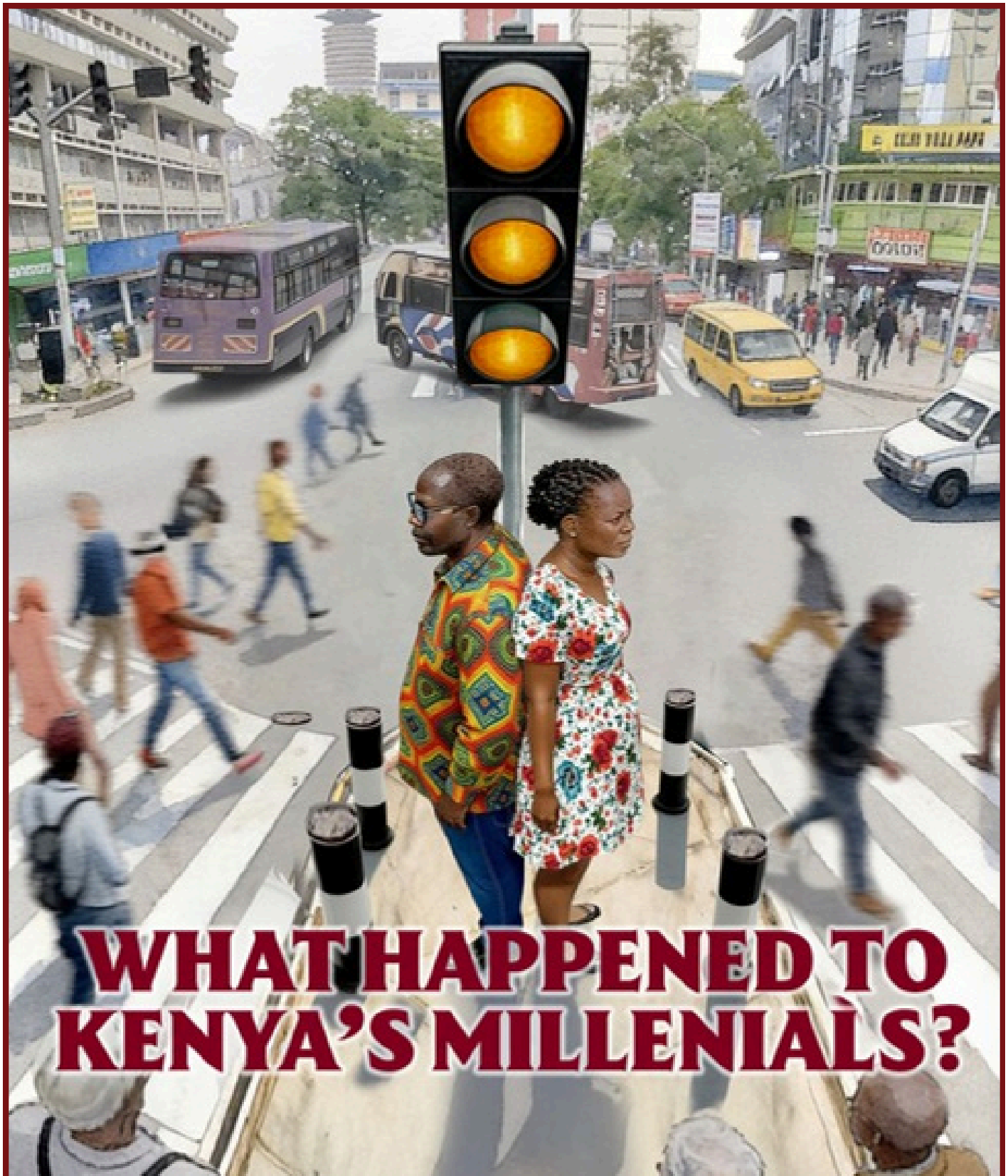




WHAT HAPPENED TO KENYA'S MILLENNIALS?

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Editorial

Kenyan millennials have become a generation in limbo: the defining cohort of a betrayed promise. This edition asks with analytical urgency: What happened?



Born into a nascent democracy and weaned on the rhetoric of liberalisation, Structural Adjustment Programs, and globalisation. theirs was to be the dividend of the new constitution, a generation unshackled from the ghosts of the past, poised to inherit a “digital” nation. Yet, as explored in the seminal 2018 Millennial Series by The Elephant and crystallised in Darius Okolla’s

book about the 2024 Gen Z protests Generation Occupy, Kenyan millennials have become a generation in limbo: the defining cohort of a betrayed promise. This edition asks with analytical urgency: What happened?

The story begins with a profound intergenerational contract that was broken. As Nelly Madegwa and Saiton Righa articulate, this

generation was fed a linear narrative: excel in the 8-4-4 pressure cooker, secure a university degree, and a formal job would follow, but instead they graduated into an economy of hustle. The promised formal structures evaporated, replaced by the gig economy's precarious embrace. They became the "overeducated and underemployed," where a degree is no longer a passport to stability but a ticket to the queue for a kibarua. This economic exclusion, documented across the series is the systemic devaluation of their aspiration.

This economic rupture bred a parallel political disillusionment. Ciru Muriuki and Silas Nyachwani's contributions highlight a generation that witnessed the cyclical violence of electoral politics—from the shattered dreams of 2002 to the trauma of 2007/8 and the disillusionment that followed. They were taught to be apolitical "professionals," only to find that politics was the primary architect of their exclusion. Their apathy was a survival mechanism, a retreat into personal struggle amid public chaos. The state became not a protector or provider, but a distant, often predatory, spectre.

Yet, to label this generation merely as victims is to miss its radical core. They are digital natives who constructed new identities and economies online, bypassing traditional gatekeepers. They forged solidarity in virtual villages, translating online agitation into offline action. The activism around #OccupyParliament and the digital tax protests reveal a generation that is fiercely protective of its shrinking civic and fiscal space. Their language is one of systemic critique—of corruption, elitism, and unsustainable debt—learned from the raw data of their lived experience.

However, this path has exacted a heavy toll. The psychological burden is a silent epidemic. The cognitive dissonance between expectation and reality manifests as a "quiet crisis" of anxiety, depression, and deferred milestones. As the dream of homeownership recedes and the pressure to support extended families intensifies, they are a generation parenting both their children and the expectations of their own parents, while navigating a system that offers little safety net.

So, what happened to Kenya's Millennials? They became the

starkest auditors of post-colonial Kenya's failures. They are the products of a transition that promised openness but delivered inequality, that preached democracy but practised exclusion.

This edition curated by The Elephant features reflections from Silas Nyanchwani, Ciru Muriuki, Ty Ngachira, Nelly Madegwa, Joe Kobuthi, Saiton Righa, Tim Rimbui, and Wandia

Njoya. It delves into their redefined self-image, the political re-awakening, and the mental health battles.

The Kenyan Millennials are no longer the "future" but the fraught present, laboriously piecing together a new reality from the fragments. Their stories are not one of what was lost, but of what is being painfully rebuilt in the aftermath of the great betrayal.

We Millennials Did Everything 'Right', So Why Does It Feel Like We Lost?

Millennials were raised to believe that education, obedience, and institutional trust would guarantee stability and dignity. In Kenya, that promise has collapsed.

Cirũ Mũriũki



Millennials were supposed to be the generation that fixed things. We were told this over and over again, sometimes admiringly, sometimes with suspicion. We were audacious. Radical. Too loud. Too questioning. We were the first Internet generation, the first cohort to come of age with Google in our pockets and global conversations at our fingertips. We were educated. Politically

aware. Digitally fluent. And for a brief, electric moment, it felt like the world was opening up just for us.

In Kenya, especially, the promise felt real. We grew up at the tail end of a suffocating political era and came of age during what felt like a national rebirth. New leadership. New freedoms. A booming economy, or so it

seemed. Education was sold to us as the great equalizer. Work hard, follow the rules, get the papers, and the system would reward you. The future was bureaucratic, stable, predictable. And we were trained for it meticulously. So what happened? Why is it that so many Millennials, now in our thirties and forties, feel exhausted, cynical, emotionally brittle? Why are our relationships strained, our optimism dulled, our dreams postponed indefinitely? Why do so many of us feel like we did everything right and still somehow lost?

“Moral injury is when you know you can save a life, but the infrastructure isn’t there. And you lose that life knowing it shouldn’t have been lost.”

To understand the Millennial condition, especially in Kenya, you have to understand the bargain we were raised to believe in. Ours was the generation of mass education. Degrees multiplied. Campuses mushroomed. Everyone was told to go to school, to get credentials, to become employable. The education system we inherited was not designed to create rebels or innovators. It was designed to produce clerks, administrators, managers, professionals who

could keep a newly independent state running smoothly. Follow the rules. Respect authority. Don’t make noise. Excellence would be rewarded.

For the children of the post-independence bourgeoisie, this message was especially loud. Many of us grew up in homes that prized obedience as virtue. Questioning was discouraged. Risk was frowned upon. Stability was everything. The state was the ultimate employer. Institutions were to be trusted. Systems were real. We internalized this deeply. It didn’t just shape our career choices. It shaped our personalities. We learned to seek permission. To wait our turn. To believe that correctness would save us. That if we were good enough, smart enough, compliant enough, the system would eventually open its doors. It worked. Until it didn’t.

One sunny weekend afternoon, seated in a friend’s garden, a conversation crystallized just how thoroughly that bargain had collapsed. Dr Reign Mwendwa, a paediatrician who is also a creative director and hip hop artist, spoke with disarming clarity about what becoming a doctor actually looks like for this generation.

"One of the first realizations," he said, "is that medicine is an extremely long journey. Your peers who were with you in high school are already earning money while you're still in school." Friends who chose shorter degrees began building lives while medical students remained suspended in training. "That gives you this constant pressure of comparison. This feeling of not being where you're supposed to be."

Graduation, he explained, does not resolve that tension. It intensifies it. "You finish medicine and realize it's still a long game. Yes, you have the title 'Doctor,' but you still can't live up to the doctor name." The prestige arrives before the security. The status before the substance. "A lot of people fall into pressure trying to live a life they're actually not living because of the status."

The emotional consequences are predictable and brutal. "Psychologically, you feel like a loser. You feel like maybe this wasn't the right career path. You get depressed." The rewards doctors were trained to expect, he noted, often only arrive when they are in their forties or fifties, if at all. No one prepares young doctors for that delay. No one warns them that the promise was

never immediate.

That personal disillusionment sits inside a much darker professional reality. Doctors are now among the professions with the highest suicide rates globally. From inside the system, Dr Mwendwa said this is not surprising. "Medicine is very demanding psychologically, intellectually, emotionally. You need a lot of resilience to go through it." But resilience, in medical culture, often means silence.

The ladder we were told to climb is not just broken. In many cases, it was quietly removed.

"A doctor can't cry for help," he said. "It shows weakness. The culture is 'Only the strong survive'. If you're not coping, nobody tells you it's okay. You're just told this isn't for you."

Layered onto that is what Dr Mwendwa calls moral injury. The trauma of knowing exactly what needs to be done to save a life and being unable to do it because the system will not allow it. "Moral injury is when you know you can save a life, but the infrastructure isn't there. And you lose that life knowing it shouldn't have been lost." In under-resourced systems, this happens repeatedly. And there is no pause

to process it.

"You lose someone in resuscitation," he said, "and a few minutes later you're still on shift. Nobody tells you to go home. You just keep going." Over time, that accumulation becomes devastating. "Moral injury and burnout are the things that lead to a lot of suicide. It gives us PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder]."

Many of us learned the language of politics without ever learning the language of power.

Many doctors enter the profession already carrying unresolved trauma. Medicine does not absorb that pain. It amplifies it. "Before people become doctors, especially millennials, you can imagine all the baggage they're carrying. Then we add occupational PTSD on top of that." The result, he said, is a system that breaks people quietly.

Even the image of senior doctors, once held up as proof that endurance pays off, now looks different to him. "When I see the seniors with the big cars now, I look at it differently. I'm like, this guy is working his ass off." The wealth is real, but so are the

sacrifices. Missed families. Abandoned hobbies. Lives structured entirely around earning. "It's a rat race," he said, even at the top.

What makes this especially cruel is how little of this truth is shared with the next generation. "High school students are given these glamorous pictures of doctors," he said, "but you don't know the shit I've gone through." Unemployment among specialists is rising. Jobs are harder to find than they were even a decade ago. The profession has changed, but the mythology has not.

For Dr Mwendwa, survival has meant reclaiming parts of himself medicine tried to erase. Creativity. Art. Identity beyond the title. "The title 'Doctor' doesn't define who I am as an individual," he said. "As soon as you dissociate yourself from the profession and realize you have more to offer the world, it's very liberating."

Dr Mwendwa's story is not exceptional. It is emblematic. A life built exactly according to the rules, arriving at a destination that no longer resembles the promise. And in that gap between expectation and reality sits a grief many millennials carry silently.

Not just the grief of personal disappointment, but the grief of having believed so deeply in a system that could not, or would not, keep its word.

The fact that you now have little to no hope of a job that can sustain the standard of living you grew up with unless you have, at minimum, a master's degree, is truly wild. We were told education was the key. That promise has evaporated. We all know someone with an expensive foreign degree who has been forced into work completely unrelated to what they studied simply to survive. And beyond them are the thousands of graduates who enter the job market every year with no realistic hope of employment at all. The ladder we were told to climb is not just broken. In many cases, it was quietly removed.

Somewhere between our adolescence and our middle age, the world quietly shifted beneath our feet. The bureaucratic state hollowed out. Jobs became scarce, then precarious, then mythical. Credentials inflated and devalued simultaneously. The promise of upward mobility slowed to a crawl. The economy informalized, digitized, fragmented. Power stopped living in institutions and started living in

networks. And many millennials were left stranded.

Those of us trained to follow rules found ourselves trapped in systems that no longer played by them. We waited for promotions that never came. We obeyed procedures that only slowed us down. We trusted institutions that could not protect us. We did everything by the book, only to discover the book had been quietly rewritten. Meanwhile, others thrived. Not because they were smarter. Not because they were more deserving. But because they were more adaptable.

Power had migrated elsewhere, into markets, platforms, private networks, and informal arrangements that did not respond to the old tools of civic engagement.

Those who had never been fully absorbed into the formal system had learned something else entirely. That rules are negotiable. That authority is inconsistent. That survival depends on improvisation, hustle, relationships, speed. That outcomes matter more than process. In a world that rewards agility over correctness, they flourished. We stalled.

In Kenya today, following the rules is not just unrewarded. It is often actively frowned upon. It signals naivety. A lack of street intelligence. An inability to read power dynamics. The person who insists on doing things “the right way” is quietly pitied, sometimes mocked. Why are you still queuing when everyone else is calling someone? Why are you still waiting for approval when everyone else is moving? This is not moral decay. It is structural misalignment.

At some point, each millennial has to contend with their own reckoning, their own inventory of belief and disillusionment.

When rules are selectively enforced, when corruption is normalized, when institutions are slow and captured, strict compliance feels less like integrity and more like self-sabotage. The real operating system is informal. Relationships over paperwork. Timing over correctness. Narrative over credentials. For millennials trained to believe that rules equal safety, this creates a profound psychological rupture. We experience it as rage, turned inward. As shame. As paralysis. As burnout. As a sense that we are falling behind in a race we didn't know had changed lanes. And

because our identity was built on being “the good ones”, breaking rules feels like self-betrayal. So we freeze.

There is a particular grief that haunts this generation. It sounds like this: I kept my side of the bargain. Why didn't the system keep theirs? We don't talk about this grief enough. Instead, it leaks out sideways. Into cynical political commentary that goes nowhere. Into fixation on state power long after it has ceased to be the primary engine of opportunity. Into endless buzzwords about reform and accountability that mask a deeper despair. It leaks into our relationships. Into marriages that buckle under economic pressure and unprocessed resentment. Into intimacy that feels transactional and brittle. Into friendships strained by comparison and quiet competition. It leaks into addictions. Into numbing. Into scrolling. Into echo chambers that promise simple answers for complex pain. Into spiritual disillusionment, not always because faith failed us, but because institutions did. We were promised meaning through progress. When progress stalled, meaning collapsed with it.

Millennials are often described as

politically aware. And we are. But awareness is not the same as agency. Many of us learned the language of politics without ever learning the language of power. We can name the problems fluently. Corruption. Inequality. Bad governance. We can diagnose the system endlessly. What we struggle with is action that feels effective. So we circle the same conversations, the same outrage, the same despair. We inherit the cynicism of older generations without the illusion that time will fix things. We pass down anxiety to younger generations disguised as realism. Be careful. Don't hope too much. Don't trust institutions. Don't expect change. It's not that we don't care. It's that caring has become exhausting.

There is also an unresolved political reckoning that sits just beneath all of this, one that many millennials have never fully articulated. We came of age during a period when the language of reform was everywhere. We were told through formal channels, that authority can be reasoned with if you speak its language well enough. Letting go of that belief feels like letting go of adulthood itself. But the cost of clinging to it has been stagnation. While younger generations experiment

more freely with alternative forms of power, influence, and survival, many millennials remain caught in a loop of critique without movement, outrage without leverage. We know what is wrong. We are less sure where to go next.

This tension becomes sharper when you look at the generational fault lines now running through society. Millennials sit in an uncomfortable middle position, squeezed between older generations who still believe, however selectively, in institutional authority, and younger ones who have little patience for it at all. To those older than us, we are insufficiently respectful, too sceptical, too demanding. To those younger, we often appear cautious, risk-averse, and overly invested in systems that have already failed. We are accused, sometimes fairly, of warning against risks we ourselves were too afraid to take, of preaching realism that sounds suspiciously like fear.

This creates resentment in both directions. We resent being blamed for problems we did not create, while also being told we did not do enough to stop them. We resent watching younger people move faster, break rules more easily, build identities and

incomes in ways that feel both thrilling and terrifying. Beneath that resentment is envy, not because they have it easier, but because they seem less burdened by the need for permission. They were not promised stability in the same way. They were not trained to expect fairness. As a result, they grieve less when systems fail. They pivot faster.

At the same time, many millennials feel quietly misunderstood by those who come after us. Our caution is read as cowardice rather than the residue of disappointment. Our hesitation is framed as lack of imagination rather than the aftershock of having believed too deeply, too earnestly, in a future that did not arrive. We are often asked why we are so tired, without anyone asking what we have been carrying.

There is another layer to this story that we cannot ignore. Economic dislocation hits men and women differently. For many institutions would be fixed, corruption confronted, merit restored. We were encouraged to believe that the state could be rehabilitated, that participation and vigilance would eventually bend it toward fairness. Many of us invested our hope there,

because it was familiar territory. We knew how to engage institutions. We knew how to lobby, critique, analyse, vote, protest respectfully. What we were less prepared for was the slow realization that the state was not simply failing. It was no longer central. Power had migrated elsewhere, into markets, platforms, private networks, and informal arrangements that did not respond to the old tools of civic engagement. And yet many millennials remained fixated on the state, returning again and again to the same arguments, the same demands, the same disappointments, long after it became clear that this arena could no longer carry the weight of our aspirations.

This fixation is not foolish. It is understandable. We were trained to believe legitimacy flows from institutions, that change comes from millennial men, especially those raised with clear expectations of provision and status, the collapse of predictable pathways has been devastating.

Underemployment becomes a blow to identity. Shame festers. Some retreat. Some lash out. Some find refuge in online communities that offer belonging through grievance. For women, the picture is no less complex.

We were told to lean in, to have it all, to be everything at once. Careers stalled. Biological clocks did not. Support systems frayed. The emotional labour multiplied. Many are carrying households, relationships, parents, and children on unstable incomes while being told to be grateful. Everyone is tired. But not everyone is allowed to say it.

All of this brings us back, inevitably, to the personal. Structural analysis can only take you so far. At some point, each millennial has to contend with their own reckoning, their own inventory of belief and disillusionment. The question is no longer simply what went wrong, but how to live honestly now that we know. How to build lives that are responsive rather than resentful. How to find dignity outside scripts that no longer apply. How to loosen our grip on approval without losing our sense of right and wrong.

This is where the work becomes quieter and more intimate. It shows up in the decision to stop waiting for permission that will never come. In the willingness to take risks that do not come with guarantees. In redefining success in ways that make room for sanity, connection, and meaning, not just survival. It shows up in

choosing relationships that are mutual rather than extractive, in refusing to perform resilience while quietly unravelling. It shows up in learning to rest without guilt, to want without apology, to change one's mind without shame.

None of this is neat. There are no clean transitions from who we were trained to be into who we must become. There is only experimentation, failure, recalibration. There is grief that does not resolve cleanly, and anger that must be metabolized rather than acted out. There is the slow, unglamorous process of building a life that makes sense in the world as it is, not the one we were promised.

This is the sentence that unlocks everything. Millennials were optimized for a world that no longer exists. We were trained for stability in an era of volatility. For bureaucracy in an era of networks. For compliance in an era that rewards audacity. For patience in a moment that prizes speed. That mismatch is not a personal failure. It is a historical one. And it explains why so many of us feel unmoored, late, behind, confused, angry, grieving something we cannot quite name.

Naming the problem is not the same as solving it. But it is the beginning of honesty. The work ahead for millennials is not just economic. It is psychological and moral. We have to grieve the bargain that failed us without letting that grief calcify into bitterness. We have to unlearn obedience without losing integrity. We have to develop adaptive intelligence without becoming cynical opportunists. We have to redefine success outside institutions that no longer function.

It also requires solidarity, not competition. A willingness to talk honestly about where we are, not where we thought we would be. A refusal to romanticize struggle or pretend resilience is painless. The future will not be handed to us by the state. That era is over. But that does not mean there is no future. It means we have to build it differently. And perhaps that, finally, is the work we were meant to do all along.



Ciru Muriuki is a Kenyan journalist and presenter with international experience, including her time at

the BBC where she hosted *The Breakdown*, a news program aired on 40 partner stations across Africa. She has covered stories across the continent and built a digital community of more than 400,000 followers, combining strong journalism with an ability to engage audiences across platforms.

Africa's Millennials: Denial on Blast

Beneath the cynicism often attributed to millennials is not apathy but exhaustion. Not disengagement, but lives lived in permanent adjustment.

Ty Ngachira



July 5, 2025. I get a call from my colleague, Eve. "Ty, please come to the venue right now". This was strange as I wasn't supposed to show up until two hours later. She, however, sounded very worried, and I rushed to the venue. Nairobi traffic has a way of making you sit with your thoughts. It was D-Day for my one-man comedy special dubbed "Millennial in Denial". A bad feeling gnawed at me the

whole time. Something did not feel right. When I got there, everyone was huddled in small groups speaking in hushed tones. Before I even got the chance to ask what the problem was, Eve approached me and, in a defeated voice, said, "There is a problem with the roof. There is a risk of cave-in and it can't be repaired on time. If it rains like last night, people could get hurt. So they are saying we cancel the

show.” Eve’s words hit like a freight train. I didn’t even have the time to process what she was saying. I was still in denial. I moved around seeking clarification from everyone, yet getting angry at anyone who breathed my way. Finally, a deep, empty admission that this was indeed happening settled on me. Show biz is cruel, man. Especially for creatives. For you, it’s a dream, it’s a part of you that you are sharing with the world. It’s a very raw and emotional journey. Every success is euphoria on steroids, but every setback feels like your parents were right that you should have gone on to practice law.

At some point, for Africa’s millennials, the roof began to sag.

Months of preparation had gone into this day. I had comedians from Uganda and Tanzania ready to join my Kenyan colleagues to open for me. We were going to compare our different experiences as we threw jabs and friendly roasts at the state of each other’s countries. A lot of writing, research, and practice had gone into the jokes themselves. Countless interviews and social media engagements had gone into promoting the show. People had come from as

far as Nanyuki and Mombasa, but in the face of a leaking roof, all that meant nothing. Nature has a sense of humour, but it’s not funny when you are the joke. It was two hours to show time. And there I was, lost, with everyone waiting for me to make a decision and chart a way forward. Adulting is messy. Who put me in charge of things like this? Some of the audience was already at the gate waiting, and others were on their way. So, tears welling up in my eyes, I took to Instagram and announced the cancellation, apologising to everyone and assuring all who had bought tickets that they were still valid and that a new date would be announced. Then I switched off my phone and waited for the worst.

It took a while to recover from the cancellation. The financial loss was one thing, but the emotional kick in the teeth, that takes everything from you. Having to put on a brave face and joke. Explaining away something that wasn’t even your fault. But there was a strange familiarity about that disappointment. Not that I had experienced a cancelled show before. No. It was the feeling of doing everything in your power, and it still not being enough. Whether it’s a career, friendship, school, the economy.

Some days you do everything you can, and life just says, "No."

You know, every African millennial carries some version of that collapsing roof. A moment when effort met instability, when preparation ran headlong into a structure that could not be trusted to hold. For me, it was a cancelled show. For many, it was a degree that cost your folks loans and sacrifices that led nowhere. For others, it was a job offer that dissolved. Some who went to study in the diaspora, enveloped in the hope of an entire village, made a quiet return home that felt like reversal rather than rest. Different details, same recognition. It feels like life made promises that it decided to break just for fun and moved on.

Africans born between the mid-80s and the '90s were supposed to be the game changers. The generations that came before us had fought for independence, for democracy. Now it was our turn. The path was set, and the instructions were clear. Go to school, work hard, stay out of trouble, wait your turn. And guess what? We did. With an earnestness that now feels almost naïve. We became the most educated generation our societies had produced, fluent in the language of reform, rights,

and opportunity. Reminded every day that patience was virtue and preparation was insurance. The promise was clear. If we stayed ready, the future would eventually call our number, and we would be there waiting with an excited "Hello!!"

But life hates going according to plan. Both for the individual and for humanity in general. At some point, for Africa's millennials, the roof began to sag. Slowly at first, but with warning signs we were trained to ignore. Most, if not all, institutions seemed to hold their shape even as their strength eroded. Promises remained visible while their ability to carry weight quietly disappeared. At first, you think, I only need to work harder. I mean, like school, life should reward merit, right? What we read as personal delay was often structural strain. What we absorbed as individual failure was, in truth, the sound of a system weakening above us.

"Hustle" emerged as both ethic and euphemism, a way of dignifying instability without naming its cause.

I use the promise of education because it's very relatable. Especially to Kenyans who, in 2002, were promised free education for all by the new

government. President Kibaki led a fierce drive where local chiefs were mandated to arrest parents who refused to take their children to school. As a result, classrooms multiplied, and universities rose from dust and optimism. Degrees were framed as proof of discipline, of worthiness, of having done right by one's parents and one's country. For many families, especially those crossing into higher education for the first time, education carried the accumulated hope of generations. It was meant to be the bridge between sacrifice and arrival, between obedience and dignity. We were taught to believe that if we carried this promise carefully enough, it would carry us in return.

For many millennials, stability began to feel like a personal failure of imagination rather than a reasonable expectation.

But the world and its markets were not ready. Potential and hope are very deceiving. In the following years, graduates armed with credentials but little leverage entered a labour market that could not absorb them. Short contracts, if you were lucky, delayed pay, titles without security. Slowly, a new word emerged: "Hustle". I hate that word. On the surface, it seems

innocent, even dignifying the strive to work. Scratch the surface, and it reveals an ugly truth. "Hustle" emerged as both ethic and euphemism, a way of dignifying instability without naming its cause. It pedestalled shortcuts and connections as the way you made it. It made genuine effort and those who were ethical look foolish. The structural failure was rarely acknowledged; in fact, it was normalised. And so, many of us learned to live inside the ever-widening gap between qualification and fulfilment.

At first, we comforted ourselves by thinking that success and fulfilment were just delayed rather than denied. We learned to speak about ourselves in the language of correction and self-improvement. There were probably skills to upgrade, brands to refine, mindsets to fix. Slowly and reluctantly, failure was individualized, even when it was widely shared. Many of us stopped describing our circumstances and started diagnosing ourselves. First, there was therapy speak, the Internet told us we had ADHD or were anxious avoidant, or something like that. Anything to diagnose the sadness, really. Silence followed, because shame thrives in isolation. It is easier to believe that you alone have fallen short

than to confront the possibility that the structure itself was never built to hold you. Because, then, everything is still somehow in your hands.

A roomful of people who understood the appeal of caring deeply for something that would not ask when you were getting married or why your career still sounded provisional.

Do not get me wrong, this is not an activist piece of writing meant to deny personal agency or pretend that effort does not matter. Rather, it is intended to help us see things from a place of scale. A lot of African countries expanded education faster than they expanded capacity. They ended up producing graduates without producing sufficient industry, stability, or pathways. Policy celebrated access while quietly deferring absorption. The result was a generation trained for participation in systems that could not fully receive them. What appears, in hindsight, as individual underachievement was often the predictable outcome of institutional overreach and retreat, a mismatch between promise and provision that no amount of personal discipline could resolve.

Enough with the political talk.

Let's talk technology. African millennials grew up crossing thresholds. Between letters and email, from memorizing phone numbers to having thousands of saved contacts, from waiting three days for a response to instant blue ticks on WhatsApp. Technology did not arrive all at once; it kept arriving. Just as we adjusted, something newer replaced it. Each change was framed as progress, as access, as possibility. But it also required constant recalibration. We were asked to keep up, to stay relevant, to learn new ways of working and living in a world that rarely paused long enough for anything to settle.

The result was a life lived in transition. Just as something began to make sense, it became outdated. Skills expired. Platforms shifted. Industries rebranded themselves out of recognition. There was little sense of arrival, only the pressure to adjust again. For many millennials, stability began to feel like a personal failure of the imagination rather than a reasonable expectation. We learned to stay flexible, but flexibility came at a cost. It is difficult to build confidence, intimacy, or long-term plans in a world that keeps insisting you remain provisional.

Living that way also changed how we looked at ourselves. Phones collapsed distance and time, putting African lives next to Western ones without context or scale. Progress began to look universal, almost mandatory. You could scroll past someone your age buying a house, starting a company, announcing a second child, all before lunch. None of it explained where they were standing or what had been handed to them. Comparison crept in quietly. Not always as jealousy, but as a dull sense of lateness. Like showing up for a race already in motion, unsure when it started or whether you had missed something essential.

It is not lost on me that I am writing this as a professional comedian. Someone whose job, at least on paper, is to make things lighter. Perhaps that is why this feeling is easier to recognise than to resolve. What settled in was not rage, but something flatter. Resentment without heat. A grief that learned to pass as a joke. We became skilled at laughing first, at naming our disappointments before anyone else could. It is easier to call it "the process", or make a joke about being thirty-five and still explaining your life, than to admit how much of this was meant to be temporary. Humour, for many

of us, became less a celebration than a coping strategy. It was a way of keeping the weight from fully landing.

There is a kind of energy that comes from naming injustice, from feeling awake while others seem distracted.

That weight shows up most clearly in our relationships. Marriage, in particular, arrives less as desire than as reminder. Compared to the generations before us, who seemed to move from school to work to family with fewer interruptions, millennials are marrying later, if at all. Many of us spent our twenties stabilizing what was supposed to have already been stable. By the time marriage enters the conversation, it does so alongside rent, uncertainty, and the fear of committing from an unfinished place. Questions come from home, from relatives, from people who mean well and struggle to imagine another timeline. Each visit feels like an audit of progress. For many millennials, intimacy has had to negotiate economics first. Love becomes careful. Commitment feels heavy. It is difficult to promise permanence in a life that has trained you to expect delay.

This carefulness extends beyond

our private lives. Millennials are often described as politically aware, and the description is accurate. We know the language of power. We can name the failures of the state, the corruption of institutions, the vocabulary of reform. But awareness has not translated into influence. Many of us learned how to diagnose problems long before we learned how to fix them. Over time, this produced a cynicism that is not rooted in apathy but in familiarity. We have seen enough to distrust easy answers, but too little change to believe our knowledge is enough. What remains is a sharpness without leverage, a constant sense of seeing clearly while standing still.

It may be that our role was never to inherit stability, but to live through its erosion and learn how to remain human while it happens.

A month later, the show happened. I mention this partly because it feels important to return to where we started, and partly because I do not want you thinking I forgot about it. It was not a victory lap. It was more like fulfilling an obligation. A different venue, adjusted expectations, a roof that appeared willing to cooperate. The audience showed up. The material landed. There

was relief, yes, but it was practical rather than celebratory. The kind of relief that says this did not fail, not the kind that says something has begun.

What stayed with me that night was not the performance itself but the material it kept circling. I found myself talking about cat mums and plant dads. Adults nurturing houseplants and pets with the seriousness once reserved for children. Entire emotional investments placed in soil and sunlight. The laughter that followed was not mocking. It was recognition. A roomful of people who understood the appeal of caring deeply for something that would not ask when you were getting married or why your career still sounded provisional.

Marriage came up often, usually as pressure rather than aspiration. Calls from home. Relatives checking in with concern that felt like surveillance. Casual questions that landed like reminders. The laughter here carried tension. Not resistance, exactly, but negotiation. Many people in that room knew what was expected of them. They were simply unsure how to meet those expectations while still paying rent and keeping their lives from falling apart.

Careers surfaced the same way. Not as ambition, but as explanation. Jokes about having to describe what you do without sounding unemployed or dishonest. Shared laughter about how we tell interviewers that we always wanted to sell insurance since we were six years old. About titles that change often and security that does not arrive. About success that feels temporary and failure that feels permanent. These moments landed softly, then lingered. Not because they were exaggerated, but because they were accurate.

What became clear was that millennials do not lack self-awareness. We know our patterns. We joke about gym routines, about therapy language, about activism fatigue, about faith abandoned and rediscovered in cycles. We laugh first because laughter offers control. It allows confession without exposure. On that stage, humour was not deflection. It was a way of saying this is shared without having to ask for solutions.

By the end of the night, the show felt less like entertainment and more like a census. A roomful of people recognizing themselves in small, ordinary admissions. The jokes worked not because they

were clever. They worked because they named what many had been quietly carrying. Beneath the cynicism often attributed to millennials is not apathy but exhaustion. Not disengagement, but lives lived in permanent adjustment. The show did not resolve any of this. It simply confirmed it.

Some of us turn inward. We take the chaos outside and try to compress it into something manageable. The body becomes a project. Gyms fill up. Runs get longer. Meals get cleaner. The language of therapy slips into everyday conversation. We learn to say "boundaries" and "self-care" with confidence, even when we are not sure what we are protecting. There is comfort in improvement that responds to effort. If the world refuses to cooperate, at least a body can be trained. At least progress can be measured in mirrors and miles.

Others turn outward. Into politics.

Into activism. Into permanent alertness. There is a kind of energy that comes from naming injustice, from feeling awake while others seem distracted. Anger offers structure. It gives shape to frustration and the sense of doing something. For many millennials, outrage became a substitute for

power. We posted. We marched. We argued. We became fluent in the language of resistance, even as the systems we were resisting remained largely unmoved. It was not pointless. It was necessary. It was also exhausting.

And some turn upward. Toward faith, or spirituality, or the search for meaning that does not depend on markets or states behaving themselves. Old beliefs return. New ones are tried. Churches fill with people who were once certain they had outgrown them. Prayer becomes less about certainty and more about shelter. This turn is often misunderstood as regression. More often, it is a reaching. When life refuses to make sense, belief offers a place to put the questions. Sometimes that is enough to get through another week.

When it comes to what we passed down, the record is uneven. Millennials were generous with language. We handed over the words. Rights. Trauma. Boundaries. Systems. Accountability. The next generation learned early how to name what felt wrong. What we were less able to give them were pathways. We taught critique before construction. Awareness before inheritance. It is a strange

thing to be fluent in diagnosis yet not know where the tools are kept.

There is an irony in this that we do not talk about enough. We wanted to spare those who came after us the confusion we lived with. Instead, we gave them our cynicism dressed as wisdom. We warned them early. We told them not to trust too easily. Not to expect much. Not to wait for institutions to save them. Some of that was necessary. Some of it was fatigue speaking. It is hard to hand over hope when you are still trying to recover your own.

This is usually the point at which a solution is expected. A prescription. A call to action. I do not have one that would not feel dishonest. Millennials are often told to reclaim optimism, to rebrand failure as resilience, to hustle differently. None of that addresses the underlying truth, which is that many of us are tired in specific ways that slogans cannot reach. Naming where we are feels more urgent than pretending to know where we should be going next.

Perhaps the mistake was in believing that every generation must arrive somewhere definitive. That history moves in clean arcs and rewards patience

predictably. It may be that our role was never to inherit stability, but to live through its erosion and learn how to remain human while it happens. That is not a romantic task. It does not photograph well. It does, however, demand honesty.

I think often about that roof. About the warning that arrived just in time and the disappointment that followed. It did not collapse, but it did not inspire confidence either. Much like the world many millennials stand under now. We remain rehearsed. We remain ready. We are still waiting, not for rescue, but for structures that can carry the weight of the lives we have already built.



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sharp wit. Fluent in Kikuyu, Swahili, and English, he uses comedy as a tool to question power, unpack social issues, and spark dialogue on civil liberties in Kenya.

Millennials in Midlife: A Second Adolescence

A generation promised much but handed little, millennials are drifting into midlife burdened with the debris of shattered illusions and dreams deferred.

Nelly Madegwa



I am thirty-seven years old, childless by circumstance and by choice. I'm still learning how to name it. I live in a small rural town where the road thins into red dust and silence arrives before evening. Here, the days move at a pace that resists urgency. If you had asked me five years ago what my life would look like now, I would have described a different geography entirely; an apartment

in Nairobi with a view I barely noticed, a job that sounded impressive at family gatherings, weekends measured in brunches and traffic and exhaustion.

I would not have mentioned this place, where the nights are loud with crickets and the morning smells like damp soil, because back then I believed healing was something you did privately,

efficiently, without disrupting your life. I did not yet understand that sometimes the only way to survive is to leave.

Growing up, we were told we were the generation of promise. The future shimmered with possibility, a glittering horizon towards which we should march with discipline and ambition. Work hard, they said, and the world would open up to you. Study diligently, and opportunities would greet you. Cultivate your emotional intelligence, and your relationships would bloom into something strong and lasting.

As we stepped into adulthood, the ground softened beneath our feet and quietly gave way.

What no one ever said plainly but what we absorbed early was that being average carried a quiet kind of shame. In school, encouragement came wrapped in warning, you can do better, you have so much potential, phrases that sounded generous but implied risk. To be ordinary was to flirt with invisibility. Many of us learned, long before adulthood, that distinction was not just admirable, it was necessary. Burnout felt preferable to stagnation. Ambition became less about desire and more about

defence, a way of outrunning the fear that a life without markers of success might not be taken seriously at all. We believed it because belief was expected of us, optimism was our inheritance. We envisioned an adulthood shaped by progress, a stable career, a loving partner, a home purchased or built through responsibility and hard work. We imagined a society where institutions still knew how to function, where the public sphere still felt safe, where the future still felt negotiable.

But that's not the adult life my generation walked into.

Instead, as we stepped into adulthood, the ground softened beneath our feet and quietly gave way. The institutions that once held people up – education, healthcare, employment, governance – were fraying at the edges. Crises arrived one after another, each one declared “unprecedented” until unprecedented became routine. Our emotional lives became collateral damage in a world that kept shaking. We internalized the instability until it became the texture of our daily experience. We entered our thirties carrying anxieties that never quite settled, questions that never found answers, and a kind of exhaustion

that sleep could not touch.

I was raised to believe that exhaustion was a temporary tax on success, that if I just endured long enough, stability would eventually arrive. So, I endured. I ignored the numbness, the growing sense that my life was happening not quite inside me, but somewhere adjacent to me. I learned to perform functionality while quietly unravelling.

The turning point came quietly. Months later, I would recognize it for what it was. I lost my job, not because of poor performance, but because the company was restructuring again. I had survived earlier rounds of layoffs. This time, I didn't.

The human resource manager called me into her office, clicked through a script she had clearly practised a hundred times, and thanked me for "my contributions". It was over in seven minutes. Seven minutes to dismantle almost a decade of loyalty, ambition, and carefully constructed identity.

I remember the walk back to my desk more clearly than the conversation itself. Everything looked the same, screens glowing, colleagues hunched in concentration, but I moved

through the office as if something essential had shifted out of place. In the evening, I packed my things slowly, trying not to attract attention, as though loss were something best handled discreetly. That evening, as I rode home in silence, watching the city slide past the window, I began rehearsing explanations I was not ready to give. By nightfall, the shock had settled into something heavier, the realization that a life I had organized myself around could disappear without warning, without ceremony, without meaning. It was not only the job I lost. It was the belief that loyalty and effort offered protection.

"We stopped being people. We became problems for each other to solve. And when the money got tighter, the love got thinner."

Leaving Nairobi felt like failure at first. In our culture, movement is usually in one direction, from rural to urban, from small towns to cities. Progress has a geography, and I was moving against it. Going back felt like regression. Friends were polite but confused. Some were openly sceptical.

"What will you do there?" they asked, as if healing required a job description.

Even my own voice echoed their doubts. I worried about money, about relevance, about becoming invisible. I still do, though less now. Beneath the fear was a quieter instinct telling me that staying would cost me more than leaving ever could.

We are aging into disillusionment, carrying the debris of a generation promised much and handed little.

So I packed my life into boxes and moved to Voi. The first weeks were disorienting. The silence felt accusatory. Without traffic and deadlines, my thoughts grew louder. I slept for long stretches and still woke up heavy. Healing, I learned quickly, is not relief; it is unlearning. I had to confront how much of my identity was tied to productivity, and how little I knew myself outside of it.

I found myself single at thirty-five, jobless, drifting through a world that seemed determined to remind me how far I had fallen from the life I once imagined.

And yet, my story was not unique.

Everywhere I turned, friends and acquaintances were experiencing the same midlife unravelling disguised as "transition". The

same exhaustion hidden behind phrases like, "I'm just figuring things out or I'm taking it day by day." We all say the same things. We all know they are lies.

Last October, I met a friend, Sally, who had once been the most hopeful person I knew. In our early twenties, she spoke of the future with a kind of ferocity: plans, timelines, an almost religious faith in upward mobility.

When we met again at a small restaurant, she looked the same, but her voice carried a weight I could not miss.

Sally had recently finalised a divorce. "It wasn't infidelity," she said. "It wasn't abuse. It was the exhaustion. We were drowning in bills, pressure, fear. We stopped being people. We became problems for each other to solve. And when the money got tighter, the love got thinner." She paused, then added, "Do you know how embarrassing it is to realise your marriage did not fail for a dramatic reason? Just the quiet grind of surviving and performing."

I had heard variations of that same confession. Relationships collapsing under financial strain. Friendships fading as everyone retreated into survival mode.

People postponing having children because they couldn't imagine raising them in an economy where every month felt like a gamble.

Our emotional landscape is littered with small, silent heartbreaks, some spoken, most swallowed. We are ageing into disillusionment, carrying the debris of a generation promised much and handed little.

For women, this uncertainty carries an added, unspoken scrutiny. We are encouraged to be educated, capable, and self-sufficient, yet our lives are still quietly assessed for signs of relational completion. Marriage reassures. Motherhood settles people. When those markers are missing, curiosity turns into concern, and concern into gentle, persistent questioning. There is little room to admit fatigue without it being interpreted as weakness, or mismanagement, or regret. To exist outside the expected arc of womanhood, especially in midlife, is to keep explaining oneself, to insist that a life still unfolding is not a problem to be solved.

I am ageing into midlife without the usual anchors that once defined it. Home ownership, once a rite of passage, is now a distant

fantasy for many. Stable careers have been replaced by contract work, gig jobs, or positions that pay less than the cost of existing. Retirement savings are sparse. Healthcare is fragile. Communities are fractured. And relationships – romantic, platonic, familial – are strained under the weight of cumulative exhaustion. Our generation is drifting into its forties with fewer assets, fewer children, fewer safety nets, and more uncertainty than any generation in recent history.

There is shame in this unravelling, in needing time and care at an age meant for consolidation.

We did what we were told. We studied hard, chased careers, stayed adaptable, and still found ourselves anxious, underpaid, and unsure. We are grieving futures we planned for sincerely. That grief does not always look like tears. Sometimes it looks like numbness. Sometimes irritability. Sometimes we joke about the deep fatigue because it feels safer than admitting how disappointed we are.

It's not that we failed to reach the milestones. It's that the milestones moved.

My parents built their house in

their thirties. Most of us rent. We talk about investments the way our parents talked about vacations imagined – distant, reserved for people with more stability than we have ever known. Midlife is supposed to be a period of consolidation. For us, it feels like a second adolescence: messy, uncertain, unfinished.

Like adolescence, this stage is marked by instability without instruction. We are learning boundaries later than expected, discovering limits we were never taught to respect. Financial dependence returns in uncomfortable forms; shared housing, family support, deferred plans, arrangements that feel like regression rather than adaptation. Emotions sit closer to the surface, less buffered by the confidence we once performed so convincingly. There is shame in this unravelling, in needing time and care at an age meant for consolidation. Unlike our first adolescence, there is no cultural patience for our uncertainty. We are expected to arrive fully formed, quietly resilient, and grateful for whatever remains. This second adolescence is lonelier, heavier, and lived under the constant suspicion that we are already behind.

If you ask a millennial how they are doing, the answer you will likely get if they are being honest is, “I’m tired.” The existential kind. The tiredness that comes from years of precarity, overwork, and instability. Therapy has become our religion. Self-care, our survival strategy.

But beneath the language of healing is a quieter truth; we are worn out because we have lived through too many transitions, too many crises, and too few moments of rest. The emotional cost of being a millennial is not a footnote, it is the defining feature of our adulthood.

Being thirty-seven without children is its own complicated terrain. In Kenya, womanhood is often measured by marriage and motherhood, milestones accompanied by relentless questioning. Even now, people ask gently but persistently, “So, when?”

I don’t have a neat answer. Part of me grieves what I may be postponing. Another part is relieved not to carry the weight of caring for others while still learning how to care for myself. Depression taught me humility. It stripped away the illusion that I could will myself into wellness or outwork pain.

Out here, away from the noise, I have space to feel grief without judgment. I mourn the version of myself that believed clarity would arrive with age. I mourn relationships that did not survive the pressure of becoming adults in a hard economy. I mourn the certainty that life would eventually settle.

But grief and gratitude can coexist. I am grateful for mornings that do not demand too much. For conversations that linger. For the chance to rebuild my mental health without pretending it is a side project.

Healing has not been linear. Some days I feel light, almost hopeful. Other days the heaviness returns without warning. The difference now is that I don't panic when it does. I have learned that depression is not a personal failure.

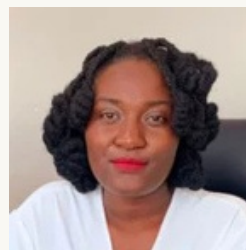
I don't know what the next decade holds. I don't know if I will return to the city, or if love and family will find me here or somewhere else entirely. What I know is that this pause, this deliberate step off the expected path, has saved me.

At thirty-seven, I am still becoming. That no longer frightens me. It feels like

permission to choose health over hustle, presence over performance, honesty over appearances. I came here to heal from depression, but what I am really healing from is the belief that my worth is tied to how closely my life resembles the script I was handed.

Out where the road ends and the days stretch open, I am learning to breathe again.

In the ruins of the promises I was raised on, I am learning to hope differently; quietly, cautiously, and on my own terms. It is a fragile hope, one that does not deny the bleakness of the present, but insists, nonetheless, on trying again.



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Millennials: Hope Deferred, Hearts Hollowed in Despair

A generation raised on stories of national possibility, millennials grieve their unfulfilled dreams, hopes, and expectations. Their healing will require introspection. It will also require systemic change.

Saiton Rigba



Hope deferred makes the heart sick... – Proverbs 13:12 NLT version

There is a particular kind of grief that comes from watching your country break the same promises your parents once believed in. For Kenyan millennials – those born between 1981 and 1996 – this grief is not abstract. It is the weight of being the most educated generation in

the nation's history while navigating an economy that has no place for them. It is the dissonance of global connectivity meeting local stagnation, of democratic ideals colliding with entrenched political dynasties, of being raised on stories of national possibility only to inherit a republic that seems determined to consume its young.

This is a generation caught in a profound contradiction: globally exposed yet locally constrained, digitally connected yet economically excluded, socially aware yet politically disillusioned. And beneath it all runs a deeper current—the unhealed traumas of parents and grandparents, the emotional debts of survival, and the question that haunts every milestone: How do we build futures when we're still excavating the past?

Millennials were raised with high hopes by parents who had learned that a good education opens doors of prosperity, leadership and opportunities. Our parents came from a time when just having a high school education guaranteed you a job, and governments that paid for education abroad and guaranteed jobs once you graduated and returned. They knew that even employers could pay for a master's and keep giving you guaranteed employment for a duration, with a house and other perks on top. They had employers that had their own hospitals and schools, making having and raising children a much more affordable venture. They had offers for land through SACCOs and mortgages that made sense. In their world, the one thing that had a

guaranteed rate of return was education, and boy, did they invest in it.

If it sounds like a dream to us, it is because we never encountered the intentionality and organisation that our parents experienced. We found semblances of it in the values they held and in the ways in which they raised us. Not only that, we were coming of age just at the liberalisation of the media. From having only KBC as the main source of entertainment on radio and television, we now had KTN, STV, and later NTV, with Capital FM, Metro FM, and Kiss FM for us urban kids, redefining our palate, our dreams and expectations. We watched *Fresh Prince*, *Days of Our Lives*, *X-Men*, *The Bold and the Beautiful*, *Batman*, *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*, and *Renegade*. TV was a part of our schedule. I remember doing my homework in the evening to the sound of music from Jimmi Gathu's shows on KTN; every day had a theme and a sound.

It may not make sense now with the Internet and YouTube, but back then, these shows were our gateway to the music happening globally. Jimmi pioneered it and we were home imbibing every single song, from *Jam-A-Delic*,

Rhythmix, KassKass, Rapem, and more. We all found our preferences, the cultural nexus points that brought us together or excluded those who did not fit in or understand. In typical teenage behaviour, what we consumed became our identity. Monday to Friday we were glued to the TV in that evening hour that was generally accepted to be for us while the adults were still on their way home or in the kitchen.

The irony of it all is that my father worked for the same organisations that were responsible for the measures that led to my mother's employment situation.

It was a different time; although many of our parents knew about the outside world from books, news, and Reader's Digests, or from friends and family who had travelled, or even from entertainment, the outlook was not the same. KBC mostly had Latin shows like *Escrava Isaura* and extremely grandiose shows like *The Bold and the Beautiful*, or *Derrick* the German minimalist detective, or *Mr Bean*. They presented a different reality, one lived by others. We could watch and be entertained and for the adults they could separate what they were watching from the lives

they lived. For us children, however, something else was happening in the recesses of our minds that was probably being missed. A certain life, a standard if you will, was being developed. Without knowing it, these shows shaped the dream of what adulthood should look like and a subtle reorientation towards global citizenship was taking place within us. For those who had solid family traditions and guidance, this was not the case, but for the rest of us without adult parental guidance, either through abandonment or absence, we built a life in our minds of how things should be once we were adults.

To understand Kenyan millennials is to first understand what they inherited. The 1990s – when most were children – represented Kenya's nadir. The Goldenberg scandal – a fraud scheme involving fictitious gold and diamond exports – cost Kenya over 10 per cent of its GDP, with inflation reaching 105 per cent and the money supply surging 35 per cent in 1993. This wasn't merely an economic crisis; it was a betrayal that hollowed out national institutions and decimated family stability. For many families, the 1980s and 1990s saw a shift from circular educational migration to a one-

way mass exodus seeking stability abroad.

Remember, our parents had been raising us to follow in their footsteps. Education was the key to success. It didn't matter what your gifts were; the expectation was that if you did well, everything else would unfold. This was said by our parents, our teachers, and our relatives.

They only knew one way, and with time, the order would be restored to what it was supposed to be. Few, if any of them, could have seen where the world was headed and what would become of their children on whom they had placed such high hopes.

One of the unacknowledged stories among millennials is what the '90s, all the way to Kibaki's election in 2002, did to us. My mother, who was a secretary then and a single mother, lost her job. Unable to sustain the city life, we moved back home to my grandparents'. It was a jarring change for me. I moved schools from the expensive IGCSE school my diaspora father had been paying for, to a local primary school in the area. The irony of it all is that my father worked for the same organisations that were responsible for the measures that led to my mother's employment

situation. Moving back was not easy; the tensions in an already difficult mother-daughter relationship were compounded by another daughter-in-law and more grandchildren coming home. At some point, there were about 12 of us. When home is welcoming and nourishing, there is impetus to start over; when this is not the case, it's a class in dysfunction, bitterness and constant tension. I watched my mother try her hand at numerous things – making candy, selling gum arabic, baking. None of the ventures took off enough to enable her to stabilise financially. In the end, the only option left that many were looking at – moving abroad.

It was sort of like the Berlin Wall, just inside a house.

We already had family abroad, and it was decided that my mother would go to the US. The plan was that she would go to America, and when she had settled down, I would follow her. She made sure I had a passport and prepared me as best as she could. I grieved; it felt like a part of me had been cut off. It didn't help that her absence had left a gap; I was now included in adult disagreements because there was no one to shield me. The workload on the home front now

included me and my education suffered. There would be times I forgot to do homework because no one reminded me, but I was also busy making dinner for the family. A disagreement with the adults resulted in the house being split into two. My cousins and aunt on one side, my grandparents and I on the other.

It was sort of like the Berlin Wall, just inside a house.

The tension was too much, and so I played the one card that would be accepted. I cried to go to boarding school, using all the reasons that could justify my case. It was accepted, and a year and a half after my mother left, I was in boarding school. My circumstances were not unique; there were at least four of us whose mothers were abroad trying to make a better life for us. One of us got to go and visit during one school holiday and I was envious of the stories she told. Boarding school was a respite for me, a haven despite the occasional bullying. It had routine, rhythm and good food, the teachers cared and were invested in our success. I was a good student and caught on and did well in my KCPE.

By then, it had been four years of expecting to go to America to

join my mother. Every time we spoke and I asked when I would go, the response was always the next holiday. I patiently waited, and when I finished my exams, the expectation was that during the long holidays it would finally happen. Only there was a small issue; I did very well in my exams, so well that I was earned a place at a coveted national school. Right there, education trumped everything else, and that was the end of that dream and promise.

The long and short of it is that things did not turn out as we had both expected, and what was meant to be a few years at most became extended by many factors, and in the end it was a 20-year separation. As an adult now, I can see why; my mother wasn't able to become stable or successful enough to build and grow deep roots in America and take me there. But passing my KCPE so well and landing in a national school became the excuse for why I didn't go to America.

Without an adult to have conversations with and help explain things, there is a way a child makes sense of the changes in their world. In my case, my mother's leaving, even if it was to better us financially, had a huge effect on me emotionally and

psychologically, leading to years of struggling with feelings of abandonment and suicidal thoughts. I was emotionally stunted, and this in turn crippled me in adulthood, especially once I became a mother. All that had happened to me had left me with powerful, underlying subconscious beliefs that could not be shaken by any experiences to the contrary that I had had. I write about them in my book, *Missing My Mummy*, but it wasn't until I began to confront what happened that I was able to find my footing in the world as myself rather than as someone continually justifying my worth and needing to prove to others that I belonged.

The early years of the Kibaki government were filled with hope and possibility; our country could finally reach its full potential.

It took many years for me to sit with what happened and how it shaped my thinking and the person I became. The expectations I had of life and the life I was living were night and day. This cognitive dissonance is lived a lot by heavy social media users in Kenya. We see dream lives, economies, and countries then settle into our own reality. The Internet has become the

millennials' escape tool of choice, just like alcohol, drugs, workaholism, and other vices.

The early years of the Kibaki government were filled with hope and possibility; our country could finally reach its full potential. There was no tolerance for police demands for bribes with some even being arrested by wananchi. Free education gave millions of children a chance at a better life and businesses were being started and thriving everywhere we looked. How could I not think that there was a better opportunity for me?

This dream was shattered during the post-election violence in 2007–2008 when I was in the last year of my International Baccalaureate programme. We watched the country burn in a way that we hadn't quite seen before. Even with previous clashes and violence, the government limited what came to the public consciousness. This one, though? We had journalists like Boniface Mwangi in the thick of things, taking gruesome images of limbs being hacked off, bodies and homes being burned, families being displaced from their homes. Neighbours were turning on each other brutally. I went to volunteer at the Jamhuri Park Internally Displaced Persons

Camp (IDP) and I couldn't go back. An entire afternoon of children and parents recounting what happened and how they lost each other and what they witnessed was too much to bear. I volunteered later with two other campaigns for IDPs that allowed me to help from a distance – one with MamaMikes which had partnered with Tusky's to supply the IDPs with food and personal items, and another with Habitat 4 Humanity to raise funds to build houses for IDPs. This was probably our first deep reckoning with the reality of the underlying hate, evil, and tribalism being weaponized amongst us.

A few months ago, I met an Uber driver who lived in the Rift Valley during the post-election violence. A millennial himself, he confirmed that the numbers of the dead were far greater than what was known. He and his village mates would fight and kill those attacking them from other villages, burying them in shallow graves. What does witnessing or participating in violence like that do to a person, to his family of origin, and if he chooses to get married, to his wife and kids? Back then I had a laptop and so I went online and found and read all the reports on the post-election violence. It haunted me deeply.

At the time, however, I was living a double life – perhaps one of the millennial skills is the ability to show up even when the world is burning. I was out clubbing with friends, Diaspora Kenyans and Ugandans living in the UK. Tamasha was full even though there was no meat, but Carnivore was empty. The Ugandans, who were older than me, had lived through Idi Amin Dada's rule as children and they kept warning us that, unlike Uganda, we had nowhere to run to. We were too modern, with too many buildings and open land compared to their fertile forests with enough food to feed and shelter people during conflict. I could hear what they were saying but I couldn't internalise it. For millennials – many in their teens and twenties – the post-election violence that killed over 1,000 people and displaced between 350,000 and 650,000 others, was a shattering of the national promise. Sexual violence increased over 60-fold during this period, and the ethnic tensions exposed fundamental fractures in the nation's identity. This wasn't ancient history their grandparents discussed in hushed tones – this was their coming-of-age, their formative years marked by smoke, betrayal, and the realisation that the Kenya they'd been taught to believe in

might not exist.

The present: When global exposure meets local stagnation

Now, consider what makes this generation uniquely positioned to feel this betrayal so acutely. Kenyan millennials are the most educated generation in the nation's history. Yet youth aged 15 to 34 years, comprising 35 per cent of the population, face a staggering 67 per cent unemployment rate. This generation grew up with the Internet, with smartphones, with access to global conversations about success, opportunity, and meritocracy. For older millennials, it is harder as they watch their peers who achieved these dreams. Almost every one of us is a person or five away from someone who has had great jobs or a successful business or made it abroad and, despite challenges, been able to set themselves up in life.

It's hard to contrast this with the many others who are unemployed, underemployed or even unwilling to work. The movies and shows they watched led them to dream of building something transformative. They consumed American and British media that promised education

would be their ticket to prosperity. Yet when they graduated, some with masters and PhDs, there were no jobs. When they looked to their leaders, they found President Kenyatta, and now President Ruto, who had styled himself as a "hustler" committed to transforming the economy from the bottom up, but instead placing punitive taxes on essential goods. The education system we were once proud of is a pale shadow of itself. Inflation is higher, and basics like food and housing aren't what they used to be. It is no wonder that in June 2024, Kenyans led by the Gen Z took to the streets in protests that were "tribeless, leaderless and partyless"—a radical departure from Kenya's ethnic-based politics.

The emotional reckoning: Trauma, expectation, and the politics of healing

Last year, during what were dubbed the Gen Z protests, led mainly by the generation that follows ours, we had to confront the reality of what our nation and our lives had become. What makes this moment particularly poignant is that it's occurring as the oldest millennials turn 45—firmly in middle age. This is the age at which people typically

consolidate identity, build stability, and pass on values to the next generation. But how do you do that when your own foundation is fractured?

Nearly 75 per cent of Kenyans under 35 face limited access to meaningful job opportunities, which means that healing remains a luxury many cannot afford. For older millennials, who tasted the heady liberalization of the Kibaki years, their current lives are especially bitter. We were too young to starting working immediately, and for those who went to university, too young to build a career that would reap the benefits of the time yet old enough to see the path taken by the older generation and follow it, only for it to lead to a mirage. There is a wisp of the things they could have achieved if only they had a few more years of good, people-focussed leadership. A few more years of good jobs, good relationships, good financial income, good businesses and good health. The dream of good leadership that plans and dreams for generations to come has never materialized in the ways we expected. The political landscape offers little solace. Our leaders seem to think that they can enrich themselves in a land of growing angst and frustration.

This is the crux of millennial disillusionment: we were promised meritocracy but inherited oligarchy. They were told education would liberate them, but found themselves overqualified and underemployed. They were raised to believe in democratic ideals but watched elections devolve into ethnic arithmetic and dynastic succession.

This is the crux of millennial disillusionment: we were promised meritocracy but inherited oligarchy.

What helped me deal with the reality of my life? Confronting what happened to me, what I had expected as a child, and what I got, the gaps, and how they had crippled my abilities in adulthood. Without covering up and without hiding, I then began to acknowledge all that had happened to me, how it affected me, how it shifted my expectations, often reducing hope, or postponing it, or putting it in a suitcase, waiting for a day that never came. I had not realized how many things I had hoped for but had slowly given up on until I began. It was necessary to grieve and lay to rest some of those expectations and dreams. The cognitive dissonance in our souls, the

hopes we held and the reality we live, is kept at bay by the addictions, all the – holisms (workaholism, alcoholism, etc.). Yet healing comes when we gain the courage to finally acknowledge and grieve, stating the truth of what lies before us. My immediate relationships, my community, my faith, held me in the tumultuous season. There are few things as devastating as realizing that you fooled yourself in your attempts to hope for better. The shattering of dreams can sweep you away, but there is another side to it all. Once you take stock, you can accurately start to see where to rebuild. Can we finally stop running away from the pain and turn to face the reality properly?

Where healing meets politics: The path forward

This is a civilizational inflection point. This is about whether Kenya can bridge the gap between the trauma it inherited, the current chaos, and the future it aspires to build.

Healing requires naming the pain, sitting with it and tracing its path to current realities. Healing also requires systemic change, because once one understands an issue, resolving it cannot be hasty. Sitting with an issue

uncovers the many unexplored angles; some of the things we blame on ourselves are historical and require painful cultural decisions. Shifting our path as a nation needs well-considered decisions that are implemented with participation and goodwill. The healing millennials need isn't just therapeutic; it's structural. It requires economic transformation that creates dignified employment, not just survival hustle; political accountability that breaks dynastic strangleholds and ethnic patronage networks; institutional reform that makes corruption genuinely costly rather than politically expedient; intergenerational dialogue that honours the trauma parents and grandparents endured while refusing to perpetuate their survival strategies; and rebuilding of community to lean into each other and receive support as we come together and move away from capitalistic, individualistic ways of living.

There are few things as devastating as realizing that you fooled yourself in your attempts to hope for better.

But here's the profound challenge: healing requires rest, and rest requires security, and security requires resources that

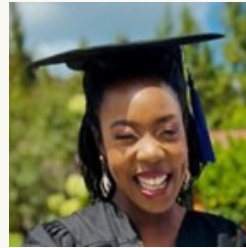
most millennials don't have. How do you process your mother's absence when you're scrambling for rent? How do you unpack generational trauma when today's crisis demands your full attention?

The unfinished dream

Kenyan millennials stand at a crossroads between their parents' unhealed wounds and their children's uncertain futures. They are the generation that was supposed to consolidate Kenya's democratic gains, leverage technological progress, and fulfil the promise of independence. Instead, they find themselves fighting battles their grandparents thought they'd won.

The dreams aren't dead; they're suspended, waiting for systems to catch up to aspirations, for healing to become possible, for the gap between global exposure and local reality to close.

Whether that happens through reform or revolution, negotiation or rupture, will define Kenya's next chapter. And millennials, standing between inherited trauma and imagined futures, need to write it – whether their elders like it or not.



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Millennials: Conquerors Dethroned, Now Barely Surviving

Never was a generation promised so much only to receive so little. Millennials have been abandoned to their fate, a generation living in financial precarity amid the debris of broken marriages and social isolation.

Silas Nyanchwani



Sometime in 2014, then in my late 20s, I attended a birthday party in a middle-class Nairobi suburb. The host was a young Nairobi millionaire, a wheeler-dealer. The birthday boy was destined to become a future member of parliament. Among those in attendance, two are now MPs, one consequential enough to be considered a potential first millennial president in the Ruto

succession politics.

No effort had been spared to make the party a success. The chef was in a decadent mood, serving us the Kenyan favourites of mbuzi choma, various stews, pilau, chapatis, all manner of vegetables and salads, typical Nairobi fare. Nairobi was quickly becoming a whisky-drinking city, as millennials led the shift in

drinking tastes, moving from cheap vodkas, gins, and brandies to Scottish/Irish whiskies and American bourbons.

The ladies were fashionably dressed, and the men, in their expensive jackets and shoes, made their aspirations for upward mobility clear.

It was one of those nights where everything goes right, and one senses with apprehension that it may be the last time you will be that young, that happy, and that optimistic.

Our conversations revolve around lending each other small amounts of money, primarily for food and basic utilities like electricity, Internet, and the occasional hospital bill.

We were on our first good jobs, earning six figures. Some of us were already married, young parents; for our cohort, the clichéd dream of a five-bedroom suburban maisonette, two children, two family cars, the prospects of another degree or postgraduate studies, and other middle-class ambitions, were all within touching distance.

That party was representative of millennial dreams, seeing how far some of the attendees have

since advanced in their respective careers. If there were at least 25 people at the party, there are five who have made it in life, in the material sense of “making it”. Today, I want to talk about the other 20, for whom life has become a mixed bag of fortunes and misfortunes.

One of the people I am in constant communication with is my friend Patrick. Our conversations revolve around lending each other small amounts of money, primarily for food and basic utilities like electricity, Internet, and the occasional hospital bill.

A decade ago, we usually loaned each other substantial amounts, running into six figures. The transactions were always casual, zero paperwork, just the usual trust between buddies because both of us were doing pretty well; I was in my first corporate job, and he was in business.

Patrick was the host of the party above, and his trajectory over the last decade best reflects how millennials of a certain demographic have gone from conquerors to mere survivors, with dwindling chances of ever rising from the ashes.

The luckiest unlucky generation

The trajectory of a typical millennial in Kenya now in their late 30s or early 40s with a university degree has probably been the following: early 20s struggles, a good start to a fine career in their late 20s, their careers or business/self-employment peak in their early 30s, followed almost instantly by job losses, vanished business, and divorce in their mid-30s. Many now in their late 30s and 40s are back where they were in their early 20s.

As someone on the Internet observed, millennials have lived through two global recessions, 9/11 (add to that all the acts of terrorism in Kenya since 1998), a global pandemic, eight stock market crashes (or the Kenyan equivalent of economic collapse), and the advent of AI which could possibly replace most jobs – and the oldest among them are barely 45.

For millennials with a bachelor's degree and above, they are the luckiest unluckiest generation. No generation was set up for so much, only to fail so spectacularly than Kenyan millennials.

Since Kenya's founding, education has long been

regarded as the key to success. Indeed, communities that first encountered colonial education, or regions that received the first colonial schools, went on to produce the first class of workers (public and private), with independence giving young, educated people opportunities to inherit jobs previously held by the departing colonialists.

There was massive brain drain to Europe, North America, and Southern Africa, especially among the educated.

By the mid-70s, the mismanagement of the economy that would characterize Kenya for the next three decades was in motion. Along with it came corruption, the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), the death of the education sector, and other ills, such that by the time President Moi left in 2002, the country was in quite bad shape. In the late 1980s and through the 1990s, education did not guarantee much in the way of a good job or good wages. There was massive brain drain to Europe, North America, and Southern Africa, especially among the educated.

When Kibaki took over in 2003, to his credit, he liberalized the economy, opening and expanding

both the public and private sectors.

Millennials who in the late 1990s and early 2000s were coming out of high school and entering university were primed to inherit plum jobs that paid salaries their parents could only imagine. By 2002, joining a university was a cutthroat competition. Only 10,000 of the more than half a million students leaving secondary education each year secured a place in any of the public universities (there were only seven at the time: University of Nairobi, Kenyatta, JKUAT, Egerton, Moi, and Maseno, and three private universities of note – Daystar, USIU, and Strathmore). By 2003, most Kenyans who did not meet the university cut-off marks went to study in Uganda or India. Under Kibaki, universities opened their doors to those who could pay tuition, doubling or tripling university intakes under the self-sponsorship programme. Soon, millennials were on course to become Kenya's first most educated generation, bagging jobs in Kibaki's liberalized economy in sectors ranging from banking, media, real estate, manufacturing, higher education, and ICT.

Good times

During my time in college, big corporate organisations like EABL, Nation Media Group, banks, and government bodies like KRA used to set up camp on campus to recruit young people into their graduate trainee programmes. Big-name NGOs were always hovering around, vying for the best talent available. The big auditing firms targeted many business graduates.

In my late 20s, it wasn't uncommon to hear stuff like, "I don't like what Deloitte is offering, I am waiting to hear from KPMG..." or, "Oxfam picked me, but I am not willing to relocate..." or, "I will take study leave to finish my master's/PhD", from my peers.

An abundance mindset pervaded the mentality of many millennials, and some were literally spoilt for choice. It wasn't hubris; they happened to be at their most employable in the most fortuitous decade in Kenya's employment history (2005–2015).

I remember banks used to dish out loans with rampant abandon. On one particular afternoon in 2014, three agents from various banks visited me, selling me mortgages, car loans, and asset financing. In our late 20s, we not only dreamed of owning homes, driving our dream cars, and

accessing credit to grow our businesses, but we also actively pursued these dreams, and many millennials succeeded. The growth of suburbs such as Syokimau, Kitengela, Rongai, and Ruiru is a testament to the better days when these dreams were possible.

The romantic and the familial aspirations of millennials

From around 2006 to 2016, big, lavish wedding ceremonies were the norm in Nairobi and across the country's major towns and cities. The three main TV stations (KTN, NTV, and Citizen) all had wedding shows, and there were even lifestyle magazines dedicated exclusively to weddings.

The growth of suburbs such as Syokimau, Kitengela, Rongai, and Ruiru is a testament to the better days when these dreams were possible.

There was an established wedding-industrial complex in Nairobi: car-hire services (limousines and high-end cars for entourages), filming and photography, floristry, food catering, all the way down to baking. Properly manicured wedding grounds such as never seen before came up all over

Nairobi and its environs to cater for the growing, sizeable population of millennials inclined towards ostentatious weddings.

Flashy proposal stunts became routine, with men flying their prospective brides to Lake Ellis on the slopes of Mt. Kenya. Millennials really aspired to the Western style of romance – flashy proposals, fancy weddings, and fabulous honeymoons, a desire fuelled by social media, no doubt.

Even millennials who did not necessarily go for fancy weddings aspired to that middle-class lifestyle: living in a good neighbourhood, with kids attending expensive academies (international curriculum, anyone?), and taking vacations.

First generation of two-income homes

A good number of millennials came from families where the father held a formal job, and the mother stayed at home, either doing small-scale farming or running a small local business in the rural areas to augment the family's income. Not until after Kibaki came to power did women join the formal workforce in good numbers. Many women also joined chamas (cooperative

societies) or “merry-go-rounds” to supplement their family’s income, in addition to their domestic labour of raising children and maintaining a homestead.

Educated millennial men were the first generation of Kenyan men to marry working-class women who were more or less their equals, as had happened in the West from the late 1950s through the late 1970s.

This came with unintended consequences. Married Kenyan millennial women still held very traditional expectations of their men, while also holding on to the model of a modern marriage where spouses share responsibilities equally. Men, too, had conventional expectations of their women, despite the difficulty of balancing work and domestic chores.

Changing dynamics

One evening, in 2018, about eight of us gathered for an evening drink in one of the better bars in Nairobi’s CBD. It was the typical after-work beer, where we exchanged notes on careers, family, and any new developments.

As we became increasingly

intoxicated, something emerged. Half of the men at the table were about to separate from their wives or the girlfriends they were cohabiting with. Two were yet to get married, and only two were in stable marriages (that have since been dissolved).

Educated millennial men were the first generation of Kenyan men to marry working-class women who were more or less their equals.

At the time, this bothered me immensely. All of us at that table were stand-up guys, normal salt-of-the-earth types, not the irresponsible, violent men you would expect to be facing marital woes in their early 30s. Something was not adding up. Yet, everywhere I looked, divorce and separation were becoming commonplace among my peers.

Of 20 of my peers, more than half were either divorced, in the process of getting divorced, or had come to the painful realization that their marriages were not working and it had to end one way or another.

COVID-19 pandemic divorces

While millennial unions began unravelling in the late 2010s, mainly due to the dwindling

economic prospects of millennials, the COVID-19 pandemic became the graveyard of many millennial marriages.

Starting in 2015, newspapers began giving over acres of space to auctioneers, companies issued profit warnings, and many corporate organizations folded and shipped out. Banks preferred lending to the government rather than to individuals, as the period saw a rise in non-performing loans due to job losses and a stagnant business environment.

Men may find it difficult to adjust to domestic responsibilities amid cost-cutting measures, for instance, when the house help is laid off to save on living expenses.

When COVID-19 arrived in early 2020, the economy contracted, and with that, many people lost their jobs, especially in the hospitality, tourism, service, and retail sectors. Many jobs were on the line in real time, making a bad situation worse.

In the United States, on average, men who are not working full-time are 33 per cent more likely to get divorced within 12 months.

“Contemporary husbands face a higher risk of divorce when they

do not fulfil the stereotypical breadwinner role, by being employed full-time,” says Alexandra Killewald, a sociology professor at Harvard University who authored a study in 2016 for the American Sociological Review.

One of the theories advanced to explain divorce is that, with their financial independence, degrees, and careers of their own, women do not feel dependent on their spouse or their marriage for economic stability.

While we don’t have exact figures in Kenya, anecdotal evidence suggests that more than half of men are divorced as soon as they lose their bread-winning role. Other factors, such as how many react and adjust when they lose their jobs, also contribute to a typical divorce. This has become a touchy subject online, one of the most debated topics, generating significant rancour as both genders trade blame as expectations and responsibilities shift. With women still the primary caregivers to children in most cases, working and providing is invariably difficult. Men may find it difficult to adjust to domestic responsibilities amid cost-cutting measures, for instance, when the house help is laid off to save on living expenses.

Also, however westernised we have become, on the domestic front, traditional gender expectations prevail in many households, and a stay-at-home husband is still considered an aberration.

Millennial men have been in a bind. Their women held very traditional expectations of a breadwinner husband, even when they had an income that could sustain a household. Ironically, our mothers held it down for our fathers in the 1990s when they (fathers) lost their jobs, despite not having formal jobs, being unemployed or surviving on meagre earnings from their small businesses. It wasn't a perfect world, but as parents, they cooperated, whether it meant making complex adjustments like moving back to the village or to a more affordable neighbourhood.

Millennial men didn't have the same privileges bestowed by patriarchy as their fathers. And thus, during the COVID-19 pandemic, I met many men who had left their matrimonial homes to start life afresh. Most of my friends at the aforementioned party, who had initially lived large in middle-class estates and suburbs, had been reduced to living in single rooms or at the city's periphery as they reckoned

with the reality of co-parenting. It is as if we have lived two lives: early success in our late 20s and early 30s, a life of survival and struggle in our late 30s and early 40s.

Many who have divorced and lost their families don't seem to have a comprehensive comeback plan, and nothing in the air offers any form of hope.

There is also another subset of quiet divorces in the villages, where wives leave their husbands to go and work abroad, especially in low-skilled jobs in the Gulf and other parts of Asia. In parts of Central Kenya and Nyanza, young wives typically leave their children with their parents and do not formally end their marriage, since many marriages may not have been formalized. And when they sign up for those two to five-year contracts in the Gulf, the marriages are effectively over before they have taken off.

In the villages, where marriages were pretty stable, the declining agricultural potential of the rural areas, driven by an increased population and overexploitation of farmland, is making marriage stability increasingly shaky, as younger millennials and older Gen Zs hold out much longer before marrying.

Black tax and buddy bailing tax

Over the last five years, something has become evident to me. The level of black tax has risen significantly, and something else has become far too common. For a while, I relied on friends to survive in Nairobi when I was down on my luck. It wasn't just the occasional bailout that you may need for rent when salaries are delayed, or one of those one-off emergencies like funds to cover a medical emergency. It was a steady stream of aid from friends for food, rent, and utilities over an extended period. In the past, one used to be helped once or twice, then connected to a job or a gig.

Many millennials in their mid-30s to mid-40s are now expected to care for themselves, their children, their siblings, and their ageing parents, and it is taking a toll on them.

Now, more and more millennials are taking up to five years to find a job, a gig, or anything going for them. Many millennials are falling through the cracks, adopting negative coping mechanisms, such as falling into alcoholism and drug abuse to escape the harsh reality of life, or resigning themselves to the village while

yet in their prime.

Many who have divorced and lost their families don't seem to have a comprehensive comeback plan, and nothing in the air offers any form of hope.

And thus, beyond the black tax that millennials, like other Kenyans, pay to their families, with the rising costs of healthcare, education, food, and other utilities, well-off Kenyan millennials must now fend for friends going through a rough patch – what we can call buddy bailing, or the buddy tax.

Unmet expectations

Compared to their parents, millennials may have peaked early, and those who escaped and secured good jobs and futures have done well for themselves. However, younger millennials, and especially those who finished college around the time when Uhuru Kenyatta's Jubilee came to power, have missed many milestones.

More and more millennials are unable to accomplish the markers of maturity like marriage, building a home, and settling down. Those who divorced earlier, who should have remarried and started over again,

additional, less discussed responsibility of caring for their parents. Balancing a career (if you have one) with a caregiving role is a big enough stretch. To do so when one has no stable job, and where mitigating institutions like the Social Health Authority or the Ministry of Education don't have their act in order, has seen millennials suffer from black tax fatigue.

However, increasingly, some unlucky millennials now have to depend on their parents, who spent a fortune on their education, an unenviable situation.

Coping mechanisms

One noticeable trait of millennials is their arrested development, which manifests in many ways. Many don't seem to slow down on what Nairobians call *sherehe*. In the past, when individuals reached their mid-30s and early 40s, they tended to slow down and adjust to their parenting responsibilities.

Most millennials seem to be in a zone of regret, made worse by the Internet. Even as Gen Z takes its place on the social map, millennials in a Peter Pan mood refuse to cede their spaces to the younger generation. Go to

any popular nightclub anywhere in the country, and you will see millennials jostling for space with Gen Z – some nearly half their age.

Additionally, many have taken up drinking, no longer as recreation and socialization, but rather as a way to cope with the vicissitudes and demands of adulthood. Even women who previously indulged in sweet, creamy liqueurs have crossed over to hard liquor, and it is not uncommon to now see videos of women in worrying states of inebriation online, or even in social spaces. Even alcohol-related violence from women is now a common occurrence that no longer raises eyebrows. It gets worse and worse every year.

Rehab conversations are now common among groups, and virtually every urban millennial knows a friend or two who could use some rehabilitation.

The strange thing about millennial coping mechanisms, even among those well off materially, is that they seem to be equally caught up in the strain and pressures of "adulthood", and sometimes they don't have their act together any more than those doing badly.

Rehab conversations are now

common among groups, and virtually every urban millennial knows a friend or two who could use some rehabilitation.

On the family front, the guardrails are taking more time, since turbulent economic conditions rarely make for a stable environment for relationships to thrive.

Compared to their parents, who held it down family-wise on a single income, there are situations where it is the ageing, poor parents who have to rescue their children. Where in the past Kenyans moved out of home in their late teens and early 20s, we now have older ones (25 to early 30s) who are still stuck at home, having failed to launch, despite having an education.

Sandwich generation

As the employment landscape has changed, with people losing their jobs and others stuck in career limbo with stagnant wages, something else has crept up on millennials: they've grown old too fast to be Kenya's sandwich generation. Many millennials in their mid-30s to mid-40s are now expected to care for themselves, their children, their siblings, and their ageing parents, and it is taking a

toll on them. These additional layers of responsibility come at a time of job-market uncertainty and a shrinking economy. This is heaping significant financial and emotional strain on millennials. It is worse for those who have the of the extended family, the church, and the community that once ensured that the institution of marriage was preserved have become weakened so much over the last decade that quiet divorces have become the norm in the city. The level of accountability people once had is absent among millennials. People divorce, and not even close friends or even parents-in-law get to hear such consequential news in time.

Interventions

Ultimately, millennials, to whom so much was promised, must come to terms with the reality of their times. Our politics are not about to improve, nor is the economy likely to, at least not in the short run.

Career stagnation, unemployment, and underemployment have arrested the social progression of many. But at some point, one has to take individual responsibility for how they forge ahead as retirement approaches.

Millennials will be the first generation to retire with no social protection. Our grandparents had their descendants take care of them. Millennials have lovingly cared for their parents to the best of their ability. Our parents had pensions, and those who didn't are the last lucky generation who could retire to the village and still eke out a living from subsistence farming with our support.

For millennials, farming is out of question. They cannot rely on their children, since the economy may not reopen quickly enough to absorb the millions of unemployed youths. Not many millennials have saved enough in pensions and have good health insurance to survive the demands of old age, especially as lifestyle diseases become more entrenched. For now, many millennials have left the country, ending up in destinations across North America, Europe, the Gulf, and Central Asia. Currently, the government estimates that at least three to four million Kenyans work abroad, and more than half of those are due to the brain drain under the Jubilee and UDA governments. The Kenya Kwanza government even prides itself in having labour exports as one of its pillars.

However, the West is not

particularly receptive, with right-wing politics fuelling anti-immigrant sentiment, leaving Kenyans, and indeed Africans, to reimagine other ways to make things work back at home.

Nothing short of a systemic change can arrest the sinking of millennials and Gen Zs. The June 2024 Gen Z protests offered a glimpse of the angst of the two generations now bearing the brunt of the mismanagement of the economy by successive regimes, especially the last two. Kenya remains on the brink of a revolution unless the government takes radical measures to address the economic and social issues affecting both generations. Presently, there is no sign that the Kenya Kwanza government understands the weight of responsibility on its shoulders. Given a chance for a reset in 2024, President Ruto did the opposite. And while he remains a frontrunner in the 2027 elections with the opposition weak and disorganised, it is up to millennials and Gen Zs to rise to the occasion and rescue the country, and in doing so, rescue themselves.



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Hope the Length of an Instagram Reel: An African Millennial's Musing

Somewhere in Nairobi, and across the rest of Kenya, younger people are watching us carefully. Our careers. Our compromises. Our language. They are deciding whether adaptability is wisdom or surrender.

Tim Rimbui



I am from the first generation, I will be forty-five years old in August this year.

I was born and raised in Nairobi, with what I now think of as privilege lite. Enough access to feel protected, not enough insulation to avoid contact with reality. I did not grow up hungry. But I grew up alert. I did not grow up oppressed. But I grew up

aware, and sometimes afraid.

Nairobi trained me early in contradictions.

High life and low life were never separate categories. They existed in the same week, sometimes the same day. A neat house with rules and routines, then the street, like Wanyee Road in the '90s, with its own economy

and ethics. You learned quickly that order was conditional.

Order was, and still is, really a function of privilege.

Language followed the same pattern. Queen's English at school and later at work. Kimeru at home during my formative years. By my teens, defaulting to an English-Sheng hybrid, a language now mocked by everyone, including those who use it. Kiswahili everywhere else, to everyone else.

Experimentation followed, polycules normalised a rite of passage.

Code switching was not cultural flair. It was basic competence. Not knowing where, when, how, or what to speak could guarantee social exclusion, and sometimes physical exclusion too. Including being beaten by other kids. "Kuja hapa wewe Barbie." Or, "Hao ni born tao," when we would go to Meru.

That constant adjustment shaped my generation in ways that are now easy to miss. We learned how to fit in, how to move, how to adapt. Not out of sophistication, but out of necessity. You learned early that rigidity was expensive.

Those of us born in the early '80s grew up under Moi, although we did not experience him as a headline. He was atmosphere and dread. Fear did not announce itself. It simply existed. Parents spoke carefully. Radios were turned up so adults could talk freely in case houses were bugged. Certain topics ended conversations. You absorbed the rules before you understood them.

Fear was not dramatic. It was administrative.

Culturally, we were consumers of the outside world. San Fan Thomas. Franco. Mbilia Bel. Michael Jackson and Whitney Houston. Later, Tupac, Biggie, the Fugees, caught late at night on TV shows and copied onto tapes that changed hands quietly, reverently. Bollywood films on KBC. Action movies passed around on VHS, watched until the tape thinned and warped.

Kenya, at that time, was not confident enough to imagine itself loudly.

You were celebrated for imitation. For how closely you could reproduce a foreign accent, a foreign rhythm, a foreign posture. But you were watched carefully, sometimes suspiciously, if you

leaned too far into your literal neighbour's culture.

Curiosity was tolerated only in one direction. Outside.

Culture, when acknowledged at all, appeared mostly as warning. Our mother tongues were used to divide us into people we should not play with, people we should not marry, people we should not trust. Our culture was not primarily about celebrating ourselves and our heritage.

It functioned instead to codify "the others, as monitoring spirits" introduced early and frequently as bogeymen and positioned as permanent interference in our success.

If you wanted scale, relevance, or escape, you looked elsewhere. Outside. If you wanted to dream beyond your circumstances, you borrowed someone else's voice.

What we did not yet know was that this borrowing would shape us permanently.

Yet Nairobi itself refused to let you be one thing.

The city was messy, unfinished, contradictory. Church crusades next to bars that doubled as brothels and early strip clubs like

Tumbos. Matatus parked outside government offices. Fundraisers with DJs, priests, and goons standing side by side – again contradiction. Weddings in the morning, funerals in the afternoon. You learned early that meaning was contextual. Order was temporary.

That was our education.

We moved a lot between 1988 and 1994. Too much, perhaps. Each move required a quiet adjustment, new faces, new rules, a new way of being that no one explained but everyone seemed to know. I learned to talk to anyone, not out of confidence but out of need. It was a small survival skill, the understanding that tomorrow you might find yourself in a different estate, starting again, asking to belong.

Corporate and political cruelty was laundered into the language of leadership, responsibility, and reform.

Then something shifted in the late '90s and early 2000s.

Ogopa DJs and Calif Records did not just produce music. They produced permission. Kenyan sound stopped apologising. It became urban, multilingual, confident. Swahili Nation. K South.

Nameless. 5-Alive. Gidi Gidi. Music that sounded like the city thought.

For the first time, buying Kenyan was not charity or obligation. It was taste.

We speak fluently about trauma and systems, yet we largely operate within them.

We invested. We bought CDs. We went to shows. We argued about lyrics, books, and their writers. Cultural relevance became something you could participate in, not just observe. Before politics opened up, culture already had. It became currency. It became leverage. The higher-ups noticed and used it to level up.

Then came 2002.

Kibaki arrived with Unbwogable, roads, systems, and a restrained optimism that felt almost suspicious. For those of us raised on caution, hope felt heavy, almost magical. We leaned into it anyway. Careers seemed possible. Planning felt reasonable. You could imagine continuity without irony.

The younger millennials, those born between 1990 and 1995, were born into this mood. Kenyan

confidence was already established. Local stars were normal. Project Fame made aspiration glossy and televised. Kenyan talent could be packaged, refined, exported. Progress, to them, felt default.

Then 2007 happened, brutal post-election violence.

For us, then in our mid-twenties, it was a shock. A revelation that the adults did not know what they were doing. That violence was closer than advertised. And yet, for my generation, it also felt like recognition. A reminder of something we had always known but had briefly ignored.

Hope in Kenya arrives conditionally.

From there, responses diverged.

My peers became practical. Functional. Deeply divided by the language and politics of our parents and kin. We pursued careers seriously. Marriage became either urgent or indefinitely postponed. Divorce and sexual freedom became common and quietly normalised. We learned therapy language, but mostly to manage ourselves, not to change ourselves. We became very good at coping and managing.

The younger millennials delayed. Commitment. Children. Certainty. If the system was unreliable, why invest early? Experimentation followed, polycules normalised a rite of passage. Drugs as regulation rather than rebellion. Hustle culture mixed with fatigue. Success performed publicly.

Then came the slow erosion.

Uhuru's era did not collapse hope. It diluted it. Grand projects. Showbiz. PowerPoint presentations and conmen. Heavy narratives. Borrowed money. Borrowed confidence. Progress as image rather than experience. The optimism of the Kibaki years was not violently destroyed. It was slowly emptied and dismantled.

By the time Covid and Ruto arrived, the language had hardened. Hustle no longer meant pulling yourself out of difficulty. It came to mean outsmarting someone else, then justifying it. Over time, it hardened further, until it became a moral test. Those who struggled had simply not hustled hard enough.

Responsibility moved in one direction only, succeeding at whatever cost to everything and everyone. Pure, unadulterated capitalism fuelled by a cocktail of

jaba juice, Class A drugs, Red Bulls, and Instagram likes. It was taught downward, repeated often, and enforced selectively. Empathy was treated as weakness, something you could afford only if you were not in charge.

We told ourselves it was consequence, not cruelty, even as we recognised how easily that distinction bends when power sits on your side of the table.

For the first time, younger people stopped assuming the future would improve. They began planning for continuity of strain rather than eventual relief. Careers were designed around instability. Relationships were delayed and made swappable. Permanence felt naive.

The Gen X cohort surrounding political and corporate leadership resembled every generation that had come before them, with one distinction that mattered. This group did not conceal its cruelty.

I wore it comfortably.

Harmful decisions affecting millions were made without embarrassment. Consequences were acknowledged without concern. Suffering was not

framed as unfortunate. It was framed as necessary, or as the outcome of not listening to supreme leaders.

Cruelty did not appear as excess. It appeared as method.

Cruelty proved efficient. It required no explanation and produced quick compliance. To reassure foreign patrons and co-opt the faithful in our eighty percent Christian nation, it was repackaged as discipline. We were told we needed to be firmer with ourselves, more orderly, more obedient, like errant children or sheep in need of guidance.

PR hacks did the rest. Corporate and political cruelty, erm discipline... was laundered into the language of leadership, responsibility, and reform. It was broadcast relentlessly, from pulpits to boardrooms, from policy statements to motivational slogans, until it surrounded us from every direction and began to sound like common sense. A Jedi mind-trick. Or as my wife normally asks when faced with the blatantly absurd, "Hii si ni uchawi?" And I understand.

Sometimes retreating into the mystical is the only way to make sense of reality that no longer

does.

This is where blame entered the picture.

The generation coming after us, Gen Z, do not see us as unlucky. They see us as complicit. We had education, access, exposure, excess. We adapted and survived. We bought property. We speak fluently about trauma and systems, yet we largely operate within them.

They have nothing but TikTok likes and views. They are angry, and rightly so.

Exhaustion handled privately. Suicides became aspirational and a way out, and by 2023, a national crisis that required government intervention complete with policy, action group, multi-sector committees, tea and mandazis, and budget to stop millennials and Gen Zs from unaliving themselves... Sigh.

From their perspective, we did not inherit a broken country. We managed to break one.

I listen to the music of a younger generation, Alpha and Gen Z, and feel both proximity and distance. Their songs speak the language of release, defiance, impatience. I play them in my car, windows up, volume controlled. I let them fill

rooms where my body is safe. I know the words. I know the references. I know the hunger underneath them.

The contradiction sharpens the moment I step into the city with intention. When I go to Gikosh, Kariokor, Kawangware or Toi Market, the negotiation begins before I open my mouth. My body announces me. My shoes, my posture, the way I pause too long at a stall, the questions I ask. Even before language, I am already being read. Not as a customer, but as a category. A class. An age... kabuda.

A conclusion.

I move carefully through those spaces, aware that curiosity can look like provocation, that hesitation can be mistaken for entitlement. Prices rise before I speak. Help is offered or withheld based on what I am assumed to represent. I am not just shopping for clothes or things. I am navigating a story already assigned to me. And yet, I keep going back. Not out of nostalgia, not out of defiance, but because that is where the culture still breathes. It is also how I pay my bills. Culture is in the streets, not in boardrooms. Because that friction, that messiness, still feels more honest than the sanitised

versions sold elsewhere.

The same calculation follows me when I think about concerts in Eastlands. Not the music itself, but everything around it. Whom I go with. How I arrive. Where I stand. How visible I am. Whether security makes me safer or simply marks me more clearly. Every decision sharpens the profile. Before I am a listener, I am an object of interpretation. Before intention, perception. I know that if I showed up fully, without buffers, I would not arrive as a fellow fan. I would arrive as a symbol, a wallet, a stand-in for a generation blamed for promises broken and futures deferred. If I were robbed, it would not feel like chaos. It would feel procedural. An efficient redistribution, justified by a story I already know.

This understanding stopped being abstract in 2023. I gave one of Kenya's biggest urbantone / rap groups their first serious brand endorsement gig. Not optics. Not charity. Real work. A door opened deliberately. I believed this was what pulling my people up was supposed to look like. They robbed the studio. They wanted to start a fight. They lit up joints in the corporate studio when the client was present, then again in the corridors, metres from an embassy. It embarrassed

me. It embarrassed the brand. And the brand, careful and polite, had already told me to deal with everything beforehand because exposure to those people constantly ended up like this. "Ghetto youts doing ghetto yout shit..." Fix it, Tim.

The phrase was delivered softly, professionally, and without irony.

So I handled it deftly and cleanly. As I always do. No police. No media. No spectacle. The theft was absorbed. The smoke cleared. Apologies were made. The incident was tidied up and reframed so the brand could move on and assured that order had been restored. That was "grit and character, what they were paying for". In the months that followed, it was not just me. A small group of us, people like me, older millennials, positioned, already fluent in how the industry actually works, made a decision and acted on it deliberately. Not loudly. Not theatrically. But precisely. Calls were not returned. Opportunities were quietly redirected. Trust was withdrawn in rooms they were never in. Their career did not end in scandal or spectacle. It narrowed. It stalled. It has faded. We knew exactly what we were doing. We understood the leverage we held, how age, class, access, and

reputation made our actions final. We told ourselves it was consequence, not cruelty, even as we recognised how easily that distinction bends when power sits on your side of the table.

The younger generations look at us and see people who explain decline very well.

That knowledge stays with me as I move through Gikosh, through Toi where I walk around recording the sights and sounds regularly, through studios and boardrooms and venues where culture and commerce collide. Wanting to pull my people up while becoming increasingly wary of their intentions. Knowing their suspicion is shaped by class, by age, by a marketplace that teaches scarcity before it teaches trust. Knowing, too, that my wariness, however earned it feels, will always be read as betrayal. And yet, I still go. I still listen. I still show up where the culture is raw and unresolved. Not because it is safe, but because it is real. Because the contradiction itself is the point. Wanting proximity without performance. Belonging without explanation. Knowing that in this city, visibility is never neutral, and that simply being present is already a statement I did not choose, but continue to

negotiate every day.

Ogopa DJs and Esther Wahome gave us belief. Kibaki gave us space, albeit with many skeletons in his closet. We turned culture into relevance. We stopped short of turning relevance into leverage. We learned to live inside broken systems rather than dismantle them. We replaced transformation with commentary and called it realism.

My advantage, privilege lite, made this easier. Enough comfort to avoid desperation. Enough friction to feel informed. It is an ideal position for adaptation and a terrible one for revolt.

Now, both millennial cohorts are grouped together. The ones who had everything and still delivered precarity. Housing out of reach. Work unstable. Politics hollow. The future postponed indefinitely. A people divided by struggle, convinced it is tribal.

The younger generations look at us and see people who explain decline very well.

The uncomfortable truth is this. Our greatest strength was adaptability. It is also our quiet failure. We learned to survive contradiction so well that we stopped trying to resolve it.

Jomo taught us oppression.

Moi taught us fear.

Kibaki taught us optimism lite.

Ogopa DJs gave us a voice.

Uhuru thinned meaning.

Ruto removed illusion.

I am not angry. I am reflective. And maybe a little sad. I have lost hope for this country where our children have been born, knowing that this may be it. The data points toward another Nigeria or DRC in the making.

Somewhere in Nairobi, and across the rest of Kenya, younger people are watching us carefully. Our careers. Our compromises. Our language. They are deciding whether adaptability is wisdom or surrender. They are not waiting for our permission and hate our contradictions. Maybe that's what growing up is really about.



Tim Rimbui is an award winning music, TV, events, and film producer by day. By night, he pursues an unruly

collection of side quests; writing included. Track the experiments by following him @timwork on all social media platforms.

The 6 AM Generation: Millennials at the Dawn of Uncertainty

Born at the tail-end of the millennial generation, we are old enough to feel the weight of expectations, yet young enough to pivot. We critique systems, adapt without losing ourselves, and inherit perspective rather than prosperity.

JL Kinyua



I was born at 6 a.m. Not metaphorically. Literally. I have no memory of it, but I try to picture it: Nairobi not yet loud, Parklands hanging between darkness and noise, the kind of light that doesn't promise anything yet. That hour feels familiar, now a city boy, through and through. A millennial born at first light, early in a day that feels long, uncertain, and deceptively quiet. We were

told we were the future, but the future arrived slowly, unevenly, and often in ways we hadn't imagined.

Those born in 1995 stand on the hinge of eras. Old enough to remember the silence before notification. Young enough to adapt to permanent visibility. Raised in analogue childhoods and accelerated into digital

adulthood. The promise was progress. The experience has been adjustment.

Thirty-one does not arrive loudly. It arrives in small recalculations.

One night this year, I sat on the edge of my bed with my phone lighting my face, calculating how long savings would stretch if no invoice cleared. The house was quiet. Too quiet. Even the dogs were asleep. I could hear the hum of a fridge in the next room and my own breathing, steady but shallow.

There is a particular weight to being 31 and not settled.

Millennial men were raised on a quiet formula: study hard, work hard, provide, and be respected.

It was simple when I was younger. Linear. If you put in effort, the system would respond.

But adulthood has not behaved linearly.

I studied film and animation, graduating in 2016. Film felt physical to me; framing a shot, adjusting light, waiting for a face to settle before pressing record. I loved that control. The way a lens could isolate what mattered.

Outside school, the world did not isolate anything.

When I told people I studied film, they heard “media” or “camera work”. Even when my strength was in design and composition, it was reduced to operating a machine. Once, someone asked, “Was that even a course?” I laughed then. I thought about it for weeks. Training in an art form in a country where art is funded by optimism forces you to confront reality early. Talent is not strategy. Passion does not automatically convert.

I shifted towards Public Relations in 2017. It felt adjacent. It felt practical. The chapter never quite locked into place. COVID did not create instability; it exposed how fragile plans already were. Lockdowns disrupted momentum, but indecision had quietly existed before them. Chapters paused by circumstance. Some by hesitation.

By 2021, I needed stability. I joined a study abroad consultancy. Structured. Corporate. Predictable hours. I was placed in “I.T.”, which quietly became digital marketing, troubleshooting, designs, and problem-solving. I showed up every day. Even when my

shoulder still ached from a dislocation that had not fully healed. Then I was dismissed. No dramatic confrontation. Just a short meeting. My access to literally all my credentials withheld the minute I walked out of that door – couldn't even wait for me to get downstairs.

I remember standing outside the building holding a bag with my charger inside it, trying to appear composed while something inside me recalibrated violently.

For a man socialized to equate masculinity with provision, dependency feels like debt even when love is freely given.

The rest of the year became recovery, physical and mental. You tell people you're "figuring things out". What you mean is: I am rearranging my idea of myself.

In 2023, I entered FMCG sales. I was green. I did not have the wiring for it, the reflex to recover instantly from rejection, the stamina for daily targets. I learned. I adapted. I stood in shops longer than I wanted to, watching more natural salesmen glide through conversations that exhausted me. My strength was still in design, in building, shaping, composing, not in convincing strangers on command. From

that experience, I picked up e-commerce too, seeing how sales, audience understanding, and product flow all intersect online.

By 2024, I had left.

A relative I consider my other mother took me in for a season and connected me to the "gig republic". I moved back into a smaller room than the one I had imagined for myself. I folded my clothes into fewer drawers. Humility is not poetic in real time. It is practical.

For a man socialized to equate masculinity with provision, dependency feels like debt even when love is freely given. I did not announce that feeling. I carried it. That is when the canines became central.

Not as hobby. As structure.

German Shepherds are heavy-boned, alert, and watchful, always analyzing their surroundings and you. When they run, you can hear it in the ground. Spitz mixes are smaller, stubborn, and loud far beyond their size.

Morning begins before 6.

Metallic sound of canines snapping at my approach. Metal bowls scrape against concrete.

Kibble pours in a steady stream.
Warm breath fogs briefly in the
cool air.

They do not care about inflation.

They do not ask about LinkedIn
updates. They care about clarity.

If I hesitate, they sense it. If my
tone shifts, they respond. If I am
distracted, they test it.

Training German Shepherds and
terriers requires presence. You
cannot outsource authority. You
cannot fake consistency. The dog
either sits or it does not.

When one of the females gave
birth, I sat beside her longer than
necessary, watching her
breathing between contractions.
The room smelled metallic and
animal. My shirt carried that
scent for hours. It was not
glamorous. It was responsibility in
its most literal form.

People assume keeping dogs is
retreat. It is not. It is time-bound,
embodied work. Feed. Clean.
Train. Vaccinate. Repeat.

Did the pups latch properly?

Is the mother eating enough?

Are vaccinations on schedule?

Did training improve recall today?

And yet, every hour spent with
them is an hour not spent in an
office shaking hands. Time is
always a trade.

This is the paradox of the 6AM
Generation.

Education taught us to specialize,
work hard, and be loyal, and that
it would all work out. Reality, on
the other hand, has a different
story to tell. Generalists thrive.
Patronage prevails. Merit?
Optional. Hard work? Yes, but
only within the right timing, the
right connections, the right
circumstances.

**You have to succeed not just for
yourself, but for those who
believed in you long enough to
sustain you.**

Living in this country without
connections can feel like pushing
against invisible glass. You see
opportunity. You even qualify. But
access is layered. Doors open
differently depending on who
introduces you.

Kenya is ambitious, young, and
digitally alive. Yet, the system is
not uniform. Capital moves
through well-known networks.
There is little tolerance for risk.
The creative industries receive

insufficient funding. Formal jobs shrink, informal work is unstable, and taxes are already choking those who try. Each day, millennials cope with that tension. Time is audible, so resetting feels heavy. You hear it. Maybe, though, dawn is misinterpreted.

Dawn is not certainty. It is tentative light. Shadows linger.

The day is long. Perhaps not late afternoon decline, but 6:31a.m. early, uncertain, promising.

No longer the “revolutionary” youth, we are transitional adults standing at a crossroads between what was, what is, and what could be.

Self-employment, even with external funding, doesn't guarantee clear independence. It adds layers. You have to succeed not just for yourself, but for those who believed in you long enough to sustain you. That belief can feel heavy, and it can also keep you moving.

On the third floor, comparison does not scream, it hums. Financial stagnation here doesn't feel abstract; it feels chronological. Peers build homes. Others migrate. Some consolidate careers. You measure your place on an invisible grid

and quietly ask yourself if you are late. When a relative asks, “So what is the plan now?”, it is not accusation. It is inquiry. But it lands in the chest like audit.

There are nights when I lie awake calculating not just money, but direction. Was it all worth it? The years of study. The pivots. The exits. The resets.

The question is not dramatic. It is quiet. Persistent.

But dawn has taught me something.

Six a.m. is not warm. It is tentative. The light arrives slowly. The city stretches before it speaks. Decisions are made before applause exists.

Maybe that is where I am.

Not late. Not finished. Not triumphant. Early.

Born in 1995, I belong to a generation that inherited perspective rather than prosperity. Our inheritance is not material, but a lens through which to read the world, navigate instability, and translate uncertainty into structure. No longer the “revolutionary” youth, we are transitional adults standing at a crossroads

between what was, what is and what could be.

The challenges are real. Inflation is real. Comparison is real. But so is adaptability. Skill acquisition. Narrative control. Perhaps the question is not whether the sun is rising.

But adaptation is not surrender.

Film taught me to frame. Sales taught me to measure fit. Corporate taught me that security is fragile. Family taught me humility. Dogs teach me discipline.

If I am paused, it is not from lack of motion. It is from searching for coherence.

And coherence takes time.

At 6 a.m., the world does not yet know what the day will become. But movement has begun.

Farmers are already in fields. Traders are unlocking doors. Someone is boiling milk. Someone is lacing up shoes.

In the yard, I hold a leash, steadying a dog that feels as heavy as doubt. The day is long. And yet, it is still morning.

JL Kinyua is a digital creative and writer from Kenya.

Go,

PHOTO ESSAY



Mwongela Kamenchu

My name is Mwongela Kamenchu, also known as Monaja

What do you do for a living?

I am a researcher as well as a performing/ recording artist. I research questions on our history before colonialism and even during colonialism, how our culture was distorted, redefined by the colonialists to suit them, and how that informs the

present. I also research African spirituality and a number of other things. I'm also known for my work on student activism at the University of Nairobi. From time to time, I'm involved in fellowships. Right now, I'm part of the Omega Resilience Awards Africa Fellowship. I'm one of those who were selected for that.

What does being a millennial mean to you?

We've had almost 10 years of conversations around our

Go millennial story. Broadly speaking, when you distill it for yourself at this point in time, what does being a millennial mean to you? These (generational) categories were given to us by the global West. But if I'm to just think of it as a concept where I sit in Kenyan history, I'll define millennialism as redefining who I am, who I'm supposed to be, and acknowledging the fact that the trajectory I was supposed to follow was robbed off by colonialism. If African communities were just left alone to grow organically, then naturally, it means there would have been a different trajectory. So for me the question is, how can I reimagine myself as a human being, as I come to this world, and as an African. I was supposed to come to this world in a certain way had colonialism not intervened. Just like the millions of others who share in the same fate. So the idea for me is to learn as much as possible from the older generations. I like talking to people who are in their 80s and 90s, who can tell you how life was in the past, and that enriches the way I look at life and

kind of gets me to, as an artist, to recreate music, to recreate realities in a way that speaks to the realities that were there before colonialism. Of course, colonialism happened. I definitely have to accept that. But I think some work ought to be done, not just for myself, but also for coming generations. And to make them aware of the fact that what they think is reality or what life should be is in many ways fabricated; it's in many ways corrupted; that they need to also recreate the world that they're living in. So I do that, both as an academic and as an artist. That gives meaning, and of course, I learn from younger people. I learn from older people. I definitely can see how the younger generation can see me as stuck in my ways. But, you know, you live and let live. But you also give an allowance of learning in your mind. You keep an open mind. You are open to different experiences, but you ultimately get to decide the kind of life you want to build and the kind of future you want to build for yourself and the others.

Go,



Edinah Bakora

What do you do for a living?

I am a Personal Assistant to a Member of Parliament.

What does being a millennial mean to you?

To be a millennial in this day and age, especially a Kenyan millennial, is to be a professional survivor. It's a constant state of "mhhhhh..." where you're perpetually balancing the weight of tradition against the speed of the future. For many of us, being

a millennial means being the "Default Responsible One." If you're a firstborn, you know exactly what I mean. You aren't just living your life, you are the unofficial HR manager, the emergency fund, and the primary consultant for your family. Responsibility isn't a choice, it's an inheritance. We are the bridge generation, carrying the expectations of our parents while trying to build a foundation for those coming after us. This sense of duty bleeds into how we work. We are the masters of the "Side Hustle Symphony." We were raised on the gospel of

Go constantly busy, taught that if you aren't tired, you aren't working hard enough. So, we navigate the corporate world by day and chase our passions and extra coins by night. We don't just have jobs, we have ecosystems of productivity. But the most exciting part? We are the ultimate eyewitnesses to change. We remember a world where computers had "two backs" and mobile phones were as bulky as a half bar of Geisha soap. We saw the transition from analog static to high-speed fiber

optics. We adapted because we had to. That evolution gave us a unique kind of grit, a tough skin that allows us to thrive in the chaos of a changing world while still keeping our sense of humor intact. Being a millennial is exhausting, yes, but it's also exhilarating. We are the generation that can fix a vintage radio and manage a crypto wallet in the same breath. We have the scars of the past and the tools of the future. We are fun, we are resilient, and honestly? We can survive anywhere.



Prisca Shiundu

What do you do for a living?

I'm a special education teacher in

Florida, USA, passionate about making a difference in kids' lives.

What does being a millennial mean to you?

To be a Kenyan Millennial is to live as a bridge between two worlds, the analog traditions of our parents and the high-speed digital reality of the West.

Growing up on the outskirts of Webuye town, my horizon was defined by the towering clouds of smoke from the Panpaper factory. To a village girl back then, that smoke wasn't pollution, it was a beacon of hope. It represented the only "system" I knew of, the singular path to a successful life. Now, living and working in the Western world, I see a different kind of system, one that actually moves. It's a bittersweet realization. Back home, our brilliance is rarely the problem, it's the tragedy of "shelf life." So many of our visionary ideas don't see the light of day, instead gathering dust on polished wooden shelves in government offices, waiting for a chance that never comes. We are

also the generation of the "Generational Shift." We grew up on the edge of a panga, driven by the blunt, loving threats of parents who didn't believe in "soft talks." I can still hear the warning ringing in my ears: "Wewe enda tu college na usome! Nimekutuma kusoma, sio kutafuta mimba!" There was no nuance, just the high stakes of survival. Today, I watch the younger generation sit through gentle, polite conversations about reproductive health and "boundaries." It's a world away from the "fear of God and parents" that raised us. Being a Kenyan Millennial means carrying that village grit into global spaces. We are tech-savvy not just because we have the tools but because we have the hunger. We are the ones turning those "dusty ideas" into digital realities, proving that no matter where we land, the spirit of Webuye never leaves us.

Go,



Albert Omanga

I am Albert Omanga

What do you do for a living?

I am a communications and PR professional working in Nairobi, creating thought-provoking and captivating content for digital media

What does being a millennial mean to you?

To me, being a millennial feels like standing at a busy roundabout in the middle of a power outage,

and you have to be incredibly agile, slightly daring and ready to navigate the chaos with a smile. We are the “Bridge Generation,” caught right at the intersection where the old school values of our parents meet the high-speed fiber optics of the future. We grew up on the soil of a community, where identity was tied to the village, and relationships were built face to face, yet here we are, managing global brands and digital workflows from a laptop in a city café. In this country, being a millennial isn’t just an age bracket; it’s a survival skill. We are the masters of the “resourceful

pivot.” We realized early on that waiting for rigid, old-fashioned systems to work for us was like waiting for a Matatu that was never coming. Instead, we leaned into creativity, storytelling, and innovation. We didn’t just wait for jobs, we created platforms. We didn’t wait for permission, we started “side hustles” that eventually became our main hustles. But with that ambition comes a heavy coat of responsibility. As a Kenyan millennial, you are often the “Social Security Fund” for your extended family while simultaneously trying to build your own empire. We carry the weight of uplifting local industries and the burning desire to tell African stories in a way that doesn’t feel like a cliché. We want the world to see the authentic,

modern, and “unfiltered” version of us, the one that dreams big but remains grounded in the reality of financial pressures and a shifting “Kadongo” economy. Our resilience isn’t about entitlement, it’s about grit. We choose purpose over shortcuts because we’ve seen where the shortcuts lead. We choose collaboration over isolation because we know that “Umoja ni nguvu.” Every day, we are intentionally shaping what comes next, honoring the “shags” roots that raised us while designing the global future we deserve. We are the ones proving that you can have a “digital mind” and still have a “communal heart.” We aren’t just living, we are building a new Kenyan manifesto, one creative idea at a time.



Rahab Gakuru

My name is Rahab Gakuru

What do you do for a living?

I work as a Customer Care representative in the UAE.

What does being a millennial mean to you?

To me, being a millennial feels like my life has been a bridge between two Kenyas. I grew up in that “analog to digital” transition, an era where the instructions

Goals were so clear: “Soma kwa bidii” (study hard) to get that financial stability, but never ever forget your place as a woman. It was a world of high expectations and narrow paths, where “societal norms” were the ultimate law. But standing where I am now, I’ve had the front row seat to something beautiful. I’ve watched the most audacious dreams that would have been laughed at in my village years ago, taking root. I’m watching this new generation run with a fire that my younger self could only imagine. However, being from that bridge generation also means I witnessed the heavy stuff. I saw the trauma and helplessness that were often “disguised” as family curses, things we were told to pray away or keep behind closed doors, never to be addressed in

the right channels. We lived through patterns of poor decision-making that were passed down like heirlooms, simply because we didn’t have the words or the “permission” to call them what they were. The shift, though, has been my saving grace. Being a millennial today means I finally have the tools to break those cycles. With the massive boost in mental health awareness, I’ve accessed the materials and facilities to heal what was once ignored. We are finally replacing “ni maombi tu” (it’s just prayers) with “ni maombi na therapy” (it’s prayers and therapy). In the end, I’ve been a witness to the struggle, an enabler of the change, and finally, thankfully, I am now free to just be.



Lilian Sirere

What do you do for a living?

I am a Public Health Nurse specializing in the management

of nursing services. My role is centered on empowering my team through mentorship, strategic advisory, and effective coordination.

What does being a millennial

Go mean to you?

To be a millennial in Kenya today is to be a “pro max” multitasker. We are the generation of the “Jack of all trades,” driven by a deep sense of purpose and a stubborn refusal to let things fail. When I say I’m committed to getting things done, I mean it Kenyan style. We don’t just work, we navigate. If Plan A hits a snag, we don’t sit back and complain, we quickly “vuta mpango” (pull a plan) and find an alternative. That resilience is baked into our DNA. As a Nurse Manager, my day is a whirlwind of precision and high-stakes decisions. But that’s just one hat I wear. The moment I leave the ward, I transition into being a wife, a mother, a baker, and even a farmer. People often ask how I manage it all but for a millennial, multitasking isn’t a burden, it’s our superpower. We were raised to believe that you

can be anything and everything all at once, as long as you have the grit to stay organized. My “ka-farm” and home garden are my sanctuary. In Kenya, we know that land is life, but for me, it’s also therapy. When the pressure of the hospital and the demands of life start to feel heavy, I retreat to my garden. There’s a special kind of healing in the simple acts of watering, pruning or planting. Just sitting there, listening to the birds chirping while the sun sets, gives me the “nguvu” (strength) to wake up and do it all over again. I have the survival skills of someone who has lived through the analog days and thrived in the digital age. I don’t just survive, I flourish. I am a proud Kenyan millennial, a healer, a provider, a creator, and a nurturer. We are the ones keeping the engine running, and I wouldn’t have it any other way.



Sadiq Kuto Wanjala

What do you do for a living?

A public health specialist (Technical Advisor for Malaria elimination) in South Africa

What does being a millennial mean to you?

Being a millennial in Kenya feels like living in two different centuries at once. I vividly remember a time before technology knocked on our

Go, doors, a childhood defined by “raja” Black Mambas and BMX bikes. We rode those heavy frames without a single helmet in sight, racing down the street with used tyres and sticks, our laughter echoing across the fields until the sun went down. It was a time when your “network” was just the group of agemates you played with in the dust. Then came the shift. I remember when mobile phones first arrived. At first, they were a luxury for the “extra wealthy,” a status symbol that made class differences clear. But then came the legendary Nokia 3310, and suddenly, the world changed. As millennials, we became the accidental heroes of our homes. For a moment, our parents and grandparents looked at us with awe as we showed them how to compose a text message or set a ringtone. Technology gave us a seat at the

table, it made us the ones who were listened to. But today, life feels like a constant pendulum swing. We find ourselves stuck between the memories of an era where you were judged by the character in your speech and this current reality where “financial power plays” decide everything. I work day and night, yet I can’t help but feel like we had “more” back then, more genuine laughter, more time, and less pressure to constantly perform. Despite the “daily bane” of trying to maintain control in a world that moves too fast, I believe we are the luckiest ones. We have seen the best of both eras. We are the guardians of the past and the architects of the future, holding the strings that connect these two worlds together. We carry the grit of the old days into the digital speed of today, and that is our true superpower.

Gc



Tabitha Jeruto

Go What do you do for a living?

I am an Accountant

What does being a millennial mean to you?

My name is Tabitha Jeruto, and by default, I am a proud Kenyan millennial and an Accountant. To me, being part of this generation is like being a "living bridge." We are the lucky ones who grew up right at the edge of the digital explosion, meaning we have the perfect balance of knowing how to navigate a high-speed internet connection while still remembering exactly what it felt like to play outside in the dirt until the sun shone away. We are the last group to truly understand the "analog struggle." We remember the days before everyone had a smartphone in their pocket, yet here we are now, managing complex spreadsheets and digital tax returns like pros. We saw the world change in real time, and that has given us a unique kind of

grit. We can handle a system crash just as easily as we handled a "raja" bicycle chain falling off in the middle of a race. But let's be honest, being a millennial in Kenya also comes with some "side effects" we didn't sign up for. I'm an accountant, so I spend a lot of time crunching numbers, but lately, I've realized my generation is struggling with things like chronic back aches. Honestly, tunaumia (we are hurting)! We have no business having back pains this early, isn't that supposed to be for the wazee (elders) or something? We're out here trying to secure the bag while our spines are acting like they've seen seventy years of hard labor. Despite the "bittersweet" back pains and the pressure to succeed, it's generally an amazing era to belong to. We have the wisdom of the old world and the tools of the new one. We are resilient, we are hardworking, and we definitely know how to make our mark.



Hezbon Bahati

I am Hezbon Bahati

What do you do for a living?

Hezbon Bahati, also known as “Baba Taifa,” or “Azee Coptel” is

an artist, rapper, and activist from Embakasi South who uses his creativity to advocate for human rights, social justice, and civic engagement. He is a founder of the Mukuru Kwa Njenga Social Justice Center and utilizes music and art to speak truth to power.

Go What does being a millennial mean to you?

To be a millennial in this country, and especially brought up in the trenches of Mukuru Kwa Njenga, is to be born into a movie that the rest of the world only watches on the 7 PM news while having dinner. We are the “Middle Children” of the struggle. We grew up in the “between,” a weird space where the digital age found us still jumping over open sewers and living behind rusty iron sheet walls. While the world was talking about 5G, we were just trying to find a “tap” that actually had water. In the ghetto, you don’t just grow up, you crystallize. You harden like the mud after a Nairobi downpour. For me, this identity stopped being a concept and became a physical weight in June 2025. During the Gen Z-led uprising, I wasn’t just an observer, I was the pulse of the streets. I was out there demanding a system that actually recognizes the “mwananchi” in the slums. Then, the cold reality of a police bullet found me. Being shot during those protests changed my DNA. Now, I carry the brunt of that brutality in my flesh, a literal,

jagged scar from a state that would rather spend its budget on teargas and silence than on feeding its people. But the “system” forgot one thing: I am a recording artist. My small, improvised studio is my sanctuary, my church, and my AK-47. I don’t just sing about “mapenzi” (love); I spit bars about governance and the “pool of dust” where our dreams are left to rot on the shelves of disconnected leaders. I rap for the “wazee” in high offices who have forgotten the sound of a stomach growling in the middle of the night. Being a millennial here means taking that trauma, that sharp pain of a healing wound, and turning it into a heavy bassline. It’s about using my survival skills to advocate for a Kenya where a kid from Kwa Njenga can dream without having to dodge a GSU officer’s aim. I am the bridge between the trauma of our fathers and the revolution of our children. Despite the scars, I am resilient. I am an artist, a survivor, and the voice the ghetto cannot ignore. We are the ones who will build this country from the ground up, one beat at a time.



Elizabeth Ngele Wacharo

What do you do for a living?

I am a transcriptionist.

What does being a millennial mean to you?

Being a millennial means I was

born between 1981 and 1996. In the Kenyan context, we are the digital pioneers. We are the “analog-digital” bridge, the only generation that grew up playing bladder, tapo, and kati in the dust, only to transition into a world of fiber optic internet and AI in our adulthood. We are the generation that remembers the struggle of tuning the “aerial” on top of the roof just to get a clear

Go signal for the only channel available, KBC. We watched the slow transition from bulky “Great Wall” analog TVs to the glowing, internet-connected flat screens we use today. We saw the world go from black and white to 4K. As a millennial, I’ve tasted both worlds. I remember the thrill of receiving a handwritten letter via a Posta box and the discipline of waiting in line at a telephone booth (Simu ya Jamii) or using a landline. Then, right before our eyes, we witnessed the birth of the smartphone and the explosion of the social media era. We went from “Please Call Me” texts to TikTok. The “Kienyeji” Modernist Being a millennial is being a perfect blend of traditional (kienyeji) and modernization. I still hold onto the values our parents instilled in us, respect for elders, community spirit, and the “shamba” life, while staying completely abreast of the

latest tech trends and global lifestyles. I can enjoy a plate of managu and ugali just as much as a fancy brunch in the city. For most of us, life followed a clear, hardworking path. We survived the 8-4-4 system, chased that university degree, built a career, and eventually started our own families. Because of this journey, I deeply value education, career growth, and the sanctity of family. Lastly, as a Kenyan millennial, I am incredibly adaptable. I’m a “shape-shifter.” I can sit through a serious board meeting or a long corporate presentation in a sharp suit, and then effortlessly switch gears to a church harambee, a chaotic matatu ride, or a local community social event. Being a millennial is about appreciating that change is the only constant. We don’t just survive social and technological shifts, we lead them.

Millennial Women: Betrayed by Gender Lies in Monster Times

Absence of a transnational historical consciousness has combined with the gender focus on education to produce the monsters of gender relations that millennials now grapple with.

Wandia Njoya



"The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters."
Antonio Gramsci

In 1994, I was a fresh, naïve, graduate of a Bachelor's of Education degree, believing that I would help build Kenya through the work I did as a teacher. I was posted by the Teachers Service Commission to teach in Kwale

County, and there I came to terms with how inequality affects education.

In the midst of this coming to consciousness about the reality of education in Kenya, one of my colleagues, a mathematics and physics teacher, attended a workshop sponsored by one of the highest-profile women's NGOs promoting girls' education.

My colleague returned from the workshop sharing insights I had never heard of, insights into the prejudices that lower girls' achievement. One example that she gave, that I never forgot, was that in mixed schools, the male students spent class time conducting the experiments while the female students spent class time washing up the lab equipment after their classmates.

I was blown away. I had never heard that kind of analysis, which we later knew to be called gender studies. I wanted to be part of it, but I was a teacher of the arts, not the sciences. That did not dampen my determination to be part of this groundbreaking initiative to promote girls' education. However, this was the mid-90s. The concept of donor-funded NGOs was fairly new, so I did not understand that this was an NGO driving an agenda, not looking for collaboration from volunteer teachers.

It so happened also that I knew that the founding Executive Director of the said NGO attended the same church as my parents. So during one of the school holidays when I was back in Nairobi, I spotted her at church and saw my chance to be part of her revolutionary movement. I approached her, explained what I

do, and told her that I'd like to be part of promoting girls' education.

To my surprise, she was not impressed. She informed me that her organization was not for teachers like me but for policy-makers and African ministers of education across the continent. Indeed, at the time, the chair of the board was one of the first female prime ministers in Africa, and the board counted several top-ranking African women politicians and top education bureaucrats. I retreated from that conversation believing that the problem was me, that I had not understood the more important things happening in girls' education, and that I had been presumptive and overambitious, meddling in high-level matters that did not need my input. But even then, that conversation never added up until just recently, over 30 years later.

Focus on the girl-child

In a sense, I'm glad that the director blew me off because after that time, I pursued further education without thinking of my gender. After all, I had been shown that gender was a boutique topic of education for the elite – policy-makers and government officials, not ordinary teachers like me. Therefore,

throughout my pursuit of further education in university, I was never conscious of myself as a female student.

The problem was that some Kenyans would often assume the opposite. They would say that I was continuing with school because I did not want to get married, and later, they would say that I was deliberately single in my early 40s because I felt that men would interfere with my schooling. I found that reasoning so absurd, but nothing would dissuade them. One time, when I was still a master's student, I was at a Sunday afternoon fellowship where I handed over a cup of tea to a male friend who had just walked in. I had arrived at the venue half an hour earlier, I knew where the tea was, so I was simply acting as a person who was more familiar with the logistics of the space. I had no idea that my gesture would soon be a point of conversation.

First, people remarked how wonderful it is that Wandia actually knows how to make tea, and then two, that Wandia can serve tea. And just when I thought the conversation could not get worse, I was asked whether, should I get married, I would serve my husband tea. At that point I got irritated by the

stupidity of the conversation, especially because I knew the facilitator of the conversation came from a household that employed at least one domestic worker. The painful conversation eventually ended when I asked him if the same question comes up for his mother.

I still fight for the life of the African mind because human beings need education, not because women need to go to school.

Some Kenyans were so sure that I did not want to get married because I preferred education, even when I said that my being single then was simply because I had not met the right person to settle down with. When I was already a lecturer, a female student walked up to me and, with pity in her eyes, asked me point-blank: "Did you decide not to get married so that you can pursue a PhD?"

All these questions, assumptions and innuendos were annoying because I was just continuing with school because I loved learning. My womanhood was never a consideration in my pursuit of education. I continued with school because I was committed to an Africa where stupidity and ignorance are not

the badge of honour that they now are. And I still fight for the life of the African mind because human beings need education, not because women need to go to school. And that point – the life of the mind – becomes the central focus to the next part of my story.

The first SAPs

Having pursued education out of love for intellectual pursuit, not to become an educated woman or to avoid marriage, I began my academic career enthusiastic about the potential to raise African consciousness through education. After all, by the time I was completing my doctoral studies, I had seen the huge gap in my own education. I had never read Pan-African theorists or leaders like Frantz Fanon, Amílcar Cabral, and Thomas Sankara in a Kenyan classroom. I read them on my own, and occasionally during my studies abroad, but most of what I knew, I discovered outside of the classroom. I had vowed that I would be that teacher through whom students would know about these texts in an actual classroom.

Unfortunately, that was not to be the case. The first ten years of my post-student life were spent on justifying why the humanities

exist in the first place. I had no students to teach about Cabral because the media and the government were telling Kenyans that the arts and humanities were useless. Therefore, instead of teaching about Sankara to Kenyan students, I was spending my time trying to explain why the humanities and performing arts are essential to the human being and to a society's economy.

And again, my faulty education had not taught me about neoliberalism and its war on the soul. So I also had to catch up on reading about neoliberalism, and the ideology of destruction that had been unleashed on African education after the fall of the USSR. Were it not for the fact that I could access reading materials through the university library, I would likely have remained quite ignorant about why the Kenyan school system hated knowledge so much. But it was also a lonely journey because few Kenyan academics were conducting geopolitically contextualized studies. They had no time to reflect on the state of education, because they were being promoted to academic administrators and writing grants for donor funding.

Yet this context, of the neoliberal assault on the African mind, was

extremely crucial to understanding why an executive director would tell me that it was not in my place to have conversations on girls' education.

With the SAPs (Structural Adjustment Programmes) waging a full-scale war on higher education, it was now time to integrate gender into elite politics to polarize the conversation and distract Africans from the larger war on education and African societies as a whole.

But it was also a lonely journey because few Kenyan academics were conducting geopolitically contextualized studies.

So, instead of protecting education for all Kenyans, we were now focused on the cultural issues that were obstacles to high achievement for girls. The descent into gender particularism has since been gradual: it began with the larger issue of enrolment and completion rates, moved to attitudes towards girls in the class, then to images of girls in textbooks. Now the focus has gone to menstrual cycles, to the extent that provision of sanitary towels was written into the Basic Education Act.

These days, the Kenyan media reports examination results in terms of the high scores by girls, for the express purpose, in my view, of keeping Kenyans drowning in the toxic conversation about high-achieving girls vs. the neglected boy child. That conversation distracts the public from the fact that average scores for the majority of girls are still lower, and that results where only 11 per cent of candidates pass KCSE indicate either deliberate failing of students by the state, or the failure of the state to offer meaningful education.

The NGO which steered the education conversation around identity was about a bigger network of an emerging beast that we would know to be "civil society". Fortunately, I was introduced to the essay "The Silences of NGO discourse", which became my anchor for navigating the strange gender dynamics I was observing. In the essay, Issa Shivji explained that the donor community was using bureaucracy and the idea of "solutions" to wage war against Africans being actors in their own destiny. And now that I'm adding two and two together, that was the point of the elite politics of promoting education for girls: it was to distract us from the

political economy of the school to the gender of who was going to school.

Meanwhile, capitalism had also realized that the one group of people that had been excluded from its orbit was poor African women. The majority of African women had remained outside the capitalist financial and ideological framework through collaborative networks where they informally raised money, farmed and shared food. Capitalism set out to capture that demographic by introducing microfinance bank products in the name of “empowering” women. In reality, microcredit was about offering women entrepreneurship, rather than political resistance, as a way for women to escape economies collapsing under neoliberal policies imposed by global financial institutions. Worse, it tied households to debt because poor women would use the money to meet family needs rather than invest in their small enterprises. Meanwhile, bankers boasted that African women were better at debt repayment than African men. They meant it as a compliment to women when, in reality, they were saying that exploiting women was a better return on investment.

The West had basically continued

its war on African societies by attacking the resilience of African women with education for the African women elite, and credit for the African women poor.

But before I drew this connection, which was only recently, a whole new generation of young people had grown up and was leaving the school system. They were trying to join the economy after the SAPs had suppressed innovation and production in Kenya. At the same time, the political ideology promised that joining donor-funded NGOs was a substitute to the political action we needed to convert our economy from a settler colony which is based on raw materials, into an economy based on production and expertise. It did not help that universities had also supported this shift by herding young people into philanthropy instead of the political economy. The universities now offered applied social sciences in the place of knowledge, for example “peace and security studies” in the place of political science or history, “human rights” instead of philosophy, communication and media in the place of language and the arts.

For this millennial generation growing up under neoliberalism, their historical consciousness

would be even more handicapped than that of my generation. As a child growing up in the '70s and '80s, it was at least possible to hear about Patrice Lumumba, Kwame Nkrumah, Sékou Touré, or Nelson Mandela, because we would come across their names when we were learning the independence dates of African countries. We grew up aware that South Africa, Azania, was in the midst of a liberation struggle. We were at least conscious that our political economy was influenced by factors beyond our borders. For the generation born in the '90s, this was not the case. History had now ended, as Francis Fukuyama is said to have declared after the fall of the USSR. For millennials, our economic problem was internal identity favouritism disconnected from global geopolitics.

It is only in the last few years that I started to sense that absence of a transnational historical consciousness was combining with the focus on women to produce the monsters of gender relations that the millennials now grapple with.

African girl magic

As I've already said, my pursuit of

education was something I did for knowledge, not accolades. I wanted to understand why Kenya was dysfunctional, and the only place where I could pursue these questions was in school. It therefore appeared strange to me, in the 2010s, to see a trend where African women lauded education, showed off about their scholarships, grants and degrees, with seeming limited consciousness that they were part of an elite. The women were fabulous: expensively dressed, globetrotting to talk about the rights of African women, and highly educated – some were even professors.

It did not help that universities had also supported this shift by herding young people into philanthropy instead of the political economy.

Their profile was striking because when I was young, African writers, for example, represented the people who articulated the difficult dilemmas of the African experience. By contrast, we now have a writer like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie who is also celebrated as a fashion icon, invited to political spaces like Chatham House and the Champs Elysées, and her words on feminism are quoted in a song by Beyoncé. Beyoncé is yet another

female icon performing radical politics while embracing something totally different, for example performing at the ultra-corporate event of the Super Bowl Halftime Show in costumes inspired by the Black Panther Party. Politics is no longer about on-the-ground organizing for specific outcomes for the people. It is about the aesthetics.

It is as if to be educated as an African woman, nothing can be ordinary any more.

These are the aesthetics that I attribute to the agenda of promoting education for girls. In the neoliberal age of social media, the promotion of girls' education has produced an aesthetic in which black women can have it all: wealth, high levels of education achieved at the world's elite schools, a string of academic publications, radical politics (?), an expensive wardrobe and a spouse and children. On social media, African women professionals share their boarding pass at the airport on their way to make a 15-minute presentation at conferences abroad, or themselves on another continent sipping martinis. I once saw a Facebook group for "doctors in heels", essentially aiming to prove that being professional and highly educated

does not mean looking drab.

That said, the point is not whether women can and should have it all. The point is why it should be important. Yet, it is as if to be educated as an African woman, nothing can be ordinary any more. Everything, including our periods and menopause, must be announced, analysed and celebrated as an achievement.

The second problem with the agenda of girls' education is that it is silent on the elephant in the room: the fact that the school system to which African women's success is attributed is invariably Eurocentric, racist and capitalist.

Therefore, educating African women in Western schools does not necessarily translate into radical African politics, as we were promised in those NGO soundbites about educating an African woman means educating a nation. The racist, mind-numbing implications of schooling do not listen to gender. In fact, Sanyu Mojola writes in her groundbreaking study that girls' education ends up increasing consumerism among female students, rendering them even more vulnerable to sexual exploitation in the very system that was supposed to make the

girls defy the same exploitation.

My third concern is about the emotional and relationship health of educated Kenyans. As other pieces in this series on millennials demonstrate, there seems to be an equation of emotional relationships with weakness. It is as if when a woman falls in love, she is necessarily being exploited by her partner, and she must do all she can to protect her progression in education and her career. If her male partner remains unemployed or does not rise up the corporate ranks, it is because he is not ambitious. And if he tries to question these interpretations, it is because he cannot tolerate “successful African women”. Meanwhile, the men are offered pacifiers like the red pill movement as a substitute to understanding that entering the elite, no matter the gender, is limited to the 5 per cent and is a function of the political economy, not of identity.

And those who take this hardline position cite cases of women battered and slaughtered by men after a woman, for example, danced to a Soukous beat. It is not that there is no “gender-based” violence problem. The issue is that it has a complicated relationship to the political economy, and it does not reflect

the entirety of gender and relationships in Kenya. And yes, Kenyan institutions are biased against pursuing justice for the victims. As they are for victims of other crimes, especially if the victims are poor. That said, the prominence of gender-based violence in the national media, as the banner under which all relationships are interpreted, is driven by, you guessed it, donor-funded NGOs.

Those of us who say that relationships are about humanity, not consumerism, are criticized as African patriarchy princesses who are offering ourselves as examples to emulate when all we are is failed women because we got married to men.

Yet the truth is, at the end of the day, the warmth of human relationships and political solidarity cannot be replaced by anything capitalism offers, in terms of schooling or career progression. Learning to be human, to relate intimately and socially with others, without giving up one’s dignity, is a skill that one must learn. But one cannot learn the skill without a historical consciousness. Yet in Kenya, neoliberalism has successfully planted a deep distrust in intimate relations by making Kenyans hostile to global

historical knowledge and political consciousness. And every time the point is made about the political economic system that depresses African growth, the point is belittled and dismissed with some reply about intersectionality.

Again, the point isn't whether one can be a fashion savvy, highly educated, married African woman. The point which that conversation is distracting us from, is that African political economies are rigged by the West, and through a political ideology that relies on division and gaslighting on the basis of identity. We should be having a conversation about regional and national sovereignty in the continent, the human dignity of

Africans, and best of all, the need for love and solidarity across boundaries and identities. We should be aiming for the dream of Mary Masombuka in the film *Sarafina*: for the war to be over, for the hate to end, for quiet days and loving nights, to sleep with our loved ones in our arms, and to come home to kindness.

But we cannot have that conversation if we have no historical consciousness about the neoliberal weaponization of gender to attack the African soul and distract Africans from the

the neoliberal weaponization of gender to attack the African soul and distract Africans from the Western sabotage of African political economies. Or if we have no consciousness about the role of media, academia and NGOs in promoting that distraction. Those were monsters I could not see in the 1990s, and which, sadly, Kenyan millennials are now grappling with in this age of US imperial decline.



Wandia Njoya is a scholar, social and political commentator and blogger based in Nairobi, Kenya.

Reclaim the Kenyan Millennial Soul – Now or Never

A crisis afflicts the collective millennial soul that calls for a suspension of our “performed identities” so that we may be able to talk to each other over the common issues confronting all of us.

Joe Kobuthi



The call came in at around 4 p.m. “Kobuthi, it’s Brian from primo.” “Oh, semama Brayo, long time, man.” “I’m good, bro.” After the usual pleasantries, there was a long pause. A deep sigh in Brian’s voice, then he cut to the chase. “Kobz, I’m in a fix. Please send me 275 Kenyan shillings; I’ll refund you when I can.”

I was taken aback. First, Brian and

I had lost touch and not connected in years. Then, there is an unspoken bro code: you need to know someone a certain way to have certain conversations, let alone borrow money. Second, the specificity of the amount. Was it a marketing ploy? Was it shame? I thought to myself. Unable to reconcile my position quickly, and still hearing the angst in his voice, I ended the call by saying

I'd send something. I wired him 2,000 shillings, followed by a text: "Don't pay back, handle your stuff. Take it easy, bro."

Brian was one of those lads who even from a young age showed so much promise. An all-rounder at school, national school alumni, STEM graduate, emotionally intelligent with the ladies in our adolescent days, handsome, with natural leadership qualities. Months later, I bumped into him in Thindigua – a sprawling middle-class neighbourhood, once a vast coffee farm. Our brief tête-à-tête in the Quickmart shopping mall car park centred on him lamenting that his girlfriend's daughter didn't respect him. I had no advice. I brushed it off with "We should link up," but we both knew I had no intention of doing so.

Youth-led social movements in North America and around the world found inspiration from the continent and pursued their own pathways to freedom and justice.

For months afterwards, I mulled over those two encounters. This guy could have been me – same elite schooling, same shadowed Nairobi streets, same fevered dreams whispered in adolescent brotherhood. It struck too close, a

mirror's cruel fracture: why him and not me? What phantom wind snuffed Brian's flame while mine flickered on? We had all sworn by our choices, our relentless climb, that triumph awaited us together – yet here he was, adrift in the wreckage, and I, trembling on the edge, wondered at the fragile thread of fate that spared one dreamer (with too many scars) while devouring another.

I decided to reach out to old contacts, colleagues, and friends to understand what being a middle-aged millennial means. Story after story revealed the same death of dreams, hopes, and aspirations. Brian wasn't an outlier but a recurring archetype. Millennials (born 1981–1996) were poised to be Kenya's generation of change. Entering public life as the first internet generation under President Kibaki, we were educated, digitally connected, socially aware and politically curious – labelled audacious radicals. Yet, now, in our 30s and 40s, many have grown cynical and disillusioned. Relationships falter, visions of societal change fade, and youthful bravado wanes. What happened? A generation once brimming with hope drifts into failed marriages, strained ties, underemployment, financial distress, addictions, incel echo chambers, cynicism

towards organised religion, and fixation on state power. How did it come to this?

On 3 February 1960, Harold Macmillan, the British Prime Minister, delivered the famous “Wind of Change” speech to the South African parliament in Cape Town. He stated: “The wind of change is blowing through this [African] continent, and whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact.” He acknowledged Africa’s rising nationalism, signalling to the West to shift towards decolonisation amid anti-apartheid pressures. This marked not only a pivotal moment in ending colonial rule across the continent, but also a shift towards a more democratic global society. Youth-led social movements in North America and around the world found inspiration from the continent and pursued their own pathways to freedom and justice: from the Vietnam protests to the civil rights movement, from the hippie movement to the Black Panther resurgence, and to the 1968 student riots in Paris – the 1960s and early 1970s were a hotbed of civic agitation.

This “democratic overload”

strained Western systems, culminating in the 1970s oil crisis, which knocked the wind out of the global economy and helped trigger a stock market crash, soaring inflation, and high unemployment – ultimately leading to the formation of the Trilateral Commission.

Established in 1973 by private citizens from Western Europe, Japan, and North America to “foster closer cooperation among these three regions on common problems, it seeks to improve public understanding of such problems, to support proposals for handling them jointly, and to nurture habits and practices of working together among these regions”.

Living within this hegemony of power made it impossible to imagine that this new world was itself an experiment.

The Commission published a report in 1975 entitled The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies, authored by Michel Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, and Joji Watanuki. This 114-page document opined that excessive democratisation – rising participation, demands, and expectations – overwhelms governability, leading to ungovernable states with

weakened authority and policy paralysis, and that too much democracy erodes effective governance without strong institutions. The report concludes by advocating balancing participation with elite-led stability to prevent collapse into authoritarianism or chaos. The overarching recommendation, which all the authors seemed to reach, was to create a world order where mass democracy is limited for the sake of market efficiency.

Later adopted by the Bretton Woods institutions and enforced globally through aid, military juntas, or economic sanctions, in Africa, this recommendation manifested as the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs). Kenya boarded this bandwagon in 1980 with Sessional Paper No. 10 on the acceptance and implementation of the recommendations of the Civil Service Review Committee (1979/80). However, President Moi – dubbed the “Professor of Politics” – adroitly balanced Western and domestic interests until 1985, when Sessional Paper No. 3 on the Civil Salaries Review Committee paved the way for full SAP implementation. The implementation of SAPs ravaged African economies, distorted social arrangements and

restructured Africa’s public sphere. But this was deliberate.

In his book The Darker Side of Modernity: Global Future, Decolonial Options, Walter D. Mignolo argues that Euro-modernity has followed a particular logic to sustain power since the Age of Discovery. First, it imposes violence and destruction upon a specific people, then it recreates that society in the image Euro-modernity desires – a diabolic salvific script that casts the instigator of the initial violence as its eventual saviour. In this way, Mignolo notes, “the rhetoric of modernity is the constant updating of the rhetoric of salvation, hiding the logic of coloniality – war, destruction, racism, and plunder”. Thus, per Mignolo’s framework, if SAPs embodied modernity’s destructive side that wrecked Africa’s economy, reshaping society to impose it – especially in Kenya – relied on twin pillars: Christian theology and secular science/philosophy.

The secular argument was best propounded by Francis Fukuyama in his 1992 book, The End of History and the Last Man. There, he posited that the global spread of liberal democracies, Western free-market capitalism,

and the accompanying lifestyle, represented the endpoint of humanity's sociocultural evolution and political struggle – the final form of human government. Henceforth, he suggested, civic work would adopt a technical character, with social, political, and economic challenges addressed through expert fixes. Thus was born civil society, a cadre of experts – local and foreign – wielding technical arsenals to mend society's fractures.

These worlds coexist side by side in Kenya's public sphere – a false binary fuelling absurd gladiatorial clashes over norms, beliefs, and values.

Kenya's landscape teemed with experts overnight: four-wheel-drive saviours roaring through the hinterlands pledged to banish poverty, slash child mortality, and uplift the natives. A deluge of development jargon followed: log frames, poverty reduction, burn rates, grassroots empowerment – all suspiciously evocative of Binyavanga Wainaina's How to Write about Africa satirical edict: "In your article, mention aid workers with rugged good looks who save the day, always with a Land Cruiser and a noble heart for the suffering African." The

beneficiaries of this industry echoed new liberal edicts to the natives: human rights were good, tribalism and nepotism bad; an independent judiciary was good, corruption was bad; free media with its young fresh acolytes postured as the new meaning makers were good; failed institutions and dictators bad. Meanwhile, the rule of law was the divine pursuit for citizens and state alike. I am simplifying, of course, but living within this hegemony of power made it impossible to imagine that this new world was itself an experiment.

The fall of the Iron Curtain, the collapse of communism, the end of colonialism and the apartheid era – marked by Nelson Mandela's release from prison on 10 February 1990 – necessitated a theological response suited to the new times. At the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) General Committee meeting on 30 March 1990, Professor Jesse K. Mugambi categorically stated: "Reconstruction theology [and not liberation theology] is the new priority for African nations in the 1990s. The churches and their theologians need to respond to these new priorities in relevant fashion, to facilitate this process of reconstruction." Secondly, he observed the sheer frustration in

Africa over its intractable problems, and the desire for a more pragmatic theology – one that seeks solutions rather than perpetuating the vicious circle of the blame game was necessary. Thirdly, as Professor Mugambi elaborated in an interview with Julius Gathogo – quoted in the article, “Storytelling as a Methodology in Developing a Theology of Reconstruction” – “Liberation tends to be focused on the past while reconstruction is focused on the future.”

The argument that liberation theology served its purpose during colonialism, slavery, and apartheid, that, with those eras ended, liberation theology is obsolete, is a falsification, particularly in light of the current global political order. This, as proponents of reconstruction theology suggest, misreads history profoundly, conflating decolonisation (a completed historical phase) with decoloniality (ongoing epistemic and structural forces perpetuating non-white subjugation). The result is a flawed theology: one proclaiming a “free, flat and fair” world where the task is simply reconstruction from ruins. Moreover, recent events like George Floyd’s globally televised murder and contemporary Black slave

markets in the Middle East expose this claim’s falsehood. Second, the push to reorient theology towards pragmatism and “practical solutions” mirrors the neoliberal zeitgeist of the time, offering theological legitimacy to market-driven ideologies. Third, by framing liberation theology as past-obsessed and reconstruction as future-focused, Professor Mugambi constructs – in theological guise – an anti-secessionist logic. This parallels the assertion that Jesus, post-resurrection, severed ties with Hebrew culture, severing theology from its historical roots. This move delinks reconstruction theology from African histories, and struggles, rendering adherents of reconstruction theology effectively ahistorical – or, at best, frozen within a nativist, seldom idealistic and historic frame of Africa – a colonial trope no less. Yet, a far more insidious theological operation lurks beneath this shift. In liberation discourse, the site of struggle encompasses both external and internal forces that shape the material conditions of the oppressed, which in turn underpin their cultural, social, political, religious, and intellectual lives.

Consider the Mau Mau – Kenya

Land and Freedom Army – who grasped intuitively that reclaiming their stolen land would unlock broader spaces of freedom. Reconstruction discourse, by contrast, executes a profound pivot: it redirects progressive struggles away from the material conditions (land, resources, tangible power) towards cultural recognition, confining justice to the realm of identity and mindset. This sleight of hand ignores enduring material inequities, leaving the oppressed to seek liberation in their minds alone while structures of dispossession remain intact. This theological shift would provide the necessary conditions for what has come to be termed as identity politics in Kenya's public sphere.

When I entered the job market in the 2010s as a philosophy graduate steeped in African thinkers such as Sophie Oluwole, D. A. Masolo, Kwasi Wiredu, and Léopold Sédar Senghor, I was surprised by how obsessively my colleagues and friends – whether religiously inclined or liberal-leaning – clung to their sense of identity. I spent the first half of the decade in faith-based ecosystems and the second in liberal circles. In both, identity

was no essentialist quest as my philosophical training suggested. Instead, identity was a performative politics of social sanction; virtue-signalling to affirm in-group belonging. The absurdity lay in the doctrinal certitudes wielded like a literal "sword of truth" to sustain the tribe and fend off outsiders. These worlds coexist side by side in Kenya's public sphere – a false binary fuelling absurd gladiatorial clashes over norms, beliefs, and values. Yet away from this performative divide, a theological truth binds them: material prosperity signals fulfilment of one's *raison d'être* and true discipleship within the ecosystem. It is within this framework that one can understand my friend Brian's tragedy. Miseducated amid illusions and vacuous political vernaculars, Brian – like many of my peers – has become trapped in a senseless, absurd pursuit of existential meaning within Kenya's public sphere, akin to the Sisyphean tragedy.

Carter Godwin Woodson astutely captured this miseducation in his book, The Mis-Education of the Negro: "The so-called education of Negro college graduates leads them to throw away opportunities which they have and to go in quest of those which

they do not find.” The Kenyan millennial, force-fed the adage “someni vijana, mtapata kazi nzuri” – study hard, youths, and you’ll land a good job – became the new doctrine echoed in the public sphere. Channel your energies into NGOs or the private sector, they said, and prosperity awaits. Instead, we now confront exhaustion: stagnant careers, donor whims, corporate drudgery, and a hollow chase for validation in systems that promised much but delivered disillusionment instead.

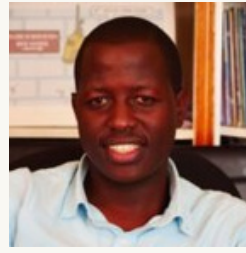
In early Egyptian civilisation, elites completed their education at forty after being tutored from the age of eight years. The Hebrew-born, Egyptian-raised prince, Moses followed the same pathway. This explains why, at forty, he killed the Egyptian – launching his mission to redeem Israel. Yet, as W. E. B. Du Bois observes in “Of the Souls of Black Folk”, the dual education now offered to Africans breeds psychic turbulence. Similarly, for Moses, his mother’s informal lessons echoed freedom and truth, while palace training basked in empire’s *raison d’être* of war, victory, dominance, and power instilled a sense of omniscience and omnipotence in

the mind of Egyptians elites.

This dualism mirrors the crisis afflicting the collective millennial soul. For Moses, another forty years in the wilderness re-educated him, reframing freedom not through imperial echoes but as a simple shepherd in the vulnerability of the natural world. I find myself asking: should we not embark on a parallel journey – not literal herding, but reckoning with freedom beyond the West’s curated “truths”? How do we rid ourselves of this dualistic logic that has hollowed our humanity, eroding our capacity for “teleological suspension”?

“Teleological suspension”, explains African American philosopher Lewis Gordon, is when a discipline suspends its own centring because of a commitment to questions greater than the discipline itself. We implement this suspension because it is more important to answer real-life questions using knowledge from various disciplines, than it is to be a stickler for rules, for doctrinal beliefs, for disciplinary boundaries or some performative identity. Just like we suspend reality when we read fiction or watch a play, we should be able to suspend our attachment to

our “performed identities” and be able to talk to each other over the common issues confronting all of us. We should be able to ask ourselves how we can be religious and intellectually curious in concert. How we can reclaim the art of disagreement and move towards what Ifeanyi Menkiti called communal personhood. We must do this and start the conversations – our wilderness awaits.



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The Elephant is dedicated to constructing a narrative of a robust, generative, and diverse global identity imbued with the African experience.

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