

Editorial

I hate githeri. 4 years of it – six times a week in boarding school, with floating bits of cabbage, cracked teeth and gravel and the dining hall smell of steaming peeling paint and bubbling giant cookers. After living abroad for ten years, I used to fantasise about boiling githeri – about rude matatu drivers; about bad speakers screaming near matatu ranks, about us Kenyans, who are so bullied by authority figures, we turn on each other, instead of on the authority figure.

We miss old ways. We are terrified about new things – because we have learnt to measure with exactitude what we can expect from a president who is a monarch – and a parliament whose single aim is to make themselves as rich as the wealthiest class of people in the wealthiest nations of the world.

This is why we, not they, are squashing any opportunity for a meaningful new Kenya – run by professional, sane feet-on-the-ground people who did not earn their stripes as Affirmative Action Vaseline-Faced Missionary School Boys (or their children, cousins, uncles and godfathers): people who have lived and thrived in a crumbling Kenya and kept their integrity about them; people who have innovative and bold ideas; people who have had their hands on earth, and their minds in the sky.

One time in South Africa, I was in a cheap country bus, and the driver was drunk. I was terrified, because I was sitting right behind him, and my Kenyan reaction was to pretend it was not happening. I slept. Half an hour later some very rude women – some grandmothers- were screaming. They stood. Picked out the strongest man in the bus, and asked him to stop the driver. Eight or nine people surrounded him. He stopped.

The travellers took a vote after some brisk discussions, the driver was dropped off at the nearest police station and a passenger was appointed to take us to Johannesburg. Many of these women were probably illiterate. Most of this time I was just annoyed. I do not know why I was annoyed. The women were changing a status quo, a way of doing things – good or bad – and maybe this is what annoyed my narrow fearful Kenyan self.

A few weeks after coming home in 2000, I took a matatu (express) from Njoro to Nakuru. It was full, and was not supposed to stop along the way - a privilege for which we paid 40 bob. I had been heaving bags of leek since early morning and was dirty and smelly. We got to Technology, and three people were hustled in, elbows in my nose, warm and squirming chicken at my feet; hot breath in my ear – a

kiss. A kiss? I had enough. I shouted at the guy to put them down. I started to elbow my way out. Behind me, in Gikuyu, speculation was rife coupled with much nose sniffing as the other passengers made it clear that they were unimpressed with my revolutionary ideas. Who does he think he is? Is he better than us who take this thing? And so on.

The conductor was laughing. In annoyance I demanded my money back and then asked them to drop me off. I could hear passengers laughing as I left in a silly, hot-eared huff.

In Kenya, until we are left naked, we will defend the status quo – much has been made of the 500 people who earn 90 percent of the government wage bill; much has been made of the knot of families and connections who have taken ownership of this country – and who are not happy with all the land they own and all the assets, who will still come into our homes and take the very last cent as taxes to fund their referendum campaign, and the elections in 2007. But these days they hardly need to do this work – a whole population of people will defend them, will make velvet carpeting for them and ululate for a loaf of bread. So when I ask a Gikuyu taxi driver in Nakuru. Is business good? He says it was better during Moi. I ask him about the government. He brightens and says, “... but he! Kibaki is a wise one! He is Working!”

For whom? Kenya’s rich-poor index has worsened since this government came to power. Clearly the economy is doing well.

But for what 5 percent?

“Truly a God. Did you know he was number 1! From Standard 1 until University! And the way he is confusing Raila?” says the taxi guy.

And what has he done for you?

“Oh! We have been telling them Kaa Mucii. Ka Mucii! We told them we would help them keep the Luos out of Nakuru.”

Which brings me to some of the motivations behind this issue:

Over the last two years a kind of insanity has overtaken many Gikuyus. Messiahs have come to “save us” from the “beasts of the west” – and these “beasts of the west” are of course, the problem with Kenya. The same people who had vowed in 2002 to allow a Kenya for Kenyans are now selling Kenya – with their massive vote - to a bunch of people who do not know the price of a pint of milk, or care – except when they own the milk manufacturing plant that stole machinery from a KCC which we built with our money.

Neither do they care about the sisal-producing district, where a whole tribe remains squatters, or the ranch in Laikipia where poor people are herded away by the same army and police forces that are meant to exist to protect them and their sovereignty. And we are grateful for this love by these people, partly because they do a little work - nowhere enough to be meaningful for Kenya, but sufficient to plant flowers on roundabouts and build one school with CDF.

The real money, our money, ends up, in now legislated ways, into the pockets of the Fortune 500. Parselelo Kantai calls it the Vampire State – and really no state in Africa is as adept as Kenya at misleading its population and channelling all meaningful monies to the few who partner with “international investors” to leave us all bone dry. This is why even poorer countries, countries with less resources and institutions were able to shed their old guard and we can't.

The Kibaki government, like the Moi government and the Kenyatta government and the ODM possible government are all cut from the same original cloth. Although we all see Uhuru and Raila and Kibaki as very different people representing very different ethnicities, they are brothers – of the same class of families who feel they have a royal right

to rule. They come from the same eras, the same schools, the same social circuits – they battle things out when we are watching – for we validate their power. But within themselves they have no real problem. This is why former enemies always seem to turn around and become friends when they need to be: because they all need each other – they are in a conspiracy to control the history and future of Kenya – which we are told is all about them, their daddies, their cousins and uncles and in-laws. Since they are heroes it is their natural right to inherit everything. So every five years we troop off to vote for one of them to inherit our assets – for we are their employees,

their citizens and slaves, their children, their feudal chattels. And we are happy when they throw extra shillings on the floor for us. It makes us feel good.

This new era of Gikuyu political power is examined in parts of this issue of Kwani? Much of what is discussed here may replicate itself all over Kenya, for these problems are not unique to the Gikuyu. We do not approach it with political essays – more we have some interesting opinions and fiction and blog entries and some heart rending confessions that talk about patriarchy and the family; the fall of the Gikuyu man; the rise of the woman – and all sorts of defenses people have built over the past 40 years, ten years after this community has cut open by a terrible season of attack; and its recovery with the rise of Kenyatta.

What I fear, as a Gikuyu and as a Kenyan, is that the mobile, flexible ambition we had for Kenya is now frozen behind a new dogma chanted by Gikuyus everywhere – that the new Mtukufus of Kenya are here to stay, and it is these Mtukufus who will save Kenya. Again, a new generation invests our hope not in ourselves; we do not want to challenge a government to be better; we want to be comfortable with the status quo – and that will send us straight back to 1969. To 1988.

Our aim is not to alienate, or to be “comprehensive” – it is simply to provoke conversation. Our newspapers speak in maidenly terms – like old Victorians about “a certain community”. We feel we need to name things - and allow conversations to take place – because it is in these secret in-between places that hate and fear build and thrive, when people start to think that at home their close friends and their families are “plotting against them.”

We feel obliged to work towards the end of an era of big men, and their families and children. And the way to do this, I believe is to question our own hearts.

The hearts of those in power are not in doubt.

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