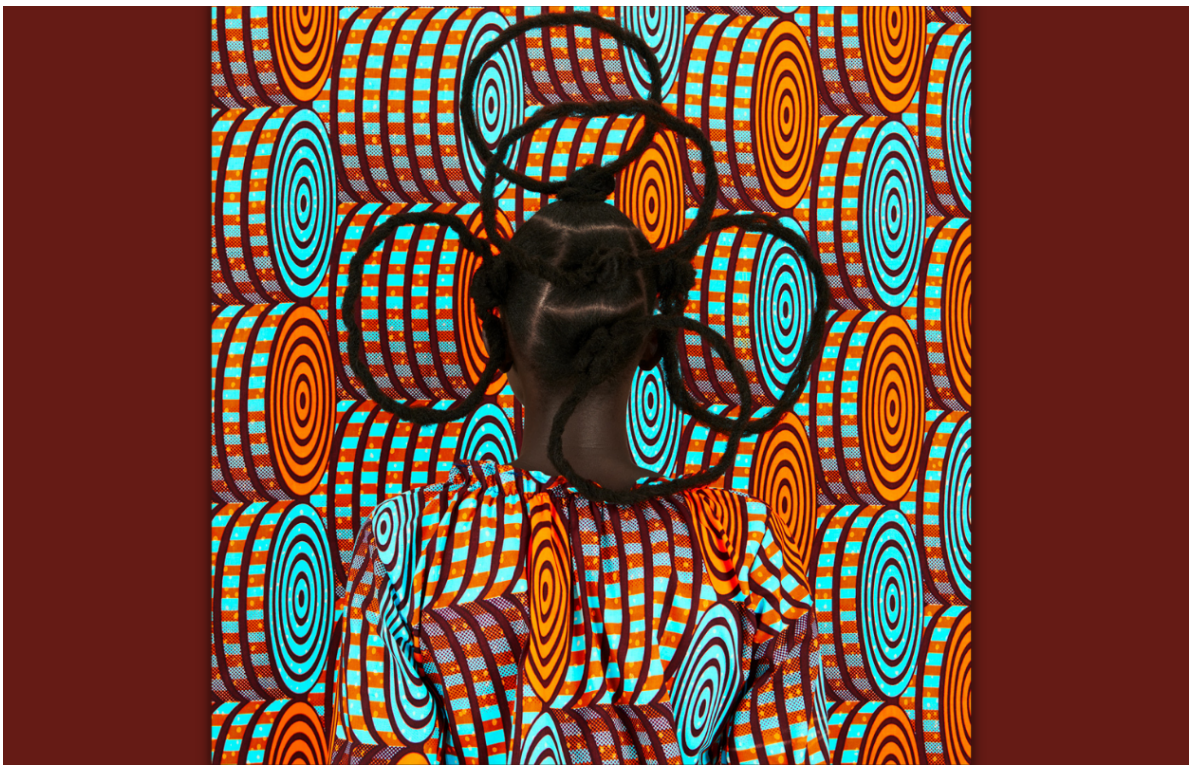
AFRICAN CULTURE AND ITS PROJECTION IN THE WORLD

Kenya’s untold histories take centre stage

Samira Sawlani



Photography: "Camo", Thandiwe Muriu

For many years the dominant narratives about the African Continent were those found in Western media and popular culture; imagery which focused on famine and conflict alongside tired tropes that reinforced certain stereotypes. This not only applies to what we hear about events on the continent in the present day, but also its history. Much of what we know and hear about involves the arrival of the colonialists, life under them and then independence. Largely left out of mainstream discourse is life prior to the arrival of foreign powers, the brutality of life under the colonialists and the bloodshed, terror and grit which formed part of the fight for independence. This is not only underplayed in global discourse, but in some cases even within the education systems and national memories of countries.

Over the years we have seen a rise in films, books, journalism and music coming out of the continent which challenges mainstream narratives and tells stories from otherwise forgotten and erased perspectives, one such example is the theatre, and this is best demonstrated through the *Too Early for Birds* show from Kenya.

Too Early for Birds: the Beginning

In 2016 two Kenyan performers Ngartia Bryan and Abu Sense came together and began brainstorming ways in which they could become full time writers and performers. Initially they came up with the idea of a TV Show known as *City Siris* which featured a lot of historical content, much of which was based upon the writings and research of Kenyans such as writer Morris Kiruga (also known as Owaahh) whose blog featured pieces on little known elements of Kenyan history and theatre maker and storyteller Ogutu Muraya's work based on *Living Memories*, a book by Al Kags, which tells the stories of individuals who lived through Kenya's journey from colonialism to post-independence.

They pitched the show to a number of local television stations, however, none would commit, "We kept getting this strange answer, that it was brilliant but might be a bit too intelligent for Kenyans. Which made no sense. We were Kenyans telling Kenyan stories", says Ngartia. After much deliberation and carrying out a range of polls on social media, they decided to take their ideas to the stage. Stories from Owaahh's blog would form the foundation of the show which was titled *Too Early for Birds*.

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Soon on board were some of Kenya's most talented performers, musicians, writers, producers and editors including Wanjiku Mwawuganga, Zosi Kadzitu, Miriam Kadzitu, Aleya Kassam, Anne Moraa, Laura Ekumbo, Tonny Muchui, Hellen Masido, Kimani Wandaka, Siteiya Njeri, William Mwangi, Gathoni Kimuyu and Njagi M'Mwenda. While the want to create and perform formed part of the motivation for the founders of *Too Early for Birds*, there were also bigger reasons at play, one being the want to connect further with the African tradition of orally telling stories, and the other to highlight Kenyan stories.

The Loss of History

In *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*, Congolese philosopher, scholar and writer, V. Y. Mudimbe wrote "Because of the colonizing structure, a dichotomizing system has emerged, and with it a great number of current paradigmatic oppositions have developed: traditional versus modern; oral versus written and printed; agrarian and customary communities versus urban and industrialized civilization; subsistence economies versus highly productive economies. In Africa a great deal of attention is generally given to the evolution implied and promised by the passage from the former paradigms to the latter" [1].

Based on the above paragraph by Mudimbe, it could be suggested that on a hierarchical

level, the written word enjoys greater respect and superiority than oral retelling, in fact going from the oral to the written and printed is considered progress. “We sought to connect further with that quintessential African oral way of telling stories. Oral literature is often passed as an outdated form that is secondary to written. We felt different. It was alive. It is still how we tell a majority of our stories, and it doesn’t come second to any other form” says Ngartia.

Furthermore, they were tired of the narrative that there were no Kenyan stories which deserved to be told, particularly in reference to the country’s history, “We were aware that our education system had defrauded us of our history. Huge portions had been left out and the rest sanitized to fit both the colonialist narrative and that of the regimes that followed independence” he adds.

In *Wretched of the Earth* Frantz Fanon argues that the colonialists did not only aim to exploit, oppress and steal from the colonised, “Perhaps we haven’t sufficiently demonstrated that colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it. This work of devaluing pre-colonial history takes on a dialectical significance today.” [2]. Fanon reminds us of the importance of history, the ways in which colonialism has been able to erase and alter it and ultimately its relationship to the identity of a people. This was another factor which formed part of the foundation of the creation of *Too Early for Birds*.

“As we worked on it some more, it became an identity thing too. We started wondering what made us who we are. Is it the stories we tell ourselves? Is it our background? Our nationality? What does it mean when you identify with a country whose construct is barely a century old? How far back does our identity go? Who and how were our people before random white dudes sat around a table in Berlin and drew acquisitive lines on a map? How do those stories and the way they are told influence how we see and carry ourselves today?” says Ngartia.

Even the selecting of which aspects of Kenyan history to feature was done through delving deeper into stories which the team were curious about and reflecting upon what they had been taught about these in school. On many an occasion they would find things which would make them wonder how this was not a work of fiction, discovering narratives and characters that had been erased or side-lined.

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“Curiosity has always been the fuel. This feeling that there is more, waaay more about this narrative that has not been shared. Wondering what actually happened in the Nyayo House

chambers, how our government became so rotten, how women end up side-lined in mainstream history, how big profile heists and crime has always been part of our lives, how the assassination of a 39 year old politician is still one of the most important events of our history." says Ngartia.

On May 17th, 2017, the show premiered to a full house at Kenya National Theatre; this was just the beginning of its success.

In search of history

In his chapter, 'On National Culture' [3], Fanon focuses upon the definition of a national culture in a nation which was Colonized. He states that "The Colonial situation calls a halt to national culture in almost every field" , according to him however, "The crystallization of the national consciousness will both disrupt literary styles and themes, and also create a completely new public." According to Fanon, through this a 'literature of combat' is born, in the sense that it "moulds the national consciousness, giving it form and contours and flinging open before it new and boundless horizons", while the context may be different, *Too Early for Birds* has arguably achieved exactly that, through what Ngartia describes as "flipping the script on history." As Ngartia puts it:

> «Such productions examine accepted histories and very often discredit them. For example, the struggle for freedom is often painted as a Kikuyu-Embu- Meru effort, but it is possible to give them their laurels while also pointing out that the Gusii were pushing the British out as far back as 1908. Then there is the place of women in Kenyan History. Muthoni Nyanjiru was leading thousands in 1922, Wangu wa Makeri was oppressing her own people while overturning social expectations of women's place, agency and desire. Field Marshal Muthoni fought in forests for over a decade and was one of the few high ranking Mau Mau commanders to come out at the end — uncaptured.»

> The search for history not only challenges the stories about Kenya that we see and hear about but also provide an understanding of present-day circumstances too

This search for history not only challenges the stories about Kenya that we see and hear

about but provide an understanding of present-day circumstances too. During the presidency of Daniel Arap Moi, many of his critics and opponents were taken to a building known as Nyayo House, there they were interrogated and in many cases tortured by members of the Special Branch Division.

According to Ngartia, "The Special Branch rebranded and it is still part of the Kenya Police, which was established as a weapon against black Kenyans", thus police killings in Kenya, (the victims of which are the less affluent in society), are not a new phenomenon, they form part of a pattern which is rooted in the past.

Re-telling history

The first show was known as the 'Unsung Heroes Edition', then came the 'Dissent Edition', following that was the 'Badassery Edition', the 'Brazen Edition' and the 'Tom Mboya Edition'. AWhile they were all exhilarating and informative in equal measure, Ngartia and many supporters of *Too Early for Birds* single out the Brazen Edition as being particularly iconic due to the fact that it was researched, written, directed and performed by women.

Led by the LAM Sisterhood, Laura Ekumbo, Aleya Kassam and Anne Moraa, that particular series of shows told the stories of iconic Kenyan women, including Zarina Patel, Mekatilili wa Menza and Field Marshal Muthoni. This was a revolutionary act, as Maureen Wambui wrote in her review of the show, "if there is one thing to be learned from *Too Early for Birds* Brazen Edition it is that women have been erased or left out of our history, our stories, and their contributions swept under the rag. These were stories of women that had dared to shift the *statu quo*, that had risen above what was expected of them as 'the weaker sex' and thrived. These were women that were way beyond their time." The Brazen Edition received much critical acclaim and set the bar even higher, however, nothing could have prepared the team or the audience for what was to come next.

There are many pivotal moments in Kenyan history featuring individuals who fought for and brought about change, challenged the *statu quo* and provided a vision for the country's future. One such man was Tom Mboya.

Mboya was a trade unionist, pan-Africanist and political leader who played a key role in Kenya's fight for independence, he became Minister of Justice and Constitutional Affairs and then the Minister for Economic Planning and Development. Mboya's charismatic nature and leadership skills led to him being amongst the most respected statesmen on the African Continent.

His dreams for his country were to be cut short when on the 5th of July 1969 the 39-year-old was assassinated in Nairobi. Mboya's life and death are an important chapter in Kenya's history, he is seen as a hero and revolutionary who existed 'once upon a time in Kenya'? But what else do we really know about him?

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Too Early for Birds took on the task of telling Mboya's story, this time it would be on a far grander scale than previous editions. "This was the first time we were focusing on an individual's story. Furthermore, we now had larger research, writing and technical teams, a vast cast and a new director, Mugambi Nthiga. Bigger still was the fact that we changed the venue for the show to the Visa Oshwal Community Center which had double the capacity of the Kenya National Theatre" says Ngartia.

So successful was the Tom Mboya edition that an online campaign was launched for a second run of the show. While brilliant dialogue, extraordinary performances and flawless behind the scenes skills formed part of why the Mboya edition was so successful, there was something greater at play. "This great, almost mythical person in Kenya's history was humanised. It was clear that our history books had barely scratched the surface, and *Too Early for Birds* was there to flip the tables" explains audience member Maureen Wambui.

The future of history

Too Early for Birds Birds is evidence of how theatre and storytelling on stage can challenge existing historical narratives about Africa on multiple levels. In audience member Deryl Aduda's opinion, such plays have the freedom to tell stories without the censoring one may find in mainstream media or the education system, "I don't expect a Kenyan media channel to say former President Daniel Arap Moi murdered people. I don't expect teachers to go against the syllabus they are given to teach from, so oral narrative delivered through plays becomes important."

According to one of the team writers Meera Damji, history taught in schools keeps people focusing upon acquiring enough knowledge in order to get good grades, whereas with theatre "the human element connects you to the story being told", thus waking people up to the realities of the past.

Not only was this done through the stories told, but also the way in which these were delivered. The team made a conscious choice to tell the story in a 'Kenyan way', the target audience was not the west, this was not made to please the white gaze this was a production for Kenyans which meant the usage of multiple languages, music, pop-culture references and layers of humour.

The rise in African publishers, writers, filmmakers and musicians from the continent has seen a whole range of new stories emerge, and theatre is certainly part of it. As a writer and performer Ngartia Bryan believes that the theatre has a huge role to play in telling, re-

examining and popularising African history, however there are certain challenges the sector faces both in Kenya and other parts of the continent.

“There is a myriad of financial challenges, particularly in terms of the sector needing more investors. The Kenyan National Theatre’s larger auditorium sits slightly over 300 people and the government is yet to deliver on the bigger auditorium it has been promising for years now. The private auditoriums are similarly sized and sometimes unaffordable.”

Too Early for Birds‘ researcher Idil Ahmed agrees, “financial constraints, the lack of sufficient art theatres, lack of government support and underdeveloped talent within the education system all pose challenges to the development of the theatre scene in Kenya.”

Despite these challenges, the sold out shows, wealth of talent and a growing audience it is fair to say that the future looks bright for *Too Early for Birds*, and potentially the theatre scene in Kenya. More importantly, shows like this have the power to awaken new ways of thinking on an individual and societal level, deconstructing the past in order to create a different future; “Before I attended a *Too Early for Birds* show I didn’t know how much sanitisation Kenya’s history had gone through. This is not what we were taught in school, the truth is so much worse. This education helps us think more critically about where the country is and helps us see clearly what happens when history repeats itself again and again. Knowing the truth allows us to imagine better futures” says show attendee Michelle C.

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2 — Fanon, F. (1968) *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York: Grove Press.
3 — Ibídem.



Samira Sawlani
Samira Sawlani is a journalist, writer, columnist and analyst with a focus on East Africa. She holds a Master's Degree in International Studies and Diplomacy from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). She has previously worked in the humanitarian aid sector. She contributes to several media such as Al Jazeera, The Guardian, Mail and Guardian & African Arguments.