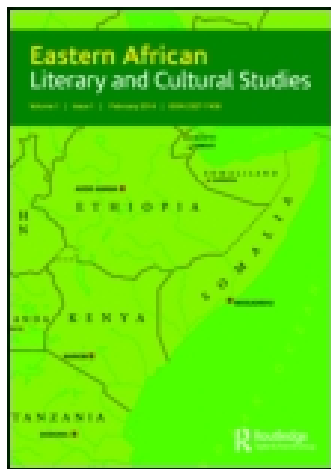


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The Intersection of the Self and History in Kenyan Autobiographies¹

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Life writing has increasingly become a popular genre which calls for sustained interrogation and analysis of the narratives produced. The autobiography is not only the story of the narrating subject but can be read as the history of the society within which the subject writes or lives. This essay reads a selection of Kenyan autobiographies representative of the various periods that the nation has lived through with a bid to examine how the narrating subjects inscribe themselves into the history of the nation. I argue that reading Kenyan autobiographies allows one to understand, through personal narratives, the history and the making of the Kenyan nation.

Keywords: Kenyan autobiography, history, self, life narratives

Introduction

The autobiography allows writers not only to narrate their life experiences but also to weave their personal stories into those of their societies and nations. To read an autobiography is to read the self as narrated by the autobiographical subject as well as to scrutinize stories and histories of the subject's society. This essay explores the meeting point of self and history in Kenyan autobiography. It is an evaluation of the role of autobiographers in interpreting the history of the making of the Kenyan nation in the past fifty years. Although autobiographies are generally read as personal accounts, they are also complex scripts of not just passage of time but of the dynamics that make, remake and unmake nations. The essay reads selected Kenyan autobiographies representative of narrating self in Kenya.

Autobiography and History: Some Theoretical Issues

One of the standards for the reading of autobiography is its supposed fidelity to historical truth. Autobiographers use their own experiences as testimony to the historical times in which they live. However, the autobiography is different from history in its use of personal details. Disciplinary convention requires historians to be faithful to the evidence available on a subject and to seek out multiple sources of evidence, including personal narratives. In *Oral Tradition*, Jan Vansina (1973) points out the need for historians to corroborate information by archeological finds and linguistic evidence to ensure reliability. Discussing the use of oral traditions as sources of history Vansina says, "... oral tradition can be of real value, but doubts must be entertained about it unless it can be substantiated by other historical sources" (8). Excellence in writing history demands precise objectivity. Historians preserve this objectivity and the truthfulness it pledges by maintaining a distance from their material and removing or qualifying any reference to themselves in the narrative.

Historians, like autobiographers, are writers assembling a story about the past from archives available to them. However, while historians place themselves outside or at the margins of the historical picture, autobiographers are at the centre of the pictures they assemble and are interested in the meaning of larger forces, conditions, or events for their own stories. William Ochieng observes in *Place of Biography in Kenyan History* (2005) that autobiographies provide

interpretations of events, not merely records as is the case in history. Georg Misch notes that although autobiographies are fundamentally personal narratives, they "... are bound always to be representative of their period, within a range that will vary with the intensity of the authors' participation in contemporary life and with the sphere in which they moved" (cited in Smith and Watson 2001, 113). These views point to the significance of the autobiography in reflecting the historical period in which the writer lives or writes.

The autobiography is intertwined with history and sometimes people read autobiographies as historical documents or evidence for the analysis of historical movements, events, or persons. The autobiography can be read as a history of the writer but it serves more purposes than just a historical record. It may contain facts, but it is not factual history, about a particular time, person, or event. Autobiographers may get some of the information for their narratives from history because, as Bethwell Ogot (2010) says,

History can provide many messages to those who turn to it for succor. It can provide opportunities for escape, blame, resentment, consolation, vindication, nostalgia. For some it can be a gateway into unparalleled aesthetic fulfillment or an opportunity to enjoy the frisson or thrill of safely viewed horror. It can feed an appetite for "experience," reinforce pride in heritage and tradition and proffer a degree of reassurance and reaffirmation regarding the closure of the past and the nature of our own identity in the present and future. It can also fuel serious—sometimes explosive—social and political aspirations (21–22).

However, while history aids autobiography in many ways as discussed by Ogot above, the autobiography does not give prominence to historical events, periods, or figures, but talks about them only in so far as they relate to the subject's experiences.

Kenyan Autobiographies through Time

Kenyan autobiographies written by African Kenyans started after independence from colonialism. Previously, autobiographies from Kenya were written by expatriates/colonialists such as Karen Blixen and Elspeth Huxley.

The earliest autobiography by a Kenyan was Tom Mboya's *Freedom and After*. Mboya's autobiography is the story of a nationalist and trade unionist which captures the activities of Kenyans who participated in the struggle for independence not just by fighting in the forest but in talks with the colonizers too. Mboya captures his rise in politics and discusses the problems of nation building. The title of his autobiography points to the author's interest not just in independence but also in outlining the future of an independent Kenya. For instance, he warns against suppression of the press, emphasizes the need for universities to be politically independent and for intellectuals to be free to analyze and criticize government policies. These are some of the problems that afflicted Kenya after independence. Since 1963 Kenyans have written autobiographies which give insights into Kenyan postcolonial politics, public service, political economy, culture, social relations, education, and other aspects of Kenyan society over time.

Rasna Warah's *Triple Heritage: A Journey to Self Discovery* recalls the history of British Imperialism in East Africa through a personal narrative. Warah's narrative is an autobiographical examination of history in an effort to trace the record of her community, the Kenyan Indians, and therefore understand herself as a person possessing a multiple heritage.

The history of Indians who served as labourers during the construction of the Kenya Uganda railway gets a personal perspective when Warah narrates about her great-grandfather, one of the earliest Indians to land in Kenya. Through a personal story we get to place history in her story and vice versa. Warah employs the narrative mode to address the suspicion that still exists between native Kenyans and Kenyans of Indian origin—native Kenyans view those of Indian origin as having sympathized with the colonial masters and worked with them in perpetuating colonialism and therefore feel that they too should have left together with the British in 1963. She explores the contribution of Indians to British rule in East Africa and notes that their role "left them with neither

the authority of the oppressor nor the humanity of the oppressed” (19). Warah defines herself as a Kenyan through historical associations. The construction of the Kenya Uganda railway acquires new meaning as not just an avenue through which the British were able to extend their imperialism in East Africa but as the beginning of a new life for one family from India and an important site of the history of Kenyan Indians.

Warah’s effort to understand herself by taking a journey through history reflects the significance of history in the definition of the self. As Francoise Lionnet (1989) argues:

Since history and memory have to be reclaimed either in the absence of hard copy or in full acknowledgement of the ideological distortions that have coloured whatever written documents and archival materials do exist, contemporary women writers especially have been interested in reappropriating the past so as to transform our understanding of ourselves. (4–5)

Warah, by engaging with history in her search for herself, transforms her understanding of herself and her community. Through the autobiographical process, she “locate[s] her personal experience in the common chronological record” (Anderson 2007, 105) and thereby becomes a representative of the common history of her people. In this sense, the history of her community and nation becomes her story. As Ogot (2010, 20) says, “new identities can be fragile and take time to substantiate. But they can be enriched and nourished by ancient roots so that many people find themselves turning to the past for guidance, reassurance and validation”. Warah’s work demonstrates that autobiographers do not only try to own the past as Ogot describes but they also seek to make their readers, through imaginative identification, feel like they too share in that past.

Political autobiographies offer accounts of Kenya’s pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial history as the writers narrate the events as they experienced them. Such autobiographies as Mboya’s, JM Kariuki’s and Oginga Odinga’s relate the history of Kenya’s anti-colonial and anti-racism struggles. They document Kenyans’ experiences of pain and suffering during colonialism, the sacrifices made during the struggle for independence and the dreams of a better nation at independence and how these efforts and dreams were betrayed by the post-independence government.

Kariuki’s *Mau Mau Detainee*, for instance, is perhaps the most detailed personal account on the Mau Mau anticolonial struggle in Kenya. The main issue that drove the Mau Mau resistance was land and the Mau Mau war remains a significant aspect of Kenya’s history. As Charles Hornsby notes:

The Mau Mau guerilla war of 1952–5 was a key event in Kenya’s history, and shaped its future political, economic and social structure. It was an unstructured, violent revolt amongst Africans—mostly Kikuyu—against foreign rule, land alienation and political and economic inequality (2012, 44).

Kariuki’s record of the Mau Mau narrative as part of his life narrative is a strategy of marrying the national story with that of the individual and in the process explaining how individuals participated in, or were affected by, the Mau Mau rebellion. The question of land, which was at the core of the Mau Mau war, was to become one of Kariuki’s main concerns even after independence when he became a Member of Parliament.

Kariuki’s experiences as a detainee between 1953 and 1960, during the State of Emergency in Kenya, give the struggle a human face. Kariuki had grown up during the colonial period and had seen and experienced first-hand the excesses of colonial rule including violence, forced labour, land excision and limited opportunities for education. In a bid to fight for the rights of his people, Kariuki took oaths and joined the Mau Mau, a step which led to his detention in various camps. Kariuki intertwines his narration of his experiences in detention with a recollection of the events happening in Kenya during this period including the formation of African political parties and the effects of the Second World War. This was also a period marked by heightened activities of the Mau Mau and swift response by the British forces. In a way, therefore, Kariuki’s narrative of

detention camps recalls the history of colonial Kenya especially in the years leading to the attainment of independence. As I argue elsewhere (Muchiri 2010) about Kariuki,

Narrating the story of his life, he puts himself on the historical map of [Kenya] by telling readers about his contribution to the struggle for independence. He is loyal to his motive of [re]telling the history of the nation through his story ... (52).

After independence, Kariuki joined government but he was one of the few members of that first postcolonial government of who agitated for the state to deliver on the *uhuru* promises. As Member of Parliament for Nyandarua, he fought courageously for the rights of the poor and his diligence might explain why the peasants held him in high esteem, making him a popular politician. Daniel Branch (2011) explains Kariuki's relationship with poor Kenyans thus:

Kariuki's supporters were the indebted and the poor, the landless and land-hungry who were dismayed at the rapid accumulation of property and wealth by the ruling elite. Of all the problems facing the country at the time, his favourite issues of corruption and land policy were those that exercised Kenyans most (105).

Kariuki spoke openly against the government's land policy which allowed individuals to own large tracts of land while many Kenyan's remained landless thus giving "public voice to a question that many Kenyans were asking themselves privately after a decade of independence: was this really what they fought so hard for?" (Branch 2011, 108). His active protest against unfair land policies did not sit comfortably with the ruling elite (Hornsby 2012, 225, Branch 2011, 106). He was assassinated in March 1975 and his mutilated body found dumped in Ngong Forest.

Odinga's *Not Yet Uhuru* is significant to Kenya's history and its title refers to the conditions of post-independence Kenya where subsequent governments have subjected citizens to a myriad of problems caused by neo-colonialism and greed for power and wealth. Odinga's narrative gives us an insider's perspective of the struggle for independence and against neo-colonialism since he was a member of the Legislative Council (LEGCO) and later a senior member of Kenya's first government. His autobiography tells the story of his life from childhood but its main focus is on his activities in politics which, he explains, he entered to join other Kenyans in pushing for independence. Odinga was among the leaders of the party of the struggle for independence, the other being Kenya African National Union (KANU) led by Jomo Kenyatta. Odinga paints himself as a true democrat and defender of justice and explains that he was dissatisfied with KANU's dictatorial leadership, leading him to resign from the government and form another political party, the Kenya People's Union (KPU) in 1969. Explaining his departure from government Odinga says,

I believe in making the democratic process work in the party, in government among the people. We fought for *uhuru* so that the people may rule themselves. Direct action, not underhand diplomacy and silent intrigue by professional politicians won *uhuru*, and only popular support and popular mobilization can make it meaningful (285).

Not Yet Uhuru gives insight into the history of political parties in Kenya. Odinga tells his story as part of the larger story of the formation of the Kenyan nation.

Bethwell Ogot's "Mau Mau and Nationhood: The Untold Story" records the growth of political parties in Kenya before independence and complements Odinga's narrative. Ogot demonstrates that there were many Kenyans who participated in the struggle for independence but were not formally recognized and neither were their names placed on the official list of Mau Mau war heroes. He argues that "most of [the heroes] have been allowed to die a second death [and that] such deaths fragment our collective memory and therefore our history" (34). Ogot is concerned about missing parts of Kenyan history and there is a way in which autobiographies fill part of this erased history. Through his autobiography, Odinga not only manages to inscribe himself into the history of the anti-colonial struggle by explaining his role in the making of the new independent nation but his personal experiences during this period reflect Kenya's history just before and after independence.

Other autobiographies offer a different perspective into the history of colonial Kenya. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Dreams in a Time of War* (2010) and *In the House of the Interpreter* (2013) and

Charity Waciuma's *Daughter of Mumbi* (1969) offer a child's perspective of Kenya's colonial history. Through the young Ngugi's and Waciuma's lives, we see how Kenyans lived under colonialism and the effects of the Mau Mau struggle and the State of Emergency on individuals and families. Autobiographies of the early politicians only offer an adult's representation of history and aim at positioning those writers right in the the action of the struggle for independence. However, narratives of childhood allow us to view history from a kind of 'domestic' perspective; how the evils of colonialism affected families and how children interpreted what was going on around them.

Daughter of Mumbi (1969) was the first autobiography published by a Kenyan woman after independence. Waciuma narrates the fear, uncertainty, humiliation and disruption that Kenyans faced during the State of Emergency. She recalls the displacement and forced movement of families into concentration villages, forced communal labour which was expected of all natives, the cruelty of the home guards who raped and incessantly harassed women and the wind of resistance that was blowing across the country.

Waciuma's story recalls the tragedy of a community at a cultural crossroads, with the colonial subjects trying to hold on to their African traditions in the face of the influence of British culture. For instance, her community, the Agikuyu, practiced female circumcision but since her parents had converted to Christianity Waciuma and her sisters did not undergo the rite. Their agemates and other villagers constantly taunted them for being 'unclean.' This memory invites us to empathize with Waciuma as she attempts to capture a time that Africans grappled with the intricate act of balancing between traditional African culture and Western culture. While in the village uncircumcised girls were alienated by their community, the colonial system of education offered them a lifeline while at the same time discriminating against the circumcised girls. At the missionary run school which Waciuma attends, she explains:

All those who were circumcised were put in one dormitory. They were segregated from the rest and we were taught to despise them ... they spent their three years at the school in half-seclusion, where their lives were made a misery and they became very withdrawn (83).

The discrimination against circumcised girls in the school is similar to that against uncircumcised girls in the village, a reversal which shows the social, cultural and psychological conflict that the colonial child lived through during this period.

Ngugi, in *Dreams in a Time of War*, narrates his early childhood as a boy growing up in Central Kenya during colonialism and the struggle for independence. His experiences capture the struggle of colonial subjects to acquire an education, especially considering that some Africans saw colonial education as part of their subjection to alien ways. The condition of Ngugi's family is representative of many families at the time that lived in poverty and uncertainty.

For Ngugi, as it was for many other children in colonial Kenya, education presented itself as the only opportunity for getting out of the drudgery of life in the village—it was a temporary respite as well as a promise of future socio-economic mobility in the changing world. The 'dreams' Ngugi alludes to in the title of the autobiography refer to the hope that colonial subjects lived with at the individual, community and national levels. Ngugi dreamed of a time when he would not have to live in poverty, watching his mother struggle to raise her children single-handedly and he saw education as the only way out of the poverty. At the national level, Kenyans had great dreams of independence when they would be able to govern themselves.

Ngugi refers to the period of his early childhood as 'a time of war' in the title of his autobiography. The war he refers to denotes the different conflicts that existed at this time at individual, national and international levels. Individual colonial subjects had to deal with internal conflicts as they lived a life of pain, torture, fear, insecurity and doubt under the colonial government. There were family conflicts as well such as the case with Ngugi's parents, who separated when Ngugi was a child. At the national level, the Mau Mau war was on and this presented difficulties for the natives as they lived in fear of both the Mau Mau and the colonial agents, while at the same time

dreaming that the Mau Mau would manage to drive the colonial masters away. In this autobiography, Ngugi inserts his brother, Good Wallace, into the history of the struggle for independence by narrating the brother's story as a freedom fighter. In this way, the stories of freedom fighters who did not get a chance to tell their stories find their way into Kenyan history.

At the international level, this was the period of the Second World War and Ngugi and his fellow children would hear about the fighting in faraway lands from stories told to them by their relatives who were among the Kenyans conscripted to fight for the British army in this war. Ngugi's brother Kabae and cousin Mwangi fought in the Second World War. The war may have been taking place thousands of miles away but Kenyans, living under British colonial rule, felt its effects. Ngugi thus weaves the significant political events of the time, such as WW2 and Kenyatta's detention, into the story of his own life whilst also symbolically tying those events into the memory of childhood in colonial Kenya.

In *In the House of the Interpreter*, Ngugi continues the story of his childhood, telling of his life as a student in Alliance High School between 1955 and 1958. Having arrived at Alliance High School at the height of the state of emergency, Ngugi confesses that he saw the school as a sanctuary which would protect him from "...the hounds [which] remained outside the gates, crouching, panting, waiting, biding their time" (2013, 4). The 'hounds' metaphorically refer to the British forces and the home guards, who made life extremely difficult for and instilled fear in the natives. In addition, his arrival at the school would mark a significant change in his social environment and lifestyle, leading to an entirely new phase in his life as one of the new breed of educated Africans in the country.

Ngugi intertwines the story of his life as a high school student with the story of the country and the world at the time. Kenya is going through the most trying period of her colonial history – the State of Emergency and its attendant violence and the heightened clamour for independence. Elsewhere on the continent a number of countries are becoming independent and the world is still recovering from the effects of the Second World War. All these events only heighten the tension in Ngugi's mind and life. His days in school are riddled with fear that the secret of his family, that his brother Good Wallace is a Mau Mau, would be discovered. If this were to happen it would jeopardize his chances of remaining in school and thus achieving his dreams. Life is not easy for young Ngugi; they have lost their home; his mother is detained at the home guard post for questioning; his sister-in-law is imprisoned; and his immediate community is virtually imprisoned. His dreams are threatened; the fear that rules the people in the outside world shadows him into the 'fortress.' Ngugi explains, "... the loss lurked inside me, stoking fears of more unexpected and sudden interruptions of my life" (2013, 30).

Ngugi recounts the challenges faced by families during the State of Emergency when he narrates how, on arrival in his village for his first holiday from Alliance High School, he finds that all the homes had been destroyed and people forced into concentration villages. The creation of concentration villages during the State of Emergency gains an intimate narration through Ngugi when he explains how lost he felt on returning from Alliance to find his home missing:

I stop, put down the box, and look around me. The hedge of ashy leaves that we planted looks the same, but beyond it our homestead is rubble of burnt dry mud, splinters of wood, and grass. My mother's hut and my brother's on stilts have been razed to the ground. My home, from where I set out for Alliance only three months ago, is no more. Casting my eyes beyond, I suddenly realize that the whole village of homesteads has disappeared. (2013, 2)

He experiences despair, alienation, pain and fear on realizing that he cannot relate to the only place he had known as home. The displacement of Ngugi's family invokes the experiences of many families in colonial Kenya which were pushed into concentration villages to make it easier for colonial administrators to hunt down the Mau Mau fighters as well as monitor the non-combatants. Ngugi's vivid description of his homecoming from school that first holiday enables readers to see

the devastating effect of concentration villages on individuals, particularly for a young man like Ngugi who is made to feel like a stranger in his own home.

Such historical events as narrated by Ngugi and Waciuma cease to be mere marks in and records of history but gain personal significance and acquire a human face. Narrated through autobiographies of the writers' childhood memories, these events become part of individuals' memories and histories.

Autobiographies and the Narration of Post-independence Kenya

Narratives about Kenya after independence reveal a populace betrayed by the post-independence government. The autobiographies written about this period confirm Ogot's claim that "those who emerged to rule in 1963 were, in many cases, those who had betrayed the freedom fighters, a group of nascent grabbers and looters" (2003, 9). Autobiographies of political detainees after independence demonstrate the pain and dehumanization of the supposed 'enemies' of the state during Moi and Kenyatta's governments. In their studies on Kenyan history Branch and Hornsby confirm that those who were seen as threats by the government were detained without trial and tortured in Nyayo House. Some of those detained include Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Wanyiri Kihoro and Raila Odinga.

Autobiographies like Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* and Kihoro's *Never Say Die* record the experiences of advocates of anti-neocolonialism and anti-dictatorship. Their stories narrate the history of Kenya in the late 70s and 80s when the government concentrated all efforts on repressing those who questioned the death of the Kenyan independence dream. Such autobiographies tell not just the narrated subjects' role in the agitation for better governance but that of other Kenyans who were detained without being subjected to judicial trial for their efforts to liberate Kenya from dictatorial rule. These Kenyans, through the narrative process, become part of an important period in Kenya's postcolonial history. Through such narratives, "the autobiography becomes both a way of testifying to oppression and empowering the subject through their cultural inscription and recognition" (Anderson 2007, 104).

Such autobiographies give human sensitivity to the pain and torture as the narrating subjects relate their experiences in the infamous Nyayo torture chambers, Kamiti prison and other prisons around the country and recall the government's efforts to suppress public intellectuals. The government appeared intent on silencing intellectuals including lawyers, university students and lecturers and journalists because it was convenient for the ruling elite to have 'ignorant' masses who would not question the excesses of the leaders. Kenyans who tried to sensitize the people about social injustice were considered dissidents and were silenced. These are stories that would not be found in history text books but they find a place in the public space through autobiographies such as Ngugi's and Kihoro's where the subjects narrate their personal experiences of a repressive regime and in the process record a dark part of Kenya's history.

Rosemary Kariuki-Machua's *I am My Father's Daughter* (2008) adds to the narrative of the history of a Kenyan government that betrayed its citizens. Kariuki-Machua is JM Kariuki's daughter and in this autobiography she narrates her difficult journey in search of the truth about her father's death and justice for the family of the slain politician.

Machua's autobiography examines Kenyan history, seeking to unearth the events that led to the assassination of JM Kariuki in 1975. Her narrative recalls political assassinations in post-independence Kenya, the most famous being those of JM Kariuki, Tom Mboya, Pio Gama Pinto and Robert Ouko. Machua's narrative of pain at the loss of a father reveals the effects of poor governance on the community and the individual. This story records the fear and intimidation which characterized Kenya's public life especially before the introduction of multiparty politics in the 1990s.

I am My Father's Daughter recalls Kenyan history as Kariuki-Machua tries to understand the circumstances that led to her father's assassination.

Her story is one of betrayal as she feels betrayed by her own country from childhood. The betrayal of one individual or family can be understood as a metaphor of the betrayal of Kenyans by the postcolonial government which reneged on its promise to deliver the independence dream—to get rid of ignorance, poverty and disease. Kariuki-Machua may be feeling the pain of losing a father at the individual level but her pain echoes that of many Kenyans who have suffered such loss over the years. This autobiography is therefore not just recalling history but it is also a cry for justice in a country characterized by injustices, especially those sanctioned or engineered by the state and an effort to confront and reconcile with bitter memories.

Stories about detention and political assassinations would not be found in official history textbooks because the education system and curriculum are sanctioned by the state and therefore children would only be taught what the government would have them know. The autobiography thus complements historical records as it offers the unofficial history of a nation in the making.

However, there is also a way in which the political autobiography can offer a falsified sense of history. Njenga Karume's *From Charcoal to Gold* (2009) narrates the history of colonial and postcolonial Kenya through the eyes of a businessman and politician. While the narrative allows Karume to inscribe himself into Kenyan history, it inadvertently reveals that being close to the state gives the subject advantage over the rest of the citizens, especially in business. Karume tries to convince the reader that he rose from selling charcoal to owning gold without any favours from Presidents Kenyatta, Moi and Kibaki, whose close friendship with him is well documented in the narrative, but readers can see through the deliberate attempt to project a clean image of industry without admitting that he was only able to make the 'gold' because he was close to the seat of power. Karume was the chairman of GEMA (Gikuyu Embu Meru Association), formed in 1971 as a welfare union for these communities with Jomo Kenyatta as its patron, which gave Karume political clout. In later years GEMA established a commercial arm to invest in land buying and businesses, which gave Karume better economic influence (Hornsby 2012, 271).

Karume, having been a politician who understood the political struggles of Kenya, especially the fight for independence, partly betrays Kenyan history by under-representing the Mau Mau story in his autobiography. This is a case of autobiographers presenting only the version of history that favours the subject and erasing that which is not in their favour.

Karume erases certain aspects of Kenyan history such as the Mau Mau war and projects himself as a successful businessman. His narrative demonstrates the possibility of convenient truths in autobiographies; it would be an inconvenient truth for him to state that the mere closeness to the ruling elite predisposes one to opportunities not necessarily available to other citizens. By narrating his story and highlighting his efforts in business, he camouflages the truth that opportunities are often aided by how close one is to power.

Scripting the Kenyan Professional

Most autobiographies of professionals in Kenya have been written by teachers, doctors and civil servants, most of whom have seen the nation transform from the colonial period to the present. These autobiographies demonstrate how literacy and education have enabled Kenyans to write their life stories. 'Professional' autobiographies, just like the 'political' ones, reveal how the professionals opt to gloss over issues related to the history of Kenya, focusing instead on their supposed professional achievements.

Autobiographies are stories of moments and events and as professionals write their life stories, they parallel the milestones in their professional lives to some of the events in the history of the nation. Bethwell Ogot's *My Footprints on the Sands of Time* (2003), for instance, is a story about the history of the Luo community, the coming of Christianity in Luoland, and other historical events in relation to the life of the subject. His recording of the history of the Luo in a bid to trace his genealogy is a creative representation of history and a style of not only writing himself into history but also claiming ownership of that history. Ogot is an historian and reading his

autobiography one can clearly see his effort to give a chronological account of the events of his professional life in relation to that of Kenya. What is most noticeable is his recounting of the assassination of Tom Mboya in 1969 but not that of Robert Ouko, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, in 1990. In circumstances reminiscent of JM Kariuki's death in 1975, Ouko's body was found dumped near his home in Koru in February 1990 and although different theories have been advanced regarding his murder (Hornsby 2012, 474, Branch 2011, 190–193, Anguka 1998, 69–99) and a number of people arrested, the matter has never been concluded. Ogot conveniently chooses not to include that important detail about Kenya's political history in his narrative—a very conspicuous omission considering that Ogot is a historian and therefore expected to be loyal to historical facts.

Joseph Mungai's *From Simple to Complex: The Journey of a Herdsboy* (2002) narrates the author's academic and professional life, whilst it is less bothered by the historical and political happenings in the country. Mungai went to elementary school and university during the period of the State of Emergency in Kenya but his story is conspicuously silent about this period. The motive of professional autobiographies is often self-portraiture and the painting of a role model and that may explain the preoccupation with the author's academic and professional journeys. However, even within its subject field of medicine, Mungai's narrative, probably unconsciously, contributes to the erasure of history in the sense that it does not give narrative space, however minimal, to the first medical doctor in Kenya, J C Likimani. Mungai, the reader expects, would have taken advantage of his agency through autobiographical narration to record the important piece of Kenyan history that the first Kenyan doctor was a Maasai, a community that has over the years been deemed to be less educated compared to the rest of Kenyan communities. Had Mungai included this detail in his narrative, it would have gone a long way in subverting conventional history with regard to the Maasai community. Autobiographies serve history by filling gaps and correcting inaccuracies and Mungai's narrative in a way fails to do this with regard to this important piece of Kenya's social history.

Grace Ogot's *Days of My Life* (2012) is the story of a professional turned politician. Her narrative can be read as the story of the women of Kenya over the years. By narrating the effect of having a father who was willing to withstand public ridicule to educate his daughters at a time when many parents considered it a waste to educate daughters, this narrative demonstrates the importance of educating women. Being among the pioneer female politicians in Kenya, Ogot narrates the events of her life by intertwining them with those of Kenya, especially under the rule of President Moi.

Ogot was the first Kenyan woman to receive a scholarship to study in England; the first African nursing sister at Maseno Hospital, the first African Sister-in-Charge of Makerere University Health Service, the first Kenyan female District Community Development Officer, the first Principal of Kisumu Homecraft Training Centre and the first Kenyan woman to be nominated as a councillor (Kisumu Municipality), among other firsts. She is a pioneer Kenyan female author and politician. Ogot has been involved in women's empowerment efforts and was the deputy leader of the Kenyan delegation to the 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. She achieved these feats in a context where the society would have expected her to become a housewife. Her autobiography, therefore, restates the history of the women's movement in Kenya from colonial to postcolonial times.

Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed: One Woman's Story* (2006) places the 2004 Nobel Prize winner as an important figure in Kenya's history. Maathai was an academic, environmentalist and later politician. Born in 1940, Maathai was somehow protected from the vagaries of the State of Emergency and the Mau Mau war because she was in school at the height of these conflicts. However, her narrative retells the history of Kenya in the late 80s and 90s during the reign of President Moi. Her narration of her efforts to force the government to treat her and her female colleagues in the university just like their male colleagues, to conserve the environment,

particularly her fight to save Uhuru Park and Karura Forest from greedy real estate developers is an indication of the effects of poor post-independence leadership.

Maathai's narrative recalls the presence of political prisoners in the country as she narrates how she joined mothers of political prisoners in Uhuru Park to agitate for their sons and husbands' release by the Moi government. Branch notes that the women's 'release political prisoners' campaign:

...built Maathai a national reputation as a fierce advocate of political reform and the extension of human rights. By contrast images of policemen beating the women protesters... led to yet more public condemnation of the regime (2011, 189)

Maathai's participation in this campaign and her experience in politics demonstrate the hurdles Kenyan women have faced over the years in their effort to get a public political platform. Fifty years after independence, the women of Kenya are yet to get sufficient representation in the political class—in the 2013 general elections not a single woman was elected governor or senator. Maathai's narrative adds to the archive of stories on dictatorship in Kenya. Due to her advocating for good governance, respect for human rights and justice, she was tortured, harassed, beaten, arrested and sacked from her university job by the Moi government. Narrating the period after she was sacked from the University of Nairobi she says,

On Monday, I woke up and was confronted with the question of what to do with my life. I had no job and no salary. I had no pension and very few savings. I was about to be evicted from my house. Everything that I had hoped for and relied on was gone—in the space of three days. I was forty-one years old and for the first time in decades I had nothing to do. I was down to zero (2006, 163).

Maathai's personal experience at the hands of the Moi government elucidates the history of political harassment of intellectuals and activists in Kenya. In addition, her narrative makes a significant contribution to the archive of Kenyan women in politics. Yet Maathai remains one of the most significant figures of Kenya's history, not just because of her political and environmental activities but also because she made history by becoming the first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize and the first to receive the award for environmental conservation. Her story, therefore, places Kenya on the world map while at the same time offering insight into Kenya's political history.

Conclusion

Kenyan autobiographies reveal that autobiographers use historical sources for their stories and that history, inherently, shapes autobiography. Anderson argues that "the autobiographical self is not invented *ex nihilo* but constructed by 'calling on' representations that are historically available" (2007, 104). In light of this argument, the autobiographies read in this essay reveal that autobiographers take advantage of poetic licence to manipulate their narratives and produce accounts that either endorse or challenge official or state history. In addition, autobiographies create their own silences and publicize their own preferred histories by manipulating narratives for self-positioning. Kenyan autobiographers retell the history of the nation only insofar as it relates to their personal lives and enables them to project themselves positively.

Note

1. This paper was first presented at the "East Africa at 50: A Celebration of Histories and Futures" Conference held at the University of Nairobi, 10-12 September 2013, and co-organized by the Department of Literature, University of Nairobi, Native Intelligence, Nairobi, and the English Department, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch.

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