

# Plotting Our Raging Hope

*“Each generation must out of relative obscurity discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it. In underdeveloped countries the preceding generations... fought as well as they could... we must realize that the reason for this silence lies less in their lack of heroism than in the fundamentally different international situation of our time.”*

**Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth***

Nairobi, 2003: Following the indefinite closure of Moi University due to a students' strike against the system that privileged self-sponsored parallel students over the regular ones, I teamed up with a friend who had graduated from Catholic University and set out to mentor and inspire primary and high school students in the name of Preparing Leaders Of Tomorrow (PLOT). However, we had limited access to the students owing to Michuki era matatu strikes and watchmen who, lumping us together with religious missionaries, turned us away or directed us to officers least interested in our proposals. While we contested the misrecognition and missed opportunities, the fact that we spoke to more watchmen than students and the contradictions of our own lives was also a cause for laughter at the time. However, with the insight of hindsight (mediated by significant ideological shifts), I came to learn that this was not a laughing matter.

Here I was, a public university student whose comrades were now serving long suspensions due to resisting the privatization of higher education walking side-by-side with an unemployed private university graduate (then postgraduate) trying to prepare leaders of tomorrow while being ill-prepared to make sense, or inhabit the present effectively. Also significant for me was our inattention to the political lives of the readily accessible watchmen who, knowingly or unknowingly, had prevented our short-lived, and ill-conceived initiative from reproducing the same maladies that we were desperately seeking to break away from.

Reflecting on our inattentiveness to the watchmen's lives often returned me to childhood memories of an episode of the KBC TV drama/ situation comedy Plot 10 where the plot watchman Munai (Ronald Kazungu) reminds the caretaker Kajogoo (Joseph Njogu) of the cold nights he endures while the tenants sleep in their

houses and the end-of-month hunger experienced due to salary delays while the tenants go for their monthly feasts. However, Munai's own suffering does not translate into empathy for tenants such as Adam (Thomas Onsong) who requests for an extension on his rent payment due to his wife's medical bill.

Munai's lamentation and impatience with Adam was crucial in helping me to see differently, and in more politically perspicuous ways, the tragic inattentiveness that makes it difficult, if not impossible for urban inhabitants to compose lives in common even with those with whom we share a time/space — our contemporaries. From the intimate space of the plot, we learn of the multiple webs of assistance and resistance that tenants create in order to survive. We are also reminded of adaptation, self-help mechanisms, and resilience developed in response to the privatization of key services and amenities that make urban life more precarious.

Like actual multi-occupancy, low-rent, tenement spaces, the fictional Plot 10 is hospitable and hostile in equal measure. But this understanding of the word plot does not exhaust its meanings. Plot also has connotations of the designs/plans for a ravenous night out (*plot/ plan/mpango*) and an undeveloped piece of land. More recently, the desire to have a plot of land of one's own has turned associational life into a means of individual gain, credibility/creditworthiness, entitlement, self-actualization, and ultimately, pleasure. It is a guarantor of intergenerational hope for those who possess it and a cause for hopelessness and rage for the dispossessed.

With the moralization of plot ownership, being plotless or homeless is considered an individual rather than structural and systemic pathology related to the institutionalization of private property and disposal of unalienated land in ways that benefit those closest to the sites of power. Similarly, the plot, the dark underside of the colonial ideal of the green garden city that kept the black native quarters separate, unhygienic, overcrowded and male-dominated is normalized. In a postcolonial city characterized by fragmented rhythms and fortified enclaves the simultaneity of concrete plots and green gated communities make it difficult to imagine common times and a generational politics that is not predicated on class.

When inequalities such as those alluded to above create an existential rift between age-mates, the idea of generational mission becomes frivolous and

unattainable. Accordingly, Fanon's call for each generation to find its mission and a politics attuned to the weight of international structures from the standpoint of time raises fundamental ethical/political questions regarding how to live (well) with those with whom one is in synchrony with. Better still, we are forced to ask what it means to be contemporaries, to share a time/space, or even a mission with others in a world characterized by alienation.

In cases where the ideal of the generation does not acknowledge how different people are situated in the world/time, it becomes difficult to imagine a new human due to fidelity to the land, to the (mother) tongue, *shibboleths*, oaths, bloodlines, race, or class. Generational lines here involve the passage of things and meanings between variations of the same in ways that maintain foundations while disavowing foundational and other forms of violence. This desire to stay true to the name of the father, the son, and any other thing that they find holy, which in most cases is race, property, and group propriety, makes people inattentive to the lives of some of their contemporaries.

However, it is possible to compose a dissensual sense of time, 'other' contemporaries, and a common world with those who we are told are carriers of an insurmountable difference. In the Kenyan context, this involves refusing colonial inscriptions and narrow crisis-based sympathies that invoke old bloodlines as moral lines and even lines on the map. It is also a refusal to join alliances that invoke elite destiny/destinations and origins while being inattentive to our co-presence, people's material conditions of existence, and ambiguous ethical relations.

Unlike co-presences that bring together multiple lifetimes, there are conceptions of the contemporary and generational times that fetishize a consumption of the present that erases the past and ruins the earth. These presentisms makes life in the present intolerable for many and the future improbable for other generations of human and non-human beings. They also invoke alternative histories and family stories that treat past injustices, dispossessions, and broken promises as anachronistic threats that call up ghosts that are too old for us to be concerned with today. So, they go on their knees and call on us to Forget! Forgive! They want a chance to develop the present without the burden of the past and responsibility to the future.

This is the mantra of the leadership of 'our' generation. In its quest for

reconciliation, it shies away from the truth that the dry bones from the past constantly throw at it. It remedies the quest for justice, or dissenting voices through violence first and then development projects underwritten with human blood. With blood-soaked hands, they point upwards invoking gods of forgiveness. Downwards, they point to rails and roads that project today's debts into the future. Pointing east, they contract comrades who pour concrete over the blood-soaked lands quickly entombing the dry and not so dry bones. To cover up their tracks, they accelerate time. They turn history into ethnology; compare one group to another, crunch numbers, and then project them into a perverse developmental scheme. Schools, roads, hospitals, language and other common entitlements become communal favours and bribes that individuals can plot to plunder.

In defence of this time of development and/as plunder, young tongues are sharpened. They sing praises and lick crumbs from the floor. They silence their own multi-lingualisms and disavow their impurities. These young tongues traffic in diglossia—two versions of the same language—one for the people that they now want to constitute as a single and unproblematic whole, and another for those that they consider part of their proximate, exclusive, and intimate world. A world that, even in the face of gaps in material conditions of existence and incommensurate world-views, considers itself to be one with the potentate, the potentate in waiting, or the one who is robbed of the status of potentate and pursues it perpetually.

As committed presentists, the figureheads of generational wars and cleavage stand hand-in-hand. They claim to be forming something new but only speak the old language of Peace, Love, and Unity now recast as grand projects of anti-graft and neoliberal development. In this monolingualism, the oneness of tongue ensures that only a few lick the bones dry. For them, being a contemporary is a perverse gastronomy. It involves eating together and then devouring those who serve them. It is a potential cannibalism that turns away from the cries of their contemporaries - *“Watameza mate sisi tukikula nyama.”*

During this orgasmic feast, we are told to suspend politics in the service of the economy. For these brothers turned foes, and then turned brothers again, the present is “our time to eat.” Others, other generations, must wait for their turn. In the meantime, their tongues can be put to better use...speaking in tongues, singing praises, and hurling abuses. After all, we are a generation of forgivers.

For the impatient, the generation of leaders-in-waiting, and those whose time has come and passed, they are summoned to hustle! Gamble and speculate. To be a plotter of one sort or another. To learn many trades and always throw their eyes askance. To learn how to wink and lick their lips. Engage side-hustles, side-kicks, and 'side-dishes' "...you never know which one will land on your lap. You never know which one will be an economic boom, or which one will make your loins 'burst.'" They are told to plot and have no time for the plotless.

Beyond the shared games, our generation is forced to ask what it means to inhabit a rift between oneself and those with whom one shares a living space but whose rhythms of life, recent tongue-waggings, and eating habits, make it impossible to share a common world/time? Are they still your contemporaries? We are forced to speculate on how we can live with those who, owing to their dealings, do not only live in an exclusive space, but have fractured our present such that they can afford to live in another time. Those who shared our childhood but, in order to secure the future of their own children, have accelerated accumulation and destabilized the present for today's children.

Speaking of our times in common involves breaking hegemonic temporal rifts between those who declare that it is their time to eat and those who live in perpetual hunger. Between men, women, and all others. Between those who are made premature elders complete with ceremonial adornments irrespective of their age and experience, and those subalterns who remain perpetual children. It involves disabusing ourselves of the times of otherness that is assigned to those who, according to Johannes Fabian, are located allochronically - in another time of human development (infantilism) or of social development (primitivism) and therefore must be represented, converted, developed, and brought into national or capitalist time even if they resist. For, according to the owners of our time, these people from another time do not know any better. If they resist, *watajua hawajui*.

But hope persists. Not due to a panglossian optimism that always announces that "all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds," or a focus on the soul (for which it is well) even when things are evidently broken. Hope persists because we believe it is possible to compose new, ethical, and more equal ways of being-in-common while refusing to adapt and live with otherwise intolerable indignities. For a generation that had its hopes domesticated through the mantras of positive thinking, the fetishization of the hustle, funny memes, fancy civil society themes,

and the language of adaptability and resilience rather than resistance against the intolerable, a new and raging hope becomes an imperative. One that breaks up with those children of the first and second liberation who salivate waiting for their turn to sit at the table as it is currently constituted. Like the South African *Rhodes Must Fall* and *Fees Must Fall* movements, this hope that is all the rage invokes old names and devises new revolutionary games for the dispossessed who refuse to be crushed any further.

This hopeful rage for a postcolonial age exists in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novel *Matigari* where Matigari ma Nijirũngi returns from the bush and finds a new generation of neo-colonial collaborators such as Johnny Boy Junior (the son of the colonial collaborator John Boy). With new contemporaries from another generation— Muriuki , a poor boy who lives in the wreck of a Mercedes , Guthera, the sex worker, and Ngaruro wa Kiriro, the leader of the workers' strike—, Matigari imagines and works towards a dissensual, yet more life-affirming present and future. These dissenters, children-turned-comrades do not only tell us what is amiss but point out that what we think is a gap, is really a gaping abyss. They make it apparent that the land problem, police brutality, education, and exploitation of labour, are not things to be solved through individual effort or some perverse form of self-help. They can be addressed by composing a more affirmative commonwealth.

Like the old laws of the fathers that Matigari contests, an old bifurcation is descending upon us today. One where familiar and familial handshakes on screen or behind the scenes are presented as solutions to 'our' problems without acknowledging their spectral character, their sacrificial logic, and their global connections. Standing hand-in-hand, the sons vow to get over with politics and return to economics (not political-economy) as if the economy were a domain devoid of politics.

But 'our' generation should know otherwise. Having lived through the tragedies of structural adjustment programs, the explosion of neoliberal self-help and occult economies, we know the violence of moves to naturalize the separation of the market and the state. We know that the economy is political and that the public / private split has been mobilized for the ruination and privatization of the commons as part of our neoliberal common sense. We know what IMF letters of intent mean and tremble when the appetite for borrowed money pushes us to live in borrowed space and borrowed time.

We have seen how the things we “cannot not want”; development, democracy, life, have been projected into the logic of sacrifice, enmity, and abandonment where some lives have to be given up in order for ‘our’ democracy or development to survive. For those who lived through the Moi years, we know the death-deploying force of emergency measures geared towards getting rid of traitors and ‘treasonous plotters’ by constantly asking people whether they want to be free or secure. Whether they want peace and security or free and fair elections. Whether they want politics or development. Whether they want peace, love, and unity under a single party and the ‘stability’ it guarantees or chaos and disorder of democracy and pluralization. These false choices affirm the sacrificial logic and sovereign violence that has always been part of our national plot.

A logic of sacrifice holds multiple generations captive. It asks them to choose between friends and enemies, politics and economics, modernity and tradition, good and evil with violence being deemed permissible if not necessary for the maintenance of order. As liminal figures, the uncertainty-generating youth become a problem to be solved through uncritical pedagogy, entrepreneurial services that turn them into a lootable resource and discipline. To maintain order, youth disorder or dissensus is dealt with violently at home, on the streets, at school, and across the border. Putting the youth in their proper place becomes a state fetish that ‘our’ generation silently condones or loudly cheers on in the name of restoring discipline, certainty, preserving the sanctity of property, and securing the nation.

But loss of certainty is more than a youthful concern. The uncertain times that ‘our’ generation is living through are tied to larger displacements of certitude on one hand, and the emergence of new forms of certainty or resurgence of old ones on the other. Under such circumstances, familiar political codes and coordinates do not hold. Calls for peace serve as a moral alibi for pacification, and developmental encroachment on wetlands and accelerated ventures into extractive carbon economies (like oil and coal) cover up the slow violence, corruption, and environmental destruction that is already here and that which is yet to come. They also pave way, not only for the end of the world as we know it (as Immanuel Wallerstein put it), but for the possibility of a world without us. A world marked by more drought, floods, smoke, choked seas, and more blood owing to backhand plots that decimate spaces that human beings (not a generation) share with other non-human beings.

These are the signs of our uncertain times where seemingly small acts in this small part of the world have effects elsewhere. After all, aren't the fault-lines in Mai Mahiu causing speculation about continental drifts in the anthropocene — an epoch where man is recognized as a geophysical force. As UoN's Amollo Kenneth Otieno (2016) states, we cannot continue relating to the land and construction in the same way in light of increased flooding and subterranean erosion along the existing fault line as well as the fissures arising from the liquefaction of less cohesive soils. However, the hustle continues. We people of the plot, even in the face of the earth opening up see opportunity in the weak volcanic ash/sand from Mai Mahiu. With this sand, we mercilessly build the ever-collapsing vertical plots of Huruma.

The episodic killing of contemporaries is part of the political imaginary we grew up with. It is not merely part of the assassin state's extra-judicial violence, it is also a *demotic* people-sanctioned violence. Today, we cannot be critical of the militarization of the police in Kisumu without seeing its connections to the violence in Kismayu and the martialization of society. All the talk of "Our boys in uniform" in Kismayu intensifies hatred of the enemy without and prepares the ground for the violence, preemption, and revenge of 'Our boys' in Kisumu. The scandal, the tragedy, is that 'we' cheered on the KDF when they ravaged the Somali as part of *Operation Linda Nchi*. We turned a blind eye when they threatened to close Dadaab and deport the refugees. Silence...when the police ransacked Eastleigh and incarcerated the Somali in Kasarani as part of '*Usalama Watch*.' 'We' are silent when Boni forest is bombed as part of *Operation Linda Boni*. We cheer politicians who wear military fatigues and dare each other to a fight.

Now that the guns are turned inwards and contemporaries deported, we put our faith in the handshakes of the sons of founding fathers even though we know that they conceive violence narrowly. With each embrace, with each song, with each prayer, we see new capitulations each generating a narrower sense of those one considers their contemporaries. These capitulations show that the old games do not work. The political appeal to the human conscience and moral good sense of the state and the 'international community' is falling on deaf ears. The Kenyan democratic order, borne out of popular struggle in concert with allies is now being sacrificed based on business and security interests. Based on the imperatives of the War on terror, AFRICOM strategies, Chinese business

partnerships, and a gluttonous political elite that misreads diplomatic codes and trivializes the suffering of Kenyans, and non-Kenyans in Somalia, Palestine, and elsewhere. In their dealings, they reproduce the complicities of a previous generation that sat silently, exploited, and turned a blind eye, to the violence of apartheid in South Africa.

Whither the reformers of yester-years? They are both the subject and object of betrayals. In their perpetual calculations, capitulations, and political realignments, they too lost the plot. They betrayed the cause. The liberal democracy they summon is no longer compelling for it is taking place in an era when liberal ideals and the neoliberal economic order is in its terminal crisis globally. An age characterized by what some call illiberal democracy. An age that privileges resilience over resistance and as always, holds Africans and African politics to a lower standard... "rigged peaceful elections are good enough."

We have been betrayed. Like their predecessors, the younger leaders remain inattentive to precarious lives at home and abroad. They reproduce the *phallic logics* of an older generation rather than composing something totally new. Because we are held captive by the law of fathers (patria) and the fetish of the fatherland (patriotism), both elite and subaltern classes articulate a phallic logic of comparative entitlement: "My suffering is bigger than yours, we are a bigger community than you are, our cut is deeper than yours." The resultant phallocracy, if we are to borrow Grace Musila's words, haunts Kenya's politics. It is transgenerational and involves one generation of men learning the phallic logic from the other men in their lives. It permeates institutional and popular narratives about the 'return to tradition', fidelity to 'our son/ our people', the impossibility of co-habitation or *mwanaume ni kujisimamia*. The contest of sons, and protection of 'our' corrupt sons/daughters has become the basis of new friend/enemy distinctions. It is the basis of moral calculations about lesser or necessary evils and ultimately, the possibility or impossibility of co-habitation with those contemporaries marked by an insurmountable difference. It is the basis of the desire for more virile versions of an old self as a guarantor for 'our' survival. It is a most tragic and self-perpetuating sovereign 'cock-fencing' based on anxieties over 'spending power.'

Can we, in search of a different plot, in the name of a new hope, dis-identify with the familiar/familial categories through which we are counted today? Can this generation, this composition of contemporaries, betray the forms of affiliation,

phallic logics and fantasies, as well as the violence, and desires cultivated by the generations past? Can we decolonize our bodies and minds? Can we proceed in ways that question rather than merely assert what it means to be a part of a community (broadly conceived) or to be contemporaneous with others? Can we compose commons rather than seek our seat at the table farthest away from the commoners?

To do any of the above requires the betrayal of some of the things 'our' generation holds dear; its plots, its hopes, and speculations. It involves dis-identifying with the ideal of the generation and composing new contemporaries. From Matigari, a man who composes new contemporaries in the struggle against oppression, we learn that struggle and hope in struggle and life is vital. That victory, if there is one to be won, "is born of struggle" and even in crushed times and moments of darkness; "There is no night so long that it does end with dawn."

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## **ME AGAINST THE SYSTEM: The frustration of Wasted Potential**

At almost 35, I'm yet to find balance in life. I was born into a family of five, two parents, two boys and a girl. I am the first born. My two siblings are doing just fine. Set in the family way, raising children, pursuing and living life by their own personal terms, happily, no less. Given all the trouble they put me through growing up, I can honestly say their success is my success, and wouldn't have it any other way.

My personal life however, is a conundrum of sorts. No family. No (real) job, No prospects! Growing up in Kayole, Eastlands in '94, life was harmonious and easy for a child who saw the world through innocent eyes. Kayole estate was a World Bank housing project designated for the middle class. In the original plan, facilities such as schools, dispensaries and markets were strategically placed to serve the residents with paved roads and functioning streetlights. The houses came with large parking lots and a fully functional drainage system that stands to

date. Crime was rare. In early 90s, there were a few white folks living in Kayole before they all moved out and relocated as the neighbourhood lost its gentrified status.

Apart from the few model houses that were built to World Bank standards, the rest of the dwellings were squatting houses that mushroomed into a hostile takeover after residents began flaunting the building regulations with no consequences. Those who were connected, began constructing 8 to 12 rooms on 50×100 plots and the Eastlands suburban vision that was part of the original plan fell apart. Toilets, bathrooms and cloth lines were communal in these new dwellings and with it came congestion tension between tenants.

In the early 90s, Kayole was characterised by wide open spaces everywhere, a gigantic play ground. Our days were marked by childish pursuits that included, football matches played using improvised polythene plastic paper bags rolled into a tight ball then fastened with sisal strands to give it a firm texture. My love for the sport was, as my mother put it, more than that of life itself. She had a point. I had a dream of becoming a professional footballer and joining the ranks of Roberto Baggio, the Italian midfielder, Luis Figo, the Portuguese Forward, and the Brazilian striker sensation, Romario, my football godfathers of the 90s. All of whom I followed on KBC, thanks to a portable radio that my dad had bought to keep himself updated on the politics of the day.

I must have been 12 years old when I first started noticing the three white men visiting our neighborhood and spending a lot of time watching us play. Two tall men, both lean in frame and the third, a bald man with the beginnings of a paunch. They drove an old Nissan Sunny. After the matches they would sit us down and offer us soft drinks and cookies engaging us in polite conversations about our families, our education, dreams for the future and whether we wanted to play footie in Britain! I particularly intrigued them a great deal.

Their talk of playing in Britain, cast a spell on me and I became obsessed with the idea. They kept on showing up every few months each time bearing gifts of new balls and sport shoes. Eventually, they insisted on meeting my parents to “introduce” themselves. My mother was super elated and quickly gave in to the request after I broke the news at home. My father however, a hardware store employee off River Road, downtown, warned me about fraternizing with strangers. His authoritarian style of parenting stifled any designs I had about my

own life choices. So when he said no, it was final. Attempts by mother to bring him on board bore no fruit. His refusal adversely affecting me and I was diagnosed with clinical depression that required psychiatric evaluation.

The final blow came in 1997 when the indiscriminate land grabbing linked to David Mwenje, then Member of Parliament for Embakasi and other politicians in the Moi era arrived in my neighbourhood. The political class and their cohorts embarked on a privatisation spree, leaving no open public space untouched including our playground. Marooned and helpless, the sport died a natural death and the football scouts stopped coming. Consequently, my hopes died shortly thereafter, my dreams, valid as they were, with me as well. It would only come to emerge later that they were UK agents scouting for new talent in Africa and I was on their watch list. Twenty two years down the line, I wonder how my life would have turned out had I gotten my professional football break!

To stave off the pain of loss, I began drawing and sketching and my scribbling morphed into a budding career in calligraphy and poetry. My passion for creative writing was inspired and fueled by Tupac Shakur's 1996 Album, *Me against the World*. I felt like a social pariah and Tupac's music and US hip hop on inner city experiences became relatable. In the mid 90s, the transport sector experienced the emergence of a new breed of vehicle in Nairobi as the privatisation and free market bug hit with the collapse of the two major state funded public transport bus services, the Nyayo and Kenya Bus. The privately owned matatus ushered in a new-fangled culture that revolutionized the whole matatu industry and gave it its present day mojo. This was the age of the Manyanga, a name drawn from the original street *Sheng* term used to depict a young voluptuous woman. The pimped matatu was a far cry from its weathered predecessors, with graffiti cutting across its body, both inside and out. They spotted large sport tyres with flashy rims and loud music systems that played a lot of hip-hop and reggae music to lure customers. Influenced by both American hip-hop and Jamaican ragga cultures, both weed smoking and baggy jeans hip-hop fashion became vogue as the flashy touts paraded their brand of swag that quickly caught on as a trend that started in Eastlands and spread on to all parts of the city.

My two skill sets found a place in the industry where I spent my days in garages designing creative works and getting paid for it. I became a matatu graffiti artist and settled in my new 'career' until a directive from the Ministry of Transport under the famous "Michuki Rules" instituted by John Michuki in the Kibaki era

banned matatu art. Flashy matatu art was term as a conduit for “hooliganism” and undesirable social elements and in an effort to streamline the industry, monochromes and yellow strip became the new civilised matatu look. Most garages closed shop ostensibly forcing many youths to look for alternative means to survive. All I was left with was my poetry and prose.

While moonlighting as a matatu art creative, I completed a certificate course at Utalii College specialized in food and beverage and joined the multitudes in the job market hunting for opportunities. My first stop was at The Norfolk, Nairobi, where a college buddy worked courtesy of his father, an industrial kahuna. He tried pushing my case with the head chef who agreed to an internship but personnel blocked my entry sighting my “nobodiness!” Undeterred, I kept pushing my luck for about a year until the management had enough of my persistence and finally physically threw me out of the premises.

Disillusioned, I decided to send over a hundred applications all over the country hoping for the best only to receive one reply, a regret letter, no less. In my desperation, I stormed through hotel doors demanding to see human resource managers to explain the problem! Was it me or them! Most would ask in surprise rather than shock at my audacity, “Who sent you?”

“Myself,” I would reply, “I sent myself” but that was not the response, they wanted to hear! I had no godfather in this skewed system, essentially, a nobody. As the post election conflict of 2007-2008 and the ensuing unrest blew over the country, I despaired, weeping and wiping my tears silently as my country burned with my hopes and dreams.

After a year of listlessness, a job vacancy landed on my lap in March of 2009, when I received a message stating, “a tour company is looking to hire new drivers, for more details, call the number below,” The number and company was unfamiliar but I went ahead and called the number immediately. A lady shared directions to their offices, in industrial area where I reported for an interview and despite my absolute lack knowledge of the tour operator space, I got hired on the spot and training started promptly. I began travelling to the country’s game parks, Nairobi, Nakuru, Meru, Mara, Tsavo guiding visitors and learning about wildlife. I experienced the novelty of museums, hotels and resorts as a tour driver, met new people and got wide exposure to Kenya’s rich natural and cultural heritage. There was one challenge though, the company was not paying us

salaries even after seven months of hard labor. Frustrated and fed up, the bunch of disgruntled workers decided to exercise to two options left at hand, paralyze the operations and sink the ship or jump overboard and swim to shore. We settled for the former then bailed. Needless to say, I was once again on the streets scratching my chin, staring into space, my college certificates in hand. There were no breaks for another year and a half. Thankfully, the seven month stint had equipped me with enough skills and contacts to maneuver.

Shelving my academic credentials, I began hustling every top dog I had come to know in the industry, head-on. Luckily, my number came up and I got absorbed by one of the many I reached out to. Wilfred was a good man who wanted good for everyone. The management sadly misconstrued his kindness for nepotism and fired him. Without a safety net, my godfather dispatched, I knew it was only a matter of time before things went south which happened a week later. From then on, the job tap ran dry. At my wits end, living an insipid existence, I started entertaining suicidal thoughts.

My turning point was triggered by an old, torn bible handed down by my mother which sat gathering dust on my table. I was never a religious person and my church attendance was incidental but something caught my eye between the pages. I opened the book and stumbled on Acts 17:26-27

“And He has made from one origin and blood all nations of men to settle on the face of the earth, having determined their periods and boundaries. So that they should seek God in the hope that they might feel after him and find him, although he is not far from each of us.”

This verse provoked my contemplation on my spiritual purpose and the place of God in my life.

About to close the book, I happened upon this,

Romans 10:13 “Whosoever calls on the name of Jesus shall be saved.”

I stared at the verse, blankly, then vividly remembered a quote someone had once shared of a drowning man clutching on to a serpent. I closed my eyes and uttered a very simple prayer, crying, then shut the book and put it aside. Nothing happened and life went on as usual. Three months later when I started having psychic revelations, that correlated with live situations during the day. I started

noticing very “mundane” things like a person’s energy, when one is in distress. I could discern impending illnesses, investment outcomes, accidents, robberies, even death, surprisingly. I attributed all this to a divine revelation and embarked on a new spiritual journey in the Christian faith my mind renewed. Jesus saved me!

Meanwhile, old buddies I had met along the dusty streets of struggle kept enquiring about my welfare. Some had joined the taxi business to earn a living. With nothing to lose, I found myself reunited with them chatting the days away, occasionally covering for any absentee drivers and developed an interest in the taxi business as a new career path. My first car was a Nissan B14, silver in colour that belonged to a senior police officer in Nairobi who always threatened to shoot me if I ever played him. He had a serious demeanor. The threat was not taken lightly.

I entered in the taxi world feeling like a fish out of water. By day, Nairobi is the city in the sun. At night it is a hell hole that requires intelligence and a thick skin to get by. A puzzle to be solved before one can advance to the next level. By any measure, a pain in the butt. Police want a piece of you. City Council use any opportunity to shake you down. Thugs lurk at every bend and fellow operators want you dead.

The experiences I have faced are surreal. I remember my first case, her name was Dorothy. Heavy with child, we had just left Uchumi supermarket, at Adams Arcade and were discussing baby names headed to Nairobi hospital where she was to be admitted waiting to deliver. The two way Ngong Road was legendary with traffic jams that turned full blown chaotic during the rainy season. Everything was fine until she started feeling some kind of “wetness” and sharp pains from her lower abdomen that saw a previously calm woman turn breathless and scream in agony. I was clueless in matters of childbirth. The screaming sent me into a panic seizure and my thinking brain was suspended. It would take the intervention of two good Samaritans to deliver a newborn baby in my backseat. Between them sat Dorothy, looking half dead with blood all over. A few meters stood a cop directing traffic away from us, shooing curious onlookers that had gathered. It would take me months to recover from the ordeal.

Another bizarre episode happened at The Junction months later when a thug put a gun on my skull intending to steal my car as I walked towards it. His mission

however, proved impossible when two police officers arrived and stood by obliviously waiting for a matatu. I took off singing Amazing Grace. I have ferried a corpse, had distressed a woman ditch her 2 year old daughter in my cab, had to deal with horny couples copulating in the back seats and met a long list of unsavoury characters in line of duty. The taxi business is Nairobi peppered with drama but the best was yet to come. In February 2015, more disruption came knocking when Uber, the app-based modern day taxi hit Nairobi streets running.

With its remote management capabilities, cheap rates and new cars, industrial dynamics changed drastically giving it an unfair edge over us old school traditional taxi types. Mass protests by local operators to have it deregistered met with tear gas courtesy of the government as we fought for the measly crumbs off the taxi table. This would mark the third time the government and free market forces had kicked me in the nuts and arrested my development! Days turned into weeks and weeks into months and years but nothing gave. My story was now akin to that of a wounded dog of war relegated to the back alleys to leak its wounds, waiting for death. To cope, most of my peers found solace in alcohol, gambling and prostitutes.

I have been caught between the proverbial rock and a crazy place, for almost a decade now and my youth is spent with nothing to show for it. I kill time by writing. It is my alcohol, my mistress, my prostitute. I love her and together we stare at the horizon hoping for better days ahead in this, my country.

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## **Reclaiming my blackness as an African feminist**

Before I gave birth to my daughter I was probably what the embattled boy-child would today call a 'toxic feminist'. My place was not in the kitchen, nor was it in a labour ward. I considered myself the stereotypical, 'strong black woman', never giving a thought to the origin of the term, the baggage that came along with it, and the culture within which it originated. The '*strong black woman*' stereotype is

considered positive but it is problematic because, one, it characterises an entire gender and race based on a singular attribute, and two, it creates the impression that black women do not need help.

But then there is another complication: See, while I am a woman, black, and strong, I am not an African American, and it is to African American women that the term refers. It comes heavily laden with years of oppression that was targeted specifically at black women in America. A history that required them to dig down deep for the kind of resilience that is only unearthed under severe pressure. So for me, as a woman born in post-independence Kenya, the term did not really apply.

Yes, I am a black woman, but I am not an American – and the term ‘strong black woman’ was coined for that demographic specifically. Therefore, anyone who appropriates it should at the very least understand the history. I described myself as such for the aesthetic. It sounded like something I should be as a woman, and a feminist. But it wasn’t my reality. It wasn’t my history. As my parents often reminded me, I was never exposed to the sharp edge of Kenya’s colonisation. I was born in an age when those who fought for freedom had laid down their weapons, and those who received the gift of independence had created lives that were far removed from the poverty of their childhoods, and the socio-economic shackles of their white oppressors.

My parents worked hard to make sure that even the cell memory of oppression was removed from my DNA. So the strong, black womanhood I was envisioning was in the words of Bell Hook, a “half-told tale”. It was not my story to claim. But I did. I used it to justify my non-expertise in the cooking department, because no man was going to chain me to the kitchen sink, and expect me to keep him fed, watered and bathed. I brandished it when I declared that if I had a child I would never be referred to as *Mama Nani*. I had a name dammit, and *Baba Nani* was going to put some respect on it. I was that girl who would wear a turtleneck and then compulsively pull it over her chin because my body was not an exhibition and men were not welcome to view it. I became what I recognise as a caricature of strong womanhood. A caricature which existed to amplify ‘strength’ at the expense of authenticity.

It wasn’t until I gave birth that I understood that feminism cannot be defined in broad terms that every woman must adhere to. Strictly speaking, it is the idea

that women and men should have equal rights and opportunities. But what it's really about is the right of a woman to choose how she wants to experience that equality. Feminism is personal and women should have the freedom to decide what it looks like on their own terms. I grew into my own version of strong womanhood through motherhood, but every woman should feel free to discover who they are, and what they want, through a variety of their own experiences. So, now I have become the kind of woman who wears that '*Mama Nani*' tag with pride because motherhood requires a woman to dig deep to find the kind of resilience that is only unearthed when you have the weight of another human being on your shoulders.

Which brings me back full circle. See, much as I loved my own mother, I had often thought of her as 'less than' because she was a traditional wife. She was the quintessential homemaker who spent a good amount of her time making sure my father was comfortable, even when it caused her discomfort. For her troubles, I viewed her as disempowered. I thought of her as a woman who refused to use the power of her femininity to temper her man's overbearing masculinity. This was despite her achievements in the workplace which quite frankly, were larger than life. She was an advocate for the empowerment of the girl-child way before it had become a catchphrase. Paradoxically, I admired her advocacy with the same fervour that I disdained her choices as a 'traditional' wife, and mother.

I rebelled against her version of womanhood and took up a form of feminism that I mistakenly believed to be my own. But with the birth of my daughter, which was six years after my mother died, I began to see very clearly that I had internalised a form of female empowerment that had precious little to do with my experience as a Kenyan woman.

In my rebellion against what I viewed as conservative, unimaginative, and weak, I reached into my spirit and grabbed onto a version of feminism that I felt was authentic, real and right. But then came another contradiction in my feminist ideology, and that was the assumption that men were the enemy; and that every woman, regardless of race, colour, or nationality, was fighting that same adversary. Even as a self-confessing 'strong black woman' I embraced feminism in all its late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, white-woman glory, never once viewing it as a construct that was designed to overlook women of colour, and specifically women in Africa. White women approach feminism from a 'second-in-command' position, coming

immediately after white men in the global social construct. Black African woman approach it from the bottom-up, many times having to fight injustices that are unique to them on account of the colour of their skin. So yes, we all struggle, but we struggle differently.

See, to subdue Africa, the white colonising forces attempted to strip entire populations of their culture, and to replace it with foreign norms and traditions. People from my parent's generation had no choice but to embrace those norms and traditions because they were born in the age of colonialism. For them it was truly a matter of survival. So they raised us from the viewpoint that white was right, and we internalised that belief. Aspiring to whiteness became deeply embedded in our core. Even in an independent Kenya, many in my generation – the so-called Generation Xers born in the 60s and 70s – looked to white culture for our cues. It was in this context that I latched onto the Western 'burn-your-bra' version of feminism, interpreting it to mean that men were the enemy, and every woman had been enlisted to fight them. Fighting them meant railing against all the parts of Kenyan tradition that required women to assume a deferential position. To my mind, Kenyan women were expected to genuflect while cooking, cleaning and bearing children, and I wasn't having any of it.

But see, I've come to understand that African women in their natural habitat are the epicentre of societal power. Through the ages we have built a familial construct that allows us to cleverly wield that power, and to tilt the balance of influence in our favour. We have our ways, which don't typically include masculinising our femininity, or the reckless disempowerment of our men. This type of behaviour derives from the colonisation of our minds. From the parts of us that reject what white women reject, and accept what they accept without pausing to reflect on the fundamental differences in our experiences. And it doesn't really help matters to appropriate the black woman struggle either. Yes, we are black, and we are strong but we have our own history, and our own experiences, which are distinct from our African American sisters.

It is at this intersection of white, African American, and black African feminism that I have come to the realisation that I have to write my own feminism bible, and to apply it religiously to my own unique circumstances. I was born in 1977, 14 years after Kenya gained independence from colonial rule. I did not experience the humiliation of white imperialism, but I was raised by parents who still had the sourness of colonialism on their tongues. They carried the weight of that

oppression on their backs even as they used the very same colonial systems to navigate a free world. In their liberation, they used a colonial compass to find their way in life, and because of it, I subconsciously assimilated a colonial mindset. Everything worthy of having, and aspiring to, was steeped in whiteness.

This is why many in my generation still take pride in speaking with an accent. Why we privilege British system schools. Aspire to study abroad. To live in areas that used to be reserved for white folk. We continuously cast ourselves in the image of a settler because the subliminal goal is not just to be good, but to be as good as a white person. Or at the very least to be viewed as embodying cultural whiteness.

For me, the realization that I needed to emancipate myself from mental slavery came when I contemplated my daughter's future. When I stopped to really reflect on the kind of woman I wanted her to be. I realised that in my core, I valued my blackness, but that I would only thrive in it if I let go of the idea that I had to act white to be valued. This meant that I had to redefine what womanhood meant from a black cultural perspective.

In the end, it came down to enjoying the respect that is implied when folks call me *Mama Kayla*, honouring the masculinity of my Kenyan brothers without devaluing my contributions as a Kenyan woman, and raising my African vibration so that I would consistently bring the richness of my proud ancestry to the table.

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## **WHAT WE NEVER SPEAK OF: Reflections of a Britain's gulag survivor**

We are all born into the world of humanity at an ordained moment in time and space with a spiritual ordained mission yet we are the creators of our destiny. The world I came to was full of turmoil. My parents and their parents had been uprooted from their own homes to go serve settlers under very harsh conditions

in the white highlands. I was born just before the end of the Second World War in Kamara, in Mau Summit. My father, who went to Sudan and afterwards Mozambique, told me that when he returned from World War II, he found a beautiful little girl born in his absence. The short sojourn between Sudan and Mozambique must have brought my conception. During her pregnancy, my mother felt like she was going to have a baby boy since she felt a boy in her womb. But instead of the boy she expected, I showed up. Before I was born, she had had five children, both male and female.

## **The End Of Childhood**

With the aftermath of World War II, the battle for Kenya's independence was now underway. My uncle Waweru, who was very involved in that battle was captured by the Brits and was sent to Manyani concentration camp, a death hole. He once told me that the beginning of the freedom war took place many years prior in the form of a secret movement. In the early forties, he was one of the organisers of "*rika ria forty*", a very secretive oath taking movement. The movement comprised of young men and women who had sworn to take back their land which had been stolen by the white colonisers.

**Read Also:** [THE BIBLE OR THE BULLET: Reclaiming My Redemption Song](#)

He was also a teacher trained by the African Inland Mission in Kijabe but opted to go and teach in Gikuyu Independent Schools under the system "*Gikuyu Karin`ga*". These schools had their own curriculum system based on African nationalism, religion, history and agriculture. I attended "*Kiai Kia Ng`ondu*" (nursery school) for two weeks where I learnt the history of my people. I learnt that I was an African and a Kikuyu girl. Soon after I started school, the British colonial government closed all the Gikuyu Karing'a schools and arrested and detained everyone who was involved in that education system and threw them into concentration camps. I still maintain that the reason they were closed was that the schools were teaching children how to liberate their minds from slavery and were developing their dignity as humans. I often wonder why after independence this type of education was not incorporated into the present day education system. We would have been better-oriented African Kenyan citizens for it, with that kind of self-knowledge based education.

## **From Heil Hitler To Hell**

Originally, the area we lived in comprised of people from all parts of the country. There were Luos, Luhyas, Masaai, Kalenjin, some Ugandans, even a man from somewhere in the Coast. Soon after the closing of the schools, Kikuyu families were isolated from the other tribes. The Gikuyu were apportioned a separate piece of land to build their houses, far from the other tribes.

My father was an evangelist with the Africa Inland Mission posted in Kamara, before I was born. Because of that privilege, my older siblings got admission to a boarding school in Kijabe. One morning, after my mother and the other women had gone to fetch water, many trucks arrived. There were boarded trucks and flatbed open trucks lined up for half a mile. The soldiers jumped off the trucks, ran towards us and started whipping people and herding them towards the trucks. There was fear and pandemonium as we got onto the trucks. They took us to Molo concentration camp. My father had already left that day for his evangelical work hence he was not there when the trucks arrived and for years, we would not know where he was or what had happened to him. My older siblings were in school thus they were saved from the fate that beget the rest of us. My immediate older sister, my younger sister, and my baby infant sister only a few weeks old and I were in the truck with my mother. I was not yet 12 and already I was a detainee.

### **Of Auschwitz, Dachau And Molo**

The Concentration camps were typically built in a clinical style. It was a field enclosed by mesh fences about 10 metres high. On the outside of the camp were a series of razor wires, each about a metre high. On the inside of the fence was another layer of razor wire, about a metre high. After the razor wire was a barbed wire fence, about ten metres high. After the barbed wire were 1-metre high poles. On those poles, there was a wire interlinking them. At given intervals on the poles were signboard warnings - if you touch or pass the wire that is towards the fences you will be shot. There was a watchtower with an armed soldier and floodlights at intervals. The pit latrines were open roofed and near the watchtower so the guards would monitor us so we would not be tempted to dig escape tunnels under the latrines.

There were also U shaped dorms built on the inner perimeter of the fence. At the centre was an open field, which had two purposes: it was where lorries dropped the incoming detainees and also where the head count was conducted on

everyone in the camp, including children and the sick. After the head count, the detainees had to go through another gate to the stores for the food ration of maize meal and beans. For years, that is all we ate. Maizemeal and beans.

We went every day to get our rations after the headcount. If one missed going through they would not eat that day. The adults were sent to labour while the children were left at the camp. Many people and even more children died from disease and malnourishment. I was so traumatised that I was constantly sick and frequently hospitalised.

When I had the opportunity to watch the 1987 British television film - Escape From Sobibór - about the German concentration camps during WWII, I could not see the difference of those German camps and the British concentration camps in Kenya.

We stayed in Molo for more than a year then one day we were hauled in trucks and we were moved to an even worse concentration camp in Gilgil town. It was situated where the present police station is. We were there for another year or so.

More deaths occurred. The body count of children grew. More torture, more punishment, more men and women died. Death was constant. It was every day and it was all around. It had become our new normal. My baby sister learned to walk in a concentration camp. My mother did what she could to keep us alive, but it was often no more than a narrow escape from an ever-present death.

The African Inland Mission Eldama Ravine had informed the Kijabe headquarters of our detention and the mission sent a search party to look for its evangelists and their families. They finally received word that we were in Gilgil. They made the necessary interventions so that we could be released into their care. We began what was known as a screening process. The screening was designed to repatriate people to their homelands. We were on the move again, from one screening post to another, ending in Shura, Kiambu, now just a village before the Kikuyu bypass. From there, we were transported to the Kijabe mission station.

### **We Are Together Again, Just Praising The Lord**

The missionaries and colonial government were two arms of one body. Education of the African was designed to prepare Africans to serve the white man. My father told me he was lured to Thogoto Church Missionary Society School as a young

man. There were promises of education and more. When he finished at Thogoto, he was sent to Jinn School by the Thogoto (Scottish) missionaries (where the site of the now Mary Leakey School for Girls is) in Lower Kabete to learn how to bake and work in a kitchen. He had no choice. You got what you were informed you got. After completing his course, my father went on to the African Inland Mission in Kijabe, in order to continue his education. It was the Kijabe missionaries who had posted the newly trained evangelist to the Hemphill estate in Mau Summit. His task was to evangelise and to serve his master.

My father was a head chef at the Hemphill estate which must have been thousands of acres, a sub-county. There were well over 100 homesteads of workers each with wives and children. He and his fellow workers used to bake a lot of bread, cakes and other wheat items, especially at Christmas time. You cannot believe how much milk, butter, cream, wheat, hay and meat used to be sent to Britain. Whey (*mathaci/machache*) from milk was taken to the farm workers every evening. There were over 100 homesteads of workers each with children. I would collect about 2 litres of whey every evening when it was my turn to collect it. We liked it - it was very nice with ugali. At this point in time of course, those days were a distant memory of another lifetime. The Concentration camp experience had ended that.

We were released on Christmas day in 1954. Those who met us settled us and generously gave beds, bedding, clothes, food and utensils to my mother and her four little girls including my baby sister who was now just under three years old. We were happy to find our older siblings alive and together. We were almost complete but not quite.

We still did not know where our father was. We were worried because when the coloniser took men away, they rarely ever came back. Our mother settled us as much as she could, but it was not easy. A few months after our arrival in Kijabe, my mother was called by the head of the mission station and was told that they have found out which concentration camp her husband was taken. What remained was to fill documents so that he could be handed over to the mission since they had sent him to evangelise at the A W Hemphill estate. Our father was home by Christmas 1955. He never spoke of where he had been or his experiences.

**Someni Vijana, Muongeze Pia Bidii**

In Kijabe, the family was together and we all went back to school. I joined class one at Kijabe primary school in 1955. That gap of not going to school had created a hunger and a purpose studying hard through the twelve years of that British system. The system comprised of four years before common entrance examinations, another 4 years before the Kenya African Primary Education Certificate, another four years before the Cambridge school certificate, two years for the higher certificate and then, for those lucky and rich enough, college or vocational training. Then it was teaching or nursing. We walked to school barefoot, carrying a stone slate mounted on a wooden frame, with a special pen. One had to have a special permit to wear shoes and even with the permit; shoes were too rare, too expensive and too precious to wear to school.

We sat on long wooden benches and stored our lunch in a corner of the stone classroom. The education system was designed to eliminate young Africans. The grading system involved a forced curve grading which meant that in the years where students had passed well, their marks were regraded so fewer would progress. I did not repeat a grade and always got one of the few passes available. We had experienced so many traumas that we held on to one another with a true feeling of belonging and worked extra hard.

### **Free At Last...**

I remember the time Kenya got her independence. I was so happy. Whenever I see the clip of the British flag being brought down and the Kenyan flag being hoisted, I still well up with tears of joy. It was overwhelming. This is a whole story on its own, but I can tell you, it was like reaching the Promised Land. I remembered the camps, the children who died, the men and women who were killed and starved and tortured to give us Uhuru.

My greatest moment was when independence was declared as it abolished forced curve grading, shoe licences and the need to get a pass to visit my sister, who lived far away. I had had the chance to visit her in Murang'a, during colonial times after obtaining a special passbook in order to see her. We even needed a passbook to leave the Kijabe mission station even if it was to go to the nearest shops in Kimende town, 8 km away.

My parents both lived to see independence and to see their grandchildren. My mother passed away in her eighties around 1979 but our father stayed on until he

was one hundred and seven in 2003. All of his contemporaries and younger siblings had long left the world of humanity before he did.

## **To My Grandchildren**

My country is perfect. It is all right. There is nothing wrong with it. My country is beautiful, it is resourceful. It is only occupied by people who are brainwashed by a foreign colonial ideology.

When I see the ethnic conflict in the present, it makes me sad because of the knowledge that this is a devil planted in our country by the coloniser with the aim of making Africans hate one another for power and material gain. Then it was the white coloniser, today it is our brothers who have occupied the role of the coloniser. Do not be surprised by our people who still send our country's resources to the west to fulfil the desire of that demon whose power Kenyans are yet to overcome to date. Why? Because the Kenyan society has avoided addressing the psychological effects of colonisation.

The poorest families in our land are those whose parents fought in the war of independence or those who had no opportunity to take on senior offices or political positions. *Jua Kali* inventions in our land are thrown out of the window so that we can import instead of encouraging and nurturing our young inventors. Did the coloniser bewitch us? How can you steal national wealth and give it to the very entity that diminishes your existence as a human? Many of our leaders and administrators have been to the west and seen how they treat blackness, like trash! Until we begin believing in God, who is the Innovator, the all-Knowing and respect our ancestry, we shall remain where we are - food for the enemy. *Lazima tuheshimu our Africanism*, Our Creator and our ancestors who left us soil, forest and unsurpassable wildlife. For those who empty the national coffers and send it to your evil master coloniser, for Kenya to remain in a pathetic economic state of affairs, this is your warning: You will die leaving an evil legacy to your lineage. Truthfully, it is sad that I live in a beautiful Kenya with this kind of mentality.

I wish we would realise our worth as Africans, which is not less than other races on the planet. My prayer and desire is that we would wake up and claim the glory of who we are. We have bottled this evil in our hearts long enough. It needs to be addressed in a therapeutic manner, recapitulation.

My children, realise that you are Africans. Not less than any other human being

on the planet. What my fellow Kenyans are missing is respect for themselves as themselves. Know that you are a wonderful creation with great abilities. That whatever you desire will be yours, as long as you create it in loving kindness to benefit all humanity. Rise up Kenyans who love this nation of ours, God will bless your efforts.

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# THE BIBLE OR THE BULLET: Reclaiming My Redemption Song

## Won't You Help To Sing?

The young man grabbed the microphone with relish and held onto it so hard, I thought he would break it. Then he said,

*“Ukikatia dem na umefanya every effort ka gentleman, alafu akatae, and you are in a senior position let's say at work or even you are stronger than her, lazima ujue vile utafungua iyo server.”*

His friends cheered, some of the women in the room laughed. Other young men looked down as though in shame but said nothing. I saw the tears well up in one woman's eyes, before she quickly threw her head back and blinked rapidly, violently trying to push them back.

I was moderating a Gender Forum at the University of Nairobi, Lower Kabete campus. The year was 2018. This year. The month. May. We had just celebrated Mother's Day - a day that brings so much pain to so many women in a country where rapists can walk away from their children, but women must pay for life, with life, the physical evidence of their violation. The young man who was speaking comes from a long line of rape apologists. But he is not even aware of this. His history class did not teach him that rape has been a form of subjugation used to break nations, men and horses since colonization, slavery and before. He is only following his master's footsteps blindly, playing a record that has been played repeatedly in time and space and that was used against his own people.

The young man punched the air triumphantly as he sat down. *“Comrades, TIBIM!”*  
*“Boychild POWER!!”*

## **Old Pirate Ship They Rob I...**

This is the country I live in. A country where might is right and if you are the victim, it is because you did not *“jipanga, mtu wangu.”* I am a child of conflicting definitions. [My mother spent three harrowing years in British concentration camps and gulags in Kenya](#) between the ages of 10-13. She does not talk about that time but whenever we put on a movie about the Second World War, she tenses and her body becomes rigid. She was a victim of colonial crimes because she came from the Rift Valley and her parents were registered as Kikuyu.

**Read Also:** [WHAT WE NEVER SPEAK OF: Reflections of a Britain’s gulag survivor](#)

My father was raised in the Central Kenyan county of Nyeri. His father was a teacher. A harsh cold forbidding man by every description that I have ever heard. His food was never cooked in the same pot or served with that of his wife and children.

My father died when I was too young to know him, a light skinned silhouette of a shadow, never quite there, never quite not. Those who knew him or his family of origin would often comment on how I took his shade, in the right light and with the right make up, I could pass for mixed race. That, apparently makes me beautiful. As a child, I always worried. My mother had often told me how, when she was growing up, if you were a clever, studious or beautiful girl, you were in constant danger of being raped. She and her sisters never walked alone. Until I met my paternal grandmother, I always wondered if my father was the offspring of “British style civilization”.

My mother is the beautiful one. Even in her seventies, you can see why she and her sisters received a special pass from the colonial District Commissioner exempting them from cutting their hair like other natives. The District Commissioner, no less! They also got a pass to allow them to wear shoes on Sundays! Somehow, this was a privilege only given to natives on merit. I love shoes and I long to own many many shoes. I grow then cut my hair every 8 years, shaving locks that usually grow down to my waist. Perhaps, it is my residual, subconscious defiance, to a long gone violation that we believe ceased to exist.

But has it?

### **From The Bottomless Pit...**

I was born after Flower Power and Love had given way to bell bottoms and brief skirts. When I showed up, Black Panther was a movement, not a movie and the country I was born to was so powerful, so endowed, so focused that countries such as Singapore and Malaysia benchmarked themselves against mine. Their presidents and politicians took long trips to come find out how they could trade with us and how we could assist them to develop. What they, and we, had not contemplated was that what we had on paper, we did not believe in our hearts. That we are worthy of our own resources.

The crisis in our country is not a crisis of action, it is a crisis of the mind. Having been born to colonized minds that never quite undid their own colonization, it was inevitable that the values of the colonizer would become the values of the colonized in a twisted form of generational Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. After all, their most dominant reference of power and leadership is looting, stealing, extrajudicial killings, and amassing by whatever means necessary as witnessed in the killings, displacements, lootings and rape in 1993, 1997, 2008, 2017. Atrocities are followed each time by an apology and a handshake. As though a hug can resurrect the dead, or heal the wounded, or restore the property and dignity of once self-reliant IDPs told to lie low like an envelope.

The bizarre thing is that we seem to make the same mistake over and over, not understanding what Carter G. Woodson unwittingly wrote of the mindset that operates as the Kenyan voter's does, when he penned, in the *Miseducation of the Negro*,

*“When you control a man’s thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his ‘proper place’ and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary.”*

— [Carter G. Woodson, \*The Mis-Education of the Negro\*](#)

Maybe that book should be on the compulsory reading list for primary schools.

### **Have No Fear Of Atomic Energy...**

My mother was Christian by choice, her parents' "choice". The choice had been very simple. The Bible or the Bullet. One of her aunts, my great aunt Wanjiru, had chosen the bullet version. Everyone knew the consequences of the wrong choice.

My mother grew up in Kijabe, a little mission town nestled in the folds of the East African Rift Valley escarpment. Until the 1990s, the sale or consumption of cigarettes and alcohol were strictly prohibited and you could be expelled from your home in the village if you beat your wife. Mum worked for a series of church organizations. I saw her bum pinched by men in collars, I heard her prepositioned for sexual favors and casually informed that her "thing" would rot if she did not give it up. To this day, I have a healthy distrust of any man of the cloth. Mum is a constant seeker. She introduced my brother and I to the Qu'ran when I was 12. We read all the books by Eric von Daniken we could get our hands on and we regularly discussed the color of God's skin. In all the bible story books, Sunday school sketches and bible study books, he was always white. Jesus was always blond or a light brunette even though he came from the Middle East, and the holy spirit was a white dove. Suspiciously, the devil was black and red.

I constantly questioned the Bible. Why would God discriminate against some of the people when he created all of them? Why would the apostle Paul tell Timothy never to take care of young widows as they would soon get married. Obviously I had both a vested interest in the treatment of widows by the church. Why would God allow one people to enslave another on the basis of colour? Mum, having grown in the Bible Belt, warned me not to ask these questions outside of our home.

*"People will judge you and they can be vicious if you question the Bible. They will say you are questioning God."*

In my naïve youth, I would retort, *"Mum, how can questioning the Bible question God?"* But I was obedient in this one way. One day though, in frustration, my 13 year old self turned to my grandfather, my hero and an evangelist during the colonial times. I said, *"Guka, why did you agree to sell out when you knew their god was meaner and crueller than your god?"* He looked at me with those big black soft pools of sadness that looked out to the world from behind curtain length lashes and said softly, *"Because, Mami, there is a level of beating you can be beaten and it will break you like a horse. And you will do your master's bidding."*

Years later I read Frederick Douglas and a discourse dubbed the *1712 Willie Lynch letter to the Virginia slave owner*. I cried like a baby. My grandfather had been strung up and whipped in front of my grandmother and my mother, aunts and uncles. As the story goes, the young white soldier ordered the black “*gatti*” home guards, who were beating him to get a bigger bullwhip. My grandmother in distress, broke free of the *gatti* who was holding her, ran up to the white soldier and grabbed him by the throat and screamed in her broken English,

*“Beat him!! I kill you!! They kill me!! We die!!”*

Startled by the wild look in her eye and the clearly suicidal act by this diminutive woman who dared to touch him, he choked and spluttered an order to cut my grandfather down from the tree he was strung up.

### **While We Stand Aside And Look...**

I must have been in my early teens when I had the very first experience of celebrating thieves in the church. We were at our local church in the village where we had gone for a special service in celebration of the Passover. In the middle of the service, a well-known public figure walked in, loudly, noisily, with a small entourage of young men in sunglasses. The congregants murmured, “*Thief*”, “*Grabber*”, “*Overlord of thieves*”, as our local “*Master Thief*” walked into church. The main pastor, not to be confused with the more lower ranked preacher, hastened to the lectern at the front of the church, grabbed the microphone from the preacher and announced,

*“Could all our regular attendees who are seated in the front of the church please move to the back of the church to allow for our important guest to sit at the front.”*

There was a little shuffling but no one moved. The pastor repeated, “*Could all those seated at the front of the church, move towards the back of the church now, so our honorable guest can sit at the front.*” The congregants began to arise and move.

One old lady obstinately refusing to move, said loudly, “*I am not moving for a thief. Tell him to go to the altar and confess where my cow went.*” The congregants burst into laughter. The pastor hastily whispered to the preacher who was standing next to him. The preacher and one of the altar boys walked

quickly towards the old woman, our newly discovered Rosa Parks and stood over her, one holding each of her forearms, ostensibly to assist her to stand up. She acquiesced and raised herself, grumbling. As she walked past him on the aisle, she said loudly, "*Bring back my cow.*" He smiled condescendingly and wafted past her, his arrogance apparent in his gait.

When the "*guest*" sat down, the preacher announced that we would not be reading the passage from the Gospel of John 2:13-17 as earlier planned. Instead, we would be reading from John 3:16. Jesus whipping merchants at the temple did not please the "*guest*". God's redemptive Son was safer. I was not sure for whom it was safer - the pastor or the thief. After the sermon, the "*guest*" was asked to address the congregation. He immediately launched into a monologue on his greatness, followed by the removal of a large wad of money which he handed to the pastor - towards a project of the pastor's choice. Pre-Lutheran indulgences for sin at work in post-colonial Kenya. Praise god!

### **None But Ourselves Can Free Our Mind...**

In the late 1980s, the government of Kenya announced that it was moving from the 7-4-2 system of education, to the 8-4-4 system of education. I was in that pioneering class. One day we were studying Kenya's colonial history, as interpreted by Malkiat Singh, a prolific writer and publisher of school books. The next day, the books were replaced by the study of early man. While the earliest human remains were found in Africa, all indications of early man in Europe included fire, wheels, hunting tools, fur coats, things their African contemporaries did not seem to have mastered. Even amongst our monkey-like ancestors, there was a marked difference in development and "civilization" levels.

The history lessons continued in that vein into high school. Cromwell was examinable. Kismayo was not. Auschwitz was an exact figure. Hola was an "indeterminable number of rebellious natives". I knew more about World War II coming out of high school than I knew about the war for independence [I call it a war, but you will note that even that is downgraded to an "uprising" or a "rebellion" as though a people fighting for over 10 years for their country's liberation at the official cost to the colonial government, of a whopping UK Pounds 55 million in 1950s money, can be equated to a school riot].

Is it a wonder then, that I would empathize with the Jews held in Sobibór and not

with the Kenyans massacred in Manyani, whipped and beaten for hours and hours until, screaming and cowering, with flesh torn open by bullwhips and hanging off their bones, they died for a country that does not remember their names?

I saw the pictures of the Jews, read their stories, crammed dates and numbers and figures. I know more about Hitler and Goebbels than of Tom Askwith and the euphemistically named Swynnerton Plan, or how many Kenyan lives the Embakasi airport cost. I can speak with greater authority of the experiences of Ann Frank, a little Jewish girl who died in a German concentration camp, than of Wanjiku Mirye, a little Kikuyu girl who survived Molo and Gilgil concentration camps - and who is my own mother. Is it a wonder that I and millions of post-independence children including the millennials we birth, identify with a people other than our own or those like us? We don't know ourselves. We are not the authors of our own stories. Yet.

### **We've Got To Fulfill The Book...**

It matters that we know our history. It is important to know that Kenyans lived in close proximity and intermingled villages, tribe being of no consequence. It is important to know that colonial administration used sequestration and segregation as a form of subjugation. It is vital to know that rape and tribalism and segregation were part of a Final Plan To Quell The Mau Mau and people were rewarded to turn in on their fellow Kenyans. It is important because that knowledge informs the pernicious aftermath of the vexatious tribal narrative perpetrated by politicians, the press and the pulpit in an unholy triumvirate.

Maybe, if that young man at the University of Nairobi had read this history, had met my mother, had heard of the concentration camps and the enforced villages and the *gatti*...maybe if he had met my grandfather and listened to him tell his story of the day my grandmother choked a white man, maybe he would not be so hasty to advocate for the "justifiable" rape he so gleefully spoke of. Maybe he could be part of the writing of a new book. Our book. The Book Of Us By Us To Us.

Maybe we could change our destiny as Kenyans and not just play to a narrative that is not ours by right. Maybe Redemption would cease to be a disjointed broken song that begins with "*mkoloni*" and "*tulipigania uhuru*" as a refrain to drown cries of "*Thief*", when we discover Goldenberg and Chickengate and NYS

scandals.

Maybe Redemption would not only be a red covered hymnbook of English 1950s hymns.

Redemption would be our song. In our words. *Lugha yetu. Sauti yetu. Rangi yetu. Sisi wote.*

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# Children of a Revolution That Never Was

Ask any child of the 80s what, “*Polisi wa kae kama raia*” means or why August is called the “Black month” and the question evokes a chain of memories buried deep in our psyches. The children of the 80s try to forget but we remember.

I started my remembering again after I took my 26-year-old nephew on a trip down my memory road. Didi is the firstborn of my eldest brother John. He is a true blood millennial, born in 1991, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Falklands War, the failed assassination of Ronald Reagan and the assassination of Indira Gandhi.

He was born after the release of ANC’s Nelson Mandela, the end of apartheid, the victory of Museveni’s NRM in Uganda and Sam Nujoma SWAPO in an independent Namibia.

After Said Barre was overthrown in Somalia, the SPLA civil war in Sudan, Jonas Savimbi’s CIA backed war against the Marxist government in Angola, the rise and fall of Samuel Doe in Liberia,

After the assassination of Walter Rodney, Captain Thomas Sankara and the plane crash that killed Samora Machel in South Africa.

After the murder of Dr. Robert Ouko, the mysterious death of Bishop Alexander Muge, and the hanging of Senior Private Hezekiah Ochuka.

After the Wagalla massacre, the devastating Ethiopian famine that killed half a million people, the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing and the unaccounted extermination of young lives to the AIDS virus.

After the July Saba Saba riots, the repealing of the Section 2A of the constitution that made Kenya a multiparty state that promised a future of dignity, liberty and prosperity in a democratic society.

We stood on Menelik Road facing the house where my innocence was lost. Menelik II was the emperor of Ethiopia who repelled an Italian invasion in the great battle of Adowa, a fact I learned years later in a history lesson in high school. There was a high drab wall surrounding the maisonette compound. We could only see the upper part of the house, the rain gutter that peeled and cracked paint under the mouldy black tiled roof. There was a kiosk and vegetable stand right outside what used to be the main access gate now completely sealed. The road was dotted with potholes and marked by high walls. The neighbourhood had changed like the rest of Nairobi. Closed, neglected and cold.

Nairobi of my childhood was a green city in the sun. In the 80s, one had to go to the military barracks or the prisons to find high walls. I conjured up a picture of Menelik Road in the 80s. Red and purple blooms of *Bounganvillea* hedges, bamboo fences, gated homes with manicured cypress fences, see-through gates, *mbwa kali* signs where white foreigners lived, mature Jacaranda trees and children taking turns riding a single BMX bicycle. At the closed end of Menelik Road was Kilimani Primary school run by a Goan man known as Mr. Fonseca, fondly known as Fonyi.

The first time I saw President Moi in the flesh was at this school. The President had stopped outside the school gates on the road named after Kenya's first African lawyer Argwings Kodhek who died in a suspect road accident in 1969. The entire school assembled by the roadside to greet the President who had built a reputation for making surprise public stops to interact with adoring 'ordinary wananchi'. I do not remember what Moi said but he distributed boxes of tiny biscuits afterwards, leaving us elated and in awe of Presidential power.

Menelik Road fed into Ngong Road from where the KBS buses run on time and the traffic congregated at Adams Arcade shopping centre. Adams Arcade had a timeless design that has endured the onslaught of Nairobi's mall culture and a

history dating back to the 40s. The open verandahs with large walkways, a post office, butcher shop, a bakery, basement bar are still contemporary. The iconic artistic cement slide we darted up and down as kids remains stuck in stone. The star attraction of the arcade was the Metropole cinema. I only ever watched a film there twice as the movies were adult rated but we still showed up at Adams every opportunity to drool over the movie posters and envy lucky movie goers. Adams Arcade is named after its enterprising founder Abdul Habib Adam who acquired the piece of land as payment on debt owed by the colonial government and then went ahead to design East Africa's first shopping complex even though he was not a trained architect. On the lower level now occupied by Java coffee house was Tumbo's bar.

Metropole cinema closed down alongside a host of cinema halls in Nairobi some years after the '82 coup and little did we know that our privileged middle-class bubble was about to burst. My pre-teen worldview was manufactured by a father who kept up the fiction to save his children from the trauma of real world events happening around us. It was an alternative universe, much like Italian director and actor Roberto Benigni's critically acclaimed film "La vita e bella" (Life is Beautiful). In the film, Benigni plays the role of a Jewish Italian bookshop owner, Guido who embarks on the imaginative game of positivity to shield his young preteen son from the horrors of the Nazi concentration camp while under captivity. Like Guido, I had a father who coped under duress of disruptive post '82 years by choosing silence or humour because they were the most powerful ways a father could cry during hard times.

I lost my innocence of a predictable and certain world in 1982 on the first day of August. I was 8 years old. My elder brother returned from a party on the 31st July and had turned on his portable transistor radio to catch the 6 am news. That Sunday morning, the hesitant voice of radio veteran Leonard Mambo Mbotela on VOK's national service announced that the government of Daniel Arap Moi had been overthrown. On the national broadcaster, an unfamiliar voice pronounced afterwards,

"You are hereby informed that everybody is requested to stay at home. They should be no movement in town. The government has been taken over by the military. There should be no movement of persons and vehicles. The police should now assume their roles as civilians until further notice,"

For the next three days, there was a protracted firefight between the Kenya Airforce soldiers cheered on by University of Nairobi students against the elite General Service Unit and the Kenya army led by General Mahmoud Muhammed. The city of Nairobi shut down, looters broke into shops and the head of state was nowhere to be seen or heard until days later when he appeared on TV looking thoroughly shaken. The poorly organized coup was crushed in 3 days but for the next three weeks, we stayed marooned indoors listening to the radio playing martial music under a dawn to dusk curfew. At the end of the month of August '82, 100 soldiers and about 200 civilians had died and President Moi was primed to crush any threat to his hold on power.

The men who led the military revolution that never was were in their 20s drawn from low ranking Air force personnel and the public universities. There were sons of the working poor who died for their revolutionary ideals. The leader of the coup was 29-year old Senior Private Hezekiah Ochuka of the Kenya People's Redemption Council.

Nairobi went through drastic changes after the failed coup attempt and a new kind of silence fell over our house. My parents never discussed politics in our presence. I was never certain what my father, who worked for the Ministry of Health, thought of the president. Media was government controlled and the news for public consumption feted the benevolence of our great leader, Baba Moi. Oblivious of the ongoings, we had no idea how quickly the country was slipping into repression. We watched as the adults stood aside and cheered like frogs placed in a pot of cool water complacently adjusting to the rising temperature until they boiled to death.

Night watchmen started to appear in the Kilimani neighbourhood - typical men from the pastoralist communities, the brave warriors to stand guard at night because house break-ins had reportedly increased. The bamboo fences disappeared replaced by cement block walls. Burglar proofing on windows became a standard house feature. The wooden gates replaced by solid metal ones with small access doors that one had to hunch over to get through. We started to notice '*chokoras*' roaming through the neighbourhoods scavenging through growing roadside garbage piles that had gone uncollected for months.

The political and economic changes of the 80s and the 90s were disruptive to the lives of hundreds of thousands of government workers and their families who

suddenly slipped overnight from the middle classes, no longer able to afford the privilege of security. In just a few years, there was massive flight of former civil servants from Kilimani and Woodley for Eastlands and villages across the country. I became part of the generation defined by what cartoonist Gaddo characterized as the Nyayo error.

The education system changed from 7-4-2-3 to 8-4-4. We became Moi's guinea pigs, trained in the ethics of loyalty and patriotism. Moi's hold on the country affairs was iron-fisted and totalitarian. As children, we totally succumbed to the Kool-Aid of the Nyayoism, programmed by the elaborate state propaganda machine, the original Cambridge Analytica. Living under the grip of Moi's media hegemony had us parroting Nyayoism propaganda slogans.

The free school milk deprogrammed critical thought. Moi benevolence was God inspired and we knew this because TV cameras followed him to church every Sunday. Competing mass choirs emerged in droves singing in chorus in praise of the Great Leader. We memorized the '*Nyimbo Za Kitamaduni*' raising our voices in complete reverence as we sung the words to Mwalimu Thomas Wesonga choral hit song, "*Tawala Kenya, Tawala, Rais Moi*", wagging a single finger in the air and unconsciously endorsing the one-party state of affairs indoctrinated with the Nyayo philosophy of Peace, Love and Unity. During the morning assembly, we recited the loyalty pledge with pride.

I pledge my loyalty to the president and the nation of Kenya. My readiness and duty to defend the flag of our republic. My devotion to the words of our national anthem. My life and strength in the task of our nation's building. In the living spirit embodied in our national motto - Harambee! And perpetuated in the Nyayo philosophy of peace, love and unity.

Moi was the wise leader, the visionary, a man of God and the sole reason Kenya was an island of peace in a sea of conflict. There was civil war in Uganda, Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Congo, Rwanda and Burundi. Any version of events or literature contrary to the official narrative earned one a subversive and dissident tag and the consequences that came with the label. As we sang and danced to patriotic songs in praise of the great leader and the beautiful life he accorded his subjects, our parents bore the brunt of the dismantling social pillars of society.

"The forces of neo-liberalism are on the march, dismantling the historically

guaranteed social provisions provided by the welfare state, defining profit-making and market freedoms as the essence of democracy, while diminishing civil liberties” (Henri Giroux, 2004).

The government under pressure from the IMF adopted the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) designed to create rapid and sustainable economic growth but instead, they ushered in unprecedented loss of jobs and income equalities uprooting thousands of families and their dependants from the security of government social services. The state surrendered the economy to market forces, prioritising paying off foreign debt over social services. The social systems collapsed overnight as funding was choked, passing public institutions and services into private hands in the name of efficiency. Cost sharing became mandatory and the inequality grew overnight. The public education standards plummeted. The intellectuals were hounded, undermined, exiled, detained, subdued and turned into puppets.

Peter Oloo Aringo, the then Minister for Education captured the sentiment of the times when he publicly announced in biblical and Shakespearean rhetoric during a Nairobi university graduation ceremony that Moi was the Prince of Peace.

Unemployment increased as formal employment opportunities shrunk and the *jua kali* sector mushroomed. Public bus system broke down descending into a matatu culture of urgency and trickery. Potholes started to become familiar, a thing and public facilities sunk into a permanent decrepit state. Freedom of movement and association was curtailed as police officers turned rogue. Beards became profiled as marks of dissidence or Marxist in leaning, as dangerous as a young man in Kenya’s ghettos spotting dreadlocks during in the later day Mungiki crackdown. The politics became a contest of loyalty to the big man and a new cast of uneducated but loyal court jesters filled the ranks of important state positions. After ’82, Moi ran a tight ship silencing protest effectively, with the perpetual dread of the shadowy Special Branch hanging over the population.

The white man is very clever. He came quietly with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.

Chinua Achebe, - Things Fall Apart

Fear and loathing of one's helplessness is what defined the brand of enforced 'silence' of the Moi years. I had little idea that I had inherited my parents' traumas growing up in an autocratic patronage system. Even during my boldest moments of protest as a university student in the fight for second liberation in the late 1990s, I knew my boundaries. I knew when to reserve comment, speak in code, choose my word carefully and keep my political opinions to myself in public. Stronger, braver and important men had disappeared. I had no illusion what the state was capable of.

The only other thing that rivaled the dread of Moi state repression machinery was a mysterious virus that hunted young lives like Tekayo the cannibal character in Grace Ogot's "Land Without Thunder". On January 15 1985, the Standard newspaper carried a headline "Killer sex disease in Kenya". HIV AIDS virus compounded by a broken public health system devastated my generation and it became the single biggest contributor of orphaned children. The safe sex and abstinence campaigns coincided with the rise of evangelical churches capitalizing on the despondency that defined the times. By 1988, AIDS had taken on a religious dimension as the curse of our generation. Reinhardt Bonnke, a German preacher arrived to great pomp and razzmatazz to save the souls of Africans and packed stadiums preaching the gospel of healing and miracles. Tens of thousands gathered at his mega-crusade including senior government officials, swept away by the frenzy of spiritual warfare against the demonic forces unleashed on the "Dark" continent.

In traditional Anglican, Catholic and Presbyterian churches, a band of bold men spoke softly and firmly, using their pulpits to preach the gospel of redemption from an oppressive status quo. There was Bishop David Gitari, Alexander Muge, Henry Okullu and Reverend Timothy Njoya. Two years later in 1990 Bishop Muge was dead and Timothy Njoya had been severely beaten in public by state agents outside the parliament buildings.

36 years since the coup of '82, Kenya remains deeply entrenched in the politics of pilferage and division. The wealth and poverty gap is immoral. The country that the late JM Karuiki once decried as one of "10 millionaires and 10 million beggars" is firmly entrenched. The former Chief Justice Willy Mutunga bluntly called Kenya a bandit economy run by mafia-style cartels. Grand theft has become the enduring characteristic of the historical state and the common denominator co-joining successive generations.

On January 20th, 1961, at the Capitol in Washington DC, newly elected President John F. Kennedy inauguration speech ended with a line that would shape a generation in America,

“Ask not what your country can do for you- ask what you can do for your country”.

The leadership of all progressive nations have demanded the same unwavering patriotism of their citizens and bled the rhetoric of national service to death. However the contrary question is never tabled,

“Ask what your country has done to you?”

Are we willing to talk of the past human rights abuses, the forgotten events of historical injustice, the systemic traumas that we continue to stuff in the storehouse of national amnesia? How can a country that is unable to face and deal with its past move forward?

The millennials I meet ask this question in collective wonderment. How did it go so tragically wrong for a generation that ate the bitter fruits of the Nyayo philosophy? Why did the foot soldiers of the second liberation turn into eager oppressors and ethnic bigots driven by an unprecedented level of greed? If we are to make any sense of our presence and our future we have to go look back to where we lost our way in a Sankofa-esque way. The literal translation of the term Sankofa is,

“ It is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind”.

When I name my defining Kenyan traumas, I start with '82, the year that I first experienced the existential angst of Kenya's middle class. I think about the good intentions of my late father, part of the silent generation born between 1924 and 1942. He was defined by the Second World War and the Mau Mau state of emergency. By 1982, he did what any loving father would have done; shield one's children from the harsh reality and until they were old enough and equipped to deal with it. My own father died in 1989, the year that Berlin Wall came down and it was the same year that I realised that life was not beautiful, aware of my mis-education in a postcolonial reality, I began my own personal journey of consciousness and awareness.

In 2002 after the inauguration of Mwai Kibaki, I made the number of those Kenyans described as the most optimistic population in the world. Moi was gone. My generation was *unbwogable*. We had survived the repressive years 80s and 90s and gotten rid of our collective problem. The impossible dream achieved and a bright future beckoned.

By 2005, Mwai Kibaki had been in power for three years and already the optimism of the year 2002 had worn thin. The politics of ethnic hegemony that had taken temporary leave returned with fury. It came to a head in disputed 2007 election and I watched my generation fall into line and retreat to the safety of ethnic bastions. Indeed, there are no atheists in the foxholes. The illusion of national unity faded and the same fears that stalked my father to silence had returned.

We had become our parents, silenced, cynical of everything political, distrustful of those who did share our story and uncertain about what the future held for our children. It might be 2018, yet 36 years later Moi's protégés continue playing by the same rule book of economic mismanagement, rampant corruption, political assassinations, electoral theft and violent suppression of dissent. The uncertainty that defined the 80s is still here but the *unbwogable* generation that came of age in 2002, is invested in personal cultivated bubbles of security, no longer willing to rattle the status quo.

We have morphed into our parents with children living in bubbles and disinclined to sabotage our beautiful lives.