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Author(s): Catherine Muhoma

Source: *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (Spring 2012), pp. 166-173

Published by: Indiana University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/reseafritelite.43.1.166>

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REVIEW ESSAY

Versions of Truth and Collective Memory: The Quest for Forgiveness and Healing in the Context of Kenya's Postelection Violence

CATHERINE MUHOMA
Maseno University, Kenya
cathymuhoma@gmail.com

The Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission (TJRC) in Kenya was set up in the aftermath of the 2007/8 postelection violence with the mandate of providing a platform for those who had experienced political injustices. This crucial organ in the project of national reconciliation has unfortunately spent most of the first half of its tenure dealing with internal squabbles. There have been claims that some of its commissioners do not merit holding positions in such an esteemed body. The chairman of the TJRC faced criticism regarding his integrity, which has led to his resignation. The TJRC's problems were further compounded by "the ethnic angle" the debate took when members of one community declared that they will not participate in the TJRC if the chairman is removed (Kenya National Accord Monitoring Project). Against this backdrop, this review essay discusses selected narratives in Billy Kahora's *Kwani? 5 The Fire This Time* as an alternative repository of stories, memories, and versions of truths that could perhaps guide the country on a path of truth, justice, forgiveness and reconciliation.

The significance of *Kwani? 5* to our understanding of the postelection violence hinges on the journal's retrieval of stories that evoke contrary memories to those in circulation, and in so doing, provide alternative accounts to the official government version of the causes of ethnic tensions and violence in Kenya. The versions of "truths" from official political organs are in conflict with the "truths" as narrated in *Kwani? 5*. The journal uncovers a form of repressed knowledge, widely unacknowledged within the official political discourse. As such, *Kwani? 5* is an

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important tool for victims and perpetrators of the election violence who need to tell their stories. The importance of this text lies in the multiplicity of voices and stories told, often contested, sometimes contradictory and incomplete.

With five print editions to date, *Kwani?* is an avant-garde journal that includes both fiction and creative nonfiction. Its title—*Kwani?*—is the shortened form of the Kiswahili term “kwa nini,” which means “why.” The use of the word “kwani” as the title of the journal gives indications of the possible directions the contents take, asking questions that bear on the country’s creative space. *Kwani?* is part of a twin edition comprising a collective narrative, with contributions from over fifty writers, photographers, poets, and cartoonists on what Kenya was before, during, and in the aftermath of the 2007 violence. Billy Kahora, the editor of *Kwani? 5*, states that in light of the journal’s driving force of posing the question “why,” the twin editions boldly attempt to articulate the issues why Kenya exploded in violence in late 2007, early 2008. Like previous editions, the contents of *Kwani? 5* include short stories, poetry, cartoons, travelogues, and narratives.

In reviewing this text, I have selected five narratives from the *Kwani* testimonial project (40–71), and the nonfiction travelogue by the Canadian journalist Tim Querengesser (202–18). The physical locations of the testimonial project and the travelogue constitute some of the most volatile hotspots of the post-election violence. The five narratives forming the testimonial project capture the testimonies from people who were involved on all sides of the conflict, stories that were not told by mainstream media. In the words of *Kwani? 5* online editor Arno Kopecky, “[W]hatever name they went by, we wanted Kenyans to speak for themselves. We wanted them to speak at length and not be reduced to a brief quote in support of someone else’s story” (48). The travelogue is a reflection of Querengesser’s actual experience with victims, perpetrators, and bystanders of the violence in Kisumu. The title of the travelogue is “Victoria Rising,” a reference to the upheavals the writer, Querengesser, captures in his journey through the city of Kisumu, an urban center in western Kenya, located on the shores of Lake Victoria. Kisumu was one of the hotspots of the postelection violence. The greatest number of deaths and displacements were in the densely populated and fertile region of the country—the Rift Valley Province. This area is cosmopolitan and home to mainly Kalenjin and Kikuyu communities.

One of the testimonials is from Lin’Gabo Samson Opana, a nineteen-year-old student in Egerton who narrates the sense of betrayal he feels toward his Kikuyu friends who failed to warn him of the ensuing attacks, even though they were privy to the information (62–63). It seems that because of his ethnic background, as someone from the western part of Kenya, his friends took it for granted that he was a supporter of the opposing Orange Democratic Party (ODM), and hence an enemy. Egerton is an area heavily populated by members of the Kikuyu community. The assumption was that Kikuyus mainly supported the Party of National Unity (PNU), headed by the incumbent president, Mwai Kibaki. Through this single act of betrayal, the seed of suspicion and mistrust is planted in Opana’s mind. However, it is a mistrust that can be traced back to the uneasy relationship between other ethnic communities and the Kikuyus in the Rift Valley at independence.

The uneasy relationship and underlying tensions between members of various communities across the political divide can be summed up in the term coined

by Kimberly Theidon, “intimate enemies,” everyday people who are forced to live in anything but everyday environments (see Theidon). Theidon’s notion of “intimate enemies” is important because it provides the ground upon which actors relate to one another in complex subjective positions. Her position is reflected in Peter Kagwanja and Roger Southall’s argument that the causes of the postelection violence are complex, multiple, and interrelated (see Kagwanja and Southall). I agree with their analysis that the starting point of understanding “lies in a comprehensive grasp of Kenya’s political economy, especially historical injustices relating to the land question in the colonial and successor post-colonial states” (263). Kenya has over the years experienced territorial struggles between land-owning groups and squatters who were initially displaced by colonialists. Kagwanja and Southall point out two trends in Kenya’s ethnic formation: 1) a history that blames many of the country’s ills on the Kikuyu, claiming that the Kikuyu dominate key areas of the economy, including banking, trade, farming, and more critically, land ownership; 2) the formation of multiethnic alliances that have revolved around one or more of four groups: the Kikuyu, Luo, Luhya and Kalenjin (266–67). The ethnic tensions emanating from the above developments have remained a painful memory in the minds of various communities, a memory that becomes a reality during periods of heightened political activity. At the time of the 2007 general elections, therefore, many Kenyans supported one or the other party, not on the basis of ideology, but on the basis of ethnic affiliations and alliances. In Opanda’s testimonial, we are able to see how the political alliances at play are acted out locally when Opanda’s friends view him as an enemy by virtue of the political party they assume he supports.

There are many instances of such “intimate enemies” in the testimonials presented in *Kwani?* 5, including the case of Irene Mueni, a twenty-year-old Kamba woman. When she confesses to her Luo boyfriend that she voted for the Orange Democratic Movement-Kenya presidential candidate, and not her boyfriend’s preferred choice, Irene is raped by her boyfriend and the landlord (50). In raping Irene, the aggressors appropriated in her body her whole community, which is the enemy that the rival group wants to punish and humiliate. Thus, her body ceases to be “her own,” and is instead an object for contestation of power, control, and punishment. Moreover, her boyfriend, who was unable to control her through ensuring that she voted for a candidate of his choice, reclaims his authority by violating her body. The helplessness, anger, and sense of betrayal felt by this one woman signify the collective feelings of other women similarly violated during the violence. Many incidences of rape that occurred were carried out by people well known to their victims. In the case of this twenty-year-old woman, her intimate friend had now turned into an intimate enemy. In telling her story, Irene is able to convey her trauma and the sense of emptiness she felt when she was compelled to leave “with nothing” tangible out of the relationship with her boyfriend. The void in her life is filled only with memories of the rape ordeal. The hollowness in her words would make one wonder whether she has the capacity to begin the process of forgiving her aggressors and start healing. She goes on to say, “I have kept it a very big secret, and I have told it to only a few people” (50). The markers of suffering, fear, despair, and pain are evident. However, her reluctance to share her story because of the fear of stigmatization expose the challenges facing the nation in bringing victims of violence to openly tell their version of the events. The indelible

marker of rape is one the subject carries in her individual memory. Shrouded in a veil of secrecy and silence, the victim locks the truth about her ordeal in her psyche, denying it the chance to be heard, claimed, and secured by the community. Such stories need to be told so that in their “telling” they become part of the collective voice and public history of a country coming from a violent past.

Charles Mwangi, a victim of the violence, admits that he knew his attackers (52–53). Clearly, these “intimate enemies” are part of ethnically mixed communities, whether as victims or perpetrators of the violence. What should be of great concern is the resignation with which the victims respond to the violence they have experienced. Their cries for justice are weak, a likely indication of the low confidence they have in the Kenyan justice system. Therefore, they go about their duties as though everything is normal. This appearance of “normalcy” is a sign of the selective amnesia the general populace suffers from. The political leadership capitalizes on such “forgetfulness” when they urge the general public to get on with their lives. This short memory underscores the subject’s keenness for self-preservation amid the cycle of violence that plays itself out every election year. The general sentiment in the country up to the time the violence erupted was one of accepting the status quo. Nobody was keen enough to open debates on why tension and sporadic violence broke out in the country every election year. The editors of *Kwani?* 5 regarded collecting testimonials as an urgent task that “had to happen quickly, before people could forgive and forget . . .” (48). This collective amnesia finds resonance with historical sources such as Kagwanja and Southall’s article. Their account of the history provides a reference point lest as a country, we selectively forget that there are grave mistakes committed that must be addressed. The history of Kenya’s sociopolitical landscape affirms the fact that there are truths in the claims made in the testimonials of Opanda, Irene, Mwangi, and Kioko. Beyond providing data about Kenya’s past and validating the ethnic tensions that are apparent in the testimonials, historical accounts are also important in the things they do not say. The silences are loud. These silences are about deep-seated hatred and suspicions that neighboring ethnic communities have for and about one another. It is the kind of hatred that compels Kioko, when asked whether he had any regrets that his arrows hurt or killed someone, to respond, “I have no regrets—the other side would have done the same. It is called self-defense. It’s supported by the law” (55).

In the travelogue “Victoria Rising,” Querengesser documents the slip into selective amnesia that he observes in the lake city of Kisumu (211). The common argument advanced in the Nyanza region by perpetrators or supporters of the violence was that unlike in the Rift Valley Province where many deaths occurred in addition to the destruction of property, the inhabitants of Nyanza Province only drove out the PNU supporters (Kikuyu and Kisii) and did not kill them (211). The question that begs to be answered is why members of the Kikuyu and Kisii communities faced the wrath of ODM supporters to the point of being driven out of the province. The travelogue demonstrates the ways in which the memory and history of the individual can be constructed as the collective memory and public truth of an entire community (212). The loss of the presidential seat by the ODM candidate Raila Odinga in the 2007 elections is interpreted as a communal loss, felt by an entire ethnic community. A sense of *déjà vu* is evoked in the recollections of Ernest Matengo, one of the Kisumu residents interviewed by Querengesser.

Ernest associates Raila's defeat with the story of Raila's father (Jaramogi Odinga) who, in the 1960s, had a falling out with Jomo Kenyatta and, as a result, lost his prominent position in the government. The narrator therefore gives legitimacy to the anger, violence and hatred of the Luo community towards the Kikuyus in Nyanza Province, claiming that for the second time in history, the Luo community has been betrayed by the Kikuyus. This claim is important not because it is true or false. In fact, we refrain from getting into debates on the relationship between the late Jaramogi Odinga and the late Jomo Kenyatta. What we acknowledge is that in the passage of time from the 1960s to 2007, the memory of the tensions between the two individuals—Odinga and Kenyatta—has been passed on and translated into collective tensions between two communities—the Luos and the Kikuyus. Of equal importance is the fact that this bitter past has remained buried. The narrative therefore gives room for this past to be uncovered so that the memories of bitterness can be addressed.

When Ernest mentions that "land in the Rift Valley . . . was handed to Kikuyu farmers in questionable schemes" and that Kikuyu businesses "kept locals poor" (212), the reader begins to understand the historical grievances that fueled the animosity and tensions leading to the 2007 elections. This economic inequality that breeds resentment towards the Kikuyus is further confirmed in the writer's conversation with Arthur Wawera, a Kikuyu who says his grandfather was born in Kisumu. Arthur says, "They said we Kikuyus supported President Kibaki, but we even voted for Raila . . . they don't care. That is an excuse they are using to take our things. They want us to leave this town, leave it for the Luos" (215). The rallying cry for the economically prosperous Kikuyu community to leave Kisumu swiftly degenerated into chaotic scenes characterized by looting, burning, and destruction of property. Amos, a twenty-three-year-old street boy, confesses to having participated in the looting. They called the riots "ODM shopping" (215), seeking to justify mayhem and destruction in the name of their political party ODM. He believed that the PNU supporters had "stolen" ODM's victory. His retaliation was therefore to participate in looting, dubbing it a shopping spree for ODM. He feels his actions are legitimate (215–16).

The connections between the travelogue and the testimonials can be seen in the themes they share in common: ethnic marginalization, political sycophancy, and real or perceived economic disenfranchisement. The testimony by Michael Rop, a small-scale farmer in Eldoret, provides an account that demonstrates the deep resentment towards the Kikuyu community (68–69). Rop's and Amos's accounts demonstrate that there were more complex reasons for the postelection violence than the official claim that the violence reflected the spontaneous reaction of frustrated voters. The view that the violence was premeditated is one held by many victims of the violence. I argue that the contested poll could have been the catalyst, but certainly not the reason that the tension built and culminated in violence even before the official tally was released. As illustrated in the testimonials included in *Kwani?* 5, poverty, youth unemployment and economic inequality all contributed to the explosive mix that triggered the violence.

In having those who went through the violence tell their stories, *Kwani?* 5 serves as a repertoire of memory, offering versions of "truths" that contradict the "official" government position. The section in which the government spokesman, Alfred Mutua, is interviewed about the causes of the violence is appropriately

titled "Interview with Siri-Kali." "Siri Kali" is a corruption of "serikali," a Kiswahili word meaning "government." "Siri Kali" could be interpreted to mean "top secret." The title "Siri Kali" thus suggests that the government's official position is to guard the general public from finding out the root causes of the postelection violence. It is no wonder that Mutua claims that the violence was as a result of the ODM leadership's inability to accept that they lost the elections (42). When asked further to shed light on the disparity between the rich and poor in the country, Mutua states that it is absurd to think that wealth was stolen during the violence (45–47). His statement is a confirmation of the official position taken by the government in relation to the postelection violence. This position suggests a different version of truth that invariably is supposed to influence the process of creating a collective memory. This version counters the one given by the subjects in the narratives discussed earlier. Their versions of the causes for the economic disparities and the question of land ownership contradict Mutua's version that opts to gloss over the same issues. The interview with Mutua is proof that the "official" representation of the postelection violence serves to suppress and at times disrupt other memories in circulation. His utterances negate the existence of historical injustices relating to land ownership and use. His claims lean towards an official amnesia that would like to forget the reality that Kenya's prime "White Highlands" were home to a select settler community. The eventual dispossession of thousands of Africans set the stage for deeply entrenched resentment between the landed and the landless. With the introduction of multiparty politics in Kenya, the land question became the fulcrum of politics (see Kanyinga). The land issue was used by various government and opposition parties to court potential voters. Inevitably, the problems faced by a landless and economically deprived majority set the stage for an ethnically polarized and tension-packed situation. These are the issues Mutua refuses to acknowledge in the interview.

The insights offered in the testimonials contrast with the stance taken by Mutua. They challenge the government spokesman's official, powerful, and rigid position. The official position attempts to sanitize the events and exclude all other versions of truths about Kenya's electoral violence. This is a case of selective amnesia. For institutions such as the TJRC to succeed in its work of addressing the injustices of the past and to chart a new future for a more democratic and accountable government, it is imperative that the narratives of pain, loss, suspicion, hatred, and anger find their place in the congregation of remembrance.

How then can one deal with bitter memories of the past? What has to be forgotten is as important as what is remembered. The exercise of retrieving a past that seems forgotten means that something must be buried in its place. This is the juncture at which the role of forgiveness comes in. The bitterness must be buried even as the past is recovered. In *Kwani?* 5, few narrators admit that they are ready to forgive. Judith Kemunto, a twenty-one-year-old woman, violently ejected from her home and separated from her husband because they are from different ethnic communities, declares that forgiveness is difficult to achieve (67). Judith's stance introduces the importance of acknowledging one's misdeeds for forgiveness to take place. The lack of dialogue between perpetrators and victims complicates the possibility of reconciliation in the narratives. Asked whether he will ever be able to live with Kikuyus, Michael Rop answers, "No! I would advise them to sell back their land and go away. Even if they resettled we will fight again in 2012" (69).

The failure on Rop's part to admit his responsibility paints a grim picture for the country, bringing to mind the title of the journal *The Fire This Time*. The title is as appropriate as it is frightening. It is an ominous reference to the future that might await Kenyans unless issues of impunity and past injustices are addressed.

In the travelogue "Victoria Rising," Querengesser documents his horror at the sense of complacency and lack of remorse on the part of the locals despite "the burnt electronics store, the ashes of the Ukwala Supermarket . . . the chic Swan Centre that still stood smashed and empty" (209–10). The shells of buildings destroyed by fire provide the metaphorical structures upon which the narratives are based. Defiantly, these structures stand empty, smashed, some burnt to ashes. The lack of remorse or shame, and the futility of forgiveness is thus underscored (210). The destroyed city becomes a symbol of the lack of collective responsibility of a people who feel that their action of driving away "unwanted or resented residents" is justified. The empty buildings symbolize an empty spirit, the smashed parts a reference to the "truths" about the root causes of the violence that remain buried in the perpetrators' psyche. No wonder Joyce Wanjala, a fish seller, plays the victim and declares with confidence, "[A]t no point did any local boy start any fire" (216). Just like in the postapocalypse movie to which Querengesser compares the scenes in Kisumu, a street hustler named Zach tells the writer, "We needed the world to see Kisumu go up in flames. We needed that pressure to be put on the government" (214). A great sense of amnesia appears to have taken hold of the country, leaving the *Kwani?* editor, Billy Kahora, to wonder "if the first 100 days of 2008 had never happened. And so we wait for the fire next time" (11).

The underlying themes in the narratives of *Kwani?* 5 reflect a history of ethnic tensions and suspicions that heavily weigh on the general Kenyan populace. The narratives examined in this review essay help to validate the historical grievances that are the result of economic impoverishment imposed on certain Kenyan communities. Institutions like the TJRC are needed to establish a public dialogue that will uncover these versions of truth and, in the process, facilitate a process of acceptance, forgiveness, and healing. In the meantime, the selective amnesia of the political leadership inevitably leads to "the fire this time," as *Kwani?* 5 is so aptly titled.

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