

Editorial



I hate 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 - about rude drivers; about bad speakers screaming near 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 (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 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 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 of Kenya are here to stay, and it is these 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

Middle Ground

Binyavanga Wamaina

What we will become, after the machete line in the sand was drawn early this year, will only reveal itself in the fullness of time. We are, though, the designers of that future.

To me the large choices are stark: we will either use this as a measure of a thing we never want again, and become a more purposeful whole; or we will continue to stumble and splinter and hide our truths from ourselves.

The source of the biggest shame for me was our middle classes. Not once during those months did we take to the streets in huge numbers to say no; to be seen by the world and ourselves to stand for one reasonable Kenya. Instead we resorted to general sneakiness, snide sms', ethnic paranoia, raising money for arms; flapping our arms about haplessly. When the state said we should stay at home, we did, and hoped the wananchi would stop wananchi-ing about.

In this great test of our tensile strength, we failed to hold ourselves

together and separate our reasonableness from the unreason and power games of a cynical political class.

I do not think there is a place outside of this continent so endowed with human skills, able to compete anywhere. But unlike a Ghanaian middle class; or a Nigerian one, our commitment to Kenya is self-serving and cynical. We do not really want to 'be involved'. We do not want to be a part of a country of ideas – we see politics are a network for corporate advancement, for feudal connection; for protections and deals.

Most of all, we have refused to grow up.

For the whole of January, I was calling my father every day, and without really realizing it, I was berating him for not doing enough. My father is retired, and worked day and night for 40 years for this country. It dawned on me that it is not just the wazees who are refusing to let go; the vijanas, some of them now 50 years old, refuse to create a vision for a future, and take charge. Civil Kenya is somebody else's job.

So we all sat, glued to the television, and saying Kofi Annan, Kibaki, Raila, please meet. Somehow this all would boil down to them, and then life would go on, because the safcom share issue was being delayed. So when Condoleezas and Ramophosas, and Gracas were threatening, and cajoling – we remained at home.

What we were doing was passing on the responsibility of our country to others.

Already outrage is being forgotten. It is being suggested everywhere that the Post election madness was a sort of anomaly, let us go back to where we were and it will be alright.

As writers, we have said no to this. We have to look at what happened in the full-face. If there is any single reason this all happened, it is because we have refused to see, hear or listen. We are still consuming ethnic stereotypes created by the British when they first allocated work and power based on their ignorant and simplistic ideas. If we have not yet thought our way past 1910, maybe it is time for us to start to consume ideas more. Our media is obsessed with the soap opera of political characters. So Kenya is really just a theatre-screen where we watch a few people play drama games on stage, and clap, or cry or laugh.

All the many many amazing writers and intellectuals who have given their lives and time to think and help us to think are still knocking on the door of our national television screen, while news programs spend endless

time talking about why Martha and Uhuru did what.

We have produced two Kwani's this year. More than ever, we feel a sense of purpose to look hard at ourselves. Yes, we can still laugh at our own foibles; but to stop looking is to make our country as a place as base and crude as our politicians tell us it is.

Let me take a small moment here to say to Philip Ochieng that he has my Nobel. More than anybody, he spoke the truth of his heart and mind, and rose above the general pettiness and melodrama. It seemed almost like he has been waiting his whole life to put all he has gathered together for us now. When I was floundering, it seemed like somebody out there believed in Kenya, was properly outraged.

Binyavanga Wainaina is the founding editor of Kwani?. He holds a Caine Prize for African Writing (2002) for his story 'How To Write About Africa,' and is a contributor to such international publications as National Geographic, Vanity Fair, Granta and many more.

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