trigger something deeper than my fear of getting beaten. They trigger a deep-seated rage I haven't yet found an outlet for.

Unable to fall back asleep, I often fantasize about getting revenge against all those who beat and humiliated me. Most times it is something as banal as slashing the tires of a teacher who caned me often. Other times I imagine writing letters detailing these tortures and sending them to the current employers of the prefects who beat us up. I imagine them getting fired and their lives spiraling out of control.

In writing about my time at Maseno, I have become aware of my desire to mark only the kind of

torture that was remarkable, and therefore say nothing about the banal aspects of torture, such as the environment it produces, one in which fear is everywhere all the time; and one in which one never knows what it is precisely that will get one in trouble, because it could be anything. That fear is as damaging as torture itself, and remains with one just as long.

*Getting caned—slapped—punched—beaten down with a hockey stick, or gang-beaten—deprived of food and sleep—made to kneel for hours—frog-marched for long distances—I find myself wanting to use the term ‘torture’ though I am aware others will find it disagreeable, too spectacular. Liwe liwalo.*

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My experience of corporal punishment, like that of most Kenyans, goes further back than high school. I went to Arya Nursery School where there were fewer black than Asian students, and where black students were the only ones who got caned.

All our teachers were black.

Even at that young age the message was clear: we, black students, were lesser than. Corporal punishment in Kenya has always had a racialized history.

After nursery school I went on to M.M. Shah Primary School, where corporal punishment was mostly classed. Those whipped for not doing homework were those who didn't do the homework because they could not afford the textbooks. Those caned for being late were often those who walked long distances to school, as opposed to those of us who were driven to school. Those woken with blows for falling asleep during lessons were often also the kids who had to work late into the night after school to help put food on the table for their families.

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I think the punishments at high school have stayed with me because nowhere was punishment as developed a social institution as it was at Maseno. To understand torture at Maseno at the time, one has to have an understanding of the prestigious boys boarding school: its logics; its architectonics (*prefects stayed in their own cubicles*), its ecology (*the green, fertile compound teeming with all manner of trees*); its creeds (*Maseno's motto is 'Perseverance Shall Win Through'*); and its ideologies (*the exceptionalism that said we were better than all other schools*). Together these factors turned punishment into a robust social institution.

Punishment had its own logics, which produced its rituals of truth. Although punishment had its stated goals, it simply became institutional practice—it was the defining role for prefects and all those in power. It was simply what those in power did, no why or wherefore.

Additionally, punishment was a seemingly indispensable pedagogic tool for teachers. Its methodologies, from making students kneel for hours on gravel, on concrete, or outside on hot days; to 'frog-marching' students; to waking students up in the middle of the night for impromptu contraband inspections; to pulling students out of bed for overnight gang-beatings; all these were supposed to be rehabilitative for all manner of offenses, from tardiness to struggling with classwork, from falling asleep during lessons to failing to rise for the early morning wake up call.

Maseno's architectonics allowed punishment its own infrastructure. The Old Mackay building functioned both as a prefects' study area and also a torture chamber; and prefects' cubicles were the zones where overnight beatings took place.

Lastly, punishment had its own ideology. We were told that to survive Maseno one needed to be 'hardcore'. We wore our abuse as a badge: we were Maseno, meaning we were harder than you. We could take more beatings than you, and we were therefore readier for the world out there and its beatings. Our school motto—'Perseverance Shall Win Through'—was often marshaled to put out any dissenting feeling about torture. What this ideology belies is a sordid belief about fighting for freedom both inside the school and in the world out there: there is no use for it. What students need, ostensibly, is to be prepared for the unfreedom of the world out there.

*Aside:*

*We had a school exchange with Alliance High School and we found out that their wake up call wasn't until 6:30am, a whole hour and a half after ours. We ridiculed them for sleeping in, for being 'soft'—that right there was the punishment ideology hard at work, because we believed success could only come through hardship, in this case through sleep deprivation.*

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Like every institution, Maseno was invested in the production of bodies—the right kind of body. The school administration often chose boys with bigger bodies to be prefects. They also believed that students from rural areas made better prefects than those from urban areas because they were supposedly more compliant to higher authority.

But nowhere was the practice of power as the production of bodies more evident as in the food regime instituted at Maseno.

Not only was the denial of food often used as a means of punishment, but prefects were served 'top soup' with every meal. Top soup was made from beef broth and tons of fat, and was believed to make prefects' bodies larger, stronger, and therefore better tools for domination. Top soup was considered a privilege at an institution where the rest of us ate boiled everything.

With a name belying the homoeroticism in a space full of homosocial anxieties, top soup tied might to right (*mwenye nguvu mpishe*). How food was prepared—whether straight up boiled or sautéed, garnished or served with weevils—and what it contained in the way of nutrients was therefore very political. During my time in high school we were more likely to rebel over poor quality food—and we did rebel—than we were over a beating (even when it landed one of our colleagues in the hospital). And yet food itself was a regime of violence.

*Punishment, then, was the production of bigger bodies for the domination of other bodies, and concomitantly the production of the very bodies to be dominated.*

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What the violation of torture did was produce our bodies as not-ours. Prefecture, as the form of power most prevalent in student life, was an embodied politic that deprived students of bodily autonomy.

Boys with big bodies (but who were not prefects) were often targets of the harshest punishments. Their growing bodies alone were threatening, and they had to be put in their place, often at the behest of being beaten by a group of teachers or prefects at once. They were routinely taken to the staff room so all teachers present could take turns in their torture.

We came to understand our maturing bodies as threats, and this threat as in need of management, because our growth always already constituted insubordination; simply for growing and existing, our

bodies were produced as in need of discipline and punishment to succeed both at school and out there in the world.

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I have been trying to come to terms with what 'remains' of the torture at Maseno. What was written—beaten, really—into the body remains in the mind, returning as frequent nightmares reliving beatings and humiliations. Yet what was written onto the body and into the mind was written also on the lay of the land, because gardening, farming, slashing grass and uprooting trees were often used as punishment tasks.

When I arrived at Maseno it was a verdant compound with many local tree species, abundant birdsong, and those cheeky little monkeys that stole your lunch if you turned away from your dish for too long. There were all manner of insects, too, most of which I had never come across before my time there, though my family lived a mere 26 kilometers away.

My relationship with that environment—as its custodian—shifted immensely as that environment became implicated in the punishment regime at Maseno. Most disturbing among these practices was assigning the cutting and uprooting of trees (with the rudimentary tools) as punishment, an arduous undertaking that would take a student such a prolonged period of time that those receiving this punishment often either woke up earlier or stayed up late after night prep to finish the work in the time allotted—adding sleep deprivation and disruption of studies to their 'discipline'.

The transformation of that lush ecology into an arena for hard labor markedly shifted my feelings toward taking care of the environment, a feeling that remained with me a long time. I know that might sound silly to some, but I now firmly believe that taking care of one's environment should never be used for punishment, neither at school nor in prison.

There were fewer trees at Maseno by the time I graduated (*my memories might be unreliable here, but we certainly uprooted more trees than we planted at Maseno*). It wasn't just students who'd been tortured in my four years there; the land had been punished as well.

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At Maseno prefects were called 'cops' and '*karaos*' by other students. We understood the penal imaginary as governing our relation with power. The speeches at both prefects' and teachers' assemblies were inundated with threats. Prefects threatened to 'clobber' anyone showing 'insubordination'. Teachers promised that any and all indiscipline 'will be dealt with thoroughly'. This, of course, is familiar language: you only have to listen to government officials like Interior CS Fred Matiang'i to realize the language of punishment has become our language of governance.

The baraza that was supposed to be a forum for students to speak openly and directly with school administration about our concerns was discontinued after, at the very first convening, students raised issue with corporal punishment by both teachers and prefects. The school administration allowed no other convention afterwards. In my four years at Maseno we had one baraza, and it was a non-starter because those in power were not willing to divest from torturing students. They believed there was no pedagogy without punishment, no learning without subjection, and students could not be trusted to have ideas about how their education should proceed.

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In writing this I have been trying not to get bogged down in the minutiae of it all. I know how this article will be read and circulated by some sections of the public. I can already hear all the 'accept

and move on'. I already know the derisive laughter, the kind we weaponized against those of us who, as early as primary school, had not learned how to not flinch and writhe and scream while getting caned. I know that I will be laughed at. I will be dismissed as weak, petty. I will be told there are more pressing issues.

And yet.

Years ago when Mashada online forums were still a thing, former students would frequently confront former prefects about their torture, years after the fact, highlighting the toll that remains. The Internet allowed this follow through, which happens because torture has a long afterlife. Punishment in schools constructs durable things. It positions the student a certain way and creates ideologies about subjectivity and power, resilience and toxic masculinity, [sex and sexuality](#), embodiment and sovereignty, subjection and governance. These are things we interact with every day.

These things remain.

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