

# Kenyan intellectuals and the political realm

## Responsibilities and complicities

*Intellectuals have provided many of the concepts through which Kenyans have come to understand their society. However, the infrastructure that historically made intellectual work possible within the country has, over the years, been eroded by the Kenyan state, international factors and the pressures of political sectarianism.*

*The erosion of the intellectual sphere has, in turn, had a stunting effect on Kenya's political culture. By examining key moments in the evolution of the relationship between the Kenyan state and the country's intellectuals – and also the relationship between intellectuals and society – this article reflects upon models of engagement that may enable Kenya's intellectuals to regain initiative.*

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As Kenyans agonised over the violence that followed the general elections of 27 December 2007, the role that intellectuals had played, or failed to play in the crisis came to occupy a crucial role in public discussions. Writing in *Business Daily Africa*, the eminent literary critic Simon Gikandi chided Kenyan intellectuals for largely failing to commit their mastery of ideas to actions and public statements that could stand ethical and moral tests in the wake of the violence. For Gikandi, the intellectual class was in the main indistinguishable from the political class for whom they acted as 'guns on hire'. He noted that Kenyan academic intellectuals had, since the state's clampdown on dissidence in the wake of the attempted *coup* of 1982, tended to reproduce the worst tendencies of authoritarian career politicians and the most sinister elements in society as a whole.

The actions of intellectuals in the lead up to and subsequent to the 2007 elections had only thrown into sharp relief a complex of problems that had persisted for the better part of three decades. In his words, intellectuals had "failed to rise beyond partisanship to provide the voice of reason when rationality is needed most."<sup>1</sup> Gikandi implied that the failure to use reason as a resource in the management of public affairs

meant a betrayal of the ethical imperative for a consensual community based on critical deliberation on the nature of Kenyan society. In the crucial transition years of the late 1980s and early 1990s, public intellectuals in the church – such as Mutava Musyimi, Timothy Njoya, Henry Okullu, Ndingi Mwana'a Nzeki, David Gitari and Alexander Muge – were generally uncompromising in their critique of the abuse of power across the country. By 2007, however, the clergy mostly reproduced the sectarian tendencies of the political elite, drawing attention only to those matters to do with their immediate congregations. Given the bitter and sharp exchanges that saw the collapse of debate and collegiality among intellectuals, it is hard to refute Gikandi's view that intellectuals had failed to rise up to the challenge of their work.

Nonetheless, in its defense of the pursuit of 'pure knowledge' – as opposed to instrumentalised, partisan knowledge – Gikandi's article throws into sharp relief a range of problems that Kenyan intellectuals may have to tackle as they struggle to make sense of their role in a society that is increasingly riddled with violence and division. Is it really feasible, in such moments of crisis as that of the post-election violence, to subscribe to the idea of a rational, non-partisan intellectual, who is insulated from the passions and desires of his society, and especially politicians? Is it really possible and ethically desirable to hold on to the notion of disinterested inquiry or to maintain that politics is a dirty game best left to politicians? Is there a third alternative that is open to intellectuals? Such questions have a long history in post-independence African intellectual debates.

One of the key political crises that helped crystallise this debate is the Biafran War, in which such intellectual figures as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Christopher Okigbo were involved. Achebe and Okigbo were Biafra

partisans, while Soyinka sought a reconciliation between the secessionist province and the Nigerian federation. In his novel *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo*, Ali Mazrui imagined an afterworld in which Okigbo was arraigned before a court for "putting society before art in his scale of values" and abandoning his earlier stance of a universal poets' poet for a insular cause.<sup>2</sup> In spite of Okigbo's eccentric declaration at the 1962 Kampala conference of African writers that he would be quite satisfied if only a handful of other poets were his sole readership, he nonetheless retained a strong sense of his implication in the survival or destruction of his society as he understood it. Faced with a Nigeria that was quickly unraveling as a mirage, as anti-Igbo attacks were carried out in various parts of the country, Okigbo seemed to have shunned disinterest in favour of a choice whose consequences he could never really foretell.

Okigbo's uneasy entanglement with his society opens up several avenues through which we may begin to explore the 'complicity' and 'responsibility' of intellectuals in the Kenyan crisis. The terms are used to refer not only to intellectual guilt for whatever is amiss in the world, but also the capacity to bear the burden of that knowledge and to act according to that knowledge. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines being 'responsible' as being "liable to be called to account", to be "morally accountable for actions", and to be "capable of rational conduct". In short, it is to bear the burden of whatever duty to oneself and for others. To bear 'responsibility' indicates the burden of response, of articulation with one's world. The term 'complicity', as Mark Sanders uses it in reference to the intellectual response to apartheid, speaks not only of intellectual entanglement with the world in a negative sense, but also of a social folded-togetherness, a condition which intellectuals cannot totally escape.<sup>3</sup> Okigbo may have

joined the Biafran War primarily as a soldier and a man of ideas, but it is this very involvement that made nonsense of Mazrui's attempt to deny that the poet was also a person, subject to the physical and emotional tribulations... of being in the world. In a context characterised by a division of labour which normally features men of ideas – typically elderly ones – sending young men to fight wars whose ends they may not grasp, Okigbo chose the indivisible life of the poet as soldier.

Given the inevitability that intellectual issues become intertwined with layers social issues, to see the problem of the intellectual role in contemporary Kenya as simply one between the pursuit of pure knowledge on the one hand and of instrumental knowledge on the other is to oversimplify the issue. If, as Raymond Suttner suggests, intellectuals are those people who “broadly speaking, create for a class of people... a coherent and reasoned account of the world”, then the more difficult question to probe would be for whom Kenyan intellectuals have been producing interpretations of the world.<sup>4</sup> In a context of post-election violence in which accusations were being exchanged in various media – and in which intellectuals representing all shades of opinion tried to occupy moral high ground – Gikandi's insistence on the need for intellectual self-reflexivity about their role in the Kenyan crisis was an important intervention.

Accustomed to doing research on ‘others’ – whether politicians, the ‘masses’, social classes, the poor or society in general – Kenyan intellectuals have proven singularly reluctant to write about their own position, which in part would explain the thin body of sociologies of intellectual work in the country and among the growing Kenyan diaspora. This article is an attempt to account for the retreat of Kenyan university-based intellectuals from their world. It

meditates upon ways in which humanist scholarship might be reanimated, especially in its encounters with what Joseph Ki-Zerbo calls the ‘tropical Leviathan’: the state.<sup>5</sup> Where necessary, the discussion moves beyond university-based academic intellectuals to look at other kinds of intellectuals as well.

If critical thinking and the ability to shatter myths is the forte of intellectuals,<sup>6</sup> then nothing demonstrates the validity of Gikandi's view that Kenyan intellectuals had failed in their duties more than the mass of unsubstantiated rumours that circulated, with little refutation, among Kenyans everywhere during the post-elections violence. Quite clearly, knowledge had become a pliable instrument in the hands of power and intellectuals had lost control of that which constitutes their *raison d'être*. Of the many rumours, two particularly stood out in their wilful attempts to bend history for the agendas of those who purveyed them. The first – which was circulated primarily by supporters of president Mwai Kibaki's Party of National Unity (PNU) in Johannesburg, and to which I was a witness – was to the effect that Kenya's first vice-president, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, had in 1969 orchestrated the assassination of Tom Mboya, a leading Kenyan nationalist politician with whom he had sustained intense political rivalry for about a decade. This was in spite of the fact that all authoritative texts on this event point to actors within the Jomo Kenyatta-led government of the time.<sup>7</sup> A related rumour – spread mainly by members of the opposition party Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) – stated that of the country's provinces, those which contributed greater amounts to the national government received the least, since the state has tended to expend disproportionately large amounts on the ‘friends’ of sitting presidents and on the capital city, at the expense of other regions in the country. In a piece

penned in the run-up to the elections, Michael Chege, the political economist, attempted to show that this was a false premise for the opposition's call for constitutional changes that would ensure equitable distribution of national resources.<sup>8</sup>

Both of these rumours underlined the precarious position of truth, memory and critical thinking in a context in which the pursuit of state power has tended to crowd out several other priority questions in the arena of public debate. Beyond the commonplace explanation that political repression is conducive to the spread of rumours, how can we explain the attraction that Kenyan society, especially that element that has its eye on seats of high politics, has developed for falsehood and slander?

No attempt to answer this question would be complete without an examination of the role of intellectuals in mediating the public apprehension of history, especially in regard to the issues of ethnicity and power. This article therefore poses a series of other questions that might open up the subject for more debate. How can we account for the complicity with power, and the paralysis, that has characterised the response of Kenyan intellectuals to political crises that have faced the country since the advent of multi-party democracy in 1992? Is non-partisanship and the pursuit of pure knowledge, whose absence Gikandi regrets, a viable option for intellectuals in the context of such crises? What other models for intellectual responsibility are available in such moments of turmoil? Tackling the above questions requires some sense of the factors that have shaped intellectual production in the country. It requires that we consider how Kenya became bereft of a public infrastructure on which to hang any intellectual values, leading to an entrenched culture of mediocrity, which may explain the many platforms for rumour mongering and

hate speech and the under-valuing of intellectual work. The first place to begin is the state and the terrain of high politics.

In the preface to his book *Political Values and the Educated Class in Africa*, Ali Mazrui recalls an incident that throws into sharp relief the interest that political leaders in Africa have had in university-based intellectual work in the post-independence years. One day in 1968, the Principal of Makerere University College, Mr Y.K. Lule requested a meeting and questioned him about an article he had allegedly written, which drew an unflattering analogy between President Obote of Uganda and Thomas Hobbes's notion of the sovereign. Mazrui could not recall writing any such article, but began to suspect that he may have said something to that effect during one of his lectures at Makerere. This only dawned on him when Obote personally asked him – during an encounter at the Kampala Parliament Building – to explain a diagram he had used in one of his university lectures, a lecture which the president obviously did not attend. Mazrui realised that the government had recruited informers among his very students.<sup>9</sup>

While the picture that Mazrui paints of late 1960s Uganda contains a hint of threat, this stands in stark contrast to Idi Amin's reign and also in Kenya between the attempted military *coup* of 1982 and the first multi-party elections of 1992. State surveillance of university classes in the humanities had become so common in Kenya that in 1990-1991 Nicholas Nyangira – a political scientist at the University of Nairobi and a target of state harassment – would routinely interrupt his lectures in order to instruct the 'semi-literate informer' at the back of the lecture theatre to take down notes 'accurately'. President Moi, on his part, would routinely discourage students from taking provocative humanities subjects like political science (which

at the University of Nairobi had by then been renamed 'Government' to appease the system which had been jolted by the *coup* attempt that many university students had openly supported). Instead, students were now encouraged by Moi to take supposedly more development-oriented degree courses such as Education and Agriculture, and which would supposedly not encourage dissidence among the educated classes.

At the very moment when the Moi state – in what James Kariuki called 'paramoia'<sup>10</sup> – was raiding public coffers to extend patronage to its widening circle of clients, in order to perpetuate itself, it now purported to be the supreme guarantor of development. Not that intellectual work is necessarily hostile to development – indeed it is impossible to think of the two as opposed to each other – but in framing the issue in this way, Moi sought to take the initiative away from intellectuals even as he sought to co-opt them. For example, he famously scolded his long-time Vice President, George Saitoti (a professor of mathematics) at a public meeting with the exclamation of "*Profesa kaa chini!*" (Sit down professor!). It is no wonder then that Moi had, in the last ten years of his rule, come to regard himself as 'the professor of politics', and sought to rub it in the faces of academic political scientists such as Peter Anyang Nyongo, Apollo Njonjo and Mukhisa Kituyi who had tried their hand in party politics and whom he considered himself as having outwitted at every turn.

In hindsight, the fact that many of the aspirants to the title of 'philosopher-king' – especially those who had provided the ideological content for the drive towards multi-party democracy in the 1980s and 1990s – succumbed to the lure of state patronage after Mwai Kibaki's electoral victory in 2002 lends some credence to Moi's cynicism. Yet, the problem ought not to be seen simply as one of individual morality. Moi seems

to have understood that, apart from a handful of exceptions which merely confirmed the rule, Kenyan intellectuals had failed to critically reflect upon their relatively privileged position in Kenyan society.

Although the ideal model of the intellectual, famously propounded by Edward Said, is of one free from the designs and machinations of state power,<sup>11</sup> the actual conditions in which intellectual production has taken place in Kenya in its post-independence history means that the scope for the exercise of any such freedom has been severely limited. As Mazrui observes in relation to Uganda, "the university [is] penetrated by the wider system" even if "the wider political system [has] in turn been deeply penetrated by the influence of the university".<sup>12</sup> As sites for the production of new ideas and technology, universities became important drivers of projects of national development, thus they came to garner levels of political importance that they had not had before. Just how central university intellectuals came to be in projects of Kenyan national development can be seen in the individual careers of such scholars as Bethwell Ogot, Thomas Odhiambo, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Joseph Mungai.

Ogot's role in the success of East African Publishing House meant that he was a crucial element in the state's developmental drive for literacy. Among his many achievements, Thomas Odhiambo's work in entomology became crucial in the quest for food security. Ngugi's writing became synonymous with the institution of a Kenyan national literature while Mungai was instrumental in realising the state's desire for a medical school in Nairobi.<sup>13</sup> The spectacular success and considerable influence of this first generation of Kenyan post-independence intellectuals seems to have convinced the state to exercise greater influence in the university sector in order to drive the agenda of development.

Politically-driven industrial research projects like the Nyayo Car project – which was a collaborative effort between the University of Nairobi and the parastatal sector, and in which President Moi had a special interest – underscore the fact that the university and intellectuals more generally were not outside the clutches of the politics of patronage.

In many ways, the rhetoric of education and development – at whose core was the notion of applied research – was not always driven by a desire to cater to public needs.<sup>14</sup> Those who controlled the state could not tolerate the use of intellectual power in ways that would undermine their dominance in society any less than they would pass up any chance to benefit monetarily from lucrative intellectual projects, as can be seen in the interest that Moi personally took in Kenya Medical Research Institute's development of Kemron, an anti-HIV drug. Another case in point is the East African Publishing House which, according to Bethwell Ogot, clients of the Kenyatta state – favoured because of their ethnic affiliation – wrested away from his control, eventually contributing to the demise of an important outlet for academic and creative work.

As the growing work on ethnicity in sub-Saharan Africa suggests, earlier assumptions that modernisation would trump ethnicity have proven to be false.<sup>15</sup> It is therefore no surprise that university intellectuals, who are almost invariably urban-based and most exposed to processes of modernisation, have tended to embody some of the worst ethnocentric tendencies. After all, as part of the urban elite, they are better placed than rural folk to reap the benefits of, or to have their desires thwarted by, ethnicity. But, the tendency on the part of intellectual elites for ethnic power games is highly contradictory for, like other urban residents, their social relationships tend to be quite cosmopolitan.

The memoirs of pioneer historian Bethwell Ogot provide an insider's view of how ethnicity shaped the University of Nairobi from its inception. Hived from the University of East Africa and inaugurated as an autonomous institution in 1970, the University of Nairobi almost immediately found its claim to the ideals of academic freedom subordinated to the machinations of ethnicity and state power. As Ogot recalls, David Wasawo, Simeon Ominde and Ogot himself – the three most senior African professors at the institution – were bypassed for the position of Vice Chancellor in favour of Dr Josephat Karanja who “had been a supernumerary Lecturer in the Department of History, teaching ‘A’ level syllabuses for less than a year”.<sup>16</sup>

Ogot suggests that the reason for this choice was that Karanja as a Kikuyu could be trusted by the Kiambu Kikuyu coterie around President Jomo Kenyatta at a time when this coterie was consolidating its hold over all instruments of state, of which the university was an important element. Added to this, Ominde and Wasawo were Luo and known to be close to the opposition leader, Oginga Odinga, who had been detained the previous year. Ogot was a friend and intellectual collaborator to Tom Mboya, the charismatic nationalist politician who had been assassinated the previous year.<sup>17</sup> Ogot became subjected to state surveillance for an article he had written as editor of *East Africa Journal*, mourning not only the death of a friend, but of Kenyan nationalism as well. Those like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Shadrack Gutto, Alamin Mazrui and E.S. Atieno-Odhiambo, who attempted to diffuse the attempts to make ethnicity the most important principle in the conduct of public affairs, were incarcerated or driven into exile.

Given the atmosphere of outright state interference and fear in the university, it is remarkable that the 1970s is celebrated with much nostalgia as a time of intellectual freedom and

productivity in Kenya. Two possible reasons can be advanced for this contradictory image of state interference and autonomy. In spite of the dubious circumstances of his appointment to head Kenya's only university, Karanja was, at least in Ogot's account, "loyal to the institution and defended it fearlessly against malicious and ill-informed attacks".<sup>18</sup> An added reason is that Kenyan intellectuals operated with a fair degree of autonomy from metropolitan patrons. Several factors, including the moral high ground that newly independent countries occupied and the belief on the part of influential western funders that any kind of intellectual debate was preferable to the total absence of debate, meant that spaces of intellectual production remained largely unfettered by the demands of funders.<sup>19</sup> Hence the irony that intellectuals in a Western donor-funded institution could pen Marxist and nationalist tracts without fear of being cut off from sources of donor-funding.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, however, international funding for African states as for intellectual work began to be tied more closely to liberal principles of human rights, transparency and democracy. As Bethwell Ogot has noted in his discussion of the work of Kenya's public intellectuals in the early years of the post-Cold War milieu, the early 1990s, Western funders were quite ready to fund the Kenyan publishers of oppositional magazines such as *Society* and *The Nairobi Law Monthly*, but this was at the expense of editorial independence:

[W]hatever the opposition said had to be acceptable to a Western audience of patrons, benefactors and well-wishers... These were the people who could give them fame and protection. Prizes and honorary degrees were awarded liberally to the so-called human rights activist...

From their writings and statements, published in papers, journals and magazines, it is evident they simply swallowed the whole Western political tradition, with human rights forming the main principle behind their concept of society. But many of these dissidents had, only a few years back, been Marxists, who were critical of such universalist Enlightenment notions.

Ogot goes on to wonder what unique contribution Kenyan intellectual activists have made to public deliberation on "the problem of cohesion, order and civic virtue in a free democratic society", given this ceding of initiative to non-local funders with their own agenda.<sup>20</sup> The charge that the quest for democracy in Kenya in the early 1990s was embarked upon without the requisite reflection on how democracy could speak to specific local concerns and complexities cannot easily be refuted. But, in some important way, Ogot's cynicism about the rhetoric of democracy may have emanated from the accommodation he had found in the Moi state after his marginalisation during the Kenyatta years. What Ogot also seemed to forget was that if intellectual clients of the Moi state could draw on political patronage – as compensation for the large delegations they led to Moi's Kabarak home, with ruling party pins tellingly perched on the lapels of their suits – the only other viable avenue for funding for the rest who were not inclined to cheering the state were NGOs or private business, in a climate of economic austerity in which academic salaries had severely been eroded through acts of state.

Yet, for all its contradictions, Ogot's position remains informative because since the early 1990s intellectual work in Kenya has been widely instrumental in serving the agendas of NGOs whose commitment to free research is questionable. The result is that the turnover of research agendas in university academic circles is closely

tied to the changing research agendas in the NGO sector; hence the three-year research cycles with focus shifting from 'human rights and democracy', 'indigenous knowledge', 'identity', 'gender-mainstreaming', 'the girl child', and 'culture and development'. These notions often have very little to do with the interests of individual researchers or with their sense of what ought to be done, but to which they have to pander if they are to maintain very modest livelihoods.

The critical issue then is the attainment of a genuine intellectual autonomy, but one which retains a sense of connection with the world, for one of the risks that faces Kenyan universities is a 'freedom' born of disengagement; a release into alienation and irrelevance.

A key question that is likely to arise whenever the question of intellectuals is up for discussion is whether intellectual work is 'useful', whether "ideas [can] make any difference in the management of public affairs", as Gikandi himself recognises.<sup>21</sup> The view that intellectuals sometimes fall short of utilitarian demands is aptly captured in the name 'ivory tower', routinely invoked by those who oppose university-based intellectual work as such and others who despair of obscure and overly professionalised pursuits of knowledge, and which are tailored to carve out spaces of privilege for intellectuals. As Ross Posnock reminds us, the very word 'intellectual' entered our vocabulary in rather bitter circumstances as a term used to describe those who invoked 'universal values' in their defense of Richard Dreyfus, a victim of late 19th century French anti-Semitism. For this stance, "the Dreyfusards were scorned as *deracines* and branded with the imprecation of *Les Intellectuels*". The successful emergence of intellectuals ultimately depended on "the making of a political public sphere", which they democratised by wresting it away from domination by two forces: "mandarin proponents who

regard it as the private preserve of elite" and "an administrative class who designates politics as the sole province of experts".<sup>22</sup>

As citizens immersed in the world, intellectuals can play a role as voters, consultants to bureaucrats, professional politicians and so on, but their role as intellectuals by virtue of being intellectuals ought not to be downplayed. As should be evident to any observer of the Kenyan political scene over the last fifty years, the fact that key founders of the Kenyan nation-state such as Tom Mboya and Jomo Kenyatta were themselves fine public or organic intellectuals attests to the fact that intellectuals are not paragons of public virtue. The challenge, therefore, is not for intellectuals to change what politicians do by becoming themselves professional politicians. That would be to underrate the power of the institutions that shape both intellectual and political work and to assume that there are safe and privileged places from which to act. If it is true, as Mazrui notes above, that the wider society is not immune to influences emanating from the university, as an important space for intellectual production, it is equally true that "no university or school can really be a shelter from the difficulties of human life and more specifically from the political intercourse of a given society and culture".<sup>23</sup> It is this complicity of the university in society, the very fact that it is neither a discrete nor a safe space that ensures that it is well placed to respond in powerful ways to the world around it.

However, the fact that intellectuals can take strong, informed positions in public debate has oftentimes led to the expectation that it is to them that society must turn in moments of crisis. It is not unusual in such moments to find intellectuals being confronted by exasperated Kenyan citizens who will invariably ask: 'Professor, what solution do you have for this problem?' The assignation of a messianic role



to the intellectual excuses other citizens from their civic responsibility, as if public affairs were the preserve of a guild. If intellectuals single-handedly provided solutions to social problems, then everyone else would be free to lead a thoughtless life, a utopia inconsistent with the very notion of freedom itself. The expectation of an immediate solution to social crises also ascribes to the scholar, especially in the humanities, a narrow role that may hinder the capacity for experimentation and free thought. Research that may not seem relevant today may prove to be the object of great interest several years afterwards. If anything, this is one of the most compelling reasons for defending basic research and the pursuit of what Gikandi calls 'pure knowledge'.<sup>24</sup> Nothing can be more deadening to the intellectual imagination than the pragmatic fallacy that it is only when intellectuals create products that immediately work that their ideas ought to be legitimated.

The institution within the immediate influence of academic intellectuals is the university itself, with its academic presses, lecture-rooms, journals, performance venues and senates. Without making any false assumptions that these spaces are unfettered by the wider system they are nonetheless important sites, and the ways in which they are used could point to alternative ways of managing debate and public affairs more generally. Managing these spaces in ways that approximate the university intellectuals' conception of an ideal national polity might be more useful than the idealistic assumption that only a direct intervention in the state could reap benefits and get Kenya out of its crisis. Other institutions in which intellectuals have some weight include: (i) the Kenya Institute of Education and the Kenya National Examinations Council, both of which determine school syllabuses and on whose boards they may be invited to sit, (ii) publishing houses,

through which they may publish their research and for which they may act as readers and advisers, and (iii) the media in which they may act as 'expert' commentators. These are sites of real power, which raises doubt about any claim that change in intellectual practice must first be preceded by high-level changes in the politics of the state. Considerable space has opened up in Kenya since the multi-party elections of 1992, and those in the humanities in particular, no longer have an excuse for not carrying out the work of public memory and bearing witness to suffering and rampant inequality.

In spite of the perennial drama of victimhood in Kenya, which in the run up to elections frequently finds expression in the view that 'it is now our turn to eat',<sup>25</sup> with 'our' referring to whichever of the country's more than 40 ethnic groups, the reality is that none of Kenya's ethnic communities have a monopoly on victimhood and exclusion. Kenyans of all ethnic groups, classes and associations have indeed suffered a great deal since independence in 1963. The most well-known are families of the Mau Mau war veterans who were shortchanged as the new state reconciled itself to the demands of local and international capital, families of assassinated public figures such as Pio Gama Pinto, Tom Mboya, Robert Ouko and J.M. Kariuki, whole communities that have been robbed of leaders in the wake of such assassinations, those who bore the brunt of state violence in Kisumu in 1969 and Wagalla in 1984, those forcibly evicted in the Muoroto slum demolitions of May 1990, those detained without trial for alleged acts of treason and sedition, and also those gentlemen of state said to have been at the receiving end of Mzee Jomo Kenyatta's *bakora* (walking stick).

These are, of course, only the more spectacular instances of victimisation. Not given equal prominence, perhaps because they are less

dramatic, include the large scale deaths from HIV/AIDS because of the state's fear that its admission of a crisis in this regard would hurt the tourism industry, and those who have died or have been seriously injured in road accidents as political patrons and their clients creamed off money assigned for road construction and maintenance. There are also those in the arid northern and eastern districts of the country who mostly encounter the state during 'security' operations and who thus consider Kenya to be 'another country'.

Given the extent of state victimisation and neglect of individuals and communities from across the country, why is it that a good proportion of the 2007–2008 violence in Kenya involved the poor against the poor? Can we explain the violence by asserting that ethnic-based patrimonialism, of the sort that dominates Kenya's politics, inevitably sets the poor from different ethnic groups against each other? Even if we accept the latter explanation, how can we account for why the historical suffering of poor Kenyans seems to mean so little to other poor Kenyans? How do we account for competing ethnic victimhoods and the phenomenon of special ethnic entitlement to power? Does the failure of empathy with others in similar predicaments, if indeed that is what it is, point to the relative absence of self-critique and self-understanding? Or could it have something to do with the way Kenyan academic intellectuals have 'written' the Kenyan past and how their work has entered – or not entered – the arena of public knowledge and debate? Is the problem, as Gikandi puts it, one about "the stories we [referring to intellectuals] tell ourselves", and their distortion by successive governments and those opposition parties which have sought to replace such governments?<sup>26</sup>

Keeping the memory of human suffering, of the sort enumerated above, through the telling

of stories is a key part of what intellectual work entails, especially for those in the humanities and social sciences. As Edward Said remarks:

[O]ne of the major roles today for the intellectual in the public sphere is to function as a kind of public memory; to recall what is forgotten or ignored; to connect and contextualize and to generalize from what appear to be fixed 'truths'... It's not a matter of political affiliation, but it's a general... 'public' memory, for which in the generally disconnected and fragmentary public sphere, it falls to the intellectual to make the connections that are otherwise hidden; to provide alternatives for mistaken policies; and to remind an audience, which increasingly thinks in terms of instrumentalization and of what is effective... of the moral questions that may be hidden in the clamor and din of the public debate.<sup>27</sup>

This means that, at least in some way, the intellectual is a storyteller who weaves together fragments of the past so that the public can develop a more coherent sense of its experience and to develop an ability to engage in debate about that experience. If this is indeed the role of intellectuals, then why is it that so many Kenyans, among them highly educated individuals in the diaspora, seemed to apprehend the past through unsubstantiated rumour before and after the 2007 elections? Why does the recent past seem like deep antiquity to be understood only through mythology?

One answer for these questions is that Kenyans have generally been unable to reach consensus about basic aspects of their country's history because of the way in which notions of state security and national unity have been used by successive governments to deny the public access to information. Through paranoid acts of 'knowledge management'– aborted

commissions of inquiry, the banning of books, refusing to declassify documents, the dissemination of rumour by state intelligence services, political assassination, manipulated court cases, the murder of witnesses, the suing of bookshops stocking material embarrassing to political personalities, assaults on journalists, and the destruction of media equipment – the Kenyan state has shaped history, the archives and public memory for its own ends.

The setting up of official knowledge through such coercive measures has made such knowledge so suspect that the public has often resorted to that heady mix of rumour and gossip, which has in turn fed into manufactured inter-ethnic tension. Added to this is the scarcity of credible platforms for public intellectual deliberation, with forums such as radio, television and newspapers often opting for outright sensationalism. Even in those few cases where Nairobi-based media intellectuals have published stories based on declassified information after the lapse of the 30-year rule on state secrets, such stories have tended to be sensational and feature little that has not already circulated in the public domain.<sup>28</sup>

One of the ways in which public access to public memory could be enhanced is through intellectual work, whose circulation through the educational system, book publishing and other media could make a difference. While intellectuals, especially those based in universities have fairly good access to formal archives, most Kenyans have little access to, and knowledge of the existence of, such resources.<sup>29</sup> If, as Gikandi suggests, “the section on political leaders in the New History Syllabus”, prepared by the Kenya’s Ministry of Education, simply reflects a ‘bureaucratic consensus’ by talking glibly about the achievement of “Jomo Kenyatta, Tom Mboya, Ronald Ngala, Oginga Odinga, and Daniel arap Moi, without even a

hint of their failures”, the task of intellectuals as custodians of public memory would be to revisit the archive and to raise critical questions about Kenyan history.<sup>30</sup>

The fact that in 2004, for example, the NARC-led government could appoint as head of the Kenya Anti-Corruption Commission a figure whose relations to the previous government of President Moi would have been known to anyone who bothered to find out, is partly because of the dearth of critical intellectual debate on public affairs. As a practicing attorney, Aaron Ringera sued Paul Muite, then chair of the Law Society of Kenya (LSK), and others for drawing the professional body into political matters at a time when LSK had come to be identified, alongside the National Council of the Churches of Kenya and several churches, as constituting an informal opposition to the Moi state.<sup>31</sup> Two years later, in 1994, Ringera was appointed as a judge by President Moi; giving credence to the view that he was a political judge beholden to the executive. In 2002, he was honoured by LSK for distinguished service to the legal profession. The flattering citation by the LSK spoke of Ringera in a quaint register as being

in every sense a judge’s judge. His very manner and demeanor send clear and unmistakable signals that he does not take to fools kindly. His pursuits have always been serious and he is yet to lose the didactic mystique of a law lecturer, which has only been compounded by his being a Law Lord.<sup>32</sup>

The following year, Ringera was appointed to serve as chair of a committee to investigate corruption amongst judges. In this role, he oversaw the biggest purge in Kenya’s judicial history. During that period, 2002–2004, newspaper commentators focused their writings on his career rather than critical pieces that would

speak of his involvement in the erosion of the independence of the judiciary. During the first five years of Ringera's leadership, the Kenya Anti-Corruption Commission did not successfully investigate any major cases of corruption.

Opportunistic memory can also be seen in the way Moi's government treated Richard Leakey, the famous paleontologist. Leakey worked under Moi as Director of the Kenya Wildlife Services, but resigned from this post in 1994 because the Kenyan government had covertly initiated a corruption probe into the department. When in 1995 he joined Paul Muite to form the Safina party, thus receiving acclaim from the British media which saw him as Kenya's great hope, he was publicly assaulted with hippo-hide whips by ruling party 'youths' in the Rift Valley town of Nakuru, seemingly with Moi's approval. It would have seemed at this stage that Leakey had lost all credibility with the government. It therefore came as a surprise when, in 1999, Moi appointed him to head the Kenyan civil service, and to preside over a new group of technocrats called 'the Dream Team'.

Leakey's appointment was at the request of international donors who set it as a precondition for the resumption of aid to Kenya. In a sense therefore, it could be argued that Moi was simply pandering to Western donor nations, who always trusted Leakey at the expense of black Kenyans, but there was also in the act an indication of Moi's estimation of Kenyan public memory.<sup>33</sup> Although the Kenyan public could not possibly have forgotten Leakey's assault in the space of five years, there was a strong sense in Moi's action that Kenyan public memory was inconstant, too feeble to make a difference. For this reason, Moi could publicly condemn Leakey in 1995 for being a "racist and tribalist"<sup>34</sup> and then proceed to praise him without much sense of irony four years later. Leakey's hostile

attitude to black African intellectuals, especially those who posed a challenge to his dominance in the conservation and paleontological sectors, had been known in intellectual circles for a long time.<sup>35</sup> However, in the absence of a critical history of the conservation and paleontological sectors in Kenya, Moi could afford to do pretty much what he wanted with Leakey. Moi could tell his own opportunistic histories of Leakey, depending on what his particular needs were.

Yet the work of intellectuals is precisely "to deflate the claims of triumphalism" for indeed "history is often written from the point of view of the victor, and that the great procession of victory trails in its wake the forgotten bodies of the vanquished".<sup>36</sup> Part of the responsibility of intellectuals is to be curious about the uses to which their research is put to by the reading public. A key question in this regard is ethnicity, which has been the subject of modern Kenyan historical work from the very beginning and to which I would like to return briefly.

The most significant foundational texts in the Kenyan historical tradition are on the emergence of ethnic groups, for instance, Bethwell Ogot's *History of the Southern Luo*, Godfrey Muriuki's *A History of the Kikuyu, 1500–1900*, Gideon Were's *A History of the Abaluhya of Western Kenya* and John Osogo's *A History of the Baluyia*. Jomo Kenyatta's anthropological tract *Facing Mount Kenya* and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novel *The River Between* can also be included in this tradition. What all these texts have in common is what, in contemporary phrasing, would be called their 'invention of ethnicity'. If colonial texts had invented African ethnicity as a tool for managing the colonised, their post-colonial interlocutors have attempted to reinvent ethnicity in the cause of cultural pride and freedom.

Nonetheless, the historical intricacies of ethnic formation that such post-colonial texts present are largely absent from popular discussion. For instance, while historical scholarship now holds strongly that terms such as 'Nilotes', 'Cushites', 'Bantu', 'Kikuyu', 'Nilo-Hamites' and so on simply refer to linguistic groups, in the popular imagination these terms have often come to refer to distinct and well-bounded communities, divided by irreconcilable moral, cultural and racial difference. For this reason, not many in Kenya would be aware of the role of Bantu speakers in the making of what are now generally assumed to be Nilotic Luo groups, and neither is there much awareness of the historical role of Maa, Ogiek and Cushitic speakers in the making of contemporary Kikuyu ethnicity. There is also little awareness that up until the colonial era, there were no omnibus ethnic identities such as Miji-Kenda, Kalenjin, Luhya and so on, these being recent constructions of colonialists and the emergent class of educated Africans in the colonial period. The result of this is that, in Kenyan post-independence history, many have been "willing to slaughter their neighbours, friends, and even members of their own family in the name of invented colonial identities".<sup>37</sup>

Underlying the passions about such invented identities is the reality of engineered inequality, but critical thinking about the making of ethnicity just might enable other forms of political affiliation to emerge. Yet there is plenty of evidence that Kenyan intellectuals, both those aligned to ruling parties and those in support of the opposition, have been unwilling at crucial moments in the country's history to break the ethnic mode of affiliation in national politics.

In taking such a position, they have entrenched practices of the Kenyan bureaucracy that has throughout the colonial and post-

colonial period sought to classify Kenyans by 'tribe'. As a young Kenyan, one's first experiences of the imposition of ethnic identities was the requirement by school authorities that each student indicate his 'tribe' in the school identity card. The purpose of this requirement in an independent Kenya was never made apparent and no thought was given to those who may not have been able to identify with a 'tribe'. Stranger still was the situation at the University of Nairobi where students in the early 1990s, were sent 'home' and asked to report weekly to 'chiefs' after disturbances at the campus. Although the laws of Kenya supposedly guaranteed freedom of movement and assembly, meaning that Kenyans could live wherever they chose, these edicts from the university defined Kenyans as belonging to specific rural, 'ethnic' locales, governed by 'chiefs'. The man who issued these edicts was Professor Philip Mbiti, Vice Chancellor of the university, sociologist and doctoral alumnus at Cornell University.<sup>38</sup> How this collusion of the state and the university tallied with the university's charter with its proclamations of freedom of thought and academic enquiry was never really up for discussion.

In the face of pressure from students for the formation of a university-wide students' union, Mbiti in concert with influential figures in the state encouraged district-based (read: ethnic or sub-ethnic) associations, shepherded by powerful patrons with connections to the Kenya African National Union (KANU) government. How could it be that universities, in which there was good knowledge of the relatively recent emergence of ethnic groups as they were then constituted, so casually used ethnicity as a tool for political management? It is easy to ascribe this cynicism to the climate of fear that engulfed universities after the attempted *coup* of 1982. However, the more difficult task is one of probing the wilful collusion of intellectuals

in the excesses of the state during the post-1982 period. The naturalisation of ethnic difference in Kenya is certainly due to the work of intellectuals, alongside that of bureaucrats, hence the need to translate and refine ethnicity as a concept. The point is that Kenya and the communities that constitute it are not set in stone, but entities that ought to be subjected to debate.

In contemporary Kenya the culture of politics, especially in times of elections, has come to approximate pure stagecraft; leadings to evasions that empty political debate of much of its content. Political campaign speeches have come to be dominated by symbols and entertainment genres, so much so that politics now seems to be about who can stage the most impressive drama. In a poor country in which political choices mean misery for millions, the marriage between marketing and politics is bound to lead to further alienation of politics from authentic social life; an alienation which may lead to more mystification as political elites seek to defend their roles.<sup>39</sup>

In the run up to the 2007 elections, Mwai Kibaki's Party of National Unity (PNU) sought to reduce the real interest of its opposition, the Orange Democratic Party (ODM), to the party's acronym, which was distorted by members of Kibaki's cabinet to mean 'One Dangerous Man', in reference to Raila Odinga, the ODM presidential candidate. 'ODM' was also reduced by the PNU to the Swahili tag *domo domo*, meaning that the members of the party were all 'busy mouths'; all talk and no action. Kibaki himself would dismiss Kenyan citizens, especially his opponents, as *pumbavu* (fools/dimwits), *watu wachafu* (dirty people) and *mavi ya kuku* (chicken shit) that he would not lower himself to listen to. His ODM opponents were only too eager to repartee in kind, with senior officials William Ruto and Musalia Mudavadi facetiously

renaming Kibaki's PNU as '*Porojo na Ukabila*' (a party of 'idle talk/propaganda and tribalism') and 'Party of No Understanding' respectively.<sup>40</sup> Raila Odinga's speeches contained several comic and caustic references to monkeys and dogs, whose cumulative effect was to invite even more rude talk from his opponents.

In this din of insults, the real interests and fears of a part of PNU's Kikuyu support base, which had, alongside Kenya's other communities, suffered state-engineered 'ethnic' violence in the Rift Valley province in 1992–1993 and 1997–1998, were lost on the ODM politicians. Similarly, the real fears and interests of ODM's constituency, parts of which had endured the ravages of engineered inequality, were now simply criminalised as a threat to 'national unity'. Although ODM had, for the first time in the history of political parties in Kenya, developed economic blueprints for each of the country's eight provinces and presented several credible proposals on how the reality of inequality could be addressed, much of this was lost in the 'smoke and mirrors'.

Image trumped ideology in the 2007 Kenya elections, as political marketing became analogous to religion, a phenomenon Guy Debord describes in *Society of the Spectacle*, an expansion of Marx's work on commodity fetishism and alienation. According to Debord, modern mass marketing results in "moments of fervent exaltation similar to the ecstasies and convulsions and miracles of the old religious fetishism".<sup>41</sup> Odinga, running on a pro-poor platform, adopted a Hummer, the fuel-guzzling sports-utility vehicle, as the militant symbol of his resolve to subdue his opponents. Mwai Kibaki, on the other hand, now chose to walk among 'ordinary' working and unemployed people, the 'chicken shit' he otherwise held in contempt.

Given the dominance of images in Kenyan political campaigns – especially religious ones

– Godfrey Chesang concluded that politics in Kenya had become “a secular religion” with its canons, hymns, liturgies, messiahs, salvation, raptures, and heavens on the one hand and anti-Christ, Satans, purgatories, and Armageddon on the other.<sup>42</sup> Against these polarities of heaven and hell, messiahs and anti-Christ, it is crucial to remember Edward Said’s insistence that “[o]ne of the great lessons of the critical spirit is that human life and history are secular; that is, actually constructed and reproduced by men and women”.<sup>43</sup> But it is also important to revisit the very history of political campaigning in Kenya, right from the late colonial period to the 2007 elections to understand why Kenyan politics has come to seem hopelessly postmodern, all surface and little depth, confounding Fredric Jameson’s position that postmodernism is a condition of the overdeveloped world.<sup>44</sup> In some important sense, the crisis of historicity in Kenyan political culture can be seen in the historical cynicism of key political figures in regard to their attitudes to political mass mobilisation and their underestimation of the intellectual capacity of citizens.

Tom Mboya, perhaps the most eloquent exponent of Kenyan nationalism, had this to say about national mobilisation:

This [the anti-colonial] mobilization is based on a simplification of the struggle into certain slogans and into *one* distinct idea, which everyone can understand without arguing about the details of policy or of governmental programme after Independence.... Everyone is taught to know one enemy – the colonial power – and the one goal – independence. This is conveyed by the *one word* round which the movement’s slogans are built. In Ghana it was ‘Freedom’, in East Africa it is ‘Uhuru’ and in Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland ‘Kwacha’ (the dawn).

In this way one word summarizes for everyone the meaning of the struggle, and *within this broad meaning everyone has his own interpretation* of what Uhuru will bring for him. The simple peasant may think of Uhuru in terms of farm credits, more food, schools for his children. The office clerk may see it as meaning promotion to an executive job. The apprentice may interpret it as a chance to qualify as a technician, the schoolboy as a chance for scholarship overseas, the sick person as the provision of better hospital facilities, the aged worker as the hope of pensions and security in old age.

The interpretation of the goal is not immediately relevant or important, when compared with the importance of mobilization of the entire population.... *The people have to be organized so that they are like an army: they must have a general, they must have discipline, and they must have a symbol.* In many cases the symbol is the national leader himself, and it is necessary to have this kind of symbol of a heroic father-figure if you are to have unquestioning discipline among the different groups and personalities who should rally their followers behind him.<sup>45</sup>

The key responsibility for intellectuals is to look beneath the slogans, beyond Mboya’s ‘festival occasion[s]’, to probe what they may mask. This ought not to mean, as Atieno-Odhiambo saw it, a retreat “from popular struggles for democracy to liberal democracy and a preference for... reasoned elite politics of the professoriate disciplined by the political sciences”.<sup>46</sup> Rather, it would be an attempt to face up to the ways in which the realm of the popular taste itself is routinely captured by the powerful for unpopular ends, for that is indeed how hegemony is achieved in societies of the spectacle.

One of the ironies of the 2007 electoral campaign period was that, more than at any other

in Kenya's post-Cold War history, it was an occasion in which Kenyans really thought and spoke critically about state power and leadership. Whereas the 2002 presidential campaigns had been dominated by the mantra *yote yawezekana bila Moi* (all is possible without Moi), in 2007 there were clear attempts on the part of the electorate, before the voting, to secure firm commitments from the presidential candidates in regard to matters such as access to resources, corruption and engineered inequality.

It is this, perhaps, that explains why the state tried to roll back some of the democratic gains made in previous years by deploying members of the Administration Police as PNU electoral agents and attempting to clamp down on the media while using the national intelligence agencies to fuel rumours. In the face of such assaults on public freedom and knowledge, the stakes were certainly too high for intellectuals to take positions of clinical disinterest; what seemed more feasible was to make

political and moral choices and be responsible for them.

Given the profound sense of guilt and horror that many Kenyans experienced in the wake of the post-election violence, there is great risk that Kenyan intellectuals may once again be manipulated to cede whichever initiative they may have to those political interests that have always sought to maintain the status quo. It will be important to recall that as soon as the violence broke out on 30 December 2007, Kenya's daily newspapers, which had previously reaped from the spectacularisation of national politics and were party to the stoking of conflict, launched a 'Save Kenya' campaign. Media commentators of all kinds resorted to the language of unity, reconciliation and peace, with an implicit message that all had sinned and fallen short in their duty to Kenya. The challenge for intellectuals will be to look beyond any new rhetoric of unity and peace to explore national fault lines, the better to determine why 'Kenya' remains an elusive fiction.

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- 17 Ogot collaborated with Mboya in the affairs of the East African Institute of Social and Cultural Affairs, which owned the prolific East African Publishing House and published the *East Africa Journal*, which was, alongside Rajat Neogy's *Transition*, the premier forum for East African intellectual debate in the 1960s. For a discussion of the life of The East African Institute of Social and Cultural Affairs and the *East Africa Journal*, see Ogot, *My Footprints*, pp 193–244.
- 18 Ogot, *Footprints*, p 186.
- 19 As Peter Benson has noted, the American government in the form of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) channeled covert funding to African intellectual forums such as *Transition* magazine and the *East Africa Journal* in the 1960s, without any demand for ideological alignment with the American state. "Political affiliation and ideology were not in question...The fear was that political independence might bring instability; a cohesive intellectual elite might be a stabilizing force". Although broadly utilitarian in their intentions, Western funders at this stage were not overly prescriptive and desisted from setting ideological agenda for the intellectual recipients of their support, unlike what began to happen in the post-Cold War age of 'democracy' and 'human rights'. Benson, Peter. 1986. *Black Orpheus, Transition, and Modern Cultural Awakening in Africa*, Berkeley: University of California Press, p 36.
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- 36 Said, *Reflections on Exile*, p 504.
- 37 Gikandi, "Intellectuals Fail in Times of Crisis".
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- 39 This is not to say that all political spectacle is debilitating. For a discussion of the power of spectacle in enabling political change in Kenya, see Nyairo, Joyce and Ogude, James. 2005. "Popular Music, Popular Politics: *Unbwogable* and the Idioms of Freedom in Kenyan Popular Music", *African Affairs* 104(415).
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