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# IT'S OUR TURN TO EAT

THE STORY OF A KENYAN WHISTLE-BLOWER

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# The Making of the Sheng Generation

'Whether Luo or Kikuyu, our children will not act the way we do.'

EVA GAITHA, director of a Nairobi  
coffin accessory company

Not only had John's talent-spotters misread their man. They had failed to register, in the complacent, careless way of the privileged, profound social and historical changes taking place around them, tendencies fuelling a national sense of exasperation with the old ways of doing things.

Langata Cemetery, which lies on the road linking the suburb of Langata with central Nairobi, is not the quietest of final resting places. Just across the busy road bordering its grounds is Wilson airport, the capital's second air terminal. It is a gathering place for traders sending bundles of the narcotic *khat*, grown on the chilly hillsides around Mount Kenya, driven to Nairobi at breakneck speed to retain maximum freshness, and dispatched to twitchy customers in Somalia, Djibouti and Ethiopia. Returning *khat* flights drone constantly overhead, so close that graveside mourners get an intimate view of the aircraft's undercarriage and landing gear, fully extended prior to impact.

The cemetery is in constant, heavy use. With up to twenty-five funerals scheduled on an average day, three to four ceremonies are being staged simultaneously in different parts of the grounds at any one time. Styles and trappings vary, for there is no equality in death. Ceremonies in the 'permanent' side of the cemetery attract convoys of new cars, gleaming black hearses, and grieving relatives shelter from the sun under spotless white gazebos. Funerals in the 'temporary' section, where the soil is turned over and used afresh every fifty years, kick off with the arrival of a careering, inappropriately gaudy *matatu*, hired for the day by a fundraising committee, mourners crammed inside, coffin lashed onto the roof rack, with only the occasional tree offering shade. But both sides of the cemetery have one thing in common – an awareness of being on an industrial conveyor belt of death, whose brisk momentum is perhaps a little undignified but at least leaves mercifully little time to wallow in grief. 'It's very speedy, all over in about an hour,' says an undertaker. 'It's like a cocktail party. Everyone is standing, you're all uncomfortable, but it's over fast. That's why people like Langata.'

Demand is so heavy that the cemetery is running out of space. In the 'permanent' section, where members of the middle and upper classes end up below engraved marble stones, enclosed for all eternity in miniature villas with gravel lawns and iron gates, the grassy paths are being nibbled away by new burial plots. In the perfunctorily sign-posted 'temporary' area, used for the short of cash and for small children, new arrivals are being squeezed into spaces between existing graves, whose boundaries are discernible only to the cemetery officials and sweating diggers.

Once, burying a loved one in Nairobi was regarded as a near abomination by all but the colonials and Kenyan Asians, so rare that two French researchers described the city – inaccurately – as 'a capital without cemeteries' in a dissertation. Relatives paid for the dearly departed to be transported upcountry, back to the *shamba* they regarded as their true home. Only the destitute, nameless and friendless ended up in the capital's cemeteries. Now, demand so far outstrips supply that the price of plots in Langata has quadrupled in five years.

Undertakers shrug their shoulders and predict that the overcrowded cemetery cannot last much longer – 'In two years' time this place will be full,' mutters one – forcing the city authorities either to find a site for a new cemetery or to authorise the construction of private crematoria. And just as the former scarcity of local cemeteries once reflected the fact that the Kenyan nation was no more than an uneasy conglomeration of tribal statelets, the increasing tendency to bury the dead in the city marks a change in Kenyan society's sense of itself.

'The old folk always go upcountry,' says Benjamin Kibiku, director of Montezuma and Mona Lisa Funeral Services, the first indigenous funeral business to open in Kenya. 'With them, there is that feeling, "I have to be invested in the land of my ancestors."' Seeking a name that would be ethnically indeterminate, Kibiku baptised his company after a boyhood nickname and in tribute to his wife, 'because she's as beautiful as that portrait.'

Montezuma and Mona Lisa's motto – 'Service to the World' – is emblazoned on the wall of Kibiku's office, and he relishes the phrase 'one-stop shop' when describing what the company offers: coffin with satin trimmings, hearse, mourners' transport, gazebo, coffin-lowering apparatus – everything but the plot of land is included in the price. With quiet satisfaction, he shows off the forty-seat coaches, painted with the Montezuma logo, used to take city mourners back to their villages. 'I was the first person to come up with this prototype. It's specific to Kenya.' Just behind the back wheels, each bus boasts an idiosyncratic feature: an empty compartment with a neat glass port-hole, for stowing and easy viewing of the coffin during the bumpy, hazardous trip home. No one wants a coffin falling out in transit.

Montezuma's coaches are permanently booked, Kibiku says, yet he's noticed the beginnings of a generational divide. 'Young families feel that they met in Nairobi, they married in Nairobi, they have no interest in upcountry. So when members die, they are buried in Nairobi.'

The change is at its most obvious amongst the adaptable Kikuyu, least evident in residents from tradition-bound Western Province. Population pressure in Central Province means families are anxious

not to waste farming land. A body on the premises not only gets in the way of planting, it makes land difficult to lease or sell. There's also a question of cost, with an upcountry funeral setting a Nairobi-based family back up to 180,000 shillings, more than many can afford. But underlying all those considerations, Kibiku acknowledges, rests his customers' subtly shifting concept of what counts as home. 'An attitude change is under way.'

That shift seems inevitable when one looks at the figures. Like other African nations, Kenya is experiencing vertiginous urbanisation, as shifting climate patterns, the subdivision of plots, soil degradation and mechanised farming push those who will never inherit land and are no longer needed to work it towards the city. In 1962, one in twelve Kenyans lived in urban centres; by 1999 the figure was one in three, with half the population expected to be city-based by 2015. 'Whenever I go upcountry I'm always amazed at how empty it is,' says a Kenyan journalist born in Luoland. 'Only drunks, idiots and the old, only failures, stay behind in the rural areas.'

Originally designed for just 200,000 inhabitants, Nairobi now holds 4–4.5 million. It has more than doubled in size in the past five years, giving it one of the highest growth rates of any African city. That growth consists almost entirely of the poor, whose shacks have filled what were the green spaces in a network of loosely connected satellite settlements. Nearly two out of three of the capital's inhabitants occupy the two hundred resulting slums, a steady source of income for City Council officials, too busy levelling fantasy 'taxes' on the unauthorised dwellings to want to alter the status quo. Among the most squalid the continent has to offer, these settlements nuzzle against well-heeled residential areas in provocative intimacy. 'What's striking about Nairobi is that each wealthy neighbourhood lies cheek by jowl with a slum,' remarks former MP Paul Muite. 'It's almost like a twinning arrangement. Poverty and wealth stare each other in the face. And that's simply untenable. Those slum-dwellers know what they're missing, they're educated now. I tell my wife: "There's no way, long term, those guys are going to accept to die of hunger when the smell of your chapattis is wafting over the wall."

The biggest slum is Kibera, virtually an obligatory stop these days on visiting VIPs' itineraries. Kibera, bizarrely, lies within a tee shot's distance of Nairobi's golf club. Aerial photographs show the neat green medallion that is the club abutting what looks like a brown sea of broken matchsticks, in fact the corrugated-iron *mabati* roofs of between 800,000 and 1.2 million residents, prompting the immediate mental query: 'Why don't they just invade?' Kibera is where the phrase 'flying toilets' was added to the English language, a description of the method used to dispose of faeces – dump it in a plastic bag and throw it out of the window – by residents who couldn't be bothered walking to the public latrine. Yet while the slum does not boast regular electricity, tarred roads or clean water, it offers hope of a different kind. If your children miraculously survive to the age of five in Kibera, they will go on to receive a far better education than their rural equivalents, and in that education lie untold possibilities.

By the late 1990s, many analysts were confidently predicting that population trends alone would accomplish what Kenya's presidents had failed to achieve with their national anthems, independence days and flag salutes: a true sense of nationhood. Nairobi's first slums were mono-ethnic, the result of colonial attempts to corral Africans into distinct, controllable areas during the Emergency years. The newer ones started out that way, but the phenomenon didn't last long. Often dubbed a Luo settlement, Kibera itself actually contains forty-two separate tribes, 'all doing their jig together', as an official from the UN's Habitat told me. Ethnicity blurred in playgrounds, schools, universities and offices. 'When people first arrive in Kibera, they initially go to where their people are and look for work. They arrive with nothing, so to cut costs they sleep six to a room. The longer they live together, the more they fuse. They are forced to share meals, they share *mandazi* [doughnuts]. They mix at school, at political rallies, at prayer. The old people are the problem. But the kids don't know whether they are Kikuyu, Luo or Kalenjin, whether they are from Tanzania, Uganda or Kenya.'

Even in the space of the dozen years I reported on Kenya, it was possible to log a fundamental shift in the way Nairobi's residents

viewed themselves. When I first arrived, the easiest way to discover someone's ethnicity was to ask where they came from. Nobody ever said 'Nairobi'. Even those born and brought up in the capital felt they were essentially *from* somewhere else. Historically a mere junction between Kikuyuland, Maasailand and Ukambani, Nairobi just happened to be the place you received an education, held down a job or brought up a family. It remained a form of no man's land, an accidental city, commanding little pride, strictly temporary. By the end of the Moi era, the reaction to that same question was different, and as often as not came with a defiant stiffening of the spine. 'Where am I from? I'm from Nairobi,' a student would say, or: 'Look, I consider myself a Kenyan.'

Kenya's demography makes radical change inevitable. A staggering 70 per cent of the population is below the age of thirty. That statistic, shared with many African nations, is as hopeful as it is terrifying. And the fact that those youngsters do not think in the same way as their parents is highlighted by the fact that they no longer speak the same language. English and Kiswahili might be Kenya's official languages, but pupils tumbling out of school and students in the university canteens chatter to each other in Sheng, to their teachers' despair. A witty, cheeky, freewheeling *Clockwork Orange*-style brew of Kiswahili, English and indigenous Kenyan languages, with added dollops of reggae jargon, American slang, French and Spanish, Sheng originated in Nairobi's Eastlands slums in the 1980s. Adopted by *matatu* touts and rap artists, it radiated along the taxi and bus routes, spilling over into Tanzania and Uganda, moving from one urban centre to another. So popular has it become that sending an email or text in Kiswahili or English rather than Sheng is considered disastrously uncool by anyone below the age of twenty. Infiltrating radio stations, it has forced its way into national newspapers and spread its tentacles across the internet. Kenyan publishers promise future books in Sheng, it features large in advertising slogans – why, it even crept into Kibaki's speeches.

This rogue language's popularity is something of a contradiction: Sheng was originally invented to exclude the puritanical parents and

ball-breaking teachers who threatened to prevent a younger generation having a good time. Kenyan youths wanted to be able to discuss their sexual adventures, hangovers and boozy nights in their elders' presence without the latter cottoning on. A language in a hurry, it did away with the grammar and spellings slowing Kiswahili and English down, and had the same ingredients of topical humour and impish wordplay as France's Verlan or London's Cockney rhyming slang. Breasts are '*dashboad*' – from the English 'dashboard'; protruding buttocks are baptised '*to be continued*', a Casanova is a '*lovito*'. One of the many words for party is '*hepi*' ('happy'); a cigarette is a '*fegi*' (from the English 'fag'); a friend a '*beste*', and the term '*jigijigi*' – sex – needs little explanation.

Constantly inventing new terms was part of the game, allowing the speaker to show off his ability to dip into five or six languages without pausing for breath. As a result, a web-based Sheng–English dictionary, still being compiled, gives at least thirteen alternatives for 'girl' – including '*chic*' (Spanish/American), '*chipipi*' (Luhya) and '*mdem*' (French) – seven for 'money', and five each for 'house' and 'school'. Sheng spoken in Nairobi's Dandora slum differs from that spoken in the city's Eastlands area, and because the language is always on the move, shifting like a Chinese whisper from mouth to mouth, it dates fast. On their return home, Kenyans in the diaspora find the Sheng used in their blogs no longer matches the Sheng spoken by childhood friends. Incomprehensible not only to parents but even more so to staid grandparents back in '*shags*', 'deep Sheng' is a barrier behind which the new generation can hide its secrets.

Traditionalists shake their heads, seeing the threat of dissolution. 'Let Sheng be left to *matatu* touts, drug pushers, hopeless hip-hop musicians and school dropouts,' argued a columnist in the *Standard*, slamming it as 'linguistic jingoism'. But the dialect probably represents exactly the opposite, a force for national unity. Supporters point out that whereas Kiswahili and English were brought to Kenya by Arab traders and English settlers, Sheng was an indigenous invention. 'At last, here is something truly ours for once, which unites us, and which we haven't inherited,' wrote a defender. As a language of the

poor embraced by children of the elite, as anxious to sound trendy on the playing fields of their private schools as any slum urchin, it is a class leveller. Writer Binyavanga Wainana sees Sheng as the expression of a youth revolution which militates against the sharp tug at the ethnic heart-strings many Nairobi residents experience with the onset of maturity. 'As you get older, entering into marriage and having children seems to tribalise you. All those ceremonies, marriage arrangements, land issues; those decisions about which language to bring your children up in and which school to attend; they activate something in people they didn't know they had.

'Sheng has given us all a safe language to speak. There's a kind of hopefulness to it, a feeling of establishing a sensibility which encompasses tribe, is working-class, inward-looking, philosophical.' Perhaps, on a continent in which identity and language are so inter-linked, in which almost every African seems to have mastered four or five languages; and with each language, four or five different ways of interacting with others, only Sheng, with its rich, shifting mix of associations, can express the kaleidoscopic entity that is the modern Kenyan.

If the Sheng generation is more streetwise, technologically savvy and sexually knowing than its elders, it also has a radically different awareness of its rightful place in the world. As the Kenyan middle class expanded, so did the numbers of youngsters sent abroad to complete their training. Parents dispatched their offspring hoping they would learn how the world worked and win the keys to Western-style prosperity. But those who return – and a disconcertingly high proportion choose not to – look at their continent and their kith and kin with the pitiless, unforgiving eyes of the youthful idealist. They have done the maths, they understand economics and have read the newspapers. They are all too aware of how much better things work elsewhere, painfully conscious of the extent to which, in foreigners' minds, Africa is logged in the 'basket case' category. And for that they blame the very people who paid for their eye-opening educations.

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Conrad Marc Akunga, who I met in early 2006, was one example of the young iconoclasts springing up in modern Kenyan society. Tall and skinny, with the awkwardness of an overgrown swot, he looks exactly what he is: a computer geek with an instinctive empathy for the world of gigabytes and downloads. A blogger on Kenyan affairs, he met up with Ory Okolloh, a female graduate of Harvard Law School, in the wake of the 2002 elections, as disillusionment set in. Together they decided to set up [www.mzalendo.com](http://www.mzalendo.com), a website aiming to make Kenya's parliament more answerable to voters. One of the incoming MPs' first acts was to hike their own salaries, making them among the best-paid parliamentarians in the world, let alone Africa. Furious civil society groups pointed out that while the lawmakers benefited from monthly earnings 270 times the average, Kenya's parliament, in terms of days attended and bills passed, was one of the least productive on the planet. 'Ory and I used to get together and rant: it was "these guys, these guys, these guys"; says Marc. 'It got to the point where over breakfast one day we agreed to take action. The first thing we needed was information about who "these guys" were.' Out of the desire to do something other than whinge, the idea for Mzalendo – 'patriot' in Kiswahili – was born.

Originally modelled on the Westminster system, Kenya's 222-seat parliament is in theory transparent to the public. One form this openness is supposed to take is the Kenyan version of Hansard, the written transcript of parliamentary proceedings. In fact, parliamentary officials treat access to Hansard as a privilege rather than a right, and the paper transcript is, of course, of little use to rural voters wanting to know what their MP gets up to in the capital. 'These guys talk loud in public, but what they do inside that chamber isn't known,' says Akunga. 'Some have never once spoken in parliament. It's your right, as a voter, to know that.' The website gave, when it could, profiles of MPs, a rundown of their educational qualifications (often a sensitive subject), details of which committees they sat on and which motions they proposed. It provided telephone numbers and postal addresses, allowing dissatisfied constituents to pester their elected representatives in person.

Its two founders launched the project with only token assistance from donors. With no staff and no premises, Mzalendo didn't actually need money, Akunga told me, demanding instead time and commitment. Akunga, whose day job was with a Nairobi software company, provided the technical knowhow. Ory, who had moved to South Africa, focused on content, cajoling parliamentary officials into providing back copies of Hansard.

Mzalendo, it has to be said, will never be a YouTube favourite – it is far too worthy to make for gripping reading. But in the duo's eyes, the four-to-six-hundred daily hits the website gets justify its existence. The two hope to counteract what they see as a national tendency to tut-tut briefly over human folly, give a resigned shrug, and move on. It is a characteristic that gave exploiters an easy ride, allowing a small group of players to circulate like soiled clothes in a washing machine. Jumping from party to party, campaigning against policies they championed until recently, politicians rely on general amnesia to survive one scandal after another. 'Kenyans tend to forget easily and forgive easily; it takes just a few weeks. We hope the website will work against that.'

Most MPs have done their best to ignore the website. That indifference reinforced Akunga's cynicism towards lawmakers, who he blames for a steady poisoning of the political climate. 'If Kenya is ethnically polarised today, it is these guys who are at the root of it. You grow up in Nairobi and you play with everyone and then at university you suddenly start hearing people say, "They're out to get us." If the MPs just shut up, we'd sort it out, but instead they keep fanning the flames. Even educated fellows, professors, say the most unsavoury things quite openly. They seem to forget that microphones have memories.'

The project was an example of how one expectation feeds another, furtive hopes mutating into strident demands as the citizen's sense of what is his due expands. Akunga got his first heady taste of political activism in the 2002 elections, when the boss of his software company designed a programme to collate the results, a plan hatched to prevent vote-rigging. Party officials rang in from the consti-

ties with the tallies, and staff immediately typed them into the computer. 'We worked all through Christmas, working till 4 o'clock in the morning, working so hard we didn't even have time to go out and vote ourselves,' recalls Akunga. 'I remember when the votes came in and we saw the final result, I had this amazing feeling: that we had played our part in bringing that about, we had done our bit. There was this incredible sense of euphoria.' That intoxicating experience had carried all the emotional force of a religious conversion. Mzalendo.com was Akunga's attempt to keep the novel sensation of being part of something bigger and better than himself alive.

Akunga's irreverence was magnified twenty times in another Kenyan who seemed to represent what was to come. I'd first heard of Caroline Mutoko at a lunch in Muthaiga. A guest was complaining about a verbal lashing a colleague had been subjected to on Kiss FM, one of the capital's popular radio stations, by what sounded like a razor-tongued virago. A government minister joined in: he too had borne the brunt of the harridan's ire. He enjoyed a reputation as something of a progressive, so I was surprised to hear him casually mention that he had tried, without success, to persuade Kiss's management to take the presenter off the air. He shook his head. 'It's beyond a joke. She simply goes too far. The woman has to be stopped.' This Bitch from Hell, I thought, was definitely someone I wanted to meet.

I told Mutoko the story when I met her, and she gave a mirthless laugh. 'There's not a politician who likes me. Not one.' She shrugs. 'And I don't mind. They are all extremely charming when they meet me in person, but I know that behind my back they're saying: "Oh my God, get her oesophagus."'

Manicured, carefully coiffed and sporting the very latest thing in sunglasses – a 'parasite' model which clung to the face rather than hooking round the ears – Mutoko carried with her the near-visible aura of celebrity. She is not a big woman, but gives off an air of inef-fable self-confidence, much of which can be traced to the timbre of her voice. Many Nairobi broadcasters speak a very Kenyan form of English, with the stress placed on syllables no Briton emphasises. Not



Caroline. Her English has the crisp precision of a Kenyan Joanna Lumley, a quality she attributes to the Irish nuns at her school who made their pupils read long passages aloud. As warm as chocolate, low, smooth, self-assured, hers is a voice perfect for radio, letting her listeners know they are among friends.

It is such a purr that the violence of the sentiments it expresses are doubly shocking. Mutoko talked, over a lit cigarette, about wanting to slap politicians in the face, of being 'pissed off' by the powers that be and of 'butchering' those who dared repeat 'the same old crap' on her programme. Transposed to the airwaves, the approach, in a country hamstrung by etiquette, has won her the status of one of America's 'shock jocks'. Like them, she sometimes appals even her most fervent fans. Like them, she is simply too entertaining to miss, and her *Big Breakfast Show* is one of Kenya's most popular.

She'd migrated to Kiss FM after becoming exasperated by the triviality of her job at rival Capital FM, where she was 'an expert on Robbie Williams, and there was *nothing* I didn't know about the Spice Girls'. Neither Capital nor Kiss would exist had it not been for Moi's reluctant liberalisation of the airwaves in the mid-1990s, a move which marked the waning of the deference my piqued fellow guests in Muthaiga felt was their due. 'We live in a country where people in power don't realise they are actually public servants,' says Mutoko. 'When you're a politician in Kenya you're used to grovel, grovel, "honourable", "honourable". You expect to be treated like a demigod, so it's very hard when people say, "Screw you." This is a scary time for politicians.'

Talking to Mutoko, one sensed a roiling, restless fury, a huge impatience finding expression after years of control. She sees herself as mouthpiece for an entire nation whose patience has snapped. 'This country is on such an amazing high it can't be stopped. Kenya is awakening. I can hear it in the phone calls we get. People ring and say, "This road has been worked on since September, it's now March" . . . They call in to bitch about not having water for three days, not having power. That never used to happen before. We've become a whole lot more questioning. You can't sell me shit.'

Like Mzalendo's founders, much of Mutoko's bolshiness lies in her awareness that Kenyans, through their passivity, have contributed to their downfall. 'Half our problem in the media was that we self-censored. You self-censor and then you wake up one day and realise the way things are is your fault.'

Convinced that an ossified political class was trailing far behind its public, Mutoko, when I interviewed her in April 2006, was encouraging young people with no previous experience to stand in the next elections. Prospective candidates, including youngsters from Nairobi's slums, were invited onto Kiss FM to explain their manifestos. It was a high-risk strategy: 'But I would gamble anything on difference. I already know what your track record is,' she said, rhetorically addressing a member of the old guard, 'and it's crap. Your track record is garbage.'

A Kamba by birth, Mutoko should in theory have been rooting for Kalonzo Musyoka, former foreign minister, presidential aspirant, and a fellow tribesman. 'People stand next to me in bars and whisper: "If Musyoka gets in, you know as a Kamba you could get a good position, because it's our time."' In fact, she scorned an approach which would have made a nonsense of the meritocratic principles on which she had based her career. 'The whole "our time to eat" line is the worst thing that ever happened to Kenya. You'd like to find the first person who ever used it and drive a stake through their heart.'

It was impossible to separate Mutoko's political stropiness from what was, essentially, a feminist itinerary, one that appeared to have largely despaired of the African male. Single and childless, she was immensely proud of the fact that she lived in a house paid for by her salary and boasted a share portfolio built from her earnings. 'I'm a Nairobi woman who has finally found my feet and my voice. I'm not looking for anyone to complete me.'

Leaving Mutoko that day, a sudden image came to mind: of a tightrope walker who has never experienced a serious fall, stepping forward without a net. Chin up, back straight, the acrobat gazed into the middle distance, never looking down. 'The day I give in to the fear, I might as well resign,' she had told me when I asked about a

court case a minister had brought against the station. The velvet-toned presenter, I suddenly realised, was one of the few people I'd met who simply didn't seem to know the meaning of the word.

By demanding that Kenya's multi-party democracy should possess substance as well as form, Mutoko, Akunga, Okolloh and their ilk were taking on an entire school of political thought about Africa. Their convictions challenged those cynics who dismissed John Githongo's anti-corruption efforts as the naïve projection of inappropriate '*mzungu*' values onto an African nation where they were doomed to fail. If John was a 'coconut', he certainly wasn't the only coconut in Kenya.

Could John, then, be relied upon by his colleagues to keep quiet, given what he represented? At first glance the notion of a challenge to the establishment emerging from within the upper class, the very social group that benefited most from the status quo, might seem counterintuitive. But the aristocratic scion who chooses to live as a pauper, the class rebel whose antagonism towards his peers is based on the most intimate of understandings, is a well-established historical phenomenon. Discussing why someone of John's lofty caste might choose a 'deviant' path, Dr Tom Wolf, a US analyst living in Kenya, cites the examples of Lenin and Fidel Castro, 'both from well-established, upper-middle-class families . . . who nevertheless re-engineered themselves into the most ferocious of revolutionaries'. Mahatma Gandhi came from a long line of statesmen, Che Guevara was of aristocratic descent, John and Robert Kennedy were born into a family of immense wealth, much of it shadily acquired. Growing up close to power, Wolf argues, probably ensured that John was 'less in awe of those wielding it' than a Kenyan contemporary from a more humble background, anxious to assimilate. 'In that sense, his "class" heritage encouraged independence of thought and action, rather than sycophantic loyalty.' 'Less in awe' is putting it mildly. 'Generational contempt' might be a more accurate term. 'My parents' generation are the reason we are in a mess,' Mugo Githongo, John's brother, once told me. 'We have nothing to learn from them.'

There was also a specifically Kikuyu shape to John's revolt, and it took outright oedipal form. With the oil crunch of the 1970s and 1980s, which coincided with Moi's abandonment of any attempt to win the acceptance of the business elite, many Kikuyu heads of families lost their jobs. Patriarchs who had grown fat on the cream of the Kenyatta regime, bragging about their deals in the bar, suddenly found themselves out of work, disrespected at home and with time on their hands. 'In the Kikuyu community you are raised hearing ponderous voices saying "the family is this, the family is that". But as you grow there's a straining of the social contract, it begins to crack,' says Martin Kimani. 'You become aware of this tension in the house, this anger between your mother and father.' Just as Kikuyu women took the helm in the absence of their menfolk during the Mau Mau Emergency, these church-going mothers came to the family's rescue. Working as nurses, running milk-trading schemes and sewing circles, they counted the pennies as their husbands wasted pounds on beer, mistresses – who gave the men the respect they no longer received at home – and deals that failed to miraculously revive the family fortunes.

Kikuyu sons, who traditionally enjoy a special bond with their mothers, absorbed their anger at wastrel husbands, the humiliation as rumours of girlfriends and illegitimate children drifted back to the family home. Like doting gangster bosses who send their daughters to convent schools, only to be horrified when the girls turn judgemental on them, many Kikuyu fathers endured the final irony of seeing their offspring turn against them, rejecting their entire code of behaviour. 'The generation that sent its sons to schools where they got a good Catholic education were hoist by their own petard. The NGO values, the desire to build a better, more virtuous Kenya, were all sown at home,' says Kimani. 'It's a very complex family drama.' The children in these families often only grasped the full extent of a paterfamilias's perfidy at his funeral, when they would discover, standing at the graveside, a previously unknown second family, complete with second widow, grieving children and claims to the estate.

If these were some of the broad trends that meant John's allegiance could not be taken for granted, there were also some simple prag-

matic reasons why a man of his background might choose to act with unprecedented recklessness.

Under both Kenyatta and Moi, the government's hold on the Kenyan economy – whether in terms of civil service jobs, parastatal posts or contracts up for grabs – was so vast that alienating the president virtually meant financial ruin, as Joe Githongo and many Kikuyu entrepreneurs knew only too well. You could be firmly entrenched in the private sector and *still* be crushed by the hostility of the powers that be. Centralised systems of power are like onions: each layer faithfully mimics the core. Make an enemy in the top echelons of government, and business mysteriously dried up, public tenders no longer went your way, your goods took an age to clear customs, your phones were never connected and the tax inspectors took a sudden, obsessive interest in your accounts. There was simply no getting away from State House. Fall foul of the president or one of his cronies and the only thing to do was to hide yourself away and pray for either a change of regime, however long that took, or eventual forgiveness.

Scoured by the brisk winds of economic liberalisation in the 1980s, the Kenyan state shrivelled. Once a bright graduate would have automatically regarded a job in a government ministry, with its grading structure, pension scheme and subsidised housing, as the summit of his ambitions. Although structural adjustment reforms were often met with horrified cries from the likes of Oxfam and Christian Aid, the expansion of the private sector, the birth of a vibrant civil society and the blossoming of the media opened up a range of interesting new job opportunities. Who cared about keeping on the right side of State House when it was possible to join a South African research institute, work for a Nairobi-based multinational, or set up an NGO to garner well-paid consultancy work for foreign donors? John's experience at Transparency International had taught him there was life outside the state sector. Joining government had been a choice, not a necessity. What was more, the lucky fact of his birth in the United Kingdom meant that he enjoyed automatic residency there, and could work anywhere in Europe. That prospect

seemed intriguing rather than appalling to a man who felt himself to be a citizen of the world. In the shape of John Githongo, the Mount Kenya Mafia was dealing with the first generation of Kenyans whose members were financially free to follow the dictates of their conscience.

And then there were the individual peculiarities of the man himself. Ever since his childhood, John had come under huge pressure from those he loved: to excel academically, to join the family firm, to get married to a nice Kenyan girl, have kids, get involved in politics. He had ducked and swerved with skill, charting a highly individual path through the expectations of others. As a result he found himself that strangest of beings: a forty-year-old African bachelor with neither wife, household nor children. By the conventional standards of macho Kenyan society, John Githongo was weird, little short of a freak. In pre-colonial Kikuyu society, where only those regarded as having achieved something of lasting worth in their lives were honoured with burial, the bodies of unmarried men were carried outside the homestead and left for hyenas to devour. Dying incomplete, they might never have existed. Yet John was willing to defy those norms rather than neglect what really made his heart beat faster: the life of the mind.

Worryingly for the presidential coterie, John's eccentricities were all of the sort to close down possible avenues for applying leverage. For most Africans, the weight of the extended family serves as ballast, tethering their ambitions firmly to the ground. When confronting our destinies, we each tot up what we stand to lose and what we can bear to surrender. John had no direct dependants. Should he choose to commit career suicide, no child's education would be at risk, no ambitious wife's laments echo around the family home, no in-laws make impassioned appeals to his common sense. Gloriously self-sufficient, John Githongo was free to take whatever decisions he chose.

Even if the Mount Kenya Mafia's members were not given to probing motives and analysing underlying social shifts, an episode in John's past really should have caused them some concern.

## IT'S OUR TURN TO EAT

In 1998, before John moved to TI, he had briefly agreed to launch a regional political magazine on behalf of a Kenyan NGO called SAREAT (Series for Alternative Research in East Africa Trust). Headed by political scientist Mutahi Ngunyi, SAREAT won generous funding from the Nairobi office of the US-based Ford Foundation. But the project, John came to believe, was being used to front a scam. He suspected Ford's local programme officer, a Zimbabwean called Jonathan Moyo who would go on to serve as Robert Mugabe's information minister, of plotting with Ngunyi to misappropriate tens of thousands of dollars of Ford funding. Carefully documenting what had happened, John walked away from the project. Initially, recalls former work colleague Milena Hileman, he had no plans to report the issue to Ford's senior management. 'He was very upset, but he simply didn't trust the *wazungus* to do anything about it. I kept nagging him, saying, "Not all *wazungus* are the same. These are good people and they need to know.'" In the end, the two flew to New York to brief Ford's vice president, and the foundation sued both Ngunyi and Moyo.

A practice run, in many ways, for Anglo Leasing, the SAREAT episode was not exactly an encouraging sign for anyone hoping the new permanent secretary would show leniency towards those caught with their hand in the till.