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THIS IS ME: THE KENYAN POLITICAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS A QUEST FOR SALVAGING THE SELF

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ABSTRACT

The seemingly failure of the first independent African leaders to put an end to poverty, illiteracy and disease, and thus to open the gates to all-round development in their countries has elicited a flurry of scholarly debate. This paper is a continuation of this debate. It aims to account – in yet another way, for the stubborn reality of largely unfulfilled aspirations of the anti-colonial struggle in Africa, and Kenya in particular; to explain from a possible new perspective Kenya's deficient post-independence. Particularly it examines Oginga Odinga's *Not Yet Uhuru* (1966), Bildad Kaggia's *Bildad Kaggia: Roots of Freedom 1921-1963* (1975), Raila Odinga's, *The Flame of Freedom* (2013) and Joseph Murumbi's *Path Not Taken* (2015) to show how, in this literature, they employ specific literary strategies to absolve themselves of all the postcolonial blame, in the process portraying themselves as defenders of nationhood, democracy, and as forces against negative ethnicity. The paper argues that, in this self-refashioning, these leaders advance the very same escapism employed by the founding fathers. Focusing their attention on concealing their ambition-deformed personalities behind the masks of the positive self-identities they construct, the opportunity for genuine leadership and genuine service to nation-building is largely lost.

Keywords: *Identities, Postcolonial, Nationhood, Ethnicity, Democracy, Nation*

INTRODUCTION

The "Self" is rather a contested term in the current critical and theoretical space. The concept of self has been understood as always being in a state of flux (Hall, 2001). To put it differently, the self that is unitary, linear, fully comprehensible, one dimensional is an illusion. The idea of self has always captivated a prime position in literary creations. Literary works are often completely devoted to the unraveling of the labyrinths of the self. Testimonies, memoirs, diaries and confessions generally deal with this central concept of the self. However, this paper will argue that the literary genre which perceives as its principal task the writing of the self is autobiography. The advent of the twentieth century saw the dawn of an era, which presented the fertile ground for autobiographical writings (Smith and Watson, 2001; Weintraub, 1972). Autobiography is a genre that tries to capture such complex,

complicated and elusive phenomena called life and self. Its patterns change, its formal qualities change, the contours and textures change from one life to another, from one self to the other.

It is, as Misch (1950) noted:

Autobiography is unlike any other form of literary composition. Its boundaries are more fluid and less definable in relation to form. It is a representation of life that is committed to no definite form. It abounds in fresh initiatives, drawn from actual life. It adopts the different forms with which different periods provide the individual for self-revelation and portrayal (2).

However, attempts have been made to define the genre, to describe the common threads to be found in the genre called autobiography. Autobiography usually denotes the story of one's life written by oneself (Lejeune, 1989). Lejeune identifies four elements constitutive of autobiography: prose as the medium, real life as the subject matter, author as narrator and retrospective as the point of view. The autobiographies of Mahatma Gandhi (*The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, 1927), Jawaharlal Nehru (*An Autobiography*, 1936), and Kwame Nkrumah (*Ghana: The Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah*, 1957) formed a new dawn in autobiographical writing by public figures, more specifically, political leaders in the third world societies. These autobiographies went beyond a sub genre of history and attempted to introspect and reflect on personal dilemmas and crises. They take to an explication of "the self" in their autobiographies and portray a self that is knowledgeable. In this regard, the autobiographies can be thought of as the attempt to forge a national self.

The history of autobiography has almost always pointed to the elusive fallacy that most autobiographies are a docket of men who belong to the public sphere and enjoying a prime status in society. This tradition neglects the autobiographies of the downtrodden. The determinants of class, race and gender are excluded from the record of autobiography. The autobiographies of the marginalized have been silenced in the historical process; their narratives have been sucked into the metanarratives of the state. This paper will recover the lost tradition of the nationalist leader's autobiographies, leaders who reigned but never ruled.

The autobiographies of the leaders who reigned but never ruled, just like the gay and lesbian autobiographies, autobiographies of the disabled, autobiographies of geisha and sex workers, autobiographies of ethnic minorities and so on attain complex magnitudes; for, they question not only political hegemony, heterosexual, patriarchal, normative regimes but also bring an alternative sense of the self and identity, worldview and perspective into existence (Pascal, 1960; Olney, 1980; Gusdorf, 1980, Freeman, 1993). Analysis of works like these necessarily makes autobiographical criticism transdisciplinary. Marginalised groups reside in a negative relationship to power. The degree and kind of power and powerlessness may differ, but they do inhabit structures of power. An interrogation of the spaces that the subaltern autobiographies inhabit enables one to see the effect of power on subaltern subjects and the element of resistance written into them. This makes the subaltern autobiography not merely a literary act but a political act.

Subaltern autobiography is synonymous with survival literature and is narrative of resistance. The state of subordination of a community/group entails that its identity is conditioned by the dominant community/group. In this context, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga's (Jaramogi), Bildad Kaggia's (Kaggia), Raila Odinga's (Odinga) and Joseph Murumbi's (Murumbi) autobiographies are subaltern political autobiographies and are narratives of resistance. Janice Morgan argues, "to be marginalized to a dominant culture is also to have had little or no say in the construction of one's socially acknowledged identity" (Perkins, 2000: 44). What Valerie Smith speaks about the African-American autobiography becomes pertinent to all those who occupy subaltern position and attempt to construct a narrative of the self:

Simply to write the story of his or her own life represent[s] an assault' on the line of reasoning that assumes and perpetuates the construct that African Americans do not live...as fully imaginative, significant, intellectual, and complex lives as the dominant American community, 'since to make oneself the subject of a narrative presumes both the worth of that self and its interest for a reader. (qtd in Danahay,1991:67).

Auguring our argument on the conceptualization above, this paper argues that the autobiographies of Jeramogi, Kaggia, Odinga and Murumbi are autobiographers who “re-write” selfhood, in their description of their lives and the life of their community. Hence the act of writing autobiography by these leaders becomes a measure of resistance against oppression and hegemony. It is an act imbued with political connotations. These autobiographies thus call for more complex and equipped critical and reading strategies. They are not mere explications of the self, but intricate platforms of political performance. Autobiography as a genre has an important place in subaltern ideology as it proves that there are many versions of reality:

Autobiography now has the potential to be the text of the oppressed, the culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond the individual. People in positions of powerlessness – women, black people - have more than begun to insert themselves into the culture via autobiography via the assertion of the personal voice... . (Swindells, 1995: 7)

Autobiography is thus a platform for the exploration and explication of the self. The subjects of subaltern autobiographical narratives speak from marginal locations. Subjectivity of subaltern autobiography is constructed in the encounter between power and powerlessness, domination and subjugation. The leaders who reigned but never ruled have been relegated to the margin, being treated as “the other” by the political rulers. There has always been a political line drawn between “we” the rulers and “they” the leaders who reigned but never ruled. This demarcating line not only divides people into two categories but also implies a hierarchy. Their “self” often remain effaced or defaced.

Resistance in the Kenyan Political Subaltern Autobiographies

Resistance is a term that is largely associated with Edward Said in his groundbreaking work, *Orientalism* (1978). In this paper we argue that the autobiographies of Jeramogi, Kaggia, Odinga and Murumbi are texts that are involved in political resistance, reconstructing the Kenya’s political past, and in a way sanitizing the political image of the writer. *Orientalism* is mainly interested in showing the existence of political ideology that governs and uses orientalism to rule and impose hegemony over the orient. “Hegemony” as referred to by Said is pertinent in this study. Said shows how orientalism distributes assumptions and prejudices about the orient to the western audience, without a corresponding challenge from the “Other” (209; 324). It also demonstrates that every agency involved in the production of orientalism is guilty, either by association, or by themselves is central in the making and sustaining of imperialism. Judging from this, Said felt it was warranted to claim “Orientalism is fundamentally a political doctrine willed over the Orient because the Orient was weaker than the West” (204). Jeramogi, Kaggia, Odinga and Murumbi are thus weak, and we argue, thus, they write to reject this position.

As we are going to show in the course of this paper, the writers explored here assert an independent or “an oppositional critical consciousness” (Said, 1978: 326-7). The aspect of “oppositional consciousness” was identified by Ashcroft and Ahluwalia (1999) as a strategy of resistance. Wan-Ahmad (2010) contends that it is a strategy of “writing back” to the orientalists by exposing their political connection disguised under the academic pretension of pure knowledge. In writing their autobiographies, therefore, Jeramogi, Kaggia, Odinga and Murumbi subvert what is commonly regarded as oriental muteness that has led to more oppression of the orient in this power relationship. For this reason, the potential for resistance is present when “the history that resisted its ideological as well as political encroachments” is brought into life. In short, it requires the revival of repressed or resistant history that can mount challenges to hegemonic structures such as orientalism (Said, 1985: 93-94). This means that studying the autobiographies of Jeramogi, Kaggia, Odinga and Murumbi, as documents of political resistance and providing an alternative history is very important, especially so, when Kenya is undergoing various political cultural, social, and economic changes.

The Politics of Betrayal: *Not Yet Uhuru* and *The Flame of Freedom*

In their autobiographies, Jeramogi and Odinga are involved in constructing a single narrative: that Kenya as a country has been betrayed since 1963.). As we read through *Not Yet Uhuru* and *The Flame of Freedom*, we learn the clarion call that Kenya as a nation has undergone four political miscarriages.

The first miscarriage happened in 1963, independence and the first republic, 1992, the second republic and the reinstatement of pluralism, the exit of Moi and the Narc dream of 2002 and the new constitutional dispensation of 2010. Michael Wainaina argues that all babies die at birth the political class entrusted to midwife the process of the birth of modern Kenyan state is too invested in the primitive tribal state to give the new, modern Kenya a chance for survival (2016: 12).

The four missed chances have, therefore, not been by default but by design. The political class midwifing the process has deliberately strangled the baby to protect the status quo. They have consistently squandered the opportunities for renewal. In most cases politicians are given the job of midwifing the modern state because people think that they are statesmen and not just regular politicians. These leaders are so heavily and hopelessly invested in politics of ethnicity, impunity and mediocrity for them to midwife a modern Kenya. In their autobiographies, Jeramogi and his son, Odinga present themselves as leaders whom Kenya should regret for not having. In their texts, they are the statesmen per excellence.

In his autobiography, *Not Yet Uhuru*, Jeramogi comes out from the pages of his autobiography as an unrepentant patriot at heart, a pan-africanist, a staunch anti-white domination in Kenya's pre-independence politics, a genius, a father, a writer, and a leader whom would regret for not having (Nyairo, 2015). Reading through the text it becomes clear that Jeramogi seems to be fighting what he takes to be a misrepresentation by many a modern scholar. In this authoritative, sometimes brutal autobiography, the author re-writes the Kenyan history; the history oftentimes meticulously contorted to suite British Imperial propaganda; the history that is guilty of vilifying saints, and exalting villains; the history whose dying embers must be rekindled (Odinga, 1). *Not Yet Uhuru* recounts that although many of his British-Sponsored early scholars (through the several church missions) succumbed to the allure of the colonial staggering material wealth, prestige, and promises of overnight riches, Jaramogi remained steadfast in his resolve. It highlights his contribution to the welfare of the Kenyan scholars by sourcing for scholarship opportunities, and selling the plight of Kenyans.

In the text, it is recorded, when James Gichuru (in alliance with Mboya, Moi, Ngala, through KANU) joined forces with the self-proclaimed settler minority led by Blundel and the company, it was Jaramogi who remained unmoved with Kenya African National Union, especially with respect to KANU's demands of 'Kenyatta na Uhuru.' It was Jaramogi who, through endless petitions, conferences in London, trips overseas, public speeches, engineered the release of the Kapenguria Six. These assertions make Jeramogi stand out. The assertions aim to counter the misrepresentations of the Kenyan past by the mainstream state-sanctioned narrative. In this regard, Jeramogi's autobiography serves the function of self clarification and self justification (Gusdorf, 1980; Freeman, 1993).

As it appears from the text, Jeramogi amplifies what he has done to the Kenyan state, the roles he has played and the sacrifices he supposedly done for the Kenyan nation. For the sake of Kenyans, and Kenya's unity, Jaramogi ignored countless attempts made by KADU technocrats (on behalf of their Imperial Masters) to wage a rift between him and Kenyatta once the latter would assume office, first as Prime Minister in 1963, then later as President in 1964. And when he couldn't take it anymore, like a gentleman, Jaramogi left KANU without causing a scene (Ogot, 1996: 198; Odinga, 1967: 29). The text profiles Jeramogi as a nationalist leader who has always been consistent patriotism. His personal interests only came after the interests of the nation.

This profiling points an accusing finger to the other leaders, especially the then President, Jomo Kenyatta, who, as the author seems to suggest, was a self seeking oligarchic capitalist and a budding dictator (Muigai, 2004). That he had to part ways with Kenyatta (a fellow Kenya African Union member since the early 1920s, a mentor that he had cordially welcomed in Nyanza years prior to the State of Emergency in 1952, a friend whom he had consulted about Kenya's readiness for independence), as he portrays in the text, was by no means a product of selfishness, but rather a clear sign that he was not going to throw out of the window his patriotism.

Not Yet Uhuru, therefore, is a portrayal of Jaramogi's frustration with Kenyatta's turn-about that had turned fellow Kapenguria Convicts such as Bildad Kaggia into his foes. Kenyatta, like KADU Political Stooges, had betrayed the people, and there was no way Jaramogi was going to be a part of such grand betrayal. The formation of Kenya Peoples Union (KPU) and his resigning from the Government are narrated here to highlight his patriotism. The same argument can be raised in regard to Raila Odinga, Jeramogi's son.

The Flame of Freedom chronicles the remarkable journey of one of Africa's leading politicians and statesmen. Raila Odinga's life-story mirrors the triumphs and tragedies of Kenya's struggle to entrench multi-party democracy and the rule of law into the fabric of the State. The book is a testament to his courage, determination and sacrifice in the cause of peace, development and public service. It is a bold call to action for all African leaders.

Odinga's autobiography takes an in-depth look of how he has struggled to end corruption and bring freedom. It reveals the life journey of Odinga (His family and political life) and gives an account of how he Odinga suffered while inside the government. In his autobiography, Odinga paints an image of how PNU used every means to frustrate and humiliate him and his coalition party ODM. Odinga reveals of how the ODM ministers were undermined by PNU associates. The autobiography also indicates how PNU machines used propaganda to politically kill him. It mostly talks about Odinga's time in the coalition government with Mwai Kibaki and the betrayals he has undergone all through to bring him down. *The Flame of Freedom* also gives a history of Odinga's challenges since the death of his father and how he managed to overcome the challenges. It gives a slight hint of his role in the 1982 coup.

Odinga's autobiography (re)brands him as the intellectual custodian of Kenya's pro-democracy struggles, and the founding father of democracy. The photographs he selects, the stories he tells, the way he tells them and the stories that he does not tell, seem to establish Odinga as the authority on the making of Kenya. Odinga's story gives clear justification for the constitutional changes that this country finally made. The text portrays how Odinga stands tall against terror of a dictatorship where sycophancy, fear and silence reigned supreme. It is an examination of "the government's long vendetta against the Odingas" (Nyairo, 2015). Successive governments have successfully isolated the Odinga's from power. As one reads through the text the refrain *tumeonewa* lingers in the background.

Undoubtly, this is a story of courage and determination but in the end, it fills one with an overwhelming sense of pity. The humiliation that Odinga has suffered is partly in the brutality of detention, so he gives very few details of his second and third stints therein. Understandably, there is an even more harrowing pain. You hear it in the number of times Odinga reports, "[they] attacked Jaramogi". As one reads through the text, the weight of his father's unfulfilled dreams is evidently on Odinga's shoulders. The two autobiographies are, without doubt, classic examples of subaltern political autobiographies. They deconstruct history, subvert common knowledge and vilify the main stream state narrative.

The Politics of Conscience: Kaggia and Murumbi, the Unsung Heroes?

In this section of the paper, we interrogate the autobiographies of Kaggia and Murumbi. In these autobiographies one motif runs through the texts: politics of conscience. The texts profile these leaders as the heroes whom we did not acknowledge enough. After independence Kaggia established himself as a militant, fiery nationalist who wanted to serve the poor and landless people (Ogot, 1996). Because of this he fell out irreconcilably with Jomo Kenyatta. Kaggia also served as a minister in the Kenyatta cabinet; his denunciations of corruption marked him out as a member of KANU's radical tendency. When Kenyatta and Mboya combined to purge the KANU left, he was one of their victims, with Kenyatta making the trip to Kandara to campaign against him. He joined Odinga's KPU, but eventually retired from active politics in 1974, after failing to recapture his seat. His autobiography was published in 1975 and it is a compilation the reflections of a disillusioned leader. The politics of conscience permeate the text. Leaders in independent Kenya had a direct responsibility of addressing the problem of the import-oriented economy, reversing it to an export-oriented economy. Most of what was produced in Kenya during the colonial period benefited the Empire (Maloba, 1996: 23). The task of the *uhuru* government was therefore to formulate policies that would ensure that the citizens of Kenya

benefited from the economy of their country. The achievement of independence brought vital political decisions under the control of the indigenous elite, who have shaped much of post-independent Kenya (Ogot, 1996: 98).

Africanisation, in particular, was one of the most emotive political slogans in the tumult before independence and Kenyatta's promise to the people. It will be recalled that before independence, large-scale agriculture, industry and commerce were dominated by non-Kenyans. Europeans controlled agriculture and industry, while commerce and trade were dominated by Asians (Osolo, 1968: 184). Thus, after independence, one of the most pressing problems was to break the foreigners' dominance of the Kenyan economy and transfer it to Kenyans. In addition, due to the fact that the land issue had been at the root of most of Kenya's political troubles, it was necessary to find solutions to it in the interest of stability and growth in the post-independence era. The issue of land was the most sensitive item in the nationalist agenda. After independence, the Kenya African National Union (KANU) government had to tackle the land issue by resettling the landless on land previously owned by Europeans. This, according to Kaggia, 1975: 5) did not happen and it started erecting walls between him and Kenyatta.

Kaggia profiles a nationalist leader of a firm stand, a protector of the masses and a socialist. From the impression created in the foregoing, Kaggia expected that after Kenya achieved independence, those land tracts that had been taken by the European and Asian settlers would be returned to their rightful owners (Mazrui, 1970: 3). However, to Kaggia's surprise, no one received his land back as Kenyatta demanded that whoever wanted his land back must first of all pay for it. The rule was simple: no money, no land. Thus the possession of money was mandatory for land restoration and acquisition.

Kenyatta ridiculed and disgraced Kaggia by publicly saying:

Kaggia, we were together with Paul Ngei jailed, if you go to Ngei's farm, he has planted a lot of coffee and other crops. What have you done to yourself? If you go to Kubai's, he has a big house and a nice shamba. Kaggia, what have you done for yourself? We were together with Kung'u Karumba in jail, now he is running his own buses. What have you done for yourself? (Mazrui, 1965: 23).

Just like Kaggia's, Murumbi's autobiography explores different periods of his life — early years, emerging nationalist, independence, after politics and others. Joseph Murumbi served as Kenya's vice-president for less than a year; but without reading his life story, one cannot know the pivotal role he played over the decades to help bring about independence. *A Path Not Taken: The story of Joseph Murumbi* tells the story of one man whose integrity, honesty, intellect and selfless service to the Kenyan people was stellar and indisputable. It's also an important historical text which reflects Murumbi's vision and foresight since he started work on it in the 1970s, more than a decade after he had left public service and around the time he was selling his Muthaiga home and priceless collections of pan-African art, books and various other cultural accoutrements to the government.

From the autobiography, we learn that Joseph Zuzarte Murumbi was Kenya's second vice-president from May to Dec., 1966. He served as Kenya's first foreign minister for four years, opening every Kenyan embassy in Africa. He campaigned zealously for Kenya's Independence and was one of Africa's greatest private art collector. Reading through Murumbi's autobiography, one gets a feeling that what he is saying as regards leadership was that if he had stuck onto leadership, as vice president until Kenyatta's death and become president, Kenya may have turned out as a completely different country — with less corruption and tribalism. Instead, Murumbi chose another path — and resigned from government, disappointed with what he saw “Couldn't stomach the corruption” (67).

Although Murumbi had the utmost respect for Kenyatta, he was disappointed by the politics of the day. After the assassination of his mentor and freedom fighter Pio Gama Pinto in 1965, Murumbi quit. Murumbi wrote about the “Kiambu Mafia” and politics becoming increasingly tribal. He entered politics to address the injustices of the colonial regime and in the text he rails against both the colonial government and the the new African government.

He writes:

Power never interested me. I felt that I was in the struggle for Independence; when I was invited to become a minister, I thought there was a contribution I could make... I did that even when Kenyatta was arrested, the central committee of the KAU (Kenya African Union) was arrested... anybody who had any love for his country, without any promptings at all, should have come forward at that time to help. I didn't know what I was letting myself in for, I didn't even think of that... I converted all my energies towards helping in the colonial affairs, not only in relation to Kenya but other countries... I didn't go to Gatundu as other ministers did to say, 'Mzee you must make me a minister... I've never looked at politics from a tribalistic angle... I looked in a much broader perspective, that I have a duty to do for my country. (Murumbi, 2015: 98).

This reflection helps us in understanding the kind of a selfless leader that the autobiography constructs in respect to the author, Murumbi.

CONCLUSION

This paper has clearly shown that there is a consensus among the autobiographers interrogated here that they feel misrepresented by previous and subsequent writings, by friends and critics alike. These autobiographies seem to follow the same creed that people have failed to unravel the real person behind Jeramogi, Kaggia, Odinga and Murumbi. These autobiographies are therefore narratives of resistance. In them, these leaders refuse the misrepresentations of their lives and construct images of who they think they are. This desire to self-explication seems to be the central goal of penning the Kenyan subaltern political autobiographies. As we have succinctly shown in this paper, the writers explored here assert an independent and “an oppositional critical consciousness” as a strategy of resistance. They write back to the mainstream narrative, deconstructing it, subverting it and constructing, for themselves identities that are consistent to what the masses need in an ideal leader. They present themselves as the best alternatives of the leadership. They are the most wise, consistent, intuitive, ideologically wealthy and incorruptible. In writing their autobiographies, therefore, Jeramogi, Kaggia, Odinga and Murumbi subvert what is commonly regarded as oriental muteness that has led to more oppression of the orient in this power relationship. For this reason, the potential for resistance is present when “the history that resisted its ideological as well as political encroachments” is brought into life. In short, it requires the revival of repressed or resistant history that can mount challenges to hegemonic structures such as orientalism (Said, 1985: 93-94). This means that studying the autobiographies of Jeramogi, Kaggia, Odinga and Murumbi, as documents of political resistance and providing an alternative history is very important, especially so, when Kenya is undergoing various political cultural, social, and economic changes.

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