

MY CREATIVE WRITING JOURNEY IN A NUTSHELL

By Kithaka wa Mberia

I remember neither the day nor the month. However, I do recall the place. It was an institution perched atop a ridge. To the south, land descended - first gently, and then, sharply to the Naka River valley. To the north, another valley, as far as I know, nameless, lay with its bottom hidden from human eyes.

The year was 1972 and the institution was Chuka High School – a catholic boys secondary school headed by a feared Italian priest nick-named Magma, a la physical geography! That’s when and where the creative muse and I met and, I dare say, it was love at first sight.

The English teacher – an elderly, short, almost frail, but clearly amiable woman– called for a meeting of those who were interested in forming a creative writing club. I was among the boys who, in the evening of the meeting, met in one of the Form One classrooms. There we were, seated on the school desks and Miss. Morris, for that was her name, standing before us. I don’t remember how exactly she set the ball rolling, but I do recall that, with one accord, all present agreed with the idea of forming a creative writing club. It was proposed, and the proposal endorsed, that we would write poems, short stories and short plays and that we would be publishing them in our own school magazine. When Miss. Morris called out for suggestions on the name of the magazine, my right hand went up. Taking cognizance that the school was at the foot of Mt. Kenya, I proposed that the magazine be called *The Mountain’s Voice*. After deliberations, the name was modified to *The Voice of the Mountain*. So it became. We had a creative writing club and a name of a magazine for our literary sweat.

We set the pens to paper. I choose to walk the path of poetry. Rightly or wrongly, I thought it was easier to compose poetry than to write short stories or one act plays. I suspect the choice had to do with our set books some of which I had read in Form Two. The most reader-friendly book of them all, or so I thought, was Okot p’Tek’s twin songs; that is, *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*. To be sure, Ferdinand Oyo’s *The Old man and the Medal* and Chinua Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease* were not that hostile to my young mind. Not so E’zekiel Mphale’s *Down Second Avenue* and Soyinka’s *Kongi’s Harvest*. It was a challenge relating to Mphalele characters and their situation. I was also uncomfortable with Soyinka’s near-obscure treatment of his theme and the pomp of the characters’ language. Yes, I felt more at home with poetry.

My earliest attempts at creative writing were in the form of poems. A number of them appeared in different issues of *The Voice of the Mountain*. The content and the titles of most of what I wrote and published have long receded from my memory. However, I still remember the title of one of the poems and what inspired me to write it. The poem was titled “The Bell”. In it, I looked at the power of the school bell. In those days, because of

the excellent body metabolism of our youthful bodies, food digestion was extremely efficient. The result of the efficient digestion was biting hunger between meals.

During lunch, we would get crowded in front of the door to the school's dining hall. Sometimes, we would jostle and push each other as we tried to be as close as possible to the door. Hunger would be so intense that one felt as though you hadn't eaten for days. And guess what? No matter how vicious the biting fangs of the hunger become, the door to the dining hall would not open until the bell rang.

Our breakfast consisted of bread, tea and maize flour porridge. The porridge was served in plates - the same plates that we used for lunch and for supper. It was adequate and, sometimes, we go for a second or even a third helping. We would then go for morning lessons. Because of our over-primed digestive systems, by the second lesson, the porridge would be long gone leaving our bladders in a sorry state and our bodies in real agony. That combined state of the bladder and the rest of the body had a way redirecting the mind from the lesson at hand and focusing it on some tiny rooms where eventually one would answer to nature's command. That wouldn't be until the bell rang. That's how "The Bell" was born.

Besides "The Bell", I composed and published other poems and, maybe, a story or two in *The Voice of the Mountain*. Unfortunately, I do not have with me a single copy of *The Voice of the Mountain*. Neither do I have a copy of any of the pieces I published therein. A terrible loss, I must say. If someone, especially those who were at Chuka High School between 1970 and 1973, were to hand over to me any copy of *The Voice of the Mountain* containing my pieces, I would be willing to pay a few thousand Kenya shillings for every issue. The pieces bear the name "Kithaka Nyaga" or, perhaps, "Kithaka wa Nyaga". Nyaga is the name my father was given by his mother and his biological father at birth. Mberia or, in full, M'Rimberia, is his circumcision name given to him by his circumcision guardian - in Kitharaka culture also referred to as the *ithe wa muthenya*, (that is, "daylight" father) to distinguish him from the biological father referred to as *ithe wa utugu* ("night" father !!). You get the point; don't you?

Since my primary school days (and I literary mean it) I had a very strong ambition, maybe an obsession, of going to the university. As I wrote poetry and published it in *The Voice of the Mountain*, I never lost sight of the fact that, to go to the university, I had to qualify for admission to Form Five. To join Form Five, one had to get good grades in Form Four. I didn't want to take any risk. So, sometimes in Form Three, I disengaged myself from creative writing to concentrate on my academic work. My strategy paid off. I passed in my East Africa Certificate of Education (EACE) with Division 1 and was

admitted to Form Five at Alliance High School. Two years later, I entered the University of Nairobi.

For five years after my entry into the University, my creative pen continued to be on leave. However, I carried on with a habit I had picked from the two secondary schools I attended. I watched some plays at both Chuka High School and Alliance High School. At the former school, I remember watching Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* and at the later school I enjoyed watching Caryl and Joseph Copeck's *Insect Play*. In 1974 (or, perhaps, 1975), I travelled from Kikuyu (where Alliance High School is located) to watch Keneth Watene's *Dedan Kimathi* at the then Concert Hall (today's Ukumbi Mdogo) of the Kenya Cultural Centre.

University of Nairobi and its environs were bustling with artistic activities especially theatre. There were plays at University's Education Theatre II, at the French Cultural Centre, at the Goethe Institute and at Kenya national Theatre. There were plays by Robert Serumaga, Francis Imbuga, John Ruganda, Arthur Fugard, Jean Moliere, William Shakespeare, Dereck Walcott, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi Mirie, and Ngugi wa thiong'o and Micere Mugo. Dario Fo made a late entry into the arena but he did so in style with *Can't pay, Won't Pay* and *A Woman Alone*. I watched most of the plays on offer. At a later point, I watched (and sometimes directed) plays by Kiswahili writers such Ebrahim Hussein, Al-Amin Mazrui and Emmanuel Mbogo. I mention the names of the playwrights whose works I watched because, although I'm not able specify the influence watching the plays have had on me, going to the theatre has taught me a thing or two as a playwright and an occasional theatre director.

In 1982, after I was given "powers to read and do all that appertains" to Master of Arts in Linguistics in a 1981 Congregation of the University of Nairobi, I resumed writing. I first went back to my old love, poetry, and then extended my pen to drama. To date, I have under my name, nine books, that is, six anthologies of poetry and three plays. The anthologies of poetry are *Mchezo wa Karata* (1997), *Bara Jingine* (2002), *Redio na Mwezi* (2005), *Msimu wa Tisa* (2007) and *Rangi ya Anga* (2014) and *Dau* (2018). The plays are *Natala* (1997), *Kifo Kisimani* (2001) and *Maua Kwenye Jua la Asubuhi* (2007). Five of the nine books have been translated and published in English as *A game of Cards* (2011) *Another Continent* (2011), *Death at the Well* (2011), *Natala* (2011) and *Flowers in the Morning Sun* (2011).

Sometimes, those who haven't read my works ask me what I write about. That's not an easy question to answer briefly and satisfactorily. I deal with many topics. However, I could, perhaps, group them into: despicable politics, massive corruption, negative ethnicity, deprivation of individuals and communities, violation of human rights,

degradation of the environment, lack of discipline in society, low level of or lack of appropriate values, raw greed, the beauty of Kenya and the rest of Africa and, finally, my take on the many places I visit outside Africa.

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