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Abstract
At a book launch in Nairobi in April 2006, Kenya's most famous historian, Prof. Bethwel A. Ogot stood up and declared that Project Kenya was dead. The ideals that the nationalists had stood for were bankrupt. Kenya, he said, had never been more distant an idea than it was now at the beginning of the 21st century. Nationhood no longer existed. It had been replaced by sub-nationalism: the different ethnic groups, in effect, had eaten up the country. These declarations were a terrible indictment on leadership in Kenya, especially since they were coming from a man who had devoted over 50 years of his life to writing Kenya into being. At a time when the study of African history was considered primarily to be the study of Europeans in Africa, Ogot had defended the notion that the 43 African communities that fell within the colonial construction that was Kenya Colony were people, distinct nations.
PARSELELO KANTAI

The Reddykulass Generation

‘When the madness of an entire nation disturbs a solitary mind, it is not enough to say the man is mad.’
Francis Imbuga, Betrayal in the City (1976)

At a book launch in Nairobi in April 2006, Kenya’s most famous historian, Prof. Bethwel A. Ogot stood up and declared that Project Kenya was dead. The ideals that the nationalists had stood for were bankrupt. Kenya, he said, had never been more distant an idea than it was now at the beginning of the 21st century. Nationhood no longer existed. It had been replaced by sub-nationalism: the different ethnic groups, in effect, had eaten up the country. These declarations were a terrible indictment on leadership in Kenya, especially since they were coming from a man who had devoted over 50 years of his life to writing Kenya into being. At a time when the study of African history was considered primarily to be the study of Europeans in Africa, Ogot had defended the notion that the 43 African communities that fell within the colonial construction that was Kenya Colony were people, distinct nations. They had heritages and aspirations, traditions and worldviews. Later, Ogot was instrumental in giving life to what was little more than a rickety idea: by textualising a national identity he and others poured an Afro-centric history into what had previously been a space colonised by whites. People crept out of the darkness of their imagined savageries. We, Ogot had long postulated, had not been invented; We were.

That such an obvious statement could be so transformative is difficult for me and people of my generation to fully appreciate. People were validated, and at the euphoric moment of their validation — as the Union Jack fell and the Kenya flag went up — they entered into a new enterprise: Kenya. It was a huge undertaking. And now, one of its principal architects was announcing its failure.

We who were born under the Kenyan flag had listened to the propaganda of nationalism for so long, we internalised its cadences and often missed its import: that nations are built, they are projects and ideas. We were its building blocks, constructing in the very enterprise of our construction; we were, as we so often heard, the leaders of tomorrow. We were raised on a diet of free primary education, mandatory mid-morning primary school milk and personal rule: whatever His Excellency through the Voice of Kenya and/or his domestic representatives (the parents) said, was good for us. The Party was good but Playboy, for instance, was clearly not. So Playboy was banned and new party offices opened and those who sought out Playboy were bad and those who sang at the opening of the
new KANU branch were good. I am simplifying of course, but living within the hegemony of power made it impossible to imagine that your existence was in itself an experiment.

All around us, the experiment was going wrong. When I was 13, the Prisons Band — at the time His Excellency the President’s favourite — sang:

We are a loving nation
United and free
We are! We are!
We gonna tell it all again
Ethiopians!
Welcome to the land of Kenya
People are happy and are living in peace
Ugandans!
Welcome to the land of Kenya
People are happy and are living in peace
Moi, Son of God
Moi, President of Kenya
People are happy and are living in peace.

The soloist of the Prisons Band was Kalenjin, from His Excellency’s ethnic group, an ever-smiling man with a gap in his front teeth wider than mine. He sang with a heavy accent that mangled English and caused us city kids much superior laughter. But His Excellency liked the band and the song was played over and over. We noted the mangled accent and therefore registered the words as nonsensical. Only later did I recognise their self-congratulatory import. His Excellency would often remind us that ‘Kenya is an island of peace in a sea of chaos’.

For the longest time, I had pronounced chaos as CH-A-O-S, and had no idea what it meant. My mother is from Uganda and we always knew, in the way that you know a beat on a distant drum, that there was trouble there. Once a year, my Jajja, my grandmother, would appear at our doorstep unannounced, and thin and wearing a silk busuti beneath a faded blue sweater. Once she had settled down and mother and daughter had exchanged greetings, she would tell us about Kampala. When she started making her annual visits to Nairobi, Tanzania was liberating Uganda from Idi Amin’s murderous dictatorship. She would tell us about Nyerere’s guns that boomed so deeply they could break your heart. But they had also chased away Amin. And then on later trips, she would tell us about Obote’s soldiers who every evening drove in huge lorries into Kampala’s neighbourhoods announcing in Kiswahili (which every Ugandan disdained as army language): Ombeni Mungu wenu! Pray to your God! It was a cue to switch off your lights and run into the bush.

My uncle Miro Kasozzi, who taught my younger brother and I chess and had two degrees from the Soviet Union, arrived one day from that bush. The soldiers
had come to his house and he had run out through the back, hid in the bush for two
days and, when it was safe, caught a bus to Busia on the Kenya-Uganda border.
All he had was the shirt he was wearing, his trousers and his certificates in an old
brown briefcase.

These were stories from relatives who occupied a story-book reality. They
smiled as they told us these stories, smiled that Kampala smile that insisted
above all else that dignity must be retained even in the direst of circumstances.
In lessening the blow for us, they banished us from that reality, gently pushed it
over into an impossible realm. So we listened patiently and then politely inquired
whether they liked *Football Made in Germany*, and dragged whoever it was to our
bedroom, my brother’s and mine, to show them the giant Fuji poster of Karlheinz
Rummenigge. CH-A-O-S to a nine-year old boy obsessed with football could
be defined as being deprived of the right to watch the Bayern Munich-Borussia
Munchengladbach game because a new relative had suddenly appeared and the
adults were talking in the sitting room where the TV was.

I marvel at the ingenuity that it took to keep the experiment alive. The codes
unconsciously communicated across the landscape of our earnest faces that
prevented the Ugandan visitor from dragging us to the edge of the abyss from
which he had only just emerged; the elaborate infrastructure of adult secrecy that
ensured that in ignorance lay our childhood bliss. The nation was being built
inside us. We were its unconscious laboratory. We needed to be protected at all
costs. But it was also the age: His Excellency was the Father of the nation. We
were all his children. The Prisons Band sang ‘welcome to the land of Kenya’
bowed, boarded the green Prisons bus and went back to the office to torture
some dissidents, misguided university lecturers who were being paid by foreign
elements trying to destabilise His Excellency’s government.

Like Kenya’s other successful experiments of the time — tea and coffee as
small-holder cash crops — we were rooted locally but designed for export. We,
the sons and daughters of the nationalist elite, sat behind dark and heavy wooden
desks wounded with the insignia of those other children — the white kids of
colonial bureaucrats. ‘JT was here’ carved into the wood with the tip of a compass
point. We spoke only when spoken to and bowed and curtsied and pronounced
‘properly’ by skipping over the superfluous ‘er’ or else got a rap on the knuckles
from Mr Gerson Fonseca. We disdained Kiswahili and crammed facts about
places we would never visit so that we could pass exams and slip behind other
desks in national schools that were extensions of our primary schools, schools
named Lenana and Nairobi that had not long ago been Duke of York and Prince
of Wales. The prize at the end was the White Collar, a job behind another desk,
a car in the secured parking lot, 2.8 kids in a primary school much like the ones
we were in. So, repeat: wheat was grown in Regina, cattle ranched in the Pampas,
the Bantu came from the Cameroon Forest and the Maasai thought they had come
down from heaven on the skin of a cow.
This was our real heritage, despite Professor Ogut: ritualised incantation with no meaning save for the inner logic of developing collective obedience. We were signs that signified themselves, and we were rooted in contradiction. Sons and daughters of the victors of anti-colonial struggle, the only reliable precedent for our ongoing invention was the colonial elite our parents had replaced.

And that was the problem. That at the age of 10, some 20 years after independence, I was sitting behind a desk that had been marked years before by a settler boy; the disused inkwell probably still contained ink samples from his Fountain pen. We had failed to produce new realities for ourselves. Along the way, the new African elite, so young and transcendent when they came to power, were now older and fatter, and had lost their hunger. They were the Firsts: the first large cadre of Western-trained university graduates which, in the heady days of independence, filled the gap left by the departing colonial administrative bureaucracy. By the age of 30, many of them were sitting at the head of public corporations, running government departments, taking over senior management positions in multinational corporations. Doctors, engineers, administrators, others: they gave muscle to the rhetorical idea of Black Rule. Their extended stay in the West, their return trip with a rolled-up degree certificate and a graduation photograph, had given them Promethean reputations in their home villages. They were called *mzee* (old man) before they were 40. When they stood up to speak at local gatherings, entire locations fell silent; people cocked their ears and stared at their bare feet and tried to decipher every nuance and cadence in the great man’s voice. The great men lived in Nairobi and did important things. They did not visit often. They were building the nation.

And yet a scene in Ayi Kwei Armah’s unflinching account of corruption in early independent Ghana, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, comes to mind. It is the early years of independence and The Man, the main character, is walking through a former white neighbourhood in Accra. All around him the houses are now occupied by the new African elite. It is the names by the entrances to the mansions within that begin to disturb him. Everybody has changed their name to fit their uplifted circumstances. People who only a few years ago had been called Joe Amoako and Peter Kuffour are now A. Joseph and K. Peters: ‘Perhaps it was not hate that drove us but love: love for the white man’s things, his life’ observes The Man.

In Kenya, the heroes of the independence struggle had been deftly replaced post-uhuru by the traitors of the struggle, the sons of the colonial-era chiefs who had collaborated with the colonial government during the Mau Mau insurgency. Once in power, President Kenyatta, a Kikuyu and Mau Mau’s inspirational figure, had surrounded himself with the chiefs’ sons. Further betrayals had taken place after independence. His most powerful supporter during the struggle, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, a Luo from Nyanza, was shunted aside as the government took on an increasingly Kikuyu character. One of the catch-phrases of those early days *kula matunda ya uhuru*, eat the fruits of independence, became the code-word for elite accumulation generally and Kikuyu patronage specifically.
On national days, we dutifully remembered the names of the original heroes. Cardboard characters who had lived heroically and died tragically at some point in a misty past, we only knew them as blank spaces for the end of term exam: Field Marshal Dedan Kimathi Waciuri was the ___ of Mau Mau. Mau Mau was the ___ of independence. History was one of several subjects to be conquered over three days of examinations. It had nothing to do with present reality. Words substituted meaning, and the past with its betrayals and accommodations, remained in the shadows.

So the past was out of bounds. And for good reason: who were our parents within the context of these huge betrayals? As benign and apolitical as, say, the pursuit of engineering or medicine was, what had they done to achieve what they had? Who had been betrayed? How many spaces were left blank in their personal histories? They had worked hard, they explained. And so we lived under a code of hard work. The pursuit of educational glory became our defining objective. Such arid values combined with the secrets of our parents’ previous lives produced in my generation, not curiosity, but a vast need to conform. Instinctively, we knew the consequences of unconventional thought. So we feared unbeaten paths, ideas that had not been endorsed by authority. When we were older and unable to find meaning anywhere else, we excavated the already hollow words of our education and, judging them to be valuable, the best of us laid them down as a foundation on which to live. That, ultimately, is the meaning of the story I am about to tell you.

My friend Bee was found hanging in her ground floor apartment in Nairobi’s Kilimani area on a Thursday morning in March 2005. She lived alone and left no suicide note. Fanatically neat and notoriously absent-minded, her farewell gesture was to leave her curtains partially open. It was a plea that whoever should discover her corpse would do so before it began to putrefy. So they found her and took her away. And then the phone calls and text messages and emails — the whole ritualised jumble that follows a death in middle-class Nairobi — all of it was set in motion. If anybody, a newcomer late to arrive into the circle gathered on an evening in a designated house where the funeral arrangements were being made, asked what had happened, it is quite possible that they received an honest answer. It is also quite possible that they did not — did not dare ask for fear of provoking that embarrassment always so present during such occasions. And if one of the mourners in a moment of weakness and honesty broke down and asked ‘Why?’ it would have been to a reception of equally confounded faces.

I was not there. I was in faraway Oxford being paid a nice scholarship stipend to ruminate on the Kenyan state. The last time I had seen Bee was on my daughter’s birthday the previous December. Bee was Santayian’s godmother. I received the news of her death from Santayian’s mother, Bee’s closest friend, Jane, my ex. A text message that said, simply and devastatingly: ‘Hi, Bee died yesterday. Suicide.’

She and Jane had known each other since their university days. I knew Bee differently. We had gone to the same primary school. Her brother was my classmate.
We had lived for a time in the same neighbourhood. There had been many hours spent drinking and talking in what seemed to be several Nairobi incarnations: in our early 20s as students at the police canteen that was our neighbourhood local; as salaried folk, bumping into each other in bars and clubs downtown, a coincidence that on one occasion led me to Jane; even later, swapping invitations to parties at each other’s houses. There were memories of shared holidays and lazy Sunday afternoons. Oddly fixed in my mind is a photograph, vintage Bee, taken of Santayian, one-tooth old and in a yellow sweater knitted by one of her grandmothers, scrambling across the carpet towards the camera, screeching, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

I remembered other things: the funeral of another mutual friend, Betty, who, finally accepting her HIV-positive status and deciding to go public with it, had died a few years earlier. Her funeral service had been held at the church in which I had grown up. I remember another friend, a playwright, Bee’s and Jane’s year-mate at the University of Nairobi, who, refusing to accept that he was positive, had died prematurely; going on anti-retrovirals would have been an admission to himself of his condition. Bee had worked with the playwright’s brother. He and a cousin of mine were a couple until his death. And in the vines of our tangled relationships but cut off from the confines of Nairobi, that village of four million where such questions were not openly broached, something in me arrived at a tentative conclusion.

We used to joke that even when you did die in a car accident, it was probably still HIV-related. A suicide was so much easier to deduce; the act itself only confirmed lingering suspicions. AIDS was the silent guest at every death.

I bought a phone card from the Indian at the Off-Licence on North Oxford Parade and called Jane.

‘Was she Positive?’ I finally had the courage to ask after talking in circles.

‘No,’ Jane was emphatic. ‘She would have told me.’

‘Then what was it? Why did she do it?’

Jane told me an implausible story. Bee was depressed. Depressed because she was in debt.

‘Why didn’t she come to you if things were so bad?’ I asked

‘She had. She already owed me quite a bit.’

‘But still…’

‘I offered but she refused,’ Jane explained. ‘She said borrowing would just depress her some more.’

Bee owed all her friends money.

She had gone quiet soon after Christmas, the last time I had seen her. Eventually, when Jane had sought her out she had rolled up her sleeves and revealed a set of slash-marks across her wrists, barely healed. That last conversation, those
slashed wrists, they agreed, would be their secret. They would never discuss that foolishness again. Thinking about it now, it seems to me that even as she promised to desist from the foolishness, Bee had already retreated to a place from which there was no return.

Her father was inconsolable at her funeral. When Jane told him what she thought — when she gave him an answer to ‘Why’ — he asked, broken, why Bee hadn’t gone to him. But who can explain how far away, how impossible to reach everybody is when you are down that black hole?

Beyond our grief and her despair — beyond our private ‘Why’s — Bee’s suicide seemed to suggest a larger failure. If, as Stalin had once infamously remarked, one man’s death is a tragedy and one million a statistic, what drama had my friend been involved in? On what canvas was her death painted? What was her ‘tragic arc’?

Let us pull out from the close-up image on that grim Thursday morning. In March 2005, the sunlight glinted off the dozens of brand new cars parked in Bee’s large apartment complex where US$ 500 a month secured you a prime piece of Nairobi upper middle-class real estate, with uniformed guards at the gate, electric fencing and ayahs taking out the trash and walking the baby.

Beyond the high stone walls that protect this brahminic existence lie the questions — the street with its statistics, its faceless many, the potholes, the honking matatus, the rat-race for rat-holes — questions we must answer in order to understand the state in which this enterprise called Project Kenya finds itself at the beginning of 21st century.

But not so fast. You need first to understand how and where Bee fitted on that canvas.

Bee was 36 years old, single and a post-graduate, at the top end of that growing ‘demographic’ that Nairobi’s advertisers and copywriters pulverised with ‘disposable lifestyle’ — cars, clothes, credit cards and cosmetics. She had in the 1990s accumulated a vast number of post-graduate certificates in addition to her degrees (a Bachelor of Science in Botany and a post-graduate degree in Journalism). She had a diploma in management, the mandatory certificates proving computer literacy, a certificate in disaster management, another as a human rights trainer. Like so many young Kenyans negotiating their way through the 1990s, Bee used certificates as a shield to ward off the evil spirits of those uncertain days. You never could tell when the next wave of retrenchments would come, and who it would carry away.

All around her, the old certainties were disappearing. Her parents had retired to their farm in Nyanza — they were Luo — after quietly distinguished careers in the civil service in Nairobi. They had managed to buy a house in Woodley, the same house in which Bee had grown up. But the ownership of the house was now disputed. Somebody with links that through a series of intricate paths eventually ended up at State House, somebody ‘connected’ had obtained a duplicate title deed on the property and was trying to sell it. So there was a court case or, more
accurately, the dispute over the property was now in judicial quicksand. Unless Bee or her siblings or her ageing parents knew someone at the High Court, the case would not be heard for years. The file would be lost. Or else, because they were dealing with somebody ‘connected’, there was every chance that they would one day be surprised to find the furniture from their childhood sitting on the sidewalk, and a strange woman, mistress of Mr Connected, inside the house supervising the movers, and waving a copy of a court order.

In the 1990s, His Excellency fell out of favour with his Western backers, and the privileges of an entitled elite two generations deep began to be shaken. The inalienable rights of the Firsts, the undoubted pedigree of their sons and daughters, their collective rights to the spoils of the post-colony (rural land, urban real estate, corporate jobs, resultant from years of cultivating the right accent); all that, as well as the old boy networks that secured those privileges, was profaned. The First Network, that of His Excellency and his tribesmen, was desperate for cash. Frozen out of the Paris Club — some dubious charge of trampling on human rights — and other Western donor clubs, this network turned inwards and began cannibalising itself. It liquidated everything it could lay its hands on: rivers and road reserves were privatised; forest and wildlife parks turned into ‘plots’ for its beneficiaries; public toilets and government houses disappeared, became shanty towns and apartment complexes, all property of mysterious new men with names that had no pedigree. Unprotected sex and AIDS became a metaphor for free-fall — for the unsheathing of the privileges of the independence elite and, as always, the victimisation of the citizenry in whose name this public shafting was conducted.

Certificates were condoms. But one also needed to know Who — more than How — could guarantee protection. Bee was prepared to sleep with no one, both literally and figuratively. She drew a line at that point. She had not been brought up that way. She had faith in merit. And so she drifted from job to job, assuming that she was not rising up the career ladder because she was restless, searching for that elusive ‘right’ path. She moved from the aid industry to the corporate sector, back and forth, and went to school at night. She was careful with her money and talented enough to ensure that there was always enough for rent and a little extra. Many of her friends left for the US and the UK. They left, or they died in alcohol and HIV.

In December 2002, a Gallup global poll declared Kenyans the most optimistic people in the world. Moi was leaving and a new coalition government, NARC, led by his old deputy Mwai Kibaki, was taking over. Over a million people gathered at Uhuru Park in Nairobi to witness Kibaki’s inauguration on December 30, 2002, nearly as many if not more than those that had turned up at midnight on December 12, 1963 to watch the Kenya flag rise for the first time. This was the Second Liberation. The new president sat in a wheelchair, recovering from a car accident, and pledged a renewal of Kenyan values — hard work, decency and honesty — and an end to corruption. A decade of accumulated certificates suddenly had real value.
Even as the propaganda of renewal, the busy-ness of cleaning up and sorting out, sounded from State House, the old politics of betrayal returned. Kibaki suffered a stroke. His old friends, a group of businessmen, retired technocrats and politicos — the Firsts, in their mid-dotage — fenced off the Presidency and locked out the NARC coalition partners, including its chief architect, Raila Odinga, son of Jaramogi Odinga.

Like the nationalism of the 1960s, the idea of renewal became farcical. An anti-corruption czar was appointed and run out of town as soon as he uncovered evidence of new corruption. Cabinet ministers gave TV interviews in the basement gymnasia of their new mansions as the press revealed fresh information on the latest corruption scam. As a sign of the new openness, the Mayor of Nairobi gave out his mobile phone number during a live FM appeal — he was appealing for patience at the height of a crippling water shortage.

Farce and cosmetics. Nairobi yielded to a beautification campaign. Streets were closed off for days. City Council workers in new luminous green jackets were repainting street signs. People joked that the paint was probably supplied by a good friend of a council strongman. A blacklisted company was contracted to redo a major city road at four times the advertised cost and twice the time. Hawkers and kiosks were cleared out of the city centre and the middle-class neighbourhoods west of Uhuru Highway, usually at night. Somebody wrote a Letter to the Editor, saying it was all very well to eject the hawkers from the city centre (‘they are a menace’) but there was absolutely no justification for Council askaris to use machetes in the process. A 50-year-old council estate was demolished. Its occupants were given 24 hours to pack up and leave. A few days later, the President laid the foundation stone for a new market at the site. Poverty was being eradicated. Street kids were sent to rehabilitation centres and arrested if they returned to the city centre. Even AIDS disappeared. Anti-retrovirals were made widely available. You no longer saw the ashy faces and falling hair and emaciated figures of full-blown AIDS sufferers, and the statistics proved that infection rates were falling.

There was money everywhere and nowhere. Banks offered personal loans for the salaried, as taxi drivers complained that even during the worst of the Moi times there had been more business than there was now. New appointments in both the government and the corporate sector were heavily lopsided in favour of the President’s ethnic group, the Kikuyu. Mortgage finance companies put the customer first and apartments rose like hosannas across middle class Nairobi. The stock exchange was booming and corporate Kenya launched wave after wave of IPOs, all ridiculously over-subscribed. It was a festival of Tiger Economy capitalism. Still, the UN’s Human Development Index report in 2004 said that standards of living in Kenya had fallen to their worst levels ever. But the economy was growing at five percent and there were day-long traffic jams to prove it.
Bee had an epiphany: she quit her job, sold her car and went to Durban for six weeks. When she returned, she had another certificate. She was a certified mountain-climbing guide, one of a handful in Kenya. She had decided that she was going to start her own business, ‘Under Open Skies’, a safari company that would specialise in walking tours. Its target market was the new middle-class, people like herself who loved to get away on the weekend. She registered the company, got her brother to design a website and started printing posters and leaflets and brochures. Like everything she did, she wanted to do it right.

Some months before she died, Bee was featured in Eve Magazine as ‘young, independent, female and entrepreneurial’, the embodiment of the new woman who was the magazine’s target audience. Still the business did not pick up. Somehow it wasn’t working. I met her less frequently now that I was no longer with Jane. But when we met, the usual Nairobi question of ‘how is biashara?’, how is business, yielded a little too often, the response of the dark 1990s: it was slow, it wasn’t picking up, it would take time. It did not occur to Bee — it never would have — that Who you knew still mattered more than what you knew. She borrowed some more and sank deeper into her hole, a smile on her face.

Bee killed herself because, even after everything had changed, nothing had changed. After democracy and renewal and anti-corruption drives, after the privatisation of public services and collective dreams and the repackaging of tribalism as the victory of decency over grabiosis, nothing had changed. She had bought into the highest ideals of a sham project where public good was code for private accumulation and the acquisition of papers could never protect you if you were from the wrong tribe. Bee, a Kenyan, had not been designed to speak in ethnic code, had not been designed to ‘deal’.

Modern Kenya was not built by conquest or by mutual agreement; it was the product of the Lancaster House independence negotiations where The Firsts haggled over the fine print of a constitution drawn up by the departing colonials. There was no referendum at independence to decide whether the wholesale adoption of the colonial constitution was a good idea. The project existed in name only. It had been abandoned in favour of private accumulation based on the fiction of collective ethnic advancement: our people deserve to ‘eat’ because we suffered. In other words Kenyan identity was something attained through the experience of the Kenyan State: how had Kenya arrived at your doorstep? As a friend or an occupying force? How had you survived the experience?

In November, 2005 a truth about Kenya was uttered. During a referendum on the draft constitution — in which the country was divided into two — Bananas (Yes to the new constitution) and Oranges (No) — people voted overwhelmingly against the government’s draft. Kibaki and his Kikuyu community, having voted Yes, were a bunch of Bananas in a sea of Orange. People wanted a new
constitution but they were not going to be manipulated by the new ‘eaters’. It was a profound statement: that people wanted to be Kenyan but not according to the designs of the State.

A new Kenya had to be found elsewhere. It has begun to emerge in different ways. My generation is sometimes called the Reddykulass Generation, after a group of eponymously-named comedians who made a career out of satirising Moi. We glance at the state and its boots and rungus, its seedy representatives and their just-add-water sycophancy, their promises of jobs and opportunities — we look at all that and laugh.

The Reddykulass Generation’s central experience is survival: the informalisation of Kenyan life as the rickety idea of ethnic patronage began to wobble underneath its half-truths and lusts. The life that had developed at the margins gradually invaded the bankrupt centre. In place of the English and Kiswahili constituted as the main currencies in which life was transacted across the ethnic divides, we now spoke Sheng. A bastard mixture of the two, long long condemned by officialdom, more and more Kenyans found themselves living within its fluid borders.

A new Kenya is developing from the margins. It is chaotic and unstructured but it has a distinct voice. In 2002, a Kenyan writer, Binyavanga Wainaina, won the Caine Prize for African Literature. He returned home from London and the Caine Prize, and along with other budding writers, established a journal Kwani? and sparked off a literary renaissance. The idea behind Kwani? was to showcase emergent literary talent. But there was a larger idea and that was to explore the different ways of being Kenyan.

This project of renewal is being replicated elsewhere: in the urban sound of new music, in the media where young journalists are continuously exposing corruption and robbing the State of its formerly unchallenged legitimacy. This emergent democracy has come in spite of the betrayals and backroom deals of a cynical leadership. It is brash and noisy, but it understands fundamentally that the silences and secrets of the past are no longer an option.

Project Kenya may be dead as an idea but we are. We continue to be. We cannot run away from what was developed inside us. Kwani? is now four years old. Around it has grown a stable of young writers who are re-defining the Kenyan space for a new generation. By providing a forum where a multiplicity of experiences of Kenyan-ness are presented, discussed and celebrated, it has broken with the old mould. What we lacked before was this diversity. Being Kenyan was to accept and to arrange oneself inside the mould of the official story of The Firsts. Through this assertion of cultural and political diversity, a new reality is taking shape.

NOTE