



We, Too, Have Parents

By Wandia Njoya



Very rarely do I speak publicly about my family and my relationship with my father, because I am an intensely jealous daughter. I refuse to share my relationship with my father with the public, because our lives were public already, both due to my father's career as a church minister but also due to the political positions he took.

When I was young, I often used to be asked what it felt like to be a pastor's child. I would reply that I don't know, because I only know him as "Dad." I learned to do that from my mother who constantly refused the label "pastor's wife." She argued that that label was used to disregard the clergy as workers who needed to be treated decently because they too had families. Unlike the prosperity gospel churches, the PCEA sometimes treats clergy like TSC treats teachers, posting them at the drop of a hat with little consideration about what the relocation means for their families. So I learned from my mother to protect my relationship with my father.

But with his piece entitled "[Moi, the passing of a father figure](#)," Oyunga Pala has made me temporarily break the rule of privacy. His writing is a work of art that pierces through our intellect into our soul.

Oyunga argues that Moi's wounds are painful because they are father wounds. Moi presented himself as a father who disciplined us with violence because he "loved" us and knew that peace and unity were good for Kenya. Days after Moi's death, this narrative was repeated in the mainstream

media by people who were wise enough not to deny the atrocities of his regime. We must understand, they argued, that Kenyans are a disorderly lot (epitomized by the August 1982 coup), and Moi had to do what he had to do to maintain order for the Kenyan state.

There are two deeply contradicting tensions that Oyunga's piece highlights: intimacy and violence. Being a citizen of Kenya means constantly grappling with the state that is in our business, which hurts us so much, a phenomenon which Christine Mungai and Dan Aceda referred to as "death by a thousand cuts."

As Oyunga demonstrates, Moi's rule was characterized by intimacy, which was in turn cultivated by his ubiquity. Moi was in every aspect of our lives, not just administratively, but also at a psychic level, thanks to his workaholicism and a media that reported his every public appearance. Moi was so caring; he was the father who gave us children free school milk.

And this intimacy implies another emotion: inescapability, which Oyunga captures with the metaphors of "helplessness" and "entrapment." Moi was inescapable not only as a person but also as a role model, because in Oyunga's words, he became the alpha male who set the tone of fatherhood in Kenya. Because Moi was so dominant, men are implicitly doomed to become Moi in politics, as well as at home and in the workplace, despite what they may feel about Moi. Like the persona of Joe Crocker's song says, "Yes, I'm my father's son. I am inclined to do as my father's done."

The toxicity of such a situation becomes apparent when we think of the violence that accompanied this intimacy. In a normal relationship, intimacy implies validation. But in an abusive relationship, intimacy makes us experience shame instead of self-confidence. This would explain why, as Oyunga observes, our desire for justice is whittled down into a refusal to let go of the pain. And, unfortunately, this refusal has become all consuming, so we adopt a "victim mentality."

How do we get out of this toxic relationship?

In summary, Oyunga argues for new national intimacies, new rituals where we are not so personally invested in the ruling elites that they hurt us both physically and emotionally. These intimacies should be cultivated by rituals which force the ruling elite to "share the bitter herb of truth" with their victims. Also, we must remember what happened, because memory helps us understand "the circumstances that gave birth to those motives [of our offenders] so that we do not end up becoming what we hate."

It takes the village.

Oyunga's piece answered my bewilderment at the reactions to my father's and my own memorialization of Moi. As a child of a man whose humiliation by Moi is still exploited by the media for shock effect, people expected me to rant and cry about how bad Moi was, and not to do as Oyunga says, which is to understand the circumstances that created Moi. For taking that approach, I was told that I was suffering from Stockholm syndrome.

The same thing with my father. When my father explained that he had no grudge against Moi because he was aware he was going into battle, and that he won the argument for a new constitutional dispensation, an audience member asked him to stop sugar coating his experience and tell the truth about how much he had suffered.

Oyunga's piece helped me understand what upset people about our positions on Moi. Kenyans were upset that we were not emotionally invested in Moi as a father. For us, Moi was simply a politician and instrument of a colonial state. Why my father didn't see Moi as his father is something my father would have to explain. But for me, I can say that I never took Moi as a father figure because I had

my own father. The nature of my interaction with my father is complex enough not to have been supplanted by similar expectations of Moi.

And in contrast to the state which projected fathers as violent and infallible, my father is tender and vulnerable. When I was young, my friends used to get surprised when I would tell them that it was my father who explained to me things like why the church opposed FGM. "You mean you can ask your father such questions?" they would say in surprise. And my response was "you mean it's not normal to ask a father such questions?"

Sometimes my father and I disagree. Of course we do. But never do I doubt that he loves me, and he reminds me of that all the time. I have learned from him that vulnerability and weakness are strength because they make people elastic enough to bend in adversity, rather than make people brittle so that they break. That is why I feel no shame in naming weaknesses, either my own or those of others, to which Kenyans often react in shame by telling me not to blame others.

When Moi's thugs publicly beat my father, I simply grieved with him. I still do, that is why I look away from those pictures which Kenyans like to remind me about, as if invoking beatings automatically makes a profound political statement. But for me, those pictures are not about Moi's rule, brutality or betrayal; they are about my father's pain and commitment to justice.

When my father recently said that he won his battle with Moi, I believed my father because I see it all the time. I could not understand why others could not see it, and my husband suggested that maybe, they look at Dad and see no political position or wealth, so they can't see what victory Dad is talking about. Because my father does not fit the profile of extreme wealth and brutal power, he could not have won any battle. This means, as Oyunga suggests and has written about for several years, we must have a new Kenya, with new structures and new rituals that allow different and multiple models of masculinity and fatherhood which affirm us.

I would like to push Oyunga's argument further and suggest that we also need to break these father ties we have with the ruling elite. Politicians are not our fathers. They are not family. They are representatives who asked to be elected (or pretended to be elected) to serve us. We are not supposed to request them for services in the same way, as Jesus said, a child asks a parent for a loaf of bread. We need rituals to dismantle the intimate father role that politicians have snatched for themselves, distorted and dominated. Maybe more men would feel empowered to be fathers when they are not manipulated by the media and the state to compare themselves with the thieves in office.

We also need to either question the assumption that "fathers start out as heroes to their children," or else we define what to be a hero means. For one, I think that the assumption of the heroism of fathers puts too much pressure on fathers to be infallible. On the other hand, we need to remember that heroes belong to tragedies. Heroes are not the infallible, unrelenting and ubiquitous masculine figures that Hollywood, colonialism and Western theodicy have taught us to consider fathers to be. In tragedies, heroes may strong, but they are also fiercely committed and humanly vulnerable to the will of the gods and the ancestors, and to the people they love. In tragedies, heroes don't cover up their vulnerability. Their heroism is in their vulnerability.

So remembering history, as Oyunga suggests, is enacting tragedy, or the circumstances in which our fathers live. By remembering, we are able to tell if our fathers are victims or heroes. And right now, in the current global economic order, our fathers who should be heroes are being reduced to victims: of state brutality in the streets like the youth of Kisumu, at the airport like Miguna Miguna, or at the police stations for saving a child's life. Despite being hard working, men are humiliated with poverty to the point that they smuggle their own infants out of the hospital in the same way

Joseph smuggled Jesus to Egypt or Moses's mother put her son in a basket to float on the Nile to save her son's life.

Above all, we must perform rituals and ceremonies to remind ourselves, and the ruling elite, that they are not our parents or our fathers and mothers. If they want a claim to this title, they must be the village that supports parents to be parents, not destroy the economy and rewrite history to replace our parents with themselves.

A few years ago, I lamented that the Kenyatta family philanthropy had subjected us to the humiliation of having our parental roles performed by their children, as if we too were not parents who want to raise and fend for our kids like Muigai and Margaret have done. Today, the message is slightly different. We too, have parents. Oyunga's piece has helped me articulate why I am not bitter with Moi. Moi did not betray me as a father, because I already have one, and a cloud of witnesses who provide humane and affirming male role models better than Moi ever did.

By telling the story of my father, I am not advocating for every child to have a father like I did, the way the Euro-centric church demands of us by forcing nuclear families on us. I strongly believe in the village raising the child, precisely so that villages cater for the humanity of fathers. It is not an accident that in our languages, we talk of younger and older fathers (baba munyinyi/baba munene) instead of paternal uncles. In defining our male relatives that way, there is an implicit expectation that they are supposed to be a fatherly figure of support, whether or not our biological fathers step up to their responsibilities. In other words, we ideally have several fathers, not just a sperm donor who must be also god, king and priest at the same time.

Neither am I advocating for everyone to remember Moi the way I remember him. Every individual pain is different and is mourned differently. Rather, I'm affirming Oyunga's position that "our bigger task is to restore the broken social fabric that is devastating our communities and the disrupted social harmony in society." We need not be the children of Moi, but it will take memory, justice and social change to redefine our relationship with him.

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