

## Travels through Kalenjinland

*Binyavanga Wainaina*

To get a matatu to Baringo, you have to get to Ogilgei – which is the name of a notorious bar, and more: throughout Kalenjinland, the plains, and rifts and mountains and towns – inside State House and its circles, among Special Branch police with their grey shoes and red or white socks, and shiny suits with a KANU party badge near the pocket; nearly everywhere the two million people, of various related languages and cultures called Kalenjin, whether they be in Texas working for an IT company, or in the hills of Cherengani shaking bones and wearing cloak of skin for a ceremony, Ogilgei in Nakuru means a lot. Across the road from the bar, just 10 metres away, are 15-seater Nissan vehicles that go to various places in Kalenjinland. So this noisy corner, not 20 metres square, is a sort of Kalenjin national nerve centre: you can land, dusty and tired, from Texas or Kabartonjo, and ask around in your language for mursik, or porridge, or to be updated on all the latest politics, or negotiate, if your tongue is adroit enough, to meet the President; or a good traditional healer, or a trustworthy doctor, or your missing cousin, or a guy who knows a guy who speaks your language who can find you a tractor to hire, or a friendly policeman to help your court case disappear.

When times are hot and there is conflict with the Gikuyu, this is a place of safety – or danger – for you can hide here, and be hidden, or be sought out here. If you stand outside the bar, a soft mist of Kalenjin babble rises. To the outsider it has a slight falsetto, not high, flat – sounds are sharp sticks hitting wood, hard g's and b's are soft porridge, gurgly, and a force defined in secondary school physics class as a bush or a bull, because that is where p becomes b.

If there are riots against a perception of Kalenjin threat – which means that people feel that State House is being ethnically xenophobic – people will know to head to Ogilgei. To attack this small place, even with loud banging noises, is to speak loudly to the nation of Kalenjins, and directly to the President.

There have been ethnic clashes here: In 1991, and 1994. We all know Moi and his people were at the centre of it: shoring up his support among the Kalenjin by creating paranoia about the Gikuyu, the Luhya – all neighbouring tribes. They use the cheapest and most flammable political tactic: the outsiders are out to get you, if you give them an inch. There is enough tinder here, from Kenyatta days and before, when the Gikuyus were seen to benefit disproportionately.

But ethnic clashes never really have to do with the noble quest of the oppressed. In Kenya, it is always the poor who get killed and displaced by the poor, and only to serve the territorial needs of the political elite. If Gikuyu petty traders are kicked out of Maasailand, Maasai politicians can grab their assets. Those who really steal from Kenyans, in all our political regimes, have never had their wealth challenged. As people become poorer and more desperate, the politicians escalate the paranoia, for fear that, one day, the crowd will stop and turn on them.

Not 10 metres away from Ogilgei, you are in little Somalia, which merges with little Mombasa – because the mosque is nearby – and so spicy things to eat can be found alongside sweetmeats and incenses. Behind Mombasa Stores, a Swahili grocer, and right next to the mosque is Nakuru's most famous whorehouse, also referred to as Mombasa Stores. Any teenager knows what you mean when you say Mombasa Stores.

I walk down, past Zoom Zoom, where we used to eat ice cream, past the Rift Valley Sports Club, an ocean of green cricket fields, and brown tennis courts, marked with white chalk, waiters who have worked there for 40 years, and Mwangi, the chef, who has been making cheap English food (fish and chips, shepherd's pie and others) for 46 years and who talks about the days when you would be beaten by settlers in Nakuru town if you were black and seen wearing shoes within club grounds. Behind the wall are Topsy and Nakuru Sweet Mart, twin restaurants, one a bakery and vegetarian thali restaurant and the other serving burgers and chips and the best marsala chips in the world.

I stop to get a cup of marsala tea, and a grimy face with brown smelly teeth presents itself in front of me: Wainaina! – he shouts. I am embarrassed, I can't remember his name. He is waving a rag – a group of young men have been seated here for thirty years fighting to wash cars. This particular young man has been a street kid since I was a child. He and his brother operate from the market which is two streets down – both of them are fond of my mother and my brother Jim. He has a new car, Jimmy does, I am informed, and he helped me very much, very much. Your brother, he! He has a good heart. Your mother is very strict, but she always helps, and your brother has a good heart, he never forgets me. You have grown fat...you were in Botswana right? No, South Africa, and how is Mandela? An almost empty bottle of glue sticks off the side of his face. Things are rough these days, he says, there are people coming down from Molo and places, the Kalenjins are coming for Gikuyus ...there are even Maasais hiding in Nakuru...are you driving the 505?

I can remember the first day I met him and his brother. I was 7 or 8, and it was the first time I had ridden my bike into town, with my brother. I was exhausted, and hating it: my brother loves exercise and I don't. But I loved the idea of being allowed to be next to Jimmy. My lungs were burning as we peddled, but my heart was twin purple fluorescent tubes of happiness. My sister Ciru and I are like twins, maybe too close for me to feel love so violently. My love for Jimmy, and my desire for approval from him, disables me.

So, by the large patch of loudly trading voices and hooting vehicles opposite the market, we were peddling furiously, when we saw, spread out on the dust, two long bodies in ragged shorts and nothing else. Their ribcages stood like hills, skin patchy and blackened with dirt, bruises and scars. In the full heat of the dry high altitude day, they were motionless, and my brother turned to me and said, 'they are dead,' and my heart stopped, my feet flailed and I toppled, scratched deep by the bicycle chains. I did not want to look to see if their tongues were hanging out, because that was, in our childhood language, the utter confirmation of death. I squinted at the bodies, and one of them jerked up, red swollen eyes caught mine and I squealed in fear and he started laughing, not so different from how he is laughing with me now.

I am not afraid now.

*Drama unfolded at Nyandarua County Council on Thursday afternoon when a chief officer swallowed a bankers cheque for Sh1 million only a few minutes after being suspended. Civic leaders were dumbfounded at a special full council meeting when the officer grabbed the cheque and swallowed it. Chaos erupted as councillors wrestled with the treasurer in a bid to retrieve the cheque. Mathingira ward councillor Margaret Wambugu was bitten as she tried to*

*retrieve the cheque and was rushed to a local hospital.*

*- The Standard*

## **1995**

The road shoots out into the distance, knobbly grey tarmac, straight and true, and making equal: Nakuru town; the Agricultural Showground; the dead straight line of jacaranda and their morning carpet of mushy purple on rich, brown damp earth; President Moi's palace and its attached school in Kabarak; plains of grain and cattle; stony, sky land, hot and dry; a pile of lonely casks of fresh milk, slowly souring by the side of the road; another pile of recycled bottles filled with dark beer-coloured Baringo honey, waiting for a market that is not coming; an arm reaching out to show off a wriggling catfish to the odd city car; a huddle of schoolgirls in purple school-skirts swollen by the wind into swaying polyester lampshades, giggling; goats seated in the centre of the road just past Marigat town; dried riverbeds; and the plains of grain and cattle as we head towards Baringo; groups of shining vaselined people walk or cycle by the side of the road, to church, sometimes 10 or more kilometres away; 10 or 12 tribes, three lakes; the whole unbroken line of human evolution here, in the base of the Rift Valley, as I head out to Pokot.

This road was the promise of a president to his people. The honey projects, the milk, the irrigation scheme not far from here that once produced eggplants the size of small pumpkins – all these things failed to make wealth; to find markets. The only durable success is the school, Kabarak High School that provides some of the best high school education in the country and has created a meritoclass of Bright Young Kalenjins now in banks, and government, in Wall Street and teaching at universities all over the world. Moi has invested a lot in education all over Kalenjinland. I got into the early matatu to Kabartonjo at dawn, and got the front seat, next to a plump woman in a thick prickly sweater and a massive handbag. She is reading the Bible, and chatting to the driver – in Kalenjin, which I do not understand, but which I love to listen to, the soft t's and baby softness of it, and how it is spoken always with the mouth yapping up and down in the grip of a full smile, a smile sometimes made poignant by a gap in the bottom teeth some men have, like the driver.

When I was a child there was a season of Sunday drives like this. My father had committed, one year, to playing golf in every Sunday tournament in the country. So come Sunday morning, we would be tearing roads up to make tee-off time. Mum hated golf, and golfers – and this whole expedition – and although we often did not attend church in our home town, she often insisted we go when we were on such trips, which we hated.

Trips were for other things.

This particular Sunday, the plan was to launch ourselves into a frenzy of splashing and swinging and sliding with fellow golf children and lick tomato sauce and molten Cadbury's chocolate off hot fingers and generally squirm and bliss around.

Uplands pork sausages.

But Mum must find a church first.

We end up in just some corrugated iron church, and the heat and light is blinding and people are jumping up and down and singing what seems to me to sound like voices from an accordion.

I do not know what this religion is.

But it is unseemly.

I do not like accordions.

We sit. All hot and in Sunday sweaters and collars and Vaseline under the hot iron roof, and people spit and start, and this is because we are frying, not because God is here. In the front, there is a line of young women dressed in long gowns: bright red and green, with a stiff cone rising outwards up their chins. They are bouncing up and down. Up and down. And some of them have rattles, and some have tambourines and they are singing and sweating in that gritty dusty Kenyan way – not smooth and happy like America-on-television.

And the man in the front stands in the pulpit, sweating and shouting. The Catholic Church I know is all about kneeling and standing when everybody else kneels and stands and crossing and singing with eyebrows up to show earnestness before God, and open mouth dignity to receive the bread. Some women will not put out their tongues for the priest – this is too suggestive. They will cup their hands

and receive bread, and put the bread demurely into their hands and move back and bend one knee briefly before fading back to their seats, adjusting headscarves before sitting, kneeling, standing. Kneeling. Standing. Massing rosary. Service ends in 57 minutes.

This service goes on and on. Mum is shushing us a lot. Why does she come here? What is she looking for? Jimmy is quiet and looks pained. Mum, dressed in a simple elegant dress, her hair professionally done, with her angular Tutsi face, looks out of place here. She does not seem involved; her face is set. People are dressed in wild robes: orange Peter Pan collars, neon blues and golds and yellows. And I am curious at this clang of music and God. And heat. Why does hot sun music clang?

And somewhere, things reach a pitch after we have given money, and people are writhing in the heat and shouting in the heat. Words are flowing from their lips, like porridge, in no language I know. Some people just hiccup for 20 minutes. In the front eyes are closed, tears are flowing and hand-made bottle-top tambourines rattling at full slapslapslap, the tin roof church is so hot. And people have stretched to be integrated into this heat and clang. Have found a commitment. Not us though. Our hot wet breath and moisture is now dripping back down on us from the roof. Some faint. I want to drink. What is she looking for here?

Then – some are moaning, others whisper, music softer, honeyed panting, tongues lolling, and the pastor's hands are spread out and he is swaying, and the tambourine is soft, and soon we spill out, and people are talking to each other and shaking hands solemnly and we go to swim and lick Cadburys chocolate off our fingers.

We drive past the turnoff to Kabartonjo. There the road rises a few thousand metres in a few minutes. To our left, in the hills up there, is the series of humps called the Tugen Hills that run all the way to Kabartonjo, from where you look down from a great height on the Lukeino triangle, on the lakes of this area, the deep Kerio Valley. On a clear day you can see past Pokot lands to Turkana. The Lukeino Basin has for long been thought to be a good candidate for finding early hominids. The Turkana, who live not far from here in the hostile desert in the north of Kenya, are many things. They are also the world's oldest society, all 500 000 of them. A few years ago, it was discovered that the Turkana are the most genetically diverse people in the world, more diverse, they say, than all the populations in the world pooled together.

When I got into the matatu this morning, the conductor, a young shabbily dressed man, had been slapping the vehicle, eyes narrowed and shrewd, sometimes urging people on with his hand on their back – sometimes grabbing people from the side of the road, all the time in Gikuyu – bawdy and rustic, laughing hoarsely when somebody shrugged away in annoyance. We left, and he marinated chatter in Gikuyu, and in Gikuyu-accented English.

We had just past the police post at the industrial area when the driver turned to the young man sitting next to the door in the back seat of the 15-seater Nissan and addressed him in Kalenjin, and he replied in the same language. I was so startled I turned back and his eyes caught mine and he laughed, then broke into Kalenjin for the benefit of the passengers, swinging his chin to point at me, laughing softly, his smile now open and friendly, teasing, rather than mocking. I notice this less and less, and often only after travelling. The man's body language, his expressions, his character even, change from language to language – he is a brash town guy, a Gikuyu matatu guy in Gikuyu, and even in Kiswahili. In Kalenjin his face is gentler, more humorous, ironic rather than sarcastic, conservative, eyes more naked to vulnerability. Easier to shock, easier to anger. By the time we pass Kabarak, the newer passengers are helped in with more courtliness and less rush, things piled on the roof, one older woman is helped in, his eyes respectful.

Some frail old threads gather as the woman sitting next to me sighs, long, in the middle of saying something to the driver, her shoulder slumps, and she says, “Mslip, ai, aliniuthii” – the Mslip, a sort of pulling in of saliva – a completely familiar movement, and one I haven't seen in years. The thing about it is how complete it is; it is not just the sound that she has, it is the way her neck swings, her shoulders move up the droop quickly, as she says, oh, that man! He really offended me, her slack shoulders say, even now she can only soften and succumb to

this offence, for like me, or you, she suggests, we are vulnerable to being offended and being defeated by the offence: and this moves us all, for she has told us all too, that she trusts our common reaction enough to know that we too, would not put up a wall of pride at offence, or begin an escalation of conflicts.

We sigh with her. For a moment we become a common personality, and she is chatting back and forth with people all over the matatu. In the soft quiet following her shrug, if she turns back to me and asks me some small intimacy, that my individual would not appreciate, my common person will find himself

being gracious and open. ..and it occurs to me, just now, that all the movements she presented, are, like Ogilgei, a national capital; a small tool that can be used to elicit an act of grace, in any part of this country, where neither our anthem nor our tax base, nor our language, nor view of the world is in any way universal.

I look out, and there is a horizontal placenta of cloud, dirty pink and brown, and somewhere in this distance, shafts of cloud-coloured rain is falling; on both my sides there is a wall of blue mountains, the escarpments of the Rift Valley. Some ragged-looking cows stand staring at us stupidly, and there is a trail of goat shit on the road. It comes from every direction – shrapnel climbing up my arms, warm pools at the base of my stomach, a pulse of rising heat in my temples: the feeling of home.

They say, those scientists who know these things, that our smartest nerves are mirror neurons. They fire when we watch sports, or watch somebody dancing. Our brains have been this big for 200 000 years – most of this time, we have lived within a few miles of where we are right now, the Rift Valley. But it is only 40 000 years ago that the “Big Bang” happened, some sort of critical mass in which tools, tailored clothes, religion appeared. Some speculate that some sort of genetic change also happened to the brain.

We have become used to thinking that until we learnt to write, human beings struggled to build a scaffolding of knowledge and ideas to carry them, and spread them.

What a defense of good!

That the patterns we spread around, we pass on, as efficiently as title deeds carry realty; we can pass on ourselves through our grace, down generation after generation. We spread even simple motions, movements, defences, loyalties.

But grace is a funny thing, and I don't mean just the grace that refers to swans. Because if we are sitting together, in this vehicle, and somebody's motor neurons fail to fire (maybe there is a Bavarian sitting with us) when this woman shrugs and her soft phrase pierces the silence, and group chatter rises, and she begins to speak to the whole vehicle, and this Bavarian person says something poisonous, like, 'please shut up Madam, can't you see I am reading?' – and the moment this happens, this man senses the small shift and stiffness inside the vehicle, the sudden silence of 15 chattering mindinownbusiness people, and his body is now numb, fingers do not know what to do as they fidget, and throat clears, gurgling defenses, he knows exactly what mood he has spoiled, but not at all what she said or did, or

what that meant. So, he may choose to stretch out a hand which we are all so suddenly acutely aware of – it stands outside this common experience – a naked thing wriggling in empty space.

It is scary, and we are tense, as this foreign object reaches forward. Perfectly physically familiar, this hand becomes an immediate animal threat, an inhuman object. It knows this and is tentative, and those long pale wrinkled things that spread like a fan from a palm, flutter for a moment, and then pat the shoulder of the woman, too hard or too soft, somehow not right, and she jerks sharply with an inhale of breath to catch his eyes, which are jumping now, clueless, and he looks down. And this immediately releases our tension. He mumbles, sorry, sorry mama, and there is silence for a moment as we let him marvel with us, his own bravery, standing naked of mirror neuron empathy in thorny space and time, and finding his way to us blindfolded.

And somebody, the conductor maybe, and this becomes a truly appropriate word – conductor – will send us all into a new series of patterns by saying hallo mzungu, and jerking about in a deliberately unpatterned way, but close to our idea of a foreign Bavarian clumsiness, and we all burst out laughing at this joke with no punchline, constructed only out of movements that are incongruous, a word I am already associating with my brief religious ideology, based entirely on patterns and mirror neurons, and capital places like Ogilgei, and capital people, and conductors.

During these minutes, we climbed up the whole wall of an escarpment, drove past lakes and parks and towns, and these remained invisible as we registered with no conscious attention little sighs and slumping shoulders and a pat on a shoulder. And so, I register the irony of a swaying conductor, moving to be righteously German, doing it ever so slightly wrong; he is confident enough in the smallest of signals to suggest that he is not proposing violence by this parody but is defusing awkward patterns, killing their threat. And we all get it, even the imaginary cliché Bavarian leans back and laughs.

Timing is everything, said Miles Davis.

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