

An ode to silence – Kenya's third national language

It is three am in the morning and I am awake not because I am insomniac but because of the music from a neighbour's party. I have called NEMA (who politely tell me that curbing noise pollution is a county responsibility, not a national one, according to the constitution). I have called 999. The police officer who picks up hangs up on me (what else did I expect from the most non-responsive police force in the world?) I have called the local chief. He says there is nothing he can do.

I then decide to call a friend. I tell her I am afraid because I feel that we Kenyans are on our own. There is no one watching our back. The state is absent, and when it does show its face, it is to violate us, to deny us a service, to survey and monitor us, to oppress us. I am afraid, I tell her, very afraid.

She tells me not to be afraid; there are enough of us who are angry and that the time will come when the rain will stop beating us. A time when a neighbour will think of his neighbour's well-being and comfort and turn down the music. A time when a woman will not be raped in broad daylight with onlookers egging on the rapist. A time when matatu drivers will be courteous and kind. A time when you will not be robbed of your mobile phone and money as you lie dying at the scene of a car crash. A time when you will not cross the street when you see a policeman approaching. A time when you will not have to pay a bribe to get an essential service. A time when church pastors will reject a donation from a crooked politician because it is blood money – literally. A time when we will not elect thieves and murderers to high office. A time when the opposition will hold the government to account and not seek ways to become coopted within it. A time when you will not

wake up feeling a deep sense of dread.

She tells me that the rain started beating us when we decided that it was okay to elect people who are suspected of being war criminals. I think she is wrong. I think the rain started beating us much earlier, in 2002, when we believed that a Mwai Kibaki-led government would cure all the ills of the Moi and Kenyatta I eras.

When did the rain start beating us, I ask her. She tells me that the rain started beating us when we decided that it was okay to elect people who are suspected of being war criminals. I think she is wrong. I think the rain started beating us much earlier, in 2002, when we believed that a Mwai Kibaki-led government would cure all the ills of the Moi and Kenyatta I eras.

In a speech she gave at the University of Bonn recently, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, a Kenyan writer who is yet to be recognised by any Kenyan national or state institution, told her German audience to shift their gaze towards themselves and see how they and their country have contributed to creating a world where poverty and precarity have become normalised. Precarity (or what some might refer to as precariousness, which is a less enduring/permanent condition) has been defined as “the *politically induced* condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks...becoming exposed to injury, violence and death”. Precarity, explains Owuor, is a condition that is often associated with neoliberal capitalism and its perverted logic of blaming the victim for his or her suffering, rather than examining the skewed power and economic relations that might have contributed to that suffering – a logic that relies on scapegoating to absolve the inflicter of suffering from any blame.

Owuor uses two examples to illustrate how low humanity has

sunk and how we have lost our capacity to feel because racism and an unjust economic order allows human beings to relish the torture of another. The first example is of Pateh Sabally, a 22-year-old African migrant who in January last year drowned in a Venice canal while dozens of people cursed him and watched him die and even filmed his final moments instead rescuing him. “What did Pateh see? What did he experience as he started to die?” asks Owuor. “To know that the last human gaze Pateh experienced was the gaze of hatred is such a weight on a sensitive human conscience...So, what has become of a people and their interior values who seek and find intense porno-visual satisfaction in the death of a stranger?”

Precarity, explains Owuor, is a condition that is often associated with neoliberal capitalism and its perverted logic of blaming the victim for his or her suffering, rather than examining the skewed power and economic relations that might have contributed to that suffering – a logic that relies on scapegoating...

The second example is of the Hungarian camerawoman who in September 2015, when a wave of Syrian refugees entered her country, deliberately tripped one of the refugees, a man called Osama Abdul Mohsen, who fell to the ground along with his small son. Although the camerawoman was eventually reprimanded and fired by her news organisation, that scene will forever remain etched in many minds. In her Nairobi home, says Owuor, “when we saw it, no one could speak. But it was recognised for what it was.”

Like Owuor’s family, Kenyans recognise the erosion of their humanity brought about by six decades of bad governance and the toll it has taken on our ability to live, love and laugh – and have empathy. (Don’t believe the foreign tourists who tell us we are a “warm and friendly” people – we are only warm and friendly towards white people.)

We see it, but we don't speak about it. Because speaking about it may force us to recognise it for what it is. And once it is recognised and named, we will have to deal with it, which is just too painful to contemplate.