THE THOUGHTFUL MUSEUM

Remembering and Disremembering in Africa

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Abstract In remembering the attainment of political emancipation, post-independence African countries have learned to narrate the official national narrative and to forget other stories. Commemoration of the nation's past almost always goes hand in hand with officially decreed national amnesia. Therefore, the story of the nation has to be narrated and remembered by forgetting certain aspects of the colonial past. By implication the dual act of remembering and forgetting sets the pattern for how the postcolonial African nation narrates itself in the postcolonial moment. Focusing on Kenya as an example, this paper argues that the national commemoration of political emancipation from colonial rule tends to silence narratives of opposition and political incarceration that emerge in the postcolonial moment. The outcome is a remembering-and-forgetting battle that has implications for how diverse individuals conceive of themselves collectively as a nation and how they forge or fail to forge a coherent collective memory.

I am impelled to begin this paper on memory by extracting something from my own memory, complete with its imperfections and shifting nature. In the summer of 2007, I visited Baraki village in Western Kenya where I was born but where I wasn't bred. My father had built one of the first permanent houses in the area in the early 1960s, complete with concrete floor, solid concrete walls, and glass windows and doors. I am told that is where I was born, the lastborn child in a family of five children. Like countless children in my time, I was born at home with the help of indigenous midwives. When my father moved to Trans Nzoia District in the Rift Valley Province, where I discovered the reality of my existence, he moved with my mother and all of us kids, except my third-born brother, his best and brightest son, Wamukota who I never really knew or saw. Wamukota died while I was still a toddler. I have never even seen a picture of him. Like permanent houses, pictures were a rarity in those days. My memory of my gifted brother, therefore, rests heavily on my parents' and my siblings' accounts and the unmarked grave beside my father's permanent house at Baraki village, which I visited from time to time all my life. My father's younger brother occupied the house ever since our family's departure in the late 1960s. Each time I returned to my cradle (my father's house), I noticed that it had lost its luster; its glass windows and doors had been replaced with wooden ones, its floor had cracks here and there; but it had not lost its glory, its heroic status and its awe, its affective and symbolic significance in my mind and in my heart. At any rate, my late brother's memory is implicated in my memory of my birthplace. Up until now the memory of my birthplace, or what I might call my Garden of Eden, is bound up with the permanent house that my father built and the grave where my brother Wamukota was interred.

In 2007 I was more eager than ever before to see my father's house and my brother's grave,

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Photos 1-2: Above: Mombasa, Old Town, Kenya. Right: Fort Jesus, Mombasa. *All photos by Ken Walibora Waliaula.*

veritable emblems of where I came from. My father had died a year earlier and was interred in Trans Nzoia District, in the Rift Valley Province. I had returned to Kenya from the United States for the first time since attending his burial. His death had triggered memories of his legacy, of the things he did and did not do, of where he had been to and where he had begun his life's journey, and where all of us kids had also begun our life's journeys. I wanted to return to the site of the memory of my father's roots and my own roots, the site of my father's house and my brother's grave. To my utter shock and chagrin, I found the permanent house gone. It wasn't permanent after all. I was struck by the barbarity of the sudden erasure of my father's memory, only a year after his death. The overgrown grave where my brother's remains lay unmarked did not make matters any better. Bukusu conventional wisdom had exerted its might. When a man died, his house, Likubili, (the house of the dead), was brought down with him, within one year.[1]

I did not only grieve for the erasure of the memory of my father and the memory of a brother I did not know, I immediately formed a deep longing for answers to questions surrounding memory. It is intriguing that the convention of Bukusu culture that validated the erasure of material emblems of remembrance for the dead also sanctioned remembrance through allowing survivors to name children after the dead.

Unsurprisingly, some children of my relatives born after my father's death have come to bear his name, in sync with this Bukusu cultural practice. In fact, the naming system among the Bukusu tends to be predicated upon commemoration or perpetuation of the memory of the dead. In that sense, therefore, my father did not die. His name, Buyela, given him in honor of his deceased great-grandfather, would live on in those named after him who will also be so honored after they pass on. But the survival of a person's name and the memory concomitant with it is not guaranteed. As Wepukhukulu (1992) has stated, doing "good" during one's life is a prerogative for being named after. This implies that the memory of people known to have grossly violated social norms is consigned to oblivion. In this logic, there are individuals whose stories should be forgotten while the stories of others are to be remembered.

It may well be that remembrance of the dead in Bukusu culture is less oriented toward the tangible materiality of mementos, monuments, houses, and other physical edifices and more to the transference of names of the dead upon the living. Bukusu ways of knowing and remembering may thus be quite at variance with the Western obsession with inanimate structures as memory sites or symbols. Bukusu culture invests children with the privilege of being the means of remembrance—veritable memory sites of the treasured and cherished dead. Granted, there is among this people the communal commemoration of the dead in *Kukhala Kimikoye*, a ceremony performed 40 days after burial. But I want to suggest that this ceremony

in memorial terms pales into insignificance when compared to the investment of the memory of the dead in the children born after their death.

The practice of using children as memory sites, however, goes above and beyond the naming system, which ensures the perpetuation of the memory of the dead. Names are also critical markers of important historical events, seasons, and a whole gamut of socio-cultural and political, psychological, and metaphysical realities. The names are inscribed on the children to help the community remember these realities and events. For instance children born near the time of Kenya's independence were invariably called Majimbo (the Swahili term for Federalism) to suggest the regional blocks and political posturing of Kenyan politics at the time. Children born when the "motor-car" first appeared in Bukusu-land were called Mutoka. As is abundantly clear here, the Bukusu are not averse to adopting and adapting names from other cultures.

Shakespeare's female character Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* reprimands her love Romeo for his intention to disavow his family name, Montague, by asking him and answering herself: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose/ By any other name would smell as sweet." Juliet's rebuttal suggests a diminution of the significance of names beyond being mere labels of identity. Yet it could well be said that in light of the inextricable connection between names and memory among the Bukusu, the question "What's in a name?" would be answered by "almost everything" if not "everything." However, as already hinted, it is imperative to conclude that the structure and strictures of Bukusu culture exhibit a level of contradiction that at once allows for both forgetting and remembering individuals. The desire to commemorate is intertwined with the quest for dis-remembering—as was the case with my father's house. My father's name as a facet of his memory lives on because others have been named after him; but his house as another facet of his memory is demolished, forgotten. I hasten to add that the physical demolition of my father's house has similarities with the failure of a bad person to have someone else carry on his or her name after death. The former is a physical erasure and the latter is an intangible one, yet they are both, in a sense, instances of collective forgetting.

That this account of my father's and my brother's memory—of how they are remembered and forgotten—tends towards the personal does not necessarily occlude the communal. I think that it is now common if contested knowledge that the personal often goes beyond, beneath, and above the singularity of individual experience. Jameson suggested that the story of an individual in what he contentiously calls the Third World is often also the story of the nation, and an allegory of the nation (1986). The more I think about personal memory, in other words, the more I find it intruding on communal, institutional, national, continental, and even global memory. I am prompted to try to make sense at all levels of the conundrum of who or what gets remembered, how and why? Who and what gets forgotten? How is remembering also a form of forgetting, as Roach has suggested (1996)? With particular reference to my native Kenya, this paper focuses on the politics of collective commemoration, remembrance, and amnesia.

In remembering the attainment of political emancipation, post-independence African countries have learned to narrate the official national narrative and to forget other stories. Commemoration of the nation's past, with its attendant recall and reconstruction of memories of heroism and sacrifice along the path to "destination emancipation," almost always goes hand in hand with officially decreed national amnesia.

The call at independence by Kenya's founding father and president Jomo Kenyatta, "*Tutasamehe lakini hatutasahau*" ("We will forgive but not forget") tends to run against the grain of the official endorsement of selective amnesia as a necessary ingredient in the task of remembering and narrating the bloody past of the anticolonial struggle and the not-too-distant past of the national history. Yet in reality the story of the nation has to be narrated and remembered by forgetting certain aspects of the colonial past. By implication the dual act of remembering and forgetting sets the pattern for how the postcolonial African nation narrates itself in the postcolonial moment. This paper argues that the national commemoration of political emancipation from colonial rule tends to silence or elide narratives of political suppression, repression, and incarceration that emerge in the postcolonial moment. These outlawed alternative tales—of which narratives of political incarceration are an instance—are therefore locked in a fierce battle for attention and supremacy with the official national narrative. This narrating, remembering, and forgetting battle has implication for how individual Kenyans conceive of themselves as a nation and how they forge or fail to forge a coherent collective memory. In this sense national commemorative practices lend themselves toward contradiction in the same way as the personal narrative of my father's and my brother's memories.

The modern Kenya nation was born in 1963 after a bloody struggle with British colonial rule. Elderkin has described the Mau Mau insurgency and the British colonial counterinsurgency as constituting the bloodiest conflict between colonial and anticolonial forces of all time (2005). She argues that the exact number of those who perished in the conflict could perhaps never be known but she proposes that perhaps hundreds of thousands died. Thousands more were incarcerated in the most odious and oppressive detention camps across the country in Lamu, Naivasha, Kisumu, Lodwar, Athi River, Manyani and other places. The casuality rate in the indigenous Kenyan population was disproportionately higher than that of the colonial forces. Anderson has stated that the Mau Mau war of independence was both a war against colonial rule and a sort of civil war in which the guerrillas attacked perceived African enemies, real and imagined. The colonial forces, meanwhile, contained countless African soldiers who killed their fellow Africans with impunity (2005). Probably no one has captured the spirit of the times more eloquently than Ngugi wa Thiong'o in his childhood memoir *Dreams in a Time of War: The Story of a Child Survivor* (2010). Ngugi writes:

> It was clear that the constant daytime and nighttime raids and mass incarcerations were breaking up families, taking away or incarcerating breadwinners, and diminishing parental care. People lived under double fear: of government operations by day and Mau Mau guerrilla activities by night, the difference being that while the guerrillas were fighting for land and freedom, the colonial state was fighting to sustain foreign occupation and protect the prerogatives and wealth of European settlers (2010, 206).

The "double fear" that Ngugi alludes too is his way of knowing and remembering the reality of his lived experience of this vicious war of independence. From Ngugi's life narrative we can plumb the unpredictability of the times. There were enemies both inside and outside the Gikuyu community. As Anderson asserts, a class of civilian collaborators sided with the colonial machinery and betrayed their fellow Africans. Anderson's conclusion that the war was

Photo 3: Kenyatta Street, Kitale.

something neither side would want to remember with pride raised questions about the manner of the commemoration as the burgeoning Kenya nation forged a collective memory of the war.

But it is to Ngugi's fictionalizing of the Mau Mau war that we want turn to demonstrate the conundrum of the memory of Kenya's war of independence. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o has illustrated powerfully in his novel *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), [2] set in Kenya after the war, there were more questions than answers regarding the cataclysmic past that preceded Kenya's independence. It is interesting that the anticipated climax of Ngugi's novel is the celebration of Uhuru, independence, which ends up being an anticlimax. General R, a militant freedom fighter or terrorist, depending on how you want to view him, embraces a certain philosophy of reward and punishment contingent upon whether an individual was for or against the struggle. He states: "We must revere our heroes and punish traitors and collaborators with the colonial enemy." One could read in General R's assertion a desire to lionize heroes, to erect literal and symbolic monuments in their memory on the one hand, and to banish the villains to oblivion and obscurity on the other. It calls to mind the Bukusu naming system by which those who are deemed to have performed good deeds like my father are etched securely in the collective memory by being named after when they die, while "villains" die along with their

names, and therefore, their memory. Nonetheless, General R's simplistic division between heroes deserving of remembrance and traitors deserving damnation and erasure from memory appears compelling until one examines closely the role of each individual.

Ngugi's fictional narrative demonstrates and problematizes the stability of the politics and ethics of remembrance and heroism. At the very core of this enigma is the ambiguous nature of guilt and innocence. Who was or were the true heroes of the struggle? Who is guiltless to the point of deserving to stand on a higher moral ground and to be the first to cast a stone at traitors and sellouts?

It is difficult to move from Ngugi's fictional world to the real Kenyan world that Kenyatta helped create, because in any case Kenyatta is a character in both. In fact Ngugi's image of Kenyatta in the novel is cast in heroic terms as the famous Kenyan writer etches a glorious monument of Kenyatta in his readers' minds. If the vexing and vexed question of separating blame from praise or guilt from innocence also applies to Kenyatta in the novel, then it is only implicit. The difficulty of separating guilt from innocence confronts us when it comes to separating the real from the fictional Kenyatta. But for heuristic purposes let us assume there was indeed a difference between them, and for a moment, focus on the shape that commemoration and collective memory would take. What would Kenya—under the guidance of iconic former political prisoner Jomo Kenyatta as first prime minister and then president—remember from the past? What remembrance would Kenyatta initiate? What songs would be sung? For whom will monuments be constructed? After whom will roads, soccer stadiums, primary and secondary schools, middle level colleges and universities be called? In short, what kind of collective memory would Kenyatta's regime create for Kenyans? What kind of social imaginary of the colonial past would it conceive and construct?

In commemorating Kenya's struggle for independence, the Kenyatta government declared three public holidays: Jamhuri Day (Republic Day, remembering when Kenya officially became a republic in December 12, 1964); Uhuru Day (Independence Day, memorializing when independence was attained in June 1, 1963) and Kenyatta Day (remembering when the colonial government arrested Kenyatta on treason charges in October 20, 1952). It seems the spirit that governed the formation of these commemorative occasions was one of collective pride and collective euphoria for the sacrifices many made in order that Uhuru, the unachievable, would be achieved. It is, however, instructive that only Kenyatta Day was both named for one individual and devoted to his remembrance, his role in the struggle, while Jamhuri Day and Uhuru Day ostensibly marked the collective watershed moments in Kenya's birth as a modern nation. The commemoration of Uhuru and Jamhuri almost goes without saying. It appears quite impertinent and perverse to ask why the attainment of independence and the status of a republic would be worthy of remembrance. But how did Kenyatta stand out as one in whom the nation would invest its memory of colonial counterinsurgency? How would the independence struggle be reduced to Kenyatta's trial and incarceration? How come Kenyatta would be the one through whom known and unknown other "heroes" would have to be remembered in the nation's collective memory?

Knowingly or unknowingly, Kenyatta Day as a day of remembrance elevated Kenyatta above the status of "just a hero" so he was *the* hero. Kenyatta had returned to Kenya in 1946 after staying in England for 15 years, during which he wrote *Facing Mt. Kenya* on Kikuyu folklore, taught Kikuyu at the university, and

married Edna Clarke, a British governess. Kenyatta's arrest in October 20, 1952 coincided with the arrest of five other nationalists, Fred Kubai, Paul Ngei, Achieng Oneko, Bildad Kaggia, and Kungu Karumba. One could say these five heroes, together with Kenyatta, have remained etched in the Kenyan national psyche and memory as the "Kapenguria six"—Kapenguria, in the Rift Valley Province, being the scene of their historic treason trial. Kenyatta would soon be found guilty of the offense of "managing the Mau Mau rebellion" and was sentenced to seven years imprisonment with hard labor.

Whether or not the colonists made Kenyatta a hero in the Kenyan social imagination by imprisoning him, it is evident that the devotion of a day to the memory of his incarceration augmented his place in Kenya's collective memory. In other words, by creating the commemorative Kenyatta Day in his honor, the regime pre-empted the presence of what Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Chana Teeger have called "cacophonous commemoration." Cacophonous commemoration, they argue, is a situation whereby many individuals or events are memorialized simultaneously, and is characterized by the diminution of "the size, importance and magnitude of the elephant, recognizing it but only as one part of a much larger, busier picture" (Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger 2010). The analogy of the elephant in the picture is apt in apprehending the place Kenyatta was made to inhabit in the social imagination. Kenyatta could been seen in this sense as the elephant in the picture that deserves to stand alone, absolutely unsuited for a crowded, busier picture with its tendency to push individuals toward anonymity. There was no room for other heroes who would diminish the potency of Kenyatta's heroic memory.

Yet in creating this centripetal system of national remembrance, the state was implicitly facilitating the forgetting of other heroes, the other members of the Kapenguria Six, by dint of diminishing their importance or deleting it altogether. They could only remember themselves or be remembered by others through Kenyatta and by Kenyatta for Kenyatta and because of Kenyatta. "By him" in that Kenyatta would elect to name a nondescript street or neighborhood after them in the capital Nairobi or better still some small town somewhere. "Token remembrance" occurred in naming of streets after the likes of Ngei, Karumba, Andrew Ngumba, Kimathi, Argwings Kodhek, Oginda Odinga, Ronald Ngala, Mbiyu Koinange, Masinde Muliro, and so on. (One glaring omission is the women after whom anything significant is named, in Kenyatta's and post-Kenyatta regimes—apart from, say, the Stella Awinja Hall at the University of Nairobi.) But even while granting such independence or nationalist "heroes" an opportunity for remembrance, Kenyatta's own name on buildings, streets, sports stadiums, schools, airports, and so on would suffuse the national memorial and architectural landscape without parallel. The biggest and best spots were reserved for him: Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, Nairobi; Kenyatta International Conference Center, Nairobi; Kenyatta Avenue, Nairobi; Kenyatta Avenue, Mombasa; and Kenyatta Street, Kitale; Kenyatta National Hospital, Kenyatta University College, Kenyatta Stadium, Machakos; Kenyatta Stadium, Kisumu; Kenyatta Stadium, Kitale, and so on.

Ultimately the memory of Kenyatta as the chief architect and *Mzee Baba wa Taifa* (founding father of the Kenyan nation), the doyen of a Kenyan essence and imminence, was firmly established, almost by decree. As Fentress and Wickham suggest, this was the intended common denominator imposed by the government to shape the nature of collective national memory (1992). The hero worship of Kenyatta was what the government wanted inculcated in the

Photo 4: Kenyatta Stadium, Kitale.

minds of the generation then and in the generations after. It was reflected in the patriotic songs that artists composed in the scramble to outdo one another in their apotheosizing of the singularity of Kenyatta's remembrance and memorialization. Doubts were cast upon your patriotism, if you did not sing songs in praise of the *Baba wa Taifa*.

But always concurrent with and in conflict with this pervasive state-instigated collective memory of Kenyatta as hero and saint was another narrative that fed on bitter individual and collective experiences. We shall call this the unofficial and unauthorized collective memory, whose perpetuation was the task-narrative of so-called dissidents. Coming from another source other than the government, this will to remember (which also contains the desire to forget such things as the government's grandiose claims of achievement and legitimacy) contests Keith Wilson's proposition that the government is the sole shaper and molder of national collective memory (1996). It is common knowledge that the Kenyatta regime set the pattern in post-independence Kenya of vicious crackdown on political opposition and government critics. These are lessons he had learned from the "colonial autocrat," in Achille Mbembe's terms. It is ironic, as Malawian poet Jack Mapanje has stated, that in the postcolonial aftermath in most parts of Africa, the victim (like Kenyatta) quickly transmogrified into the victimizer. At least

three key potential threats to his supremacy in the arena of national memory and possible presidency were assassinated: Tom Mboya in 1969, Katana Ngala in 1972, and J. M. Kariuki in 1975. Where there was no outright silencing of critique through assassination, the prison walls served as a veritable tool. Kenyatta—the former political prisoner—himself imprisoned and detained without trial countless others on political grounds during his 14-year term in office. Those who survived incarceration wrote their experiences, which have been an integral part of Kenya's literary canon and corpus. Their works, collectively, are a monument to Kenyatta the monster, not the angel that the official narrative constructs. Their narratives of incarceration paint an image of Kenyatta that is unpalatable to the state since it runs counter to the official narrative and official collective memory it is intended to engender.

It is interesting that even Ngugi would transform himself from Kenyattta's praise singer to his implacable critic. In his classic 1967 novel *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi calls almost each and every one of his characters into question, except the irreprehensible Kenyatta whose heroism and exalted commemoration he leaves unsullied. But it was only a matter of time before Ngugi would witness the transformation of his hero into a villain. The Kenyatta regime detained Ngugi without trial in 1977 for his art and activism. Ngugi's meditation on his detention in *Detained* exemplifies the flip side of Kenyatta's memorialization. Ngugi forges a remembrance of Kenyatta as a typical colonial Lazarus, resurrecting and reincarnating vicious attributes of colonial atrocity and tyranny in post-independence Kenya. Ngugi accuses Kenyatta of conniving with the comprador class to deprive and dispossess the toiling masses of peasants. Invoking the memory of J. M. Kariuki, assassinated during the heyday of the Kenyatta regime, Ngugi quotes the Mau Mau hero as saying that Kenyatta had facilitated the creation of "a Kenya with ten millionaires and ten million paupers." Ngugi's invocation of Kariuki's memory recalls the unofficial and unauthorized commemoration of Kariuki's assassination every March 2 by riotous University of Nairobi students who would battle police and stone innocent motorists in the process. This unauthorized commemoration went on almost throughout the Kenyatta regime. The question to ask here is: Why don't university students commemorate Kariuki's death anymore? Has this counter-hegemonic commemoration lost its saliency because of collective amnesia? Or has the memory of Kariuki's brutal murder receded into oblivion?

It is significant that Kariuki wrote the first Mau Mau memoir, *Mau Mau Detainee*, in 1962, memorializing his substantial role in the struggle for independence. Other Mau Mau memoirs would soon follow, including Kenyatta's own *Suffering without Bitterness* (1968), which extolled the virtues of forgiveness and forgetting the past. If these memoirs intended to forge an abiding individual and collective memory, there is no doubt that they did not have the reach and force of Kenyatta Day in deifying an individual. At any rate, these Mau Mau memoirs were written fundamentally for a European audience—an audience driven by exoticizing curiosity about the Mau Mau movement, as the editor of Kariuki's memoir, Margaret Perham, revealed unwittingly—and not purely for commemorative purposes. The European audience had heard any number of wild rumors about Mau Mau savagery and barbarity. Were the Mau Mau cannibals? Did they use menstrual blood for performing oaths? Were they irreligious? The memoirs were written for this Western audience to counter or confirm these myths, or—as Marshall Cough has aptly suggested in

Photo 5: Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Son Mukoma, reading in Madison, Wisconsin.

his magisterial text *Mau Mau Memoirs*—to sanitize the movement. But by and large, the copies of these memoirs in Kenya have been few and far between and are known for gathering dust on the shelves or being entirely missing rather than being read widely. They don't, as they should, form an integral part of the accessories of the collective memory of the Mau Mau experience. Kenyatta's dominance in the national memory would remain both unsurpassed and intact with or without his two memoirs.

But when Kenyatta proposed the idea of forgetting the past, he seems to have been implicitly suggesting forgetting the Mau Mau era. The nation needed to remember his incarceration but attention on him would effectively overshadow the Mau Mau phenomenon in the social imagination. The memory of Mau Mau brought terror to the individual and collective psyche of the British settlers who had fallen in love with the land and who were terrified that there would be reprisals when Kenyatta ascended to power. But as future events would show, there was reluctance and resistance on Kenyatta's part to allow or initiate remembrance of shameful aspects of national history. It is no wonder that in Kenyatta's reign some of the most central figures in the anti-colonial war—such as Dedan Kimathi whom the colonial forces executed—receded into oblivion. Kenyatta's actions and attitude defined national official memory.

Kimathi was buried in an unmarked grave at the Kamiti Maximum Security Prison on the outskirts of Nairobi, something like the way my brother Wamukota was interred at Baraki village in an unmarked grave. But up until now there seems to be no certainty about the exact spot at Kamiti Prison where Kimathi was interred. Apparently, the colonial dispensation reckoned that making Kimathi's grave known would perpetuate the memory of a man it considered unworthy of remembrance. In addition, if after independence Kimathi's memory was associated with the Mau Mau terror that the British abhorred, it is not at all surprising that dis-remembering him was convenient and expedient for Kenyatta, who was eager to appease the former colonizers and to assure them that his leadership held no semblance of Kimathi-like murderous and vengeful militancy. Government critics such as historian Maina wa Kinyatti, who questioned the state-instigated amnesia toward Mau Mau heroes like Kimathi, were rewarded with detention without trial. Kinyatti was later forced to flee into exile for faulting the government's selective amnesia. It would seem that remembering such heroes would be quite expensive for Kenyatta, since it would mean adequately rewarding them or their families with what has now become a hackneyed phrase—*Matunda ya Uhuru* (Fruits of Independence). But Kenyatta's inner circle consisting of collaborators and turncoats had depleted the rewards and made it unnecessary and undesirable to fondle the sore spots of the Mau Mau experience in the national memory. The importance and expediency of forgetting could not have been more emphatic.

Ngugi's *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* (1981) wasn't the first attempt by a victim of the regime to forge counter-hegemonic memory of the founding father of the Kenyan nation. In 1969 a young Kenyan poet, Abdilatif Abdalla, had asked the question "*Kenya Twendapi*?" "Kenya: Where are we headed?" He was arrested and charged with sedition. During his three years in prison he put to work his poetic talent, writing poems to capture his experience and his take on the Kenyan world. One of his cryptic poems, "*Mamba*" (Crocodile), epitomizes his conception of Kenyatta's memory:

Nami nambe, niwe kama waambao
Niupambe, upendeze wasomao
Niufumbe, wafumbuwe wawezao
Kuna mamba, mtoni metakabari
Ajigamba, na kujiona hodari
Yuwaamba, kwamba 'taishi dahari
Memughuri, ghururi za kipumbavu
Afikiri, hataishiwa na nguvu
Takaburi, hakika ni maangavu
Akumbuke, siku yake itafika
Roho yake, ajuwe itamtoka
Nguvu zake, kikomeche zitafika
Afahamu, mtu hajui la kesho
Hatadumu,angatumia vitisho
Maadamu, lenye mwanzo lina mwisho.

Let me also speak, so I can be like those who speak
Let me adorn the poem, and make it appealing to the readers
Let me compose a riddle, that those who can may untangle [it]

In the river there is a crocodile, highly conceited
He brags, and regards himself as unconquerable
He claims, he will live forever
He is a braggart, thumping his chest foolishly
He imagines, his might will not dissipate
For indeed pride, is before a fall

He should remember, when his day comes

He should know, his spirit will leave him
His might, will reach its end

Let him know, no one knows about tomorrow
He will not last forever, even if he uses threats
As what has a beginning, must also have an end.

Kenyatta is figured in this poem as a ferocious crocodile ready to devour someone. In other words, the prison poet creates a lasting monument to Kenyatta as a vicious and greedy tyrant. In any case, the poet himself—as sedition suspect, convict, and then prisoner—had been devoured by Kenyatta's state apparatus and was in the belly of the beast, so to speak, at the time of his writing. That is how the poet wanted Kenyatta to be remembered and immortalized according to the internal logic of this poem. Yet in its reference to Kenyatta's false sense of immortality we discern one of the deepest ironies of the poem. It is audacious enough to equate Kenyatta with a ravenous crocodile; the suggestion that he possessed a warped or false sense of immortality, that he was a mortal man whose death would inevitably come, was treasonable. The poet both anticipates Kenyatta's death and creates the memory of Kenyatta as one who thought he would never die.

I saw Kenyatta twice in my life. Once, in 1972, when he visited Kitale, my hometown, my father carried me on his shoulders above the enthusiastic crowd of awe-struck Kenyans, so I could catch a glimpse of the father of the nation who stood waving his flywhisk as his limousine slowly passed by. Then, in 1977, I traveled in a group of school dancers who entertained Kenyatta at State House Nakuru. A year later, on August 22, 1978, the radio announced his death. We abandoned work on the farm that day. I sat there with my father and mother and relatives, all of us shell-shocked, glued to the radio as it played somber mourning music and repeated over and over what Abdilatif Abdalla had predicted would happen some day: Kenyatta was dead. Ngugi (1981) and Koigi wa Wamwere (1996) recall in their prison memoirs how news of Kenyatta's death trickled to them while in prison. Kenyatta's death would be their only hope of release from incarceration. Like them, there were those who felt Kenyatta's regime would be remembered as a long prison sentence to which no ordinary Kenyan was exempt. To others, Kenyatta's regime would be remembered as the most glorious 14 years—years of leadership worthy of imitation by future leaders.

The state-instigated memory of Kenyatta as exemplary statesman conflicted in his lifetime and continues to conflict—decades after his death—with its nemesis, the unauthorized narrative of Kenyatta, which casts him as a classic example of how not to govern. These two modes of remembering and forgetting are replicated all over Africa, particularly with regard to the forging of memories of the founding fathers.[3] For instance, in a fascinating article, Chirambo juxtaposes the official memory of Malawi's founding father Hastings Kamuzu Banda as an illustrious nationalist with the unofficial memory of Banda as an unyielding tyrant before whom innocence was guilt and guilt was innocence (2010). In these contending memories, individuals and events are necessarily selective and strategic. Thus, in both Ngugi's modified image of Kenyatta in *Detained* and Abdallah's poems, there is silence over Kenyatta's positive achievements, as there is silence over his negative attributes in the official national narrative. In a sense, both narratives seek to remember and to forget at the same time, like the people of Baraki village who remember my father by naming their children after him but forget him by demolishing his permanent house. In short, national memory entails laugh-

ing before our tears dry and weeping before our laughter dies out. END

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I am particularly indebted to my sister Eunice Nambuye Kimaliro of Worcester University, U.K., for reading an earlier version of this paper and offering her timely and crucial input on details of our family history that were somewhat nebulous to me.

NOTES

1. The Bukusu are a subgroup of the larger Luhyia community of Western Kenya, making up 16 percent of Kenya's population of well of over 40 million. The Luhyia are often collectively considered as of one of the more than 43 different ethnic groups in Kenya. In whole, they constitute 16 different subgroups, including the Maragoli, Isukha, Idakho, Tachoni, Samia, Tiriki, Wanga, Banyore, Kabras, Kisa, Batsotso, Bakhayo, Marachi, Marama, and Nyala. Each Luhya sub-group has some distinct dialetic and cultural particularities, but commonalities tend to outweigh differences.
2. The narrative strategy in *A Grain of Wheat* is something Ngugi owes to Joseph's Conrad's *Nostromo* (1904), as Sewlall (2003) argues. The outcome was a milestone in Ngugi's literary output, as he confirms on his University of California Irvine Web page: "Multi-narrative lines and multi-viewpoints unfolding at different times and spaces replace the linear temporal unfolding of the plot from a single viewpoint. This does not, however, diminish the significance of Ngugi's radical decision in 1977 when he proclaimed abandoning English and adopting his native Gikuyu as a principal medium of artistic expression, a move that has generated endless debate in critical circles."
3. The cult worship of individual national leaders in the collective memory in Africa tended to have its high-water mark in the period immediately following independence. In the same vein, the ubiquitous image of Nelson Mandela in South Africa's collective memory of struggle is attributable to the fact that the end of apartheid is fairly recent. It seems, however, that with time, de-individuated remembrance gradually gains supremacy. For example, in Kenya, since 2010, days dedicated to the memory of individuals, such as Kenyatta Day and Moi Day, have been scrapped and replaced with the de-individuated Mashujaa Day that commemorates all Kenyan heroes from all eras. In this way Africa would inevitably find itself walking the path trod by older nations that ultimately discarded commemoration of individuals and adopted the more collectivized commemorations such as Presidents' Day in the United States.

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