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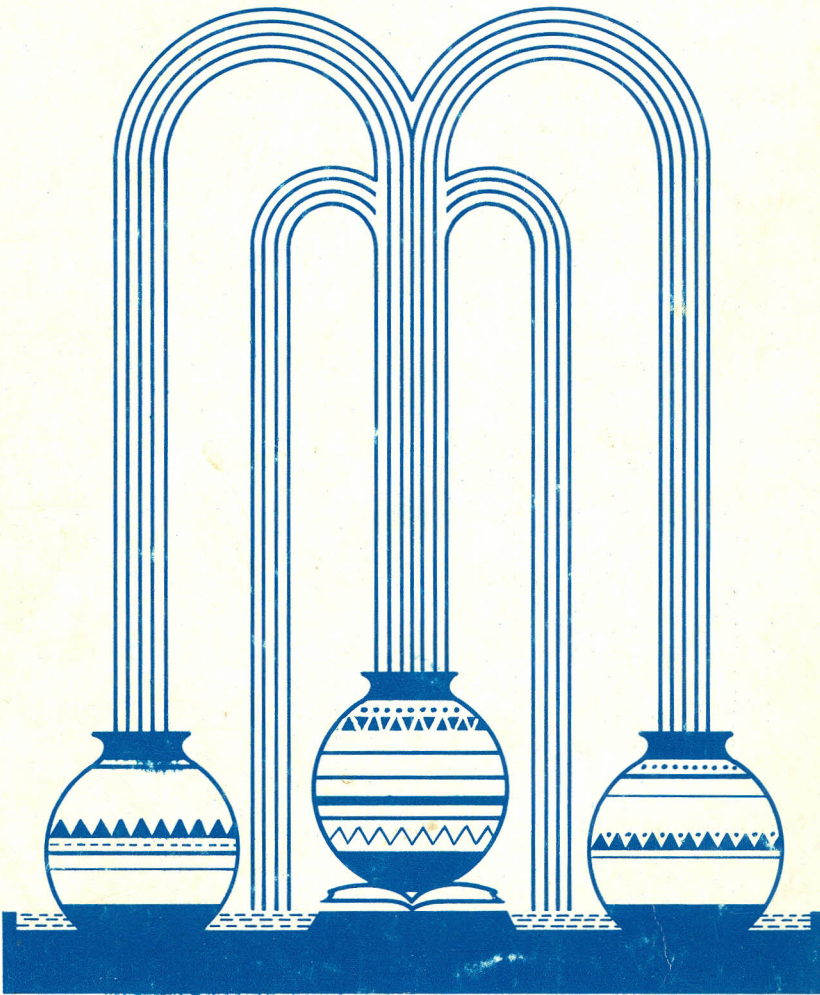
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## REVIEW ESSAY

### Using Language to Stereotype Kenya's National Character

Wahome Mutahi

*How to be a Kenyan*

Nairobi, Kenya, East African Educational Publishers Limited/Kenway  
1996.

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#### Introduction

Best known for his popular humour column, "Whispers", which appears in a local Kenyan weekly, Wahome Mutahi has distinguished himself as a prolific prose writer with a number of novels to his credit. To date, *How to be Kenyan* is probably his first critical work. On closer scrutiny, the work under review, which is reminiscent of Chinua Achebe's acclaimed political treatise, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1983), seems more of the writer's personal and subjective quarrel with his socio-political environment.

#### Content

The title, *How to be Kenyan* is simply a misnomer since the book is neither a researched anthropological nor epistemological account of the contemporary Kenyan society. The fact that the book presents an account that is not purely fictional or factual gives it a peculiar character while complicating the reader's interpretation of the theme. Where, for example, does one draw the line between fiction and fact? Secondly, are these satirized comments on the Kenyan society based on the author's own personal observation or are they already commonplace stereotypical formulations that most Kenyans are familiar with? These are some of the question-begging problems raised by Mutahi's *How to be Kenyan*.

In addition, the factual statement of the covered content is less than honest or specific. In fact, over-generalization and stereotyping of the already common-place populist ideas seems to be the book's mainstay. Given the multilingual and multicultural nature of the Kenyan society, to what extent could one talk of an aggregate Kenyan culture? What are the unifying factors that cut across the 42 Kenyan communities? What cultural and language traits stand out or characterize the "Kenyan Culture" and personality? These and many other related questions come to mind as one ploughs through Mutahi's *How to be Kenyan*.

The reader, who picks up *How to be Kenyan* with a keen eye for detail regarding the nature of the average Kenyan character, if, indeed, such an entity exists, will soon be weary of the dry, dull and mundane repetition of such stereotypes as: Kenyans' crave for the English tongue and foreign mannerisms; the abuse of the collective will to help the less fortunate, otherwise called the 'Harambee' spirit; misuse of public telephones; bribery; Kenyan's love for queuing; the unjust judicial system; 'mob justice'; superstitious beliefs such as witchcraft; idle rumour; the outmoded practices such as

payment of dowry or brideprice; and so forth. Other negativities highlighted in the book include Kenya's penchant for things foreign (call it a kind of exophilia), disregard for the highway code or even Kenyans' perceived liking for price bargains!

## Debate

By satirizing all these mannerisms and behavioural traits, does Wahome aim at purging Kenyans of the same or is his objective to reduce them to the laughing stock of those they come into contact with? As noted at the beginning, this book is not a critical work at all but a personal reflection of a situation from an openly subjective and lop-sided perspective. To start with, no detailed preface or introduction is offered. Additionally, the book is not based on empirical research or observation of specific events, people or places. It is rather a fictionalised recollection and reconstruction of personal impressionistic images of the average collective behaviour of Kenyans.

All the above ugly and stereotypical behaviours, the author stresses, are what make the Kenyan people unique in the world. This fact makes the reader readily conclude that Mutahi initially set out with the sole purpose of only parading all that is bizarre, according to his observation, about the Kenyan lifestyle, mentality and attitude. As Wole Soyinka once put it, any human society, Kenya included, makes a large metaphysical vacuum which may be used for any form of propaganda. In the case of *How to be Kenyan*, this propagandist view comes in the form of an account that thinly disguises a destructive logic in its persistent exposition of atavism and retrogressive social behaviour. In this attempt, the writer fails in that he deals with the effects and excludes the causes of these mannerisms.

In this book, the author seems to dismiss or laugh off only that which he considers ridiculous and anachronistic in the Kenyan collective psyche. He portrays Kenyans simply as an arrogant and, often, conservative lot. As pointed out earlier, although some of these claims made about Kenyans are true or realistic, most of the narrative is obviously alarmist, unsubstantiated and, even in some parts, wild. The latter parts are described as 'outrageous' if witty by the cover designer. These are the sections which an average Kenyan would "like to hide from a non-Kenyan reader", according to the cover critic. This fact, therefore, calls to mind the reason or the objective of the writer in authoring such a work in the first place. What message did he want to communicate to his fellow Kenyans and to foreigners?

Mutahi's disgust with the unthoughtfulness in the adoption of Western mannerisms is glaring. The satire here is eclipsed by the witty humour and ridicule. This seems the case in the second section which is entitled, "Fried Lice" (for the popular Kenyan accent meaning "fried rice"). Although Mutahi is definitely familiar with the writings of Tutuola of the *Palm Wine Drinkard* fame and the twin songs of Okot P' Bitek - *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*, his fiction and satire cannot be said to be influenced by these in any way. Indeed, the author's sense of anger with what he sees as a culture of apemanship is only compared to Ghana's Ayi Kwei Armah in his master piece, *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born*, published in 1966.

The descriptively simple journalistic style of the writer marked by his trade-mark humour and euphemism only manages to mask his serious accusatory tone. Behind and beyond the exposition of generalised unique Kenyan behavioural traits, values, and attitudes such as their obsession with corruption, bribery, violence, simple gossip or uncivilised language and antisocial manners - what serious message does Wahome want to impart to the reader? Is the book a castigation of a people

who have consciously or otherwise let themselves drown in the quagmire of socio-economic, cultural, political, and technological wilderness baptised “modernism” or “development” or “urbanism”? And what has occasioned this degeneration of human values among Kenyans? Is it simply just the uprooting of the so-called traditional values? What role has the introduction of a monetary economy or the technological culture played in instituting such harmful values as individualism and materialism, or in banishing respect for public or common good? This is a question Wahome Mutahi fails to address in *How to be a Kenyan*.

### **Influences on Kenyan Culture**

For instance, it is unclear whether or not Mutahi implies these popular behaviour forms are unique to Kenyans or whether they have been appropriated and perfected by them. If the latter is the case, then he may have a point but if not then his whole portrayal of these behavioural types stands on shaky ground. This is so because it is unacceptable to generalise a trait on a population based on one or two cases. Secondly, it is a well documented fact that the peoples of the so-called Third World have been culturally influenced to the same extent by the advent of Western imperialism and neo-colonialism. Not only have they been made to pursue materialistic goals at the expense of the spiritual ones of sharing and mutual concern, but they have been forced to fully convert to a new cultural environment where individualism has replaced communal ties.

To a certain limited extent, it is possible to fathom the perspectives and stand-points the writer feasibly attempts to push. For example, mass poverty has driven a section of the Kenyan society into urban slum dwellings with their attendant societal problems including indulgence in alcoholism and loose moral behaviour. Lack of legitimate avenues of social dialogue or discourse due to state controls, has resulted in the tendency by the people to depend on “rumours” and so forth. Similarly, loss of faith in the judicial system and the police is translated into widespread and institutionalised bribery, corruption, and often mob “justice”.

### **Conclusion**

Perhaps the redeeming aspect of *How to be Kenyan* is its sense of inclusiveness by which most prominent cultural groups and types in Kenya are interwoven and exposed. Examples abound of, for instance, the exploits of the football loving Luos and Luyias of Western Kenya, the commercial pursuits of the Agikuyu in Kenya’s urban centres and the love of the garb of the Akamba of Eastern Kenya.

But by the same token, the bad and the ugly amidst Kenyans is not spared. Craving for the *Mzungu’s* (whiteman’s) things is not to be seen as a mere colonial legacy but a sign of self-hate and degradation occasioned by a long history of dehumanisation. Other unique Kenyan socio-cultural institutions may include the “Harambee” movement, tendency to receive and offer gifts, incentives or “bribes” as tokens. Otherwise, phenomena such as football thuggery, womanising, fashionability, littering, religiosity, street whoring, disregard for traffic rules, loose gossip, urban violence or petty crimes, superstition, carousing, aping of foreign names and mannerisms and so forth cannot be said to be an exclusive Kenyan phenomenon.

The other defining aspect of *How to be Kenyan* is its effective use of irony as a literary device. For instance, Kenya’s preference for “imported” goods, languages, accents, names, slogans and

mannerisms is in sharp contrast with their own culture. Games and sports provide an opportunity for ethnic rivalry and violence instead of being a force for national unity. Public phones impede rather than aid communication, courts of law often dispense the very opposite of justice. Kenyans are deeply religious as well as superstitious at the same time and so on.

However, although *How to be Kenyan* is pleasant and entertaining reading, its major weakness is to give undue treatment of the undesirable facets of Kenyan lifestyle to the total exclusion of the positive side. This property makes the book appear somewhat cynical and existentialist. A study aimed at mapping out a people's collective aggregate character cannot afford to be lop-sided. In any given community, there are surely some redeeming values or practices that lie beyond the bad and the ugly. Although *How to be Kenyan* may not be saying much that is new to many reading Kenyans, it will definitely make the reader squirm with discomfort and, hopefully, jolt him or her into making a difference in the future Kenyan Society.

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