Billy Kahora, A Story Catcher

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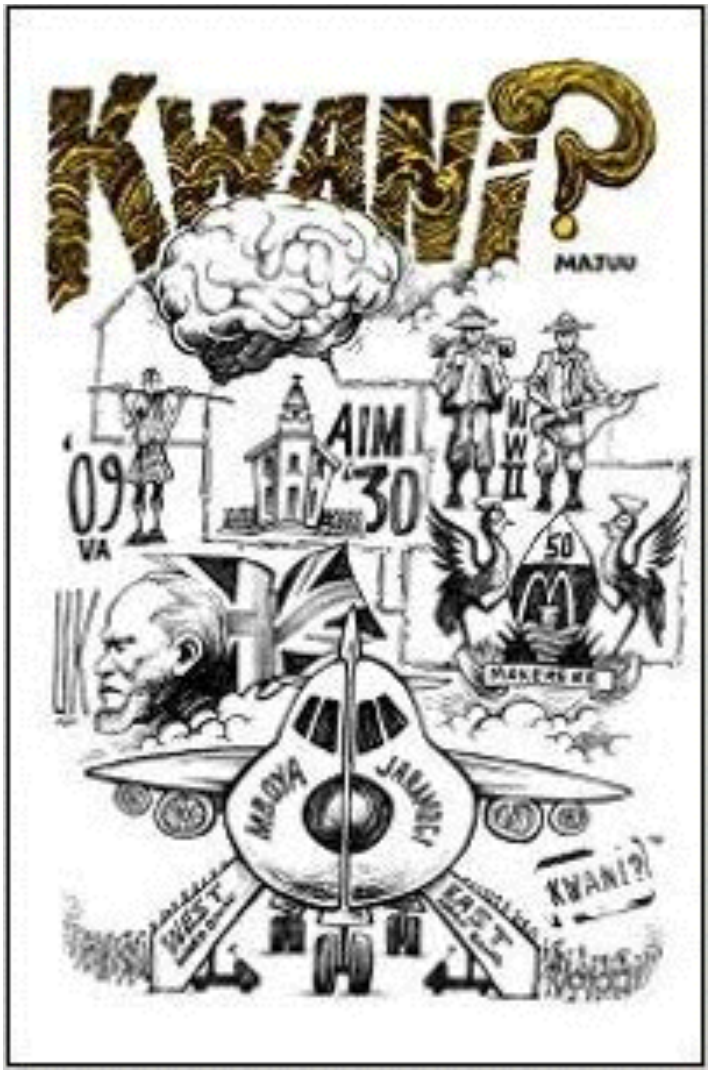

Fig. 1. *Kwani? 07 Majuu,* 2012. Cover artwork by Michael Araka. Courtesy of the artist.

"***Kwani? 07 Majuu*** picks up the idea of leaving and of return, something that has framed the conversations and hybrid identities of many Kwani? writers. It explores diasporic imaginaries and discourses in fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, history, art, design and social media." Moses Serubiri

Managing Editor for *Kwani?*, and a fiction writer, Billy Kahora [hereafter BK] was one of the Keynote Speakers at the conference: "La 'Renaissance Littéraire' Africaine Anglophone en Débat" held on July 5, 2017, at Université Sorbonne Paris Nord. Billy Kahora's non-fiction *The True Story of David Munyakei* brought back public attention to the Kenyan whistle-blower who produced proof of high-level political corruption under the government of Daniel Arap Moi during the 1990s. With the tortuous presidential election process in Kenya as a background, Billy Kahora came back to storytelling and his interest in the inscription of African languages in the world literature canon.

He is here being interviewed by Dr. Josiane Ranguin [hereafter JR] of Université Sorbonne Paris Nord.

BK: I was talking during the conference about the writers I admire and Kei Miller, who was mentioned, is a fine example of someone who is able to overcome what I perceive to be a tension between the oral and the written. The kind of education Africans get in English really tries to remove your attention from the voice. What I admire in Kei Miller and Patrick Chamoiseau, particularly in *Solibo Magnificent,* is that the narrator is continuously challenging this idea of a text written to be read, by saying something like: "I am telling this story, it is not a written thing." This is what really interests me in Caribbean writing. In *Texaco*, Chamoiseau engages in a revision of Martinican history and lets us hear a profusion of voices. This is not so much done in English Caribbean literature.

JR: What about Kamau Brathwaite who works in the same direction to conjure up Caribbean voices?

BK: True, there is this interest in the Creole, in the language of the people, in the voice of the Caribbean.

JR: I would like to ask you about your interest in the media as *Kwani?* is an attempt to create a multimedia platform on paper. Your book is an example of this technique which mixes maps, photographs, sketches, and interviews into a narrative. You also mentioned a literary event in Sweden to which major African writers were invited. You said: "The bigness of the event is not that it was held in Sweden. It is that it figures on YouTube." Is the medium more important than the content?

BK: Well, a group of young pan-African writers set up a collective called *Jalada Africa*. It was founded in June 2013 during the Kenya Literary Week. Their project was to realize online literary anthologies

and work on the translation issue since the goal is to make African voices heard in their own different languages. So, the collective decided to contact Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who is interested in the issue of the use of African languages and who subsequently sent them a story titled: "The Upright Revolution: Or Why Humans Walk Upright" which was initially written in Kikuyu, a Kenyan language. It was then translated by the collective in 36 languages. It was like a composition. The spectacle then became bigger, since this writing project got more people interested in reading the story and its multiple translations. I do not know who invited Ngũgĩ in Sweden, but it was about the same time that the Nobel Prize was going to be announced; so, when he went to Sweden, he got involved with *Jalada.* The video is now on YouTube, and the idea of questions linked to literature turning into a spectacle is quite striking. There is this desire to create new public personalities and a kind of institutional public. What *Jalada* prided themselves on is their ability to publish new literary content online, which brings us back to this idea of an online literary spectacle that is quite striking. It tells you a lot about the undertaking that the publishing of texts written in African languages represents. This fable was a very experimental kind of writing, so it was hard to get publishers interested. In the end, the focus was not so much on the aesthetic goals defended by *Jalada* but on the coverage of their experiment. Unfortunately, during the encounter between *Jalada* and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, the attention was focused on Ngũgĩ's achievements and literary career.

Fig. 2. *Attack of Jepchumba,* 2010. Cover artwork by Jepchumba. Courtesy of the artist.

JR: I have also noticed that the cover of the sixth issue of *Kwani?* refers specifically to Blaxploitation, and the African-American community.

BK: There is something from the Blaxploitation era in this depiction of Nairobi city, a cliché vision of the Nairobi skyline. It is also suggesting the growing empowerment of African women through a throwback to *King Kong vs Godzilla*. All the stories were written by young writers who had never been published.

JR: As you are also a screenwriter, I wanted to ask you about the film *Soul Boy* whose script you wrote.

BK: I did the film with a German director, Tom Tykwer. The co-director was Hawa Essuman. Tom Tykwer is very interested in the motif of the seven tasks, number 7 being quite significant in many cultures. He contacted me saying he wanted to approach Kenyan culture and its more vibrant spaces. He was fascinated by Kibera, which is the biggest slum in West Africa, and had read some of my work. Since I was also concerned about establishing something of a poetical atmosphere, I did not want to do a film that would just be darkly realistic. I needed to evoke all the chromatic nuances of that specific place to which I felt connected. The main idea I wanted to transmit about the people who live there is that they all share in this obsession of getting out. The main inspiration behind the boy's story is about escaping; it's about flight.

JR: What about folk culture, the witch character and the father who looks like someone possessed?

BK: Well, some people try to leave the ghetto by selling their soul to the devil, so that's what the boy assumes his father has been doing, but his father, a hard-working guy who wants a better future for his boy, has in fact fallen into a drunken stupor far from home.

JR: So, there are two sides to the story: a realistic thread and a fantastic one.

BK: The fantastic thread in the film is wholly the result of the boy's imagination. The script was based on a fifty-page story and mentioned a mythical figure coming from Luoland in Kenya, a water spirit that asks to dominate people. The Luo are lakeside people. They are fishermen. So, I have transposed that myth within the film.

JR: I noticed the various cultural influences traversing the film: African folk culture, Indian and African music, Hollywood and Bollywood, and references to martial arts all converging to instil an idea of threat, the feeling that the inhabitants of the slum are all potentially, to quote the film, "Dead men walking."

BK: I wanted to talk of the modernity of the African urban experience. The precariousness of urban lives, particularly in Nairobi. It's all about pressure, escape and flight. It is also a very frenzied film.

JR: To go back to your well-known short story, "The Gorilla Experiment," isn't that story also concerned with passing, passes, and passages?

BK: Passes are important in terms of ways to negotiate a city. They are markers of space. I still have to carry identification documents that were instituted during the era of colonization, which is not very different from the way passes came into existence in South Africa.

JR: Do you still need this pass today?

BK: Yes, you do. Basically, you have to carry some form of identification document. It is delivered by the Kenyan state but was instituted by the British. The pass is quite telling because it says where you come from and what ethnicity you are. It is very colonial, but it is also about state power, about division and information. It has happened in the past that if you were found without this document, you could be arrested and detained under suspicion of criminal intent. The pass was a tool in the hands of previous dictatorships.

JR: In the story, the boy's face is partly disfigured. Is it reflecting the kind of arrested development the city around him is suffering from?

BK: The boy has suffered from a sickness that has left his face partially paralyzed, but you are right about this idea of being stuck in time, and space.

JR: Are the stories collected in *Kwani?* and the urban legends you mention trying to recapture the spirit of the time in the same way, and was it the editor's conscious objective? Was it about capturing the spirit of Nairobi, or something of the Kenyan inspiration by "sucking up" all these legends?

BK: There is something of that. You've called it "freeing the voice". Because of the importance of politics, education, and dominant discourses in general, when you have this condition of coloniality,

whether it is a condition of hovering of the state or a question of class, I think that every person is trying to free their voice and actualize themselves. I think, as a writer, that English, in fact, in a very distorted way, confines you, because it is a language of knowledge; it is a language of dominance. Some things are expressed in Creole, in the Caribbean, that cannot be expressed in any other way. This language is the language of our lives as they are felt and told. The legends that are taught, they are not ours. I was talking about the estate where I grew up: the pressure is not as prevalent now, but you can imagine that under such political and economic conditions, our stories are the ones that I am trying to work on.

JR: Does music also play a role in your narratives?

BK: Up to the late nineties, the influential music was something indigenous called *rumba*: it was Congolese with a Cuban influence, but sung in the Kenyan language. Then, in the urban areas, music was hip-hop related: it was hip-hop sung in Sheng and focused on urban realities. This music became very popular, and the young singers started singing in Sheng as a form of resistance to express their own truth. Because of the production and distribution costs, music was a more widespread form of communication than writing. It was both intensely political and poetical. Some of these boys are poets, and they are very inspiring. They really influenced Binyavanga Wainaina, *Kwani?*'s founder. One of the most popular groups was *Kafani Mau Mau.*

JR: Are you considering a new multimedia version of *Kwani?* ?

BK: The book is a product that is limited in itself, but there is something to be done about the reproduction of all the things I am talking about. For example, we've done so many events. We have archived them all. All these kinds of concepts, all our literary festivals need to find a way so that they are seen and heard. All the stories that are now confined to a shelf need to get alive and kicking. We had that open mic poetry performance that has been going on now for more than ten years, in the city. And what we do now is posting them on YouTube. It is fine to undertake all these things, but you must establish a kind of collective archive to show how these stories talk to each other, and to make something bigger than the sum of their past. I am not the one who will undertake this task because I am from a generation that was focused on books and we need someone who really can make the best use of that form, and secondly, I would like to concentrate on my own writing now.

JR: You quote Helon Habila who wrote against the "almost obligatory obsession of the African writer with the nation and national politics" in his introduction of *The Granta Book of the African Short Story* he edited in 2011.

BK: It's not as black and white as that. Even if people are moving away from the involvement with the nation, it is not all set, as what the nation is is kind of being redefined. I am not interested in the nation as I was fifty years ago, partly due to political fatigue, since I don't see how I can help anyone with it. It is better left alone!

JR: You're on the eve of a new career. What are you carrying with you from the *KWANI?* experience?

BK: The beauty about that job is all the time you spend researching, formally thinking, or reaching out to people, in society. Very few jobs allow you to do that. I was very fortunate to be paid to think about this project. My knowledge of Kenyan society is quite vast, and I could spend my whole life mining all the resources that came my way.

JR: Are you also interested in issues like Afro-Europeanism or Cosmopolitanism?

BK: I am. Issue number 7 concentrates on the diasporic imagination and discourse. As for cosmopolitanism, I think it is a creation of postcolonial scholars because it seems that only Black writers are said to be cosmopolitans, with a sort of negative nuance attached to the word. Nobody says in that sense that such or such White writer is cosmopolitan. Actually, Africans have always been cosmopolitan, and if I take the example of the Cold War period, an impressive number of Africans travelled to Europe as invited students. My father was friends with Malcolm X, so I find this cosmopolitanism debate a bit hollow.

JR: What will be your new direction?

BK: Well, I have just finished a short story collection. It is about a group of students and workers from all over the world meeting in a working place and undergoing the process of acculturation. It is a political story about workers fighting among themselves. You can find there all the nuances and differences in an array of individuals ranging from Eastern Europeans to Western Africans.

JR: Billy Kahora, thank you for kindly sharing these thought-provoking ideas with us.

Billy Kahora is working on a novel titled *The Applications*. His short story collection *The Cape Cod Bicycle War and Other Youthful Follies* was released in 2019 by Ohio University Press/Swallow.

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