The Dehumanized "Other:" The Arts as a Counterforce to Otherization in Kenya

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The concept of the "other" has been used by different disciplines: in philosophy, in religion, and in literature among others. So it is a concept that cannot be fixed because it is used differently in different disciplines. However, my argument is that a number of the problems we face in Kenya come from the concept of the "other." When you talk about the "other," you are moving yourself away from a group of people in order to justify your actions.

Conceptually there is nothing wrong with the "other." It is a beautiful thing. The problem with the "other" is our relationship with the "other." You cannot avoid the "other." It is inevitable. However, it is how we live with the "other" that is the problem, and I will demonstrate how the very concept of the "other" is at the root of Kenya's problems, particularly in post-election violence.

People have this idea that Kenya is a peaceful country, and to some extent that is true. But Kenya's peace is only in relation to the general chaos of the Great Lakes and Eastern African region, which includes Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, South Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia. There are a lot of things happening in the country that are not peaceful.

There are so many conflicts, so this study will only highlight a few of them. The main conflicts are concentrated in the northeast region of Kenya, over water. Because the region is arid and semi-arid, and because most of the communities have inadequate pasture and water, conflicts regularly erupt over these scarce resources. People end up killing each other over water because there is so little of it, that everyone's basic needs cannot be met. Everyone wants access to the water resource, and when the rains fail, as it has over the past three years, the killing gets worse. The only thing that every family in this region cannot miss is a gun, and it is not just a simple gun, but a big one: an AK-47. Virtually every family has a gun in this region because it is the only way they can survive. When young boys and girls are taking goats and cows to watering points, the main thing they carry with them is a gun. It is a question of life and death for them. How then do you get to that scarce water resource and use it while knowing that

there is somebody else competing with you for the same thing? The easiest way is to "otherize" them, to make them the enemy. It makes it easier to shoot them and keep the water for yourself.

The other problem in Kenya is conflict over land. Land is an emotive subject in Kenya. Everybody is looking for a piece of land. The paradox is that there is so much land, yet so little for our greed. The British colonized Kenya and took the best land for agriculture for themselves. They took most of the fertile land in Kenya. However, when Kenya gained independence in 1964, that land was not given back to the original owners. The land was, for the most part, taken over by the new post-independent African rulers, most of them British collaborators during colonization. Even today, people in Kenya still feel that the land was wrongfully appropriated and that it should be given back. The British took this land for themselves and then distributed it between their friends. Unless the land distribution is solved, some of the conflicts we have may never end. There are people who are squatters on their ancestral land. When you are a squatter on the land that your ancestors owned, it becomes a bit problematic.

How then do you get to "other" here? The British took the land and drove the Kenyans off the land because the colonized Kenyans were the "other." Kenya gained independence, our politicians pushed the owners off the land as the others, and this created the situation that is going on today. It is the same idea as demonizing the "other" so that you can exploit them or keep them at bay while you enjoy things that everybody else does not have. It happens not only in Kenya, but everywhere. It is a global phenomenon.

Tribal conflict is one of the biggest, if not the biggest, problems that continue to plague Kenya. Tribal conflict plays out in a tricky way. Every five years we become a group of tribes, not Kenyans. Every five years is when we hold our General Elections. Every General Election, the leaders, without failure, remind us that we are not Kenyans, but a collection of tribes. In public, these leaders preach "unity, peace and liberty" as enshrined in the national anthem, but in private and coded public messages, they excite our primal tribal instincts. They succeed all the time. I happen to be a Luo, one of the two ethnic communities in Kenya that has been fighting since independence. The other ethnic group is called the Kikuyu. I have lived the history of that conflict, and by the look of things, that conflict is not going anywhere. These people fear, abhor, and sometimes kill each other, as witnessed in the 2007-2008 post-election violence, for no other reason than that they belong to different ethnic communities. How do you kill a person other than "otherizing" them, pushing them away into less than human entities? They become easy to kill. You cannot kill we because it is a part of me. The "other" is easy to kill and exploit.

Terrorism is what we are dealing with right now, and it is everywhere. Kenya has had more than its share of terrorism. Why is it happening? There is terrorism flowing across the border, largely from Somalia. The northern part of Kenya has a Somali population who are Kenyans. This makes it easy for Somalis to cross over into Kenya. There is a schism developing between Kenyans and the Kenyan-

Somalis. It is a sad situation, and it is happening because we see these Somalis become the "others," who are terrorizing us, instead of considering them as Kenyans. Kenya has been subjected to a number of terrorist attacks, two of the most infamous being the 1989 bombing of the United States Embassy and the 2013 violent siege of the Westgate Mall in Nairobi. Both were moments of horrible terror, and we lived it.

How did we get to this "other" in Kenya? I have three theories, and they could be wrong since this is unfamiliar territory for me. One of my theories is that before colonialism, the idea of the "other" was already in Kenya because tribes were already fighting each other. They were killing each other, but it was contained because there were indigenous systems that were in place to deal with this, like the council of elders that was in virtually all communities. Such indigenous mechanisms effectively managed conflicts and promoted peacebuilding before colonialism.

Then the colonialists came, and they realized that the Kenyans were already killing each other. They figured out that the best way to colonize the natives was to encourage the existing conflicts, make them bigger and more violent—classic divide-and-rule. As Kenyans were busy fighting and killing each other, the colonialists were stealing, settling on and enjoying the land. For example, my Luo community largely collaborated with the colonialists and, therefore, enjoyed earlier exposure to Western education. The colonialists did not appropriate and settle on their land. The Kikuyus, on the other hand, fought the colonialists who had stolen and settled on their land, and forced them to work on the same land without pay. The stage was set for the Luo-Kikuyu conflict that still plagues the country. The colonialists made "otherization" commonplace in Kenya. Officially, Kenya has forty-two ethnic communities. That translates into forty-two different languages. The easiest way to manage these different groups of people is to keep them apart.

Finally there was the era of post-colonialism. We got independence and for a lot of people it was not real independence. Many people had lost their land and never got it back. They did not get their independence. The new African rulers decided to continue the British policy of divide and rule, which is based on "otherization." This is still going on today. It is why the politicians have figured out so neatly how to divide us by tribes. Kenyans vote in tribal blocks. Political parties are formed along tribal lines. We are neatly partitioned into groups of "others."

How then, do we use the arts as a force to oppose the bleak picture I have painted? I have been working with Dr. Cynthia Cohen of Brandeis University for years and so I would like to borrow a quote from her program: "In times of destruction and war, artists assert the power of creativity and counteract the demonization of the enemy. They bear witness to suffering and draw the world's attention to those whose rights have been abused." The demonization of the "other" is where I see the arts helping to humanize the "other," what I would call rehumanization. When you are dehumanized, then you are not human anymore. The arts help people find their way back to humanity.

There are many successful examples of the use of the arts to rehumanize. One of the most successful examples in Kenya is graffiti and street art. Groups of young artists organize and paint powerful images on city walls in the night. One piece deals with all manner of corruption, including specific past corruption cases in Kenya. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1: Boniface Mwangi "MaVulture" as it appeared in Craig Halliday "Street Art: Taking art to the people." *Africanah.org.* August 3, 2016. http://africanah.org/street-art-taking-art-to-the-people-2/

Graffiti/street art has been highly successful as a form of activism in Kenya. It has helped to rehumanize the country by providing a forum for therapeutic dialogue on what ails the country. When the politicians do not give you space to express yourself, you turn to the walls of their beautiful buildings to do so. That is revolutionary activity!

The Members of Parliament (MPs) in Kenya are some of the best paid in the world. How is it that they are paid so well? The MPs passed a motion in Parliament to raise their own salaries. The passing of this motion provoked widespread protest countrywide. In Nairobi, a group of civil society activists painted the names of MPs who were accused of corruption onto pigs. (See Figure 2.) The protest was called "MPigs." They marched the painted pigs to Parliament Buildings where the MPs who were present saw them and disappeared into the building. As usual, the police came and broke up the protest, violently arresting some of the protestors. This is where art becomes activism. This was a high moment for Kenyan street art. I do not know of a higher form of art than a herd of brightly painted pigs in the middle of a city street!

Figure 2: Boniface Mwangi, "MPigs." As appeared in Karen Eng. "Why I chose to stand up, alone: TED Fellow Boniface Mwangi on risking his life for justice in Kenya." *TED Blog* February 27, 2015. http://blog.ted.com/ted-fellow-boniface-mwangi-on-risking-his-life-for-justice-in-kenya/

Photography has also had an impact on social activism and de-"otherization" in Kenya. There are a number of groups who are using photography to unite people. There is a group of civil society activists who use some very gruesome photos of the 2007-2008 post-election violence to remind Kenya, and indeed the world, of the ugliness of electoral violence. They put up photographs on street walls and sidewalks of people who were murdered, dismembered, and left for dead. People are confronted with what they do to each other as Kenyans. Because of these art forms, people are beginning to see each other as humans and as Kenyans, not as members of other tribes. Photography is effectively giving Kenyans a route to rehumanize themselves, to move from "others" to a nation.

Theater has the longest history in Kenya. Theater for Development (TFD) has been used in Kenya for many years, especially with international aid organizations. They get young people involved in the theater groups and they use them for whatever program they are supporting, like public health. I am not sure how effective instrumentalized use of art has been in these community development programs. Now, that is changing a little bit. Artists are beginning to use theater to remind us that we are Kenyans, across the entire country. The universities are always three or four steps behind the civil society but they are getting in on the act. The academics at the universities are still writing books, so by the time they are published, society has moved on to something else.

Part of the reason I started working with communities was a feeling that something needed to be done that the university was not paying attention to. For example, while the Maasai people are marrying

off their girls at twelve years of age, academics are writing and publishing papers about it and getting promotions. That is great for their careers, but these girls need urgent help to save them from a bleak cultural future. Assuming they beget children every two years until they are forty, those would be big unsustainable families and very distraught lives. I wanted to go beyond the university and do work that begged to be done.

I am the head of the Literary Studies Department at my university. Within our department, we have an artistic outfit called Free Travelling Theater (FTT), which produces plays and other performance pieces such as poetry recitations in Kiswahili, local languages, and English. FTT organizes performances in schools, community centers, churches, and other public places. We engage with audiences and talk about things that matter to them. These are the issues that inform the themes of the performances that we put on. In a subtle way, it is the professors who gain more from these experiences because they get to learn so much from the community. The best library will not give you the same insights that you can get from genuine engagement with communities. Theater, therefore, is a powerful and effective tool in various forms of "deotherizaion," including class "deotherization."

Poetry is one of my favorite art forms. Young Kenyans are coming forward with peace poems, some of which are turned into popular music. These young artists are crisscrossing the country to recite their poems and engage the audience in post-performance discussions. This poetry is geared towards making the "other" seem normal, to make them seem not so strange that they can be abused and killed.

Like poetry, music has been a powerful means of "deotherization." A lot of young artists, especially hip-hop artists, are addressing peace issues in their music. They give reconciliation and peace a rhythm that speaks to young people. The proliferation of FM stations that give priority to popular music is helping to spread this rhythmic peace message.

An example of this peace music is a song entitled "Mungu Baba," which means "God the Father." It is a prayer to God to make Kenya a peaceful nation. The artist, popularly known as Rufftone, worked with a group of paramilitary soldiers called the General Service Unit (GSU). The GSU is the most notorious police force in Kenya because of their earned reputation of violence in suppressing civil protests against the government. It started as a rehabilitation program for street children. Because most street children did not have traceable family, it was easy to indoctrinate them. In this collaborative performance, Rufftone rehumanizes the GSU and softens their violent image.

The arts have the power to awaken empathy. In the absence of empathy, cruelty has the space to thrive. You cannot be cruel if you have empathy. If art can awaken empathy across tribal groups, what I would call across-line empathy, you cannot only empathize with what you have, but you empathize across lines and "deotherize." If we can do this, Kenya stands a chance as a truly united nation. The arts have a powerful role in teaching Kenyans how to reawaken their empathy to "deotherize" the perceived enemy.