

Campus or Fortress? How Terrorism-inspired Security Checks Killed Public Discourse at Universities

A few years ago, I was in a matatu along Riverside Drive trying to get to town, but the evening traffic was unrelenting. I decided to get off the matatu and walk through the University of Nairobi's Chiromo Campus, thinking that this might be a quicker way of making it to town in time for my evening beer.

At the gate, the security guard asked for my ID, which I promptly produced.

"A student ID, I meant," he told me impatiently.

"I'm a former student, student leader no less. I just want to walk through to avoid this traffic," I told him politely.

"It is past 5 p.m. Non-students are not allowed in the university compound."

It was final. Unbelievable that a year earlier, anyone would walk through any public university without security guards demanding their ID and wanting to know which part of the university they were going to. I humbly boarded another matatu with a bad FM radio station on and endured the traffic.

Garissa massacre: The watershed moment

Sometime in 2012, when random terror attacks became the norm, buildings in the central business district, government facilities, shopping malls and other places likely to be targeted by Al Shabaab installed walk-through metal detectors. Those that could not afford the expensive apparatus bought cheap metal detectors and hired young men and women to man their buildings. Nobody knows how the detectors are supposed to stop marauding, gun-wielding murderers. (Having witnessed the Westgate mall attack in 2013 and the Dusit attack in 2019, we now know that they cannot stop terrorists.)

Around that time, there were messages that used to circulate on social media

allegedly from Al Shabaab, outlining their targets, predictably the United Nations complex, government buildings, embassies of Western nations, shopping malls favoured by expatriates and the University of Nairobi.

Given the frequency of the attacks and their randomness, even the tough-headed University of Nairobi students grudgingly accepted the intrusive searches in the spirit of forestalling terror attacks. And any students who felt violated by the limitation of their liberties, the Garissa university attacks removed any doubt about the invulnerability of universities.

At dawn on Thursday, April 2, 2015, gunmen descended on Garissa University College and killed 148 students and injured another 79. It was the second deadliest terror attack since the 1998 Al Qaeda bombing of the US embassy in Nairobi that killed more than 200 people. The attack sent chills down our spines for its severity and cruelty.

After the Garissa massacre, universities became like military installations. Private security firm were deployed to man the gates and the buildings within universities. At the universities' main gates, security guards began searching cars and frisking students. Non-students must produce national IDs and explain what they are going to do at the university. They don't necessary keep these details, so you can cook up any excuse if you have ulterior motives. But the presence of the guards has definitely limited the foot traffic of the general public at universities.

Buildings that host the most important people within the university are now fortified, and senior university officials have security details that rival those of the President. I recently saw the Vice Chancellor of a top local university walking around the university. He had more than five bodyguards. The building where his office is located has no-nonsense security guards who ensure that they have taken your every detail before giving you the wrong directions to the office you need to go to. The apparatus and the many security guards who replicate their roles can give one a false sense of security.

In a way, the many security guards have made university less fun. Just a decade ago, when I was a student, the university was a free place for both students and the general public. If tired in town, you could walk to the university and rest on the seats or any of beautiful manicured lawns.

At the hostels, those from less fortunate backgrounds would host their relatives in

their tiny rooms as they worked or went to college somewhere in Nairobi. Public universities had a comradely camaraderie regardless of the students' backgrounds; there was an egalitarianism, a sense of belonging. Public universities had a tinge of elitism, but they were equally accessible to the sons and daughters of peasants and of wealthy folk.

Also, the university was a place of ideas. Several public forums used to be held at universities. Thinkers, writers, foreign dignitaries, and local celebrities came and freely interacted with us. There was no payment or the signing of some Google-doc for you to attend an event.

I remember a time when the Ghanaian writer Ayi Kweyi Armah visited the University of Nairobi in the mid-2000s. Barack Obama also came to the university when he was a Senator for Illinois. So did Hillary Clinton when she was US Secretary of State. Joe Biden visited when he was the Vice President of the United States. I remember when Chimamanda Adichie was brought by Kwani? in its hey days in 2008, when her magnum opus, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, had just been re-published by Kwani? Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Mugo also delivered public lectures at the university. These forums and the resultant public discourses made the university experience all the more exciting.

I remember a time when there were no restrictions to anyone who wanted to attend. But in the last few years, there have been fewer notable public forums at the university. There have hardly been any new or controversial ideas on language, literature, politics, economics or philosophy that have been debated here in recent times. Universities have not provided an environment where we can contextualise what is going on in the country, the continent and the world.

There is no shortage of thinkers, philosophers and scholars whose works students should be exposed to, from Mahmood Mamdani to Achille Mbembe, Wandia Njoya, Stella Nyanzi, Kwame Antony Appiah, Evan Mwangi, Sylvia Tamale and Mshai Mwangola, among others. But you are more likely to encounter their minds in a civil society setting or other forums than at a university. Ironically, private universities that were citadels of the bourgeoisie have fared better in hosting these thinkers, who sometimes can be a thorn in the flesh of the ruling class and the bourgeoisie.

Symbols of segregation

Security guards act as physical gatekeepers of free intercourse of ideas that should take place in universities. Security guards are a symbol of segregation. There is a reason a public university is protected and a public market like Muthurwa is not. And the nature of security searches is so subjective. There are places you can go in if you are driving a big car or wearing a suit. A young man with dreadlocks will have a lot of difficulties going into the same place.

Al Shabaab, like their counterparts Boko Haram, have contempt for Western education, which is why they target educational institutions. However, when these terror attacks began, universities had become commercial enterprises. Since university education became commercialised through self-sponsored programmes, universities began swimming in billions. It was, therefore, in their interest to ensure that Al Shabaab did not disrupt the business side of things. Remember, most self-sponsored students come from middle class or wealthy families. Hence their lives matter more. A visit to the hostels where regular students stay can reveal the amount of neglect and class divide in our institutions of higher learning. The influx of self-sponsored students meant that the already limited resources in universities were stretched beyond the limit.

Politics and corruption also had an impact on public forums that took place at universities. It is hard to host an anti-corruption activist with progressive ideas at a university that is embroiled in mega corruption scandals. It makes the management very uncomfortable. Since the time of Jomo Kenyatta and Daniel arap Moi, opposition politicians and human rights activists have always been uninvited to universities, as university managements have tended to align themselves with the government. It is not uncommon to see a university Vice Chancellor groveling with a team of tribal leaders at State House. Their presumed intellectual autonomy is at the mercy of the powers that be. Funding can be cut because of any perceived misdeed. This is not fiction; most universities have had their budgets cut because of some misunderstanding with the Ministry of Education. You can't blame the management at times, since self-preservation is natural. Why host a talk on human rights of young men succumbing daily to extrajudicial killings and risk budget cuts when you can award a political bigwig with a dubious honorary degree to attract funding?

The upshot of this unwillingness on the part of universities to open their spaces

for public discourses is that civil society organisations and the embassies of leading Western powers have taken over this role. The Goethe Institute, the Alliance Française and the British Council are doing what universities should be doing. This is not a bad thing in itself, as we need as many of these public forums as possible. However, with universities rarely hosting notable public events - save for entrepreneur forums where phony businessmen are allowed to sell their half-baked ideas anchored on neoliberalism - institutions of higher learning are losing much of their clout.

A local university erected a huge tower recently and the only events sanctioned to take place there are events that can bring money or improve the image of the university to the outside world. Its beautiful theatres cannot host the university's student travelling theatre group because literature is considered a lesser discipline than commerce (possibly the most useless discipline ever invented by universities, but the most lucrative).

Universities have robbed themselves the agency of owning ideas, and Kenyans now have to rely on Western institutional spaces (embassies or spaces funded by NGOs) to provide forums for the many needed discussions. Young minds in much need of intellectual nourishment beyond what is served in class are poorer for this.

Foreign institutions, for all their accessibility, are viewed by many as elite institutions, and some of us neither feel at home there nor free to express our opinions as we would in a village *baraza*. You must adjust to certain dialectical expectations of the hosts.

The life of a security guard

Security guards are the best symbol of inequality in Kenya. Kenya is one of the most unequal societies in the world. According to data from Oxfam (often debated upon), 8,300 (less than 0.1%) of the population own more wealth than the bottom 99.9%. The richest 10% earn on average 23 times more than the poorest 10%.

Security guards who work with security companies are among the poorest Kenyans. A casual conversation with them reveals that they mostly walk to work. (Some live in nearby slums that are always near the richer estates and communities.) A simple chat with them will show you how meaningless their job is. They survive on a meal day (usually dinner). The reason they try to strike a

conversation and become familiar with the people they frisk daily is so they can get a tip that they can use to buy a packet of milk and a KDF (a pastry favoured by the poor). Most have to moonlight, washing cars parked in spaces they man or running some petty errands for an extra coin to augment their meagre earnings that defy common sense.

What's worse, the security companies fleece them - not only are they badly paid, the companies even deduct the cost of their own uniforms from their salaries. There is no transport allowance or transport provided by the company; most security guards walk for hours to get to work. Not even Francis Atwoli, the flamboyant Secretary General of the Central Organisation of Trade Unions (COTU), has stood up for their rights.

When you scrutinise their work, you will find that they are a symptom of a badly diseased nation. At universities they symbolise the breakdown of the flow of ideas from the university to the public sphere. Public lectures were called so because the public could attend, but presently the public is not invited to universities. There are other gatekeeping methods, such as email bookings and notices that only students can access. Security guards best represent the barrier that has been erected. And at universities, they exist to remind us whose interests universities now serve. They are there in the pretext of terrorism, but everyone knows they are badly underprepared should a gunman strike.

It is the naiveté of the Kenyan elite that baffles me. We are all like the passengers on the Titanic. Privileged ones think they can escape the inefficiency of a government that has failed to provide basic services to the poor, from education to healthcare and security, by securing the services of private firms.

But if there is one thing that the Westgate, Dusit, Mpeketoni, Mandera and Garissa attacks have taught us, it is that a society only functions properly when the poorest and richest share the same privileges when it comes to basic services and public goods. Private schools and private hospitals will not fill the gaps in education and healthcare. Neither will private security companies fill the gaps in policing.

Geometric Circles, Zigzags and Waves: The Anatomy of a Kenyan ID

I.

Some years ago, I forgot my national ID in a jeans pocket before a wash and it's been steadily losing glue ever since. Now at least three corners of this sad rectangle have curled up to expose government paper with my zeros and ones. The card's many adventures inside the small purse that lives in my handbag are evident. The open border is freckled with dust, eyebrow pencil shavings and a dash of blue ink. *Imeona* life.

Fifteen years before that peeling skin, that festering wound, had formed, I stood against a classroom wall in Embu to get my picture taken. It was a hot day and the man in a lab coat didn't allow any of us to smile. We'd been advised to apply for our IDs while still in school to avoid the confusion and long queues at the chief's camps that would really be practice for the first day we'd vote. (Many years later I would visit this hectic space and secure a new ID only to promptly lose it.)

I'd written to my father, giving him the list of information needed by all Form Four students whose 18th birthday fell within a particular window. His reply arrived by Kenya Posta's express mail service and was written in red ink, greetings and all. Still visible on the top left column of the frayed card is the district of my father's birth. Listed below that are the division, location and sub-location. Each concentric circle was intended to lead to where my grandfather lay sleeping. My father, the cartographer, even let me know the exact village and chief at the time, in case that was needed too.

A part of me likes to believe that the countless M-Pesa agents and watchmen and landlords and companies that have accepted this ugly and, quite frankly, suspect

identification document all decided to show me a kindness. However, I'm also aware of the privileges that allow me to slip past. It is the security of a presumably harmless surname.

In 2013, I visited a cousin who worked as a dentist in Garissa. It was a largely pleasant nine-hour bus ride, but as we neared the township, our vehicle was stopped and soldiers boarded the bus. I watched with terror as they moved from seat to seat with bright flashlights, asking passengers to produce their IDs. I frantically pawed through my bag but as fate would have it, I only had my NHIF and job cards on me. My cousin had forgotten to let me know that I needed this crucial document. Perhaps it was an assumption that I would naturally have it on me. But at that time in my life, the fear of being pick-pocketed or mugged for my handbag was bigger than worrying whether anyone would question my Kenyan-ness.

That night, the police let me through. On the day I was leaving for home, the bus was stopped yet again. This time the soldiers used magnifying glasses and took their time scrutinising the tapestry of geometric circles, zigzags and waves. I had organized to have my ID couriered from home so I was able to board the bus after the first checkpoint. I had a seatmate, a young lady who was travelling with a small child and an elderly auntie. When we first sat down, she had the child on her lap and we shared polite conversation. At some stage, they disappeared to the back where her auntie was sitting. Later, the lady returned alone.

We got separated when we disembarked the first time but she made it through okay. That is, until we got to the second checkpoint. This time, the soldiers boarded the bus as on the night of my entry into Garissa. The waiting card that had served my seatmate well the first time wasn't enough for these soldiers.

"Unaishi wapi?" (Where do you live?) asked the soldier, as he examined the laminated piece of paper.

"Garissa," she responded.

"Basi kwa nini ulichukua hii kadi Wajir? Ebu toka kwa gari." (Then why was this card issued in Wajir? Get off the bus), he replied.

And that was the last we saw of her. The bus pulled out of the checkpoint amid a flurry of animated shouts in Somali by the other passengers. As I craned my neck

back towards the area we'd dropped them, I saw my seatmate being escorted towards a small *mabati* structure off the road. The conductor then came to sit by me and I asked him if the girl was coming back.

He said, "*Huyo tumemwacha kabisa.*" (We've left that one indefinitely.)

II.

"But the slave who sees another cast into a shallow grave knows that he will be buried in the same way when his day comes..." - Chinua Achebe, *The Arrow of God*.

III.

Mama, the last of Nyanya Kachui's nine children, grew up right across from the mosque her grandfather had built and in the area her father had governed as chief. The story goes that her surname, *Godoro*, came from a joke her father had made when, as a young man, he marvelled at the length of a city bridge and how many mattresses one could fit on it. Her mother's name was from her diminutive size as a child; she was as tiny as a chick, *gachui*.

Babu Mkuu Tairara died in Eastleigh.

Babu Godoro is buried beside him in Thika cemetery.

Mama was lain to sleep there too.

My other concentric circles.

If we traced my lineage through her, through them, if I was Salma, like my *shangazis* had wanted, would my tattered ID card still draw laughter if I'd given the district of their birth, listed the division, location and sub-location?

IV.

There's a co-mingling of stupidity and smugness whenever I present my battered ID. They remain even when I'm trusted to enter my details into one of those large black notebooks as a nice security lady goes through my bag. To borrow Brenda Wambui's term, that visitor's log, beloved by procurement officers across the nation and no doubt purchased for its endless ruled pages and that no-nonsense hardcover, is *speculative fiction* at its best. I am simultaneously Wanjeri and Carol

of ID 12345678 and neither of us is any safer.

V.

“The alarm at the Ruiru base of the Recce Company of the General Service Unit was sounded at 6 a.m. on Thursday last week. As they gathered, officers of the elite paramilitary unit were informed that a possible terrorist attack had been launched on Garissa University College by suspected Al-Shabaab gunmen.” - [Shame of slow response in 15 hour campus terror - Daily Nation](#)

“The Kenya Police Airwing plane was not immediately available to fly the Recce Company on the morning of the Garissa University College terrorist attack because it was flying a small group of civilians from Mombasa.” - [How police plane is misused for private mission - PHOTOS - Nairobi News.](#)

One hundred and forty-eight people lost their lives in Garissa on April 5th, 2015.

VI.

Every once in a while I think about my seatmate and what fate found her. I hope she came to no harm. I hope her waiting card was accepted. I hope she finally got an ID. I hope her son, if indeed he was her son, was allowed to continue practising his family’s faith without fear; allowed to form a *zebiba*, a black mark on his forehead from constant contact with his prayer mat, like that on the foreheads of my *wajombas*; allowed never to experience either the Kasarani concentration camp or the Wagalla massacre; allowed to mourn with dignity first and only in the face of the loss of two sons like it should have been for Haji Yassin Juma.

It is not enough to empathise with the persecuted and the dead but it is a start. It is a virtue that is sorely lacking. This grand project called Kenya calls on all of us to hold space for kindness—the kind that M-Pesa agents and watchmen and landlords and companies and soldiers should show to clumsy girls who carry worn tapestries of geometric circles, zigzags and waves.

Forget Al Shabaab, the Police Are the Real Terrorists in Kenya

Listen. I don't know how to write this. What am I saying even? A few months ago, my friend and I were at the Maasai Mbili Art Collective in Kibera, and the folks there were talking about attending reggae concerts in the city. "*Hiyo siku walituangusha wengi. Mimi hizi form za reggae siendi tena.*" (That day they struck many of us down. I don't go for reggae concerts any more).

Listen. I don't know how to write about this conversation that troubled me greatly, this conversation about *kuangushwa* at night after reggae concerts, this conversation about how these people doing the felling are merciless. Instead, in its place, here's a story.

Once, there was a boy. The boy played football and disliked avocados and went to school.

In Kisumu, how many times did the boy join a crowd of people running away from police bullets?

How many times were the boy and his classmates, while in the middle of a lesson, told to lie down on the corridors of their school, away from the windows, because of police bullets?

Listen. I don't know how to write this. Can you tell? Can you tell that I am struggling, *drowning*, to find the words, wrong or right, to say whatever it is I want to say?

Once, there was a group of children. The children were less than six years old, all in nursery school. One day, while they were in school, a group of police officers came into their school and tear-gassed the children.

This wielding of power like this and that on three-year-olds, on four-year-olds, on five-year-olds, is this not terrorism?

Actually, what is terrorism? My dictionary says, "Terrorism is the unlawful use of violence and intimidation, especially against civilians, in the pursuit of political aims."

So, these little kids, are they civilians?

In Kisumu, the main road running through the city, the road that divided the city neatly into two, used to be called Jomo Kenyatta Highway. Here's a story I heard. Do you know that one night, a group of people (or could it have been just one person?) rubbed off the words Jomo Kenyatta Highway so violently that from certain angles the words appeared to have been burned away? Now people call the road Bi Pendo Road. Samantha Pendo was a six-month-old infant bludgeoned to death in Kisumu by police on the night of August 10, 2017.

Is it a good thing that roads are named after babies killed because of terror, because violence was used against a civilian, against a baby almost too young to be a civilian, because some people somewhere were pursuing their political aims?

Then, the judiciary was told, "we shall revisit" by the president, but then hands were shaken, and this revisiting, me I don't know when it will happen.

I don't know many things. But sometimes I hear things. Did you hear about Caroline Mwatha, who was fighting for the victims of police violence in Dandora? *Ati* she died of an abortion. That's the statement. Anyway, what do we know? Trust, that's all we can do. We're told to trust the system. We are *wananchi* - children and heirs of the land.

I read that the Kenya Police was established by colonial governor Sir James Hayes Sandler in 1902, but didn't exist in its modern form until 1920 when Kenya became a colony. From the start, it was anti-African. The historian and journalist John Kamau describes it as "a tool for the settlers and administrators to enforce their will on Africans".

The Administration Police's mandate is a microcosm of this early anti-African attitude in Kenyan police work, seeing as when it was first established (it was known as the Native Police). Its mandate was to enforce the payment of taxes by the African populace, to control livestock movement, to provide forced labour for the coloniser, and to protect government installations. The village headmen stuffed the Native Police with local tough guys and bullies, *ma first body* as they would be called in Sheng, and these untrained recruits bullied the Africans into doing the things that the colonial administration wanted. Therefore, instead of protecting the locals and maintaining trust with them, the police force acquired a reputation as manifestations of the terror and violence of the colonial

administration.

While one would have expected that the attitude of the police force would have changed with independence, it did not. Frantz Fanon writes, "The colonised man is an envious man. And this the settler knows very well; when their glances meet he ascertains bitterly, always on the defensive, 'They want to take our place.' It is true, for there is no native who does not dream of setting himself up in the settler's place."

Thus, since, rather than destroying the colonial system, what Kenyan leaders desired at independence was to replace the coloniser. So they saw no need to reform the police force, the very system that propped up the colonialist. Since then, Kenya's police and security forces have been used as weapons of terror against the "natives" by the country's administrators,

Another friend and I, at a sleepover at her house, talk about this. "The police is being anti-citizen? That seems to be a narrow premise," she argues. "I would lean towards them being pro-state, and in this country, that often means anti-citizen."

We were not just splitting definitional hairs. Her characterisation of the police being pro-state actually points out the irony of something we all know - that police officers are underpaid, have always been underpaid, are overworked, and live in deplorable housing conditions. So why would they be strongly pro-state if raiding citizens was not the purpose of their existence?

A police force/service/whatever it is they insist on calling themselves ought to be pro-citizen, but this one of ours - where Kikuyu police officers are deployed in Nyanza, Luo police officers are stationed in Eldoret, Kigisigis police officers are sent to Mombasa and Mijikenda police officers work in Embu - is anything but. They are deployed in this way so that they don't form bonds with the civilians. When these bonds are formed, then the officers are transferred, especially immediately before elections when the administrators want to enact their little and big terrorisms on the native, and when we expect them to be so anti-citizen that we don't realise the wrongness in this. They are supposed to be serving you, not terrorising you.

If the police service/force/whatever name they insist on calling themselves is built on the premise of being pro-state and thus anti-citizen, do the sporadic acts of virtue performed by individual police officers even matter? These, my questions,

me I don't know the answers, I don't know whether my answers are right or wrong, or even whether it is my questions that are wrong.

How do we write about terror? *Mimi sijui*. I don't know.

Instead, here is a list of attacks that Wikipedia classifies as the major terror incidents in Kenya:

1. Nairobi bombing, March 1st, 1975 - 30 people killed.
2. Norfolk bombing, December 31st, 1980 - 20 people killed.
3. United States Embassy bombing, August 7th, 1998 - 213 people killed.
4. Kikambala Hotel bombing, 28th, November 2002 - 13 people killed.
5. Westgate Mall shooting, 21st September 2013 - 67 people killed.
6. Mpeketoni attacks, 15th June - 17th, June 2014 - At least 70 people killed.
7. Garissa University attack, April 2015 -147 people killed
8. Dusit D2 Complex attack, 15th January 2019 - At least 21 people killed.

Who updates this list, I wonder. Whose job is it to add the grisly details of these deaths to this list? Don't they know about Wagalla, when the Kenya government killed its own citizens in 1984? Here's what Wikipedia says about the death toll of Wagalla: "The exact number of people killed in the massacre is unknown. However, eyewitnesses place the figure at around 10,000 deaths."

Around ten thousand deaths, is that not terror? Or maybe because we read in the Bible that David killed tens of thousands so that's no longer terror? What is it called when one of the men who is said to have abetted (authorised?) the massacre in Wagalla is appointed the chairman of the commission to investigate the Wagalla massacre? His name was Bethuel Kiplagat. Is that what they call dramatic irony?

Listen, I'm not an expert in these things of terrorism, can you tell? I'm not an intellectual, I don't think solidly about these lofty things. Have you noticed that I'm quoting from Wikipedia? But here's a question my editor asks: Why does death by terrorism grip our psyche? Why does Al Shabaab frighten us so? Is it because it's a "globalised" death? Is it because vigils will be held and commissions of inquiry will be formed and presidents will make rousing

statements about the country's unity? Is it because terrorism is viewed as that committed by the other, the foreign, so that whatever the nationality of the individuals involved in the attacks, Al Shabaab is a foreign group against which we must all stand together?

Me I don't know. Me I just hear things. Like how I heard that in Mathare, cops have their criminal networks, networks from which they eat, but that once in a while one of their superiors goes on TV and promises action, and then their bosses want action, and these same cops look for people to kill, people whose deaths will be action in the war against crime, and more importantly, people whose deaths will not threaten the networks that benefit these officers of the law.

On 28th February 2019, a community dialogue was held at the Kayole Social Hall. Organised by the Kayole Community Justice Centre, in collaboration with the Social Justice Centre Working Group, the dialogue aimed at addressing criminality and police brutality. The dialogue was a follow-up to the Machozi Ya Jana community dialogues held in Kibera, Kawangware, Korogocho, Mukuru, Mathare, Njiu and Dandora in 2017. I sit in my house and follow the #KayoleDialogue hashtag on twitter. The Director of Public Prosecutions, Noordin Haji, and the Directorate of Criminal Investigations boss, George Kinoti, are speakers at the forum. Question: Of the 123 people killed by the police in the 2008 post-election violence (according to the Government of Kenya), how many police officers were prosecuted successfully for these deaths, these acts of terror? Answer: Zero.

Here's a story. The last one. A group of friends are having drinks somewhere in Nairobi's CBD. When we leave, I decide that I want to walk for a bit to clear my head. *Haiya sawa*, one of them says, *Tembea, but chungu this street and this street kuna makarao*. You can go, he says, but watch out, on this street and that one, there are cops.

Question: Shouldn't the one that terrifies you, the cause of the terror in the citizens, be considered the terrorist?

Accept and Move On: The Handshake's Hollow Cure for Decades of Communal Loss and Grief

In the year 2003, when I was a second-year student at Kenyatta University, news of Dr. Odhiambo Mbai's assassination broke. It was a time in Kenya when political tensions around constitutional amendments were rising like dark ominous clouds, engulfing the national psyche.

Dr. Mbai was the opposition's lead in the negotiations that were taking place around the new constitution. It was a quiet day at Kenyatta University before a loud war cry tore through the morning air. Someone must have heard from the news on the radio or watched breaking news on television in the common room that Dr. Mbai had been murdered.

Upon hearing the news, we ran out of our lecture halls onto Thika Road, blocked it, and exploded our anger on innocent unsuspecting motorists. Thika Road was our coliseum, a place where we found some relief from the bloody plays we had with Kenya's riot police. We needed to be heard by our government, and we were following a script that the government had taught us. To survive, one needed to be faster, more ruthless and more efficient than a government that took pride in its monopoly of corruption and brutality.

In the next few days, Thika road would be full of all sorts of debris, blood and tear gas smoke. We wanted to know why Dr. Mbai was killed, and who was responsible. We would have not protested, but Kenya being a place where justice is as scarce as life-saving medicines in public hospitals, we needed to register our anger somehow.

Most of us did not care much about the details of the constitution. It sounded like a bulky document, too complex and beyond the comprehension of the common Kenyan. It was, like any political tussle, defining the fault lines along tribal affiliations. My major attraction to it was that Raila Odinga and many other progressives were behind it. And that Dr. Mbai had paid with his life for it. And

that two of my comrades, one from the same hostel as me, had been shot during these riots. In the midst of all the tear gas and gunshots, I knew I was living some realities that I had only watched on television.

In the following weeks, we succeeded in forcing the university to provide us transport to Mbai's funeral. At the funeral, we were met by multitudes of people mourning in confusion, anger and loss. Many had walked on foot from afar, in the hot tropical sun, to join in the mourning. I am not sure if these personal sacrifices were inspired by a strong sense of connectedness to the struggle or some form of communal kinship.

At the funeral, I ran into my younger brother, who had traveled from Moi University. There was something eerily familiar at this funeral. I felt like I was walking on a path I was aware of, one that my grandparents and parents had walked before. It was one darkened with an engulfing sense of loss and helplessness of an entire community.

I went home later that day and I sought out my grandfather. As an ardent supporter of multi-party democracy, and by extension Jaramogi Odinga and then Raila Odinga, I wanted to hear his thoughts. I was also seeking comfort in his eyes that had experienced similar pain. We would take turns swimming in the sea of communal grief. He counted on his fingers and toes the numbers of young, industrious and pioneering men from the Luo community who had been assassinated since the community migrated with Odinga into the opposition. This decision would start a quest for power and democracy, a quest that would turn the community into a hunting ground for a bloodthirsty government.

Prior to Mbai's death, the concept of being a Luo in Kenya, though occupying most of my early childhood, was abstract. I knew we had issues with the government and we were paying a steep communal price for it. My young mind could glean from the heated political discussions in our household that Luos were engaged in perpetual struggle with powers that were perceived to be the Government of Kenya. I was also aware that prominent members of the Luo community were under active persecution.

In this environment, it was a burdensome task reconciling my national identity with my ethnic identity. Tension was always in the air, in the daily news bulletins,

in the local dailies. It was dangling precariously in our household too, ready to drop at the dinner table and explode into emotional political diatribe. I could feel the tension in my father's vociferous lamentations about the systematic exclusion of Luos from the national government. The people in the government were eating and we were poor. Our time would come. Before that, we needed to consolidate all efforts behind Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, and Raila Odinga thereafter. The two were the only anointed vehicles for our economic and political emancipation.

I knew that efforts at consolidating an entire community were met by ambivalence in some sections. The debate about opposition politics being a Luo agenda or the Odinga family's ambition was a topic that was approached with utmost care, lest one slide and fall into the unwanted pile of traitors. This was a no-go zone unless one wanted to pry open community scars, like Tom Mboya's assassination. This debate also always ended with someone yelling the word traitor at another person. The same word, traitor, was yelled in our household whenever a Luo accepted a cabinet appointment from President Daniel arap Moi during the infamous one o'clock news bulletin on KBC.

I knew the region we occupied, the vast Luo Nyanza that straddles the shores of Lake Victoria to the sugarcane belt, was deliberately marginalised. The roads were broken, the hospitals bearing the greatest weight of malaria and HIV were subjects of justification by NGOs for grants to save the people. Kisumu residents, seated on the shores of an expansive lake, were thirsty for liberation and for clean water to drink.

One of these traitors was Ojwang' Kombudo. When Kombudo expressed support for Moi - an action that required public prostration with effusive praises lathering on Moi - he became a traitor. His support for Moi introduced the community to the good life that came with support for Moi, KANU and the government - his constituents in Nyakach enjoyed a short period of piped water and electricity. Like a pimp, Moi had his hand firmly on the Kenyan cookie jar, opening it to dish goodies to his cronies, with the most subservient getting the most, including opportunities to loot public funds.

Kombudo did not last long. In 1992, a wave of opposition gripped Luoland to the last man. Denis Akumu from Ford-Kenya replaced him. President Moi got into a fit of rage, sent government people in uniform to remove water pipes, including the ones that were at my grandfather's gate. Electricity poles were not spared either.

Once again, like a political pimp, Moi and his government were reminding the Luo community of the costs of supporting opposition. The remnants of broken pipes and vandalised water points, including one just near my grandfather's homestead, serve as a reminder of the costs of voting against the government of the day.

In addition to marginalisation, there were deaths too. The first one I learned of was that of Argwings Kodhek. (I had an uncle named after him though I did not know the weight of memory that the name carried.) I came to learn of its significance listening to the songs of Gabriel Omolo, a popular Luo musician. In a deep sonorous voice, with each beat punctuated with pain, Gabriel mourned Kodhek. As if his lyrics could bring Kodhek to life, Gabriel pleaded with Kodhek's killers to let Kodhek enjoy the fruits of his toil. It did not help that my grandfather played this song every other weekend before gazing deeply into the landscape of Nyakach - a landscape at the mercy of soil erosion, its nutrients washing away helplessly, just like the Luo community that was getting wiped out by the ferocious forces of multiparty politics and repression.

This would all end. There was a religious conviction that all these sorrows would be magically washed away when one of our own got into power. It was, therefore, imperative that the community united to the last man in support of the Odingas.

The communal wound from Argwing Kodhek's mysterious death had not yet healed when six months later, Thomas Joseph Mboya fell to an assassin's bullet in Nairobi. Mboya's star shone far beyond Kenya. His wide and deep influence was evident in his friendship with influential Americans, such as John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. He was also the first Kenyan to grace the cover of *Time* magazine in 1960. His assassination, therefore, not only sent shockwaves around the country, but internationally as well.

Within Kenya, Mboya's assassination sent a chilling reminder to young ambitious people that no one would be spared when Jomo Kenyatta's presidency was threatened. My grandfather bemoaned how Mboya's rich connections, as well as his prominence in the government and abroad, could not save him. Mboya's death continues to be one of the biggest "what if" moments for the Luo community. What if he had lived? What if he had never gone to that pharmacy on Government Road (now known as Moi Avenue)? What if he had joined the opposition with Odinga? The threat was real, whether in government or in opposition. It did not matter where one's star shone. It only mattered that its shine did not threaten the

status quo.

The Luo community persisted after these assassinations. There was a shared belief that Kenya needed change in leadership and assassinations would not break their zeal. The differences between Jaramogi and Jomo Kenyatta continued to fester like a cancerous wound. Four months after the assassination of Tom Mboya, Jomo Kenyatta made a two-day historic official tour of the region, ostensibly to familiarise himself with development projects there. The Luo community, still mourning Mboya, rebelled. Kenyatta's guards reacted violently, shooting dead 11 protestors.

The extent of communal loss between January 1969, when Argwings died, to Mboya's assassination in July of the same year and the Kisumu massacre three months later pointed to a systematic attempt at violent subjugation of the Luo community. The occurrences of those days are passed from generation to generation as a slow and painful narration of how the government killed Mboya, then came to our town and killed more when all we needed was to be left alone.

This year marks fifty years since those fateful events. The people who lived through that period, like my grandfather, have very hardened souls and a very strong suspicion of the government. It does not help that during each election cycle, regions occupied by the Luo community become over-policed and over-militarised and young people of the community become fair game when elections results are disputed.

I was only six months old when the coup failed. A good number of the soldiers involved were from Nyakach, my maternal grandfather's home. And their misguided ambition had thrown the community into the dark underbelly of Kenyan politics.

As expected, the failed August 1982 coup entrenched government paranoia of young Luos. President Moi's government essentially implemented systematic exclusion of young people from Luoland and other communities perceived to be sympathetic to the opposition from recruitment into the police and armed forces. This was a big blow to the quotidian life of the community. In a struggling economy with a rapidly growing population, the armed forces and the police provided sources of income and employment to healthy young people. By

blacklisting young men and women from the Luo community, the government imposed a form of official economic depression on this community as an additional tool aimed at forcing them into political subjugation.

There were other deaths of note at the time when Raila was placed in detention after the attempted coup. The most prominent of these in the mid-1980s was that of the Gem MP, Horace Ongili. The immediate former area MP, Otieno Ambala, one of the leading suspects, was arrested and charged with the murder along with six other suspects. However, after a few months in jail, he collapsed and died of a heart attack. There was a feeling within the community and across the country that he too was killed to shield the real killers.

Nonetheless, this tragedy robbed the Luo community of two prominent leaders within a span of six months. This was a scary *déjà vu* moment, since Kodhek and Mboya had been assassinated approximately six months apart. The community felt that the government was eliminating prominent Luo males or imprisoning them in order to subdue the community's will to fight. The government seemed to be reading from the same script that the colonialists used against the Kikuyu and other communities fighting for independence in Kenya.

In the early 1990s, as the opposition was gaining a very strong foothold in western Kenya, Dr. Robert Ouko's star started rising within President Moi's government. Dr. Ouko's presence in the government meant that Moi had started looking at Luos in a slightly better light. He began visiting schools and dishing money in big brown envelopes during harambees and to delegations that visited him at State House. The benefits of "having our own" closer to the presidency was becoming evident.

This did not last long. In February 1990, Dr. Ouko was abducted from his home and killed in one of the most gruesome cases Kenya has ever witnessed. The Luo community's grief was palpable. I was only eight years old and I remember violent riots in the streets of Kisumu. I remember my dad pacing, gesturing and talking with my uncle, who was a university student then, late into the night, angry at something. All universities were closed as rioting students burned their grief and rage in bonfires of lament. When Moi decided that he would forcefully attend Ouko's funeral accompanied by hundreds of armed riot police officers, university students [chanted](#) to Moi, "You killed him, you burnt him, now eat him!" Another prominent Luo, Hezekiah Oyugi, who was the Minister for Internal Security, died

in mysterious circumstances two years later, in June 1992. Ouko and Oyugi, like Mboya, were not spared, despite the fact that they were staunch supporters of the government.

In 2007, I directly witnessed loss in the form of post-election violence resulting from disputed elections. My job as a public health researcher in Kisumu exposed me to untold community suffering. In the free medical camps that had been organised by local NGOs, men and women, thousands in numbers, would show up with bodies broken and maimed by bullets. It was like a scene from what I imagined a war-torn country to be. I did not talk about these horrors with my grandfather because they overwhelmed me. They were close, inescapable and frightening.

During the 2017 elections, not much had changed. The violence continued, with over 300 people, even young children, dying from police violence. Several hundreds were shot and maimed too.

A couple of weeks before the August 2017 elections, Chris Msando, an ICT Director at Kenya's election commission, was abducted, tortured and killed before his body was dumped in a forest. Again, there was another chilling reminder that there was a price to pay by anyone who was perceived to be an impediment to the status quo. This was almost fifty years after Kodhek and Mboya's assassinations, and targeted killings have not stopped.

One of my early childhood memories is when Raila Odinga was released from detention in 1988. As a child, I was fascinated by my grandfather's surprise that Raila did not die in prison. Most people, having known how ruthless Moi's regime was, had expected Raila not to survive jail. I could sense massive euphoric relief when Raila walked out of detention alive. My grandfather regaled me with tales of how Raila's magical powers saved him. How he could turn into a fly on a wall in State House and listen to plans to assassinate him. They said he would then fly back to prison and surprise his killers with his knowledge of their plans beforehand, throwing them into total confusion.

Then there was the swearing-in ceremony of 2018, and the lack of charges against Raila when others like Miguna Miguna continue to be forcefully exiled. Was this also due to Raila's magical powers? Or was it a result of a savvy

politician leveraging fanatical support from the community as insurance and a bargaining chip for personal political ambitions? This is where the lines get blurred. When we cannot clearly delineate the boundaries of communal ambitions and individual ambitions, it is hard to tell what we are giving our lives for.

And at the end of the road, when we weigh all the losses - both physical and emotional - and place them on a scale, and then measure them against the recent handshake and the public display of brotherly love between Raila and Uhuru, do we see a perfect balance? No, there is no balance. And there will be no restitution. Not even an apology or acceptance of blame for all these deaths.

The weight of communal loss is always borne privately, silently and sometimes in shame by the poor. There are no monuments that can adequately capture all the losses the Luo community have experienced in the last fifty years.

And what if the community would have known that the path to this political and economic utopia could be forged by a handshake? Would the community have protected their youth better? Would they have stopped them from the suicidal choices of fighting with memory, anger and stones on sisal slings? Standing bare-chested before barrels of Kalashnikovs held by government-sponsored killers?

But then again, what options did we as a community have? At the end of the day, we are all Kenyans, burdened by our peculiarities, such as the ability to accept anything and move on to the next tragedy.

That is what happened after the handshake - everyone put a bandage on old and fresh wounds. The magical mantra "accept and move on" is being repeated again and again until everything looks like a distant memory.

But I can't stop knowing what I know.

'His Odour Seemed to Be

Everywhere, and It Made Me Gag': Breaking the Silence Around Sexual Violence

When it happened the second time, I felt marked. I believed that the darkness would always lurk around me and people would sense the vulnerability.

Every time someone brought the topic up, I would cringe on the inside, guilt would trail my thoughts and gnaw at my soul. But that wasn't the worst. I felt shame. I was ashamed of something that wasn't my fault. I have been on the brink of losing my sanity more times than I can recall. I didn't know anyone who had gone through what I had gone through, so in my mind they couldn't relate. All I wanted was to go back, maybe make different choices, maybe the outcome would be different. I was stuck, frozen in time. But looking back now, my choices had little to do with what happened.

Prior to the first incident, a family acquaintance had given me an article cut out from a newspaper about date rape. I was turning 17 in a few days. I guess she figured I would need it; maybe it was a premonition. I skimmed through it, and would remember what it said a few days later.

I was living in Eldoret with my dad, having finished high school as I waited to join university. My dad had gone for a workshop for a week and requested I help him out with a few things at the office while he was away. I had met this man earlier in my dad's office and he had introduced us. I would run into him many times after that, in the lift or at the supermarket, and we would chat briefly and part. In December he came in my dad's office to consult on something, and since my dad was not around I offered to help. Halfway through our conversation, as I searched for some file or other, he asked what I was up to that evening. I had another engagement, so I declined his offer for a date but asked him if we could reschedule for Thursday and he agreed.

He picked me up in Eldoret town at half past five. He had already chosen a place that I had no objection to, despite it being far off. I had known him for close to five months. He was friendly and cheerful. We chatted about his new job and my expectations of university, about the books we were reading. We ate, had juice,

and at around a quarter to seven we headed out for him to drop me home, well within my curfew time. I had just turned 17 three days before.

On our way back, he asked if he could stop by his place. There was nothing sneaky about his character, so I didn't think anything was off. I entered his house, and sat there, clueless really, until he came back from the bedroom in boxers. I froze at the thought of what was about to happen. I remember thinking with utter and sudden dismay that the charade was over; he was no longer the charming guy I had known. He was aggressive and relentless at having his way, fumbling with my clothes. I said no, many times, but my pleas seemed to fuel his aggression. I remember thinking about how short it would probably last, and that I would soon be home and forget everything. But I also knew that things would never be the same again if this happened, and so I kept fighting him off, knowing that there was a very slim chance that he would stop.

He raped me, and I thought it was over. But my nightmare was just beginning. He lifted his body from mine, mumbled something and went to the bathroom. I sat there for seasons, coiled up, shaking. I didn't know which emotion to feel first - disgust, shame, guilt, anger, anger, anger...I fixed up my dress and took what was left of who I was, and walked to the door. He came out of the bedroom, and drove me home. I should have run, or screamed, or lashed out at him. But I didn't. I was afraid of what might happen if I did.

And he did not fit the description of a rapist. He was not a stranger; I had known him for a while. As I showered at home that evening, I wished I had claws. His odour seemed to be everywhere, and it made me gag. It was like I had carried him with me. I lay there in the dark; it felt like an eerie living phantasm. I wanted it to stop. The agony and desolation was beyond what I could bear. I had never felt that powerless.

My dad had been misdiagnosed with hypertension a while before, and he still had a stack of pills in the house that he now never used. I knew they had the effect of slowing your heart rate, and I figured if I took enough of them my heart would slow down until it came to a complete stop. I'm one of those people who generally have a phobia of tablets, pills, medications of all kinds. But this time I didn't need a nudge. I took a handful of them, and as I lay on my bed, within minutes I was spaced out, quiet, waiting for the end.

I had never thought of the world as ideal; neither did I think of it as that cruel. Of course I had heard stories; that so-and-so was “allegedly” assaulted or raped. Even in our language we always give power and the benefit of doubt to the perpetrator, and we reserve our default judgment for the victim – her demeanor, her character, it’s always her choices that resulted in rape. For the longest time after this I was deluded into thinking that there were factors that predisposed me to assault. I knew nothing about the experience of sex; I was a virgin. The information I had was abstract, basically warnings about the effects of premarital sex. That was all, and with just that information, how was I to presume that I could be assaulted? The assumption was that abstinence was a choice.

But even my first kiss was an unwanted one – a wet, sloppy, detestable, dreadful act. I couldn’t report it to anyone because I was ashamed, and worse, who would believe me? Maybe it was my fault. He was a hardworking man, active in church, and I felt like I was not going to ruin reputation because of an assault. I actually thought he felt sorry and that is why he stopped before it went any further. I convinced myself that leaving it in the past was ideal. Now I think of how many young women might have met my fate with him because I didn’t take an action against him. The guilt still breaks me.

After I took the pills, I woke up the next day feeling hazy and run down. The memory of the previous evening was so unreal that even the sun was numbing and hurt my eyes. I send my dad a message telling him I was ill so I could not go to the office. But he told me he needed me to send a parcel to Nairobi. So I showered and dragged myself to town, trying not to pass out. Just as I was about to get into the lift, I saw him. For a moment I froze. I knew I could not tough it out with him in the lift and so I ran for the stairs, running hard until the fourth floor and only stopping to catch my breath when I was in the office, the door locked behind me.

Over the next few months, I worked hard at trying to forget what had happened, suppressing any memory I associated with the assault, until it almost felt like it never happened as I refused to believe it had happened. But the second incident unearthed everything. I felt denuded, and I didn’t realise how much of a toll it had been taking on my mind to hold it in for all that long.

I was at the University of Nairobi, studying what I loved, and everything was on course. It was the second year of my study, the second semester in late January,

and classes had not fully started so we had lots of free time on our hands. Esther, my roommate, and I had gone to the graduation square for some fresh air, feeling guilty that we had spent the day indoors alternating between sleeping and watching movies. It began drizzling so we started to walk back. I ran into a friend just before the tunnel that passes under Uhuru Highway; we had not seen each other for a while, since before we closed school for Christmas.

Esther was not well acquainted with him so she excused herself, leaving me behind. It was a little bit past seven, and not very dark - sunset comes later in January to March in Nairobi, so it was still twilight. As we took cover from the light drizzle, reminiscing at how we had spent Christmas, he mentioned a comedy series he had, which I was happy to check out. He even offered to upload it on my flash disk, and as we walked up to his room I grumbled about the how long the flight of stairs was. We got into his room and he locked the door behind him. That wasn't unusual in student rooms - we all did it to avoid random people barging in. There was always that crazy student moving up and down the hallways. By now the rain had intensified. We rarely experience such a downpour in January; it is typically the driest, hottest month of the year. Maybe that should have been my cue that this wasn't going to be a normal evening. I sat on his bed as he scrolled through his laptop.

Out of nowhere he tried to kiss me, and I quickly rebuffed him. But there was this look in his eyes; he definitely did not take well to rejection. Maybe I shouldn't have been so curt. He shifted suddenly from being friendly to purely aggressive. He threatened to call his friends, which was really a threat of gang rape, adding I would be doing myself a favour if I agreed to just him.

My mind couldn't fathom it. I could not think of a life after that. So I pleaded, too scared to scream as I didn't know who might hear me or come in, or worse, whether I might agitate him even more. He tried taking off my tights as he undid his pants. And then, maybe he got tired, or he changed his mind with all my fighting and squirming. He stopped, sat there and stared at the wall. I was afraid to move or even breathe. After what seemed like an eternity, he turned to me and apologised. He opened the door and insisted on walking me back to my room. But I just ran, and ran, and ran.

For the next few days I felt like his shadow was always trailing me. I was scared to go to classes as I had to go through a route that was next to his hostel. Again, I

told no one. The fear of being ashamed made it even harder. Silence was preferable to being called a slut.

This time I couldn't push it away. It triggered everything, and hit hard like a mudslide. It bore a hole into my soul and my sense of security. I kept up appearances, got better at dry laughs and feigning interest as I barely held on, crying myself to sleep for almost three months.

As days went by, I was hardly making it through the day. I stopped going for lectures. I know how it feels to not be dead yet not feel alive. I knew it had reached a critical point when I walked into traffic and it was the screeching of cars that brought me back to reality. When I got back to my room, I googled places I might find help, and I did find one place somewhere in Upper Hill. I booked a session that Friday, but ended up having only one session out of the five that were prescribed. Each cost Sh2,000, and even that was a student discount from the usual Sh3,500, I couldn't afford all those sessions unless I talked to my parents to chip in, something I couldn't do because it would have risked them knowing what had happened.

I instead enrolled in a programme on sexual and reproductive health rights at the Young Christian Women's Association (YWCA) next to the university. That was my saving grace. There I met Camilla who took us through the programme. She opened up about going through rape. I no longer felt isolated. I spent a lot of time crying it out.

At the end of the session, I talked to a group of young girls about consent and sexual violence. I had more than fifty notes with questions on them, and that's how I got to know about three other girls who had been raped. The statement that stood out was: "I am embarrassed and ashamed."

One of the girls had been raped during the last school holidays. It happened on a day when she had not finished up some work that her mum had left for her to do. So when her mom returned, she was furious and wanted to hit her. The girl ran out of the house, into the darkness. She hid, terrified, trying to figure out her next move.

Then someone grabbed her, pinning her down in the thicket, tearing off her clothes. He raped her, and when he was done, he walked away like nothing had happened. She lay there, bleeding and overwhelmed.

She limped home, nauseated by the experience. Her mom is a nurse so she figured she would know what to do. But her mother looked at her torn clothes, and her tear-stained face, and instead of comforting her, shamed and berated her. She told her to shower and to go to the health facility alone the next morning, and not to mention her mother's name - she did not want to be known as the woman whose daughter had been raped.

When she went back to school, she was traumatised. She began experiencing nightmares. Thankfully her friends noticed and informed the teacher in charge of counselling. I hope she and the other two girls get the help they need.

Sexual violence is about power. Men's sexual desires are not uncontrollable. My experiences, and those of so many others like me, are the result of socialisation that makes boys feel entitled to girls' bodies. That encourages silence and compliance in girls.

The conversation around sexual abuse and mental illness needs to shift; the stigma makes it a shameful secret that has to be hidden. Young girls and boys need to be talked to about consent and sexual violence. It has to be a priority, not an afterthought.

During orientation week when I joined university, there was a day they had mentioned drug and alcohol abuse, but no one talked about sexual violence. Maybe they had planned to do so the next day, but then a strike got in the way.

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

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 Nairobianness. My grandfather spoke to us in Lwischwa, 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 fixing 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?

No African Women Allowed: Equality in the Age of Terrorism

Before the age of terrorism, security guards were the bane of my life. It goes back to my youth. When I was a young woman, getting into a hotel in Kenya with my dignity intact was never guaranteed. I was eighteen years old when a watchman first followed me to interrogate me. When I stopped, he rudely asked me what I wanted at the hotel and proceeded to accuse me of being a prostitute. I remember being astounded at his audacity and wondering how he could mistake me for a prostitute since I wore glasses.

Over the years I became accustomed to being harassed and humiliated by watchmen as I tried to access hotels and restaurants. The coast was the worst. Here, even being an employee of the United Nations did not spare me, despite the fact that it was clear to all that I was the organiser of a particular workshop or

conference at a particular coastal hotel. I was a young African woman and so for the security personnel at these hotels, I could only be a prostitute.

I often watched as grubby white backpackers, wearing *pata pata* slippers on their cracked dirty feet, were ushered into hotels denied to me by watchmen wearing fake smiles so wide their mouths were at risk of being ripped apart. Later I found out that these watchmen were being purposefully malicious. They knew the sex workers and had arrangements with them, allowing the women to conduct their business unhindered – for a fee, of course.

So forgive me as I crow at the new security dispensation that has made everyone a security threat and which limits access to public spaces in equal measure to everybody, black, white, male, female, young, old. This is security equality. Terrorism has given these establishments and their security operations “real” danger to pursue. An informal poll I conducted amongst a few young African women shows that there really has been a shift in hotels and other establishments, and security guards no longer police their presence quite as insistently – you won’t be singled out as a woman so explicitly as was the case in the past.

This curious “equality in the age of terrorism” started after the August 7, 1998 United States embassy bombings in which over 200 people were killed and over 5,000 were injured in nearly simultaneous truck bomb explosions in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. But even after the horrors of the 1998 bombing, the checks were still hasty and haphazard, and many of us still chose when to comply and when to ignore them. Considering my previous history with security guards, I was especially rebellious in retaliation for the harassment I had endured when I was a powerless young woman. I frequently refused to submit to security checks.

But then something happened on December 31st, 2011, and seemingly overnight, Kenyans began to religiously comply with the expanding security protocols. I was no exception. I credit a young woman named Rebecca Kerubo, a security guard for this transformation. This is how it happened.

It was New Year’s Eve, 31 December 2011, when Nancy Baraza became the new Deputy Chief Justice (DCJ), the first woman to hold such a lofty post in Kenya. On that day, the DCJ walked up to the security desk at the Village Market, an upmarket mall, and proceeded to engage in an inexplicable act of “abuse of

power". The Deputy Chief Justice, who is charged with a supporting role in upholding the rule of law in the country, allegedly pulled the nose of a security guard called Rebecca Kerubo, threatened her with a gun and also purportedly instructed Kerubo thus: "You should know people!" a phrase that made its way into popular parlance. All this because Kerubo had the temerity to insist that the DCJ submit herself to being searched like all other mortals as she entered a city mall. The DCJ lost her job.

Nancy Baraza felt herself above a routine security check, and now because of Rebecca Kerubo, I and most residents of Nairobi have become very well behaved. When approaching the security detail at the entrance of a building, we stop and offer ourselves for the search even before we are asked.

After the Kerubo affair (or the Baraza saga), we understood that a female security guard may not have the ability to protect us from much, but she does have the power to take us down. We understood that a woman who over time had garnered some power of her own, through hard work and connections, could easily lose everything. For a woman, there are no second chances.

The latest high profile terrorist attack that took place at the DusitD2 hotel complex on January 15, 2019 has again led to additional layers of security. Several establishments have since added sniffer dogs to their security.

These layers of security are not without costs. One of the things I have noticed over the years is how much my relationship with Nairobi has changed. I used to own Nairobi and roamed large swathes of the city. A visit to a relative in Buru Buru could be followed by a trip to watch a movie in Westlands and end with a party in Karen - all on the same day. But today security concerns and traffic jams restrain my movements to a few neighbouring locations and it is now not surprising when I go six months without visiting the central business district. It has become easier to travel outside of the country than to visit some parts of this city.

But what does the future hold when there is already a generation who do not know a world without the threat of terrorism and the security consequences it has brought with it? My generation was marked by the threat of HIV/AIDS and its import. At the height of the epidemic, 700 people died every day.

But change did come. Those of us who escaped by changing how we approach

sex, or by just being lucky, grew up and stopped being in the risky age cohort. Perhaps even this threat of terrorism and the security apparatus it has spawned will end someday.

Dangerous Abroad

By Sitawa Namwalie

I left the shores of my own safe home,
To wander far and wide,
A ship adrift in foreign storms
In search of new adventure
Out of the blue from winding queue,
I alone am called.

"Yes you, madam just follow me,"
"We want a word or two,"
"We won't be long," the woman said
She smiled her mouth stretched wide,

I stepped aside and followed swift,
Quite curious now to play this game
To see where it would lead.
And soon enough with little fuss the two start interrogation,
A sharp barrage of questions, to maximize intimidation.

"Where are you going Madam?"
"Where have you come from Madam?"
"What were you doing there Madam!"
"And why Madam!"

I looked at those two and chose my attack.

I decided to purr like a cat.
And hid my claws for grand effect,
I must confess, I was going to play.
"Giving a keynote address at a conference"
I spoke with divine composure.

"What do you mean Madam?"
The man asked.

"I was the guest of honour,"

I followed kindly enough with two new questions

"Are you surprised?

Don't I fit your bill?"

I now spoke motherly sweet,

"Is it my height, or perhaps my weight?

Or maybe my hair or rather that it's not there?

"I know,"

I explained some more.

"I cut it off, first in girlish pride.

Only to expose a pleasing shaped head,

I chose to keep it,"

See it in profile, at its very best.

I urged them both,

"But don't touch!

That's out of bounds, I will not abide your hands on my head."

The woman spoke up.

"In these days you can't be too careful,

The pattern has changed,

The world is upside down,

Women have joined men in their criminal ways,

They are shooting and killing and robbing some banks!

Now, we make no assumptions."

She blinked in rapid succession.

"Don't take it like that,

We are doing our job,

We are highly trained,"

Said the man.

"And what job is that?"

I growled down low,

"Is that work, to lay in wait for me,

Oh lucky me, oh, what joy,

*My very own welcoming committee!
How did you know I was passing through?
When this is but my very first time with you?"*

The innocent man spoke up some more,
Unaware of the threat in my molten voice

*"Oh madam, we don't mean to offend,
I am employed to guard the nation,
We are highly trained in detection,
We are alert to stop all intrusions.
You know these days there are dangers and more,
Al-Qaeda, Al Shabbab, and other terrorists afoot,
Spreading dread from state to state.
And ours is no exception."*

I looked at him who had just spoke
With honest aplomb and certain clear tones
So sure of his words.

And I started to snarl.
The cat became lioness hunting her prey.

*"Oh thank you kind sir for that wise explanation,
I see your point in its full summation,
Those terrorists are truly exasperating,
Endangering innocent lives.*

*I just wanted to know.
How many of them have been like me?
Beautiful and brown I mean.
A woman, that is, from Africa?
Take your time, do not haste and make a mistake
I am sure you have facts from the Internet,
Of scary insurgent women,
From the Dark Continent,
Who have blown themselves up for a peculiar cause?
Do let me in on your special report."*

I watched for a while with the grip of my eye,
Slowly I resumed my speaking.

*“So it is I with terrorist look, I alone in this colourful crowd?
I see a flaw in this deduction that could cost you a nation.
I offer you aid for no special reward,
Look at that man he has squinting eyes,
To me he is doubtful don't you think?
That other one, and that one as well,
I count a dozen, more hostile than me,
Why not call them as well,
Really, I could do with the company,
So alone am I here all by myself”*

And this last I speak for all to hear

The two are taken aback,
They turn to exchange incredulous looks,
Abruptly they send me away
“OK Madam, you can go!”
They say, as if dispensing a favour,
But the feline in me, won't leave, not so soon, not yet,
I hold my look and watch them some more,
And when I am done, turn slowly to go.

‘Why Are You Running Running?’ Losing My Freedom on Nairobi’s Badass Streets

I generally consider myself a happy person. My body speaks for me most of the times, my excitement lifting me up to a low tree branch, just to touch it. It sometimes strikes me with bolts and sprints, and you might find me racing

against no one in particular, sidesteps, goosesteps, jump steps.

A close friend once described me as an excessively physically active person, even for a male. He made sure to remind me of this “fact” when we were walking together in town. He said to me, “Considering our physiques, you need to minimise your jumping around. We aren’t so big, but just realise you might scare an innocent person or draw unwanted attention to us.” I don’t know if I have scared anyone yet, but I have certainly got the unwanted attention. Three times so far; twice in the space of one week.

The first incident.

There is some sort of radio communication from the Israeli Embassy’s watchtower. Officers on the ground patrol the road, and the guard at Fairview hotel also monitors the movements outside. Probably wanting to be part of the action, the guard stops me first and asks, “What is wrong, why are you running running?!”

I hold my calm and ask, “Am I not supposed to run here?” I could have added that this is a public road, and I was practising my freedom of movement whether by walking or running. But two intimidating figures suddenly engulf me.

“Do you know this is a protected area?” one of them asks. He’s in a pair of jeans, denim shirt and black baseball cap, and could have easily passed for an ordinary person on the street if it weren’t for the radio on his side.

“Why are you running running behind a car, do you want us to think you are a terrorist?”

“Are you a Kenyan?”

The questions come in such quick succession that I don’t know which one to respond to first.

So I just say, “yes”, and hand over my ID. His colleague just stands there, saying nothing, probing with his eyes.

My place of birth is Kapsengere, a village in a place called Kapkerer in Terik.

They must have considered it remote enough to not be able to produce a terrorist. They advise me not to make myself conspicuous, and then they smile to themselves as they return to position. A naive villager. I want to think this was the reason they let me go, but hindsight gives me a different view which you are going to see when I tell you my third run-in with security agents.

But first, the second incident.

I was stopped on the same road again, at the junction opposite Loreto Valley Road. I had noticed a Red Beret watching me walk down 3rd Ngong Avenue. He stopped me and asked me what I had in my bag. I told him it was my laptop and books. I opened the bag and let him see inside it and then he let me go. But he didn't look satisfied. Since then, I have been avoiding 2nd and 3rd Ngong Avenue as I go to the library from Valley Road; I've been taking the much longer route on 1st Ngong Avenue. I've been telling myself that it doesn't matter, a road is just a road; what matters is that I get to the library, right?

And now, the third incident.

It's a few minutes past midnight but the night feels young. I'm walking fast, partly skipping and hopping, towards Bus Station trying to get there before the last matatu leaves town. I'm turning right at Naivas on Kenyatta Avenue towards the National Archives on Moi Avenue. Moi Avenue is that conveyor of the city's nightlife that cuts the city into two, from Memorial Park all the way to Jeevanjee Gardens. The western side of the road is uptown, the other side is downtown.

Moi Avenue at this time of night is like a river, with predators on both sides of the banks. Herds are crossing the valley oblivious that they are prey; the beasts are lurking everywhere, camouflaged, waiting. A stray member of the herd may just step into their snare.

Just as I cross on the other side, I see a commotion. Two older men are throwing kicks and blows at a young man fixed between a canteen and a shoe shine stand. There are three other men around who do not seem disturbed by what's going on. I didn't need to think twice about it. It was obviously a robbery. I shout, and run to help the guy. It never occurred to me I would need more than a good heart and

legs with this one.

“Kijana, we ndo unatetea huyu hapa, mko pamoja na yeye eh?” (Young man, so you are defending this guy because you are together?) The gang pulls me in and is about to drag me on the ground when two Administration Police (AP) officers show up.

“Afisa... Afisa nisaidieni!” Help me, I cry out loud, but the gang is not at all shook by their presence. The police officers on their part seem not to be in any kind of rush.

“Afisa!” I cry out again, this time with my big voice, and it sends both parties cracking in laughter.

“Hao pia ni afisa,” (those are also cops), the APs announce as they pass, leaving me in the hands of five men, all plainclothes officers.

“We ni activist sindio, hebu fungua hiyo bag tuone uko na nini ndani!” (You’re an activist, right? Open your bag and let’s see what you have inside it!)

They call me an activist because I was rushing to someone’s aid.

I empty all the contents of my bag on the dusty pavement. Two of the officers fan out; one stands next to a lamp post, another lingers on the opposite side. The remaining three encircle me in the middle, where they alternate in interrogating me.

“Hii ni laptop yako, ebu washa?” (This is your laptop, right? Turn it on.)

“Haina battery na inahitaji moto kuwaka,” (The battery is dead), I say, holding it out for them to see. I’d just started to breathe easy again when they hit me with a totally unexpected plot twist.

“Wapi risiti yake?” (Where’s its [purchase] receipt?)

“Sina,” I tell them. (I don’t have it).

“Haya. Rudisha vitu zako ndani ya bag, uende ukae na yule rafiki yako muliiba naye.” (OK. Put your things back in your bag, and go sit next to your friend and fellow thief.)

I settle next to a man humbled to silence by a proper beating.

“Eh... so you are a student?” The unit leader now speaks. He is a tall, light-skinned man in his forties whom we shall call Tooth. (He has at least two missing teeth in his lower jaw.) He says this while cuffing my left hand the man’s right one. I didn’t want to think about what this meant, choosing instead to focus on the question. I answer him.

“Storyteller and writer.”

“*Sasa hii yote inafanyika you are going to write eh?*” Tooth asks. (Oh, so you’re going to write about all this?) It’s rhetorical, but my gut’s intention is to keep the conversation going,

“*Hapana! Naandika history na oral literature.*” (No! I write history and oral literature).

“*Haya, pigeni stori na huyo jamaa akwambie kile amefanya.*” (OK, so talk to that guy and let him tell you what he’s done.) Tooth climbs up to the seat of the shoe-shining stall, not looking, but surely keeping an eye on us with his ears.

For the first time I engage “the suspect”. He has been squatting silently, as if he was trying to make himself disappear.

“*Me nilikuwa tu nimetulia pale,*” pointing to other side of the road, “*Mse mwingine tu akakam akaniambia tuende tunyang’anye huyu kijana hapa simu, kidogo kidogo nikaskia watu wameanza kunipiga. Hata sijui ule jamaa, mi nasukumanga trolley huko Bus Station.*” (I was just chilling on the other side of the road, and some guy told me we should go grab a phone from a boy who was standing here. Before I knew it people were beating me up. I didn’t even know the guy; I push a trolley there at Bus Station).

He adjusts the sleeves of his jacket. I notice he has a silver watch on his left wrist, and a closer look at him shows a face that appears too clean for someone who just got kicks and fists to his head. Now, another person I had not noticed before says he is the victim, and insists that the suspect was holding a broken glass bottle that was used in the robbery.

“*Unaona sasa, watu kama hawa ndo unataka kutetea. Ingekuwa ni wewe, tuseme akudunge na chupa ungesema nini?*” Tooth says. (Now see, people like these are

the ones you want to defend. If he had stabbed you with the broken bottle what would you have said?)

For a moment, Tooth seems empathetic, and I almost get Stockholm syndrome, trying to see things from my oppressor's point of view. I actually almost feel safe in this moment. With the police, and not the thieves. Wait, I am cuffed together with a thief!

Meanwhile the other officers are on a harvest in the streets. All the targets are young males. Their first catch is a short young man in a black cap with combat (military fatigue) patterns on the front.

"Kijana, we ndo unajifanya unataka kuvaa kama sisi?" (Young man, so you want to wear clothes similar to ours?) The young man is frisked head to toe then told to sit down on the steps of the stall, cuffed to a metal bar.

The second catch surprises me, a street boy barely thirteen years of age brought to Tooth. He (the boy) is not a Nairobiian; this I know from the scanty Kiswahili and Kisii he won't stop speaking. Let's call him Sokoro.

"Mbona mnafuata fuata watu mkiwasumbua, iko wapi simu?" (Why are you following following people and disturbing them, where's the [stolen] phone?) Tooth demands of the boy as another cop warms his palms on Sokoro's cheeks. He cries a few things in Kisii before he is gagged and left in the hands of Tooth.

Tooth is a real beast. He grabs Sokoro's arm and starts twisting it, not for a moment setting his eyes off the boy who lets out a painful cry. He stops then repeats his question.

Sokoro is now silent. Tooth is irritated. He brings him closer to where I am and uses the metal bar the combat boy is chained to as a fulcrum. I helplessly watch as Tooth twists and pulls Sokoro's arm like he would if he wanted to break an adult's.

"Aah...aki unanivunja, wacha wacha..." (Stop, please...You're breaking my arm!) Sokoro screams with tears now welling up his eyes. Tooth pulls one last time then stops.

The other beasts are still harvesting. Two unsuspecting young men, both in beanie hats, are about to be flagged. One of them senses it and tries to escape but

the grid is locked. Tooth mentions something about young men dressed like them (in beanie hats, tight pants, sports shoes and Timbaland boots) being troublesome. The procedure is simple and the same for everyone: stop, show ID, get frisked then proceed to the ground after shackling.

Sokoro has broken free! He is running and screaming at the same time. His small frame was his key out the cuffs, but it is also his weakness; he never gets far.

Tooth is the first to land his hand on our boy when he is forced down. Another beast opens his arms wide for a clap. Sokoro is in between. I look away and prepare myself to forget what I'm about to hear.

"Now you want to tell me this one is not a criminal?" Tooth is addressing me now. "Whoever defends such people becomes an equal partner in crime, what we call an accessory. You don't run shouting, *ama* do you know each other?"

Then he surprises me by saying, "*Haya, tafuta kifunguu ya pingu.*" (Look for the keys to your handcuffs.) There is a bunch of keys in his hand; in the middle is a small key, the cuff key. I look at him, then back at the keys.

"Si you say you are a literature man, *tafuta kifunguu ya pingu.*" It takes me a while to figure out what he meant - he wanted money. I had two hundred shillings in my pocket; I tell him I have only one.

Tooth opens the cuffs and sends me to his partner, "*Enda nunulia yeye credit.*" (Go buy him some airtime.) The cop refuses to take my one hundred shillings. I go for my bag next to Tooth's seat, and before I leave Tooth's partner takes out a pen and notebook, writes my name, ID number and phone number and declares, reading out my name first, "You are an accessory, an aide to criminal activity and we have pardoned you."

My legs trembled all the way to the National Archives, with cold air freezing my bones. I never wanted it to be the case of Lot's wife, and my body seemed to understand this very well. The universe seemed to understand this too, and I walked stiffly all the way to Bus Station. I was glad to be safe, to be heading home. But what about Sokoro? Tortured for being helpless and homeless. What about the others? The combat guy, the beanie hat guys. The ones who were equally innocent as myself. They never did anything, what about them?

The Moi Avenue incident is obviously the most violent encounter I have had with the beasts compared to the other two. However, the Red Beret encounter is the scariest one now that I think about it; I was one of the beanie hat boys but on the right side of town, the other side of Moi Avenue. His dissatisfaction with my innocence is the same dissatisfaction Tooth and his unit had with the young men's innocence, based on just their dressing. It didn't matter that they passed every test they set; they looked like criminals and were therefore guilty.

My physical appearance that night with Tooth and Company was almost formal; I didn't fit the profile. At the Israeli Embassy though, I was in jeans and a T-shirt, generally a sporty look. If I had a beard and hair on my head, would things have been different?

In hindsight, there are many reasons why I'm still a free man. Key among them is that I probably did not fit the profile of a criminal or terrorist at the time of the encounters, and when I did, I was in a privileged side of town where things tend to go down much different - where the benefit of doubt is afforded.

I changed my route to 1st Avenue, avoiding 2nd Avenue that is much closer to the library. Just to be safe.

But why do I have to go through all this? I do not want to have to change my route because Israelis feel unsafe with me running outside their embassy in my country. I don't want to change my dressing, my hair's look; I do not want to suppress my joy and happiness.

I want to be able to speak when something goes wrong; I do not want to pretend I do not know that torturing a crime suspect or a minor is wrong. I do not want to feel unsafe whenever I am around people who are supposed to protect me. I do not want to be scared, to feel helpless enough to want to give a bribe.

I do not want to be estranged from myself. I want to be free.

Search and (Maybe) Protect: Stop and Frisk, Nairobi-Style

The other day, a friend of mine told me about something he witnessed in a matatu. Two post-secondary school students boarded the matatu and sat down. As they waited for it to fill up, all the other passengers uneasily stood up and walked out one by one. The reason? The other passengers felt “under threat by possible terrorists.”

The same students had moved into a hostel that week and some residents of the area had called the local OCPD to alert him of the presence of some *strange and suspicious people*. The OCPD deployed a police unit near the hostel immediately. Traumatized, the students eventually opted to move to a neighbourhood that had more residents of a similar ethnic origin to theirs. They would feel more comfortable there. What was their crime? They were of Cushitic origin and people from other communities had branded them as “suspect terrorists”.

Kenya has experienced several terror incidents over the last five years. There have been major attacks at Westgate Shopping Mall, Mpeketoni Town, Garissa University College and Dusit Hotel, which have left numerous fatalities and many others injured. Other attacks have also occurred at a Nairobi’s police station, in Mandera Town, and parts of Lamu County. The attacks have heightened the sense of insecurity in urban areas, the coast and the north-eastern part of Kenya. In addition, the country is also grappling with internal security concerns. We occasionally read or hear in the news of armed robberies, roadside muggings and spiked drinks in pubs leading to robberies.

Many have put the blame on the porous borders with neighbouring countries. It is understood that these enable the easy movement of arms into the country. Added to this is the high level of corruption within the immigration system and some security organs. Youth unemployment and hopelessness have also enabled easy radicalisation.

As a resident of Nairobi for over 36 years, I have witnessed a gradual shift from a very open society to one that now habitually interacts with suspicion and a deep sense of insecurity. In the 1980s and 90s it was the norm in many residential

areas to have cypress or bougainvillea fences. School gates remained open throughout the day and shopping areas had entrances wide open. Serious robberies were the preserve of famous armed bank robbers though occasional muggings were reported. The newspapers even had a “Lost and Found” column.

Things began to change in the 1990s, perhaps due to the impact of the austerity measures of the structural adjustment programmes (SAPs). Growing cases of burglaries forced us to start installing burglar proofing to fortify our doors and windows. Many of us went ahead to replace natural fences with walls. Around the same time the country experienced political riots, often accompanied by looting. These forced shop owners to start completely sealing off their displays during non-working hours. Window shopping in the Central Business District became a thing of the past. The streets increasingly came to host large numbers of street children who would threaten to smear you with human excrement if you didn't give them a few coins.

At the start of the new century, the government made an effort to improve the situation by re-installing street lighting. One of the individuals in the private sector who was instrumental in this initiative was the current women's legislative representative for Nairobi, Esther Passaris. Through her company's “Adopt a Light” campaign, Ms Passaris promoted the commercial value of street lights through advertising. Informal areas, parks and public spaces also received the benefit of high mast lighting. The city felt safer.

But the past few years have witnessed a change in major security threats. Although petty theft and armed robberies remain a concern, the threat of global terror has taken the limelight. Kenya had experienced prior terror attacks, notably, the August 7th 1998 US embassy attack and the Norfolk Hotel attack in 1980. As serious as they were, however, such attacks were infrequent and not viewed as a common trend. Terror attacks have been on the rise since 2008, and particularly since 2011 when the Kenyan military crossed over into Somalia to fight Al Shabaab militants.

The effect of this new trend in urban areas is visible in shopping malls, churches, buildings and public transport. Twenty years ago it was unheard of that one would be stopped and searched as one entered buildings; today it is the norm. Entry and exit points are highly controlled in these buildings. One is at times left to wonder how occupants would escape in case of a genuine emergency.

Government buildings have also sealed off pedestrian pavements in the city centre under the pretext of “security”. Standing and waiting somewhere or appearing to be idle has become a crime.

The security infrastructure is formidable. CCTV cameras are now common in many buildings, as are properties guarded by electric fences. Guards sitting in control rooms, with access to alarm response units and several barriers for vehicle access to parking lots and basements have become a feature of most buildings in the city.

Unfortunately, many security features/responses are on a high alert only immediately after a terror threat or attack. After a few weeks, laxity sets in. I have worked in buildings where nobody is in the security room over lunch hour. Security guards are also less rigorous with individuals they are used to seeing, and turn the searches into mere formalities. I find it humorous that the guards at some buildings never search my pockets when I have a bag. On the other hand, they are very quick to find out what is in the bag. They mostly find either a rugby kit or a book and packed lunch.

For bloggers and photo enthusiasts, photography is generally not permitted in most public places. While carrying out some transport and urban planning research recently with some colleagues from the United Kingdom, we were stopped by security officers and had to explain why we were taking pictures. To the visitors it appeared strange that one can be questioned for photography of infrastructure. But in any case, I was recently able to reconstruct the entire site in 3D using images from Google Maps!

Two years ago, one of Kenya’s top photographers and bloggers who runs the blog nairobinoir.com was [arrested on suspicion](#) of terrorism while taking photographs near a shopping mall. He was eventually released after a campaign by activists and bloggers who used social media and other channels, but the ordeal left him traumatised and had a negative effect on his business. It is regrettable that it has become the norm for many citizens to be treated as suspects on flimsy grounds.

I also remember a few years ago when a parent of Asian origin at a local school dropped his son off and decided to take pictures of some birds. Another parent who was dropping off her child saw him. Alarmed, she took a photograph of him and shared it on social media, warning people of a “possible imposter”. The image

trended for the better part of the day. When it got to the man's attention, he had to take to social media and explain who he was and what he was doing.

As a person of mixed racial heritage, I have become accustomed to being forced to identify myself to the police in various parts of the city. The reason they give is normally that *"you don't look like a Kenyan"* (as if there is a textbook definition of how a Kenyan should look). It happens so frequently that these days I even make a joke of it when I am stopped. When this happened recently in December 2018, I joked to the young policeman that I could predict the order of the questions he would ask. He looked at me in surprise.

Not too long ago I asked a group of biracial friends to share their experiences with the security organs. There were several amusing responses. It was clear that all had experienced some "confrontation" with the police. A common theme was that they were used to it and did not hold any hard feelings. This included taking the cops in circles by answering questions in their African mother tongues! One who happens to be a linguist once chose to respond to a policeman in deep Dholuo. He left the officer baffled, as he could not follow half of the conversation. Many say they simply opt to identify themselves and move on with their lives.

The two students' experience in the matatu, however, is one of those occasions where citizens are treated as suspects because of mere assumptions related to their external appearance and ethnic origin. Such people are searched more thoroughly at buildings like shopping malls and are treated with suspicion when walking in groups. The arbitrary arrests and detention of several people of Somali origin in 2014 left many of them scarred. It is believed to have widened the divide between Cushites and people from other language groups in the country. As detailed by Owaahh in [From 'Shifta' War to Al Shabaab: Why Kenya is her own worst enemy](#), it is clear that there has always been some sense of friction between the inhabitants of Northern Kenya and the rest of the country since independence.

But we are all caught up in this security dragnet one way or another - some more than others - and I wonder what it does to our sense of who belongs here, what a city is for, and how one can feel at home in a place like this.

Trapped: My Twelve-Hour Ordeal in DusitD2

On Tuesday, January 15, my editor sent me on what I thought would be a routine, if unnecessary, assignment. I was to do an interview with George Ooko, the chief executive officer of the Commission for Revenue Allocation (CRA), which was to run in NTV's 9pm bulletin. As the reporter, I thought my story on county revenue was strong enough with the video clips we already had, and that it could run without it. But I was overruled, and along with my cameraman Dickson Onyango, I grudgingly set off for the DusitD2 complex on 14 Riverside Drive where CRA's offices are located.

The afternoon was sunny, hotter than usual, and dry. Our interview had been scheduled for 2:30 pm, but because of logistical challenges, we arrived at the venue some minutes past 2:40 pm. I was already anxious and irritable.

We were ushered into the boardroom of CRA's offices, located somewhere on the third floor of Grosvenor building, which is adjacent to the Dusit hotel.

Our interviewee Ooko arrived, and Dickson and I spent a few minutes setting up before settling down for the interview. But just before I asked my first question, we heard a loud explosion that must have lasted a few seconds and shook the entire building.

At first, we thought that the explosion was from a different building, perhaps from another office compound. But then, it was followed by gunshots. I remained unmoved in my seat, because I had not wrapped my mind around the fact that our building was under attack.

Ooko suggested that we hold the interview until we figured out what was happening. But just then, we heard a second explosion, again closely followed by gunshots. It is at this point that the CEO dashed to his office, leaving Dickson and I in the conference room.

From the windows, we could see people on the ground floor running for safety using the back exits with the help of the security guards. By this time, staff members who were on our floor started running up and down the corridors. We got up and followed them, not really knowing where we were going.

I was running for the stairs holding the camera bag, which had other equipment inside; it weighed about 10kg. Dickson was holding the tripod and the camera.

On reaching the stairs, we found a crowd of people scampering for safety. Nobody at this point had figured out what was going on; the flight down the staircase was confused and disorganised. In my hands, I was still gripping the bag.

Dickson, thinking like a journalist, asked me to carry the tripod with the camera bag. He wanted to capture some video. But just before he could frame his shot, one of the assailants shot at us, forcing everyone to scamper for safety. The sound of the gun was so loud that we thought he had shot at us from inside the building, perhaps from the ground floor through the staircase.

And because of the terror, I remember freezing on my way up for a few seconds before I regained my senses. Dickson was running for the lifts, which I thought was not a good idea, but driven by panic I followed him. But the lifts did not open.

I ran into the nearest open door, which turned out to be the door that led to the washrooms on the first floor. Inside, I found some people, whose number I could not figure out at that moment. It is in this washroom that I remember mumbling some prayers to God for safety.

But once we entered one of the cubicles, our fears grew. Someone whose identity we could not figure out was trying to gain access to the washroom from the ceiling, which was cracking under his heavy weight. I didn't have time to think of how bizarre this was, or how on earth that person got there. We were just looking for somewhere to hide.

We ended up in an open space just outside the washroom, which was a room under renovation. Again, a shot was fired towards the window, I guess after one of the attackers saw us from outside. We ran back to the washroom without thinking twice, just that this time around we ran into the first cubicle, the second one's ceiling having proven unsafe. It later turned out that the "intruder" was one of the staff members of the CRA, who was stuck on the second floor. By this time I

had abandoned the camera bag and the tripod in the empty room.



WATCH: As it Happened: Attack on
14 Riverside, Nairobi

We were seven people in the first cubicle, its small size notwithstanding. The second one now had other people. Our first thought was to lock the main door of the washroom from the inside before we locked the door of the small cubicle. I do not remember the person who offered to lock the main door leading to the washroom. All I can remember is that the last man who entered the cubicle, a tall clean-shaven man, was the one who locked the door of the cubicle.

I remember one of the people I was hiding with in the cubicle was breathing heavily, loud gasping breaths which scared most of us. In our thinking, any slight sound would alert the attackers to where we were. Our attempts to ask the good old man, who I later learnt was Prof. Edward Akong'o Oyugi, to manage his breathing, fell on deaf ears, adding to our turmoil.

I was sitting on the toilet seat, which I believed was the safest position and was away from the door, just in case one of the attackers gained access and tried shooting through the door of the cubicle.

But my comfort did not last. Since Prof. Oyugi, who by this time was leaning on the door of the cubicle, could not control his breathing, someone asked me to give up my seat for him. It meant that I would take up his position, which I thought was riskier since I would be standing directly opposite the door. But I got up, and gave the old man the seat.

The other people had taken up all the safe spots away from the door. I decided to squeeze myself to the side of the toilet seat. The other two men squeezed themselves on the opposite side, while another two stood on the opposite direction, but away from the door.

The heat inside out cubicle was beginning to get thicker and hotter. My standing position was also getting uncomfortable. Because of the squeezed space between the toilet seat and the wall, I had to stand on one leg, and switch to the other often.

Any slight noise sent us all into a panic. I remember at one point someone in the opposite cubicle had tried flushing the toilet, I do not know for what reason, throwing the whole washroom into further panic mode.

By this time, the shooting was rampant, punctuated by tense silence.

I remember one man who had taken refuge in the wash area where the sinks were mumbling a prayer. In the adjacent cubicle, I could hear some people whispering what I believed were their last prayers. One was on the phone, telling the person on the other end that we were under attack.

The time now was heading towards 4pm. At this point, I decided to alert my colleagues in the newsroom on what was happening.

I checked my phone and news was already spreading that DusitD2 complex was under attack. I was scared for my life. I remember making a prayer to God asking him not to send me to hell if I died.

The ensuing hours would be some of my longest. We would swap sitting positions, but carefully so as not to make noise. My legs grew sore at some point, but the thought of getting killed in case I went outside the washroom kept me stuck in my position.

Lucky for us, the washrooms were air-conditioned, which helped cool the damp air that was increasingly filling up the space. My fear, however, was the gap underneath the cubicle door, which easily exposed our legs. We all tried as much as we could to push ourselves as far from the door as possible.

As time went by, the air in the washroom become thicker and heavier. I took off my tie and waistcoat, and so did the others. Seconds turned to minutes, and minutes into hours. We didn't speak much to each other. How could we? What can you tell six other strangers in that moment?

To keep myself distracted, I stayed in communication by text message with friends and colleagues, who were encouraging me to keep strong.

There were occasional gunshots, which made us jump every single time. At some point, we heard someone try to gain access of the main door that led to the washrooms where we were in. We could not tell who it was, because they never gained entry.

We kept silent, and the good old professor tried to control his breathing, even though he occasionally went back to his “default setting”.

I remember telling the people I was hiding with that help had come after my colleagues in the newsroom informed me that the police had arrived at the scene. This was sometime after 4pm. Little did I know that I would spend the next 12 hours holed up in the same place.

I had by then not informed my parents about the situation since I knew they would get too anxious and panicky. But I kept contact with my colleagues. My bosses had also reached out to me, asking me not to lose hope as they were trying all they could to get me help. I remember speaking to Dickson just a few minutes after we separated, telling him that I was hiding inside one of the washrooms on the first floor. I later learnt that he was hiding on the same floor, but in a different room.

I remember one dear friend from work asking me to keep communicating with her through text messages. I know she was trying to keep me calm. This, however, did not last long, as my phone battery died. I do not remember what time it was, but before my phone went off, I gave her a number of one of the people I was with so that she could reach me.

I informed my parents of what was happening some minutes past 10 pm with the help of a friend. And since I knew how agitated my father would become, I told my friend to notify my mother first. I can't imagine what she felt at that moment.

News had by this time spread that two NTV journalists were part of the hostages trapped inside the complex. That in part got me worried, because I could not imagine what would happen if the terrorists got wind of this and stormed our hiding place.

At some point, I lost hope, thinking that we would only be rescued in the morning. But we resolved that we would fight the attackers, and at least die fighting in case they got to us.

Sometimes towards midnight, we heard loud noises and the lights suddenly went off. We agreed not to open the doors until we were sure that those knocking were the police.

We stayed in darkness for another two to three hours before we finally heard footsteps inside the building. When the police got to us, we were ordered to walk out one by one, with our hands raised up. They frisked us before asking us to sit down at a central place as they combed other rooms looking for hostages. The time was about 3:45 am.

Those 12 hours taught me the value of family and friends, and that life is a gift. Live every day as if it was your last day alive, because one of these days, you might just be right.

I occasionally get paranoid. I am still afraid of being in the dark. Noises and bangs on the door scare me a lot. I am afraid of staying in crowded places. I get anxious being by myself. I still live scared. But I hope it will end soon.