

The Garissa University College Tragedy: An Accident in Building the Kenyan Nation

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Résumé - Cet article s'inspire d'un événement récent au Kenya, l'attaque terroriste dans l'un des campus de l'université de Moi, le 2 avril 2015.

Cette attaque se produit dans le contexte du terrorisme international avec la complicité et l'implication du groupe situé en Somalie, Al Shabab. Elle pose un certain nombre de questions comme la construction de l'Etat-nation postcolonial kényan, l'idéologie du développement décentralisé matérialisé par une répartition socio-géographique des universités publiques kényanes à travers le territoire national, ainsi que la définition rituelle et l'interprétation des conflits dans la société post-indépendante kényane. L'article soutient l'argument selon lequel le terrorisme au Kenya est une expérience qui se nourrit d'un ensemble de facteurs favorables, tous inhérents aux processus et défis de la construction de la nation, et que l'attaque de Garissa University College ne doit pas être lue comme un événement isolé, mais une conséquence inévitable des processus complexes de la construction de la nation kényane dans un contexte postcolonial...

Mots-clés : Développement national, université, décentralisation, terrorisme, post-colonie, Etat-nation, conflits.

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Abstract - This article is based on a real life event in Kenya, the terrorist attack on one of the constituent colleges of Moi University on April the 2nd, 2015. This attack occurs within the context of the international terrorist framework, in this case facilitated by the Somalia-based group Al Shabab.

However, the attack is interpreted in a number of other contexts, namely the process of nation building in the post-colonial Kenyan state, the discourses of de-centered development as captured in the spread of the Kenyan public universities across the geographical terrain of the country and the ritual definition and interpretation conflict resolution in the Kenyan post-independent society. The article develops the argument that terrorism in Kenya is an experience that thrives on a set of enabling factors, all inherent in the process and challenges of nation building, and that the Garissa University College attack should be read not as an isolated event but an inevitable expression of the complicated processes of nation building in the post-colonial world and the attendant challenges.

Keywords: National Development, University, decentralization, terrorism, post-colony, nation-state conflicts.

On 2 April 2015, at around 5.30 in the morning, Garissa University College, a constituent college of Moi University, was attacked by terrorists. Here is how a newspaper item reports the experience:

Gunmen likely sent by Somalia's Al Shabaab stormed a university in neighbouring Kenya early on Thursday killing 14 people, wounding at least 30 and taking dozens more hostage in campus dormitories.

The squad of 5 men burst through the gates of Garissa University College before dawn shooting dead a guard there before continuing on into the grounds 'firing indiscriminately' according to police. They zeroed in on the rows of halls of residence that house students, who are drawn from communities across Kenya's arid north-east. Garissa is the largest town in the region, which borders Somalia.

Heavy gunfire continued as the sun rose, witnesses in the town reported. One said that it sounded like fireworks going off. The town lies 210 miles east of the capital Nairobi, midway to the Somali border in an area rarely visited by tourists.

(The Telegraph 2015)

Kenyan security forces responded to the crisis but by the time they had managed to contain the situation 147 lives had already been lost and many more wounded. The whole thing had become a national disaster with the president declaring three days of mourning.

From this and other reports that followed the incident, it is clear that Al Shabaab planned this operation to create a sensation and to draw attention to themselves as representatives of a particular fundamental Islamic ideology whose main concern is to take control of the Somali Republic and establish an Islamic Caliphate in Somalia and north-eastern Kenya. While claiming responsibility for this attack they also added that this mission was aimed at punishing Kenya for sending its troops into Somalia to fight Al Shabaab's control of large sections of the country. It is noteworthy that this was not the first attack on Kenya made by Al Shabaab in

pursuit of the said revenge mission. There have been several attacks in different parts of the country mainly in the major towns of the north-east, and also in Nairobi and Mombasa. Prior to the Garissa University attack, the worst of these attacks was the West Gate Mall incident in Westlands, Nairobi when terrorists laid siege to a popular up-market shopping centre for four days before being finally overcome by Kenyan security forces. In this case, it was reported that a total of 67 lives were lost.

It is evident that Al Shabaab plans each attack meticulously and ensures that it is executed in an exhibitionist manner to draw as much attention, fear and anger as possible. These actions may be far between, involve just a fraction of the Kenyan nation and be carried out by a very small force, yet they serve as symbolic representations that are meant to effectively express the interests, anxieties, and aspirations of a certain perspective on contemporary geo-political trends. This cycle of Al Shabaab's performance within the Kenyan national space clearly parallels the way in which ritual works.

I) The Ritual and Symbolism of the Somalia-Kenya Crisis

Ritual consists of symbolic acts whose significance goes beyond the surface and invokes a set of narratives and counter-narratives representing contesting interests that the whole performance seeks to resolve. In addition, a ritual is often engaged by a specific community during moments of crises (Turner 2008). In the case of Kenya it is worth noting that the Northern Frontier has been a region in crisis since the colonial period. There are several factors that have led to this crisis. The geographical location and conditions have been a major hindrance to the absorption of this region into the mainstream of Kenyan society. This region adjoins the western part of Somalia and shares harsh desert conditions in which nomadic pastoralism is the mainstay. Because of these conditions, and the vastness of the space, it has always been a very difficult region to police both for the British colonial government as well as for the various post-independent Kenyan regimes.

In terms of policy, the colonial and post-colonial governments did not consider it economically viable to invest in infrastructure and development projects in this and other regions that were otherwise perceived as arid. The local populations therefore felt excluded from the nation and have since consistently expressed their disenchantment

with what they consider to be deliberate marginalization. Furthermore these communities share similar ethnic, cultural and religious identities with the Somali community in Somalia. Because of this link, the Somali communities from both regions (Somalia and north-eastern Kenya) have historically claimed and agitated for a union that would form a Greater Somali. Such claims are a result of perceived discrimination and exclusion from the state (in the case of the Kenyan Somali) and the push for political and economic control of the Horn of Africa (in the case of the Somali Republic).

Such invocations for a Greater Somalia have historically led to violent clashes between the Kenyan state and the Somali community (in Kenya and Somalia), the most recent being the so-called Shifta War of 1963-1968 (Rinquist 2011). Despite the claims that this crisis in the Northern Frontier was officially resolved by a peace agreement between the then Kenyatta government and the Somali Prime Minister at the time, Ibrahim Egal, in 1967, there have been continuous episodes of secessionist agitation. In the process, a number of atrocities have been committed by the government, including the famous Wagalla Massacre on 10 February 1984 in Wajir County in which the Kenyan armed forces brutally tortured and then murdered about 5,000 ethnic Somalis. This crisis has never had closure and this explains why it has been very easy for the national crisis in Somalia to spill over into north-eastern Kenya. Groups that have specific claims to the Somali state, the most recent being Al Shabaab, easily find sympathy and support on the Kenyan side.

It is significant that the Al Shabaab crisis began purely as a Somalia problem as a consequence of failed government, dating back to the 1980s with the ousting of the Siad Barre regime, which has led to a long-standing civil war between various factions. Al Shabaab is itself an off-shoot of the Islamic Courts Union which was deposed in 2006 by the Transitional Federal Government. Al Shabaab, like the Islamic Courts Union from which it emerged, seeks to establish an Islamic state run by Sharia law. It is a militant organization that employs violence to achieve its political aim: to control Somalia. However, it portrays this interest as a Jihad, a holy war against the unbelievers. In the process, the Jihadists also define perceived sympathizers of the secular government as its enemies (infidels) that must be fought. Furthermore, it identifies with and is

influenced by other anti- Westernization and globalization movements of the Arab world such as Al Qaida and recently ISIS. Underlying this alignment with these anti-US/Western movements from the Arab world is the need for military and financial support. The modus operandi of these groups, that Al Shabaab has adopted too, is the effective use of propaganda and terrorist activity to recruit followers and create visibility and fear among its so called enemies. These tactics have been employed to recruit Kenyan Somalis and other disaffected groups in Kenya into its ranks. It has been easy to recruit Kenyan Somalis because of long-standing historical grievances, as well as by invoking the dream of a Greater Somalia and Muslim Caliphate that includes Kenya's north-eastern region. Evidently, Al Shabaab invokes symbolic statements to communicate specific messages that go beyond the immediate circumstances and express deeper themes.

This scenario can be understood in the light of Victor Turner's concept of social dramas and the ritual resolution of conflicts therein. According to Turner, social life is vulnerable to *breaches* because of inevitable conflicts that occur as a result competing interests. These conflicts come to the fore in the form of particular events that threaten the stability of the group. If the conflict is not resolved it leads to *crisis*, characterized by the widening of the breach into increasingly open and public displays. Turner argues that these may be several and successive, each more public and threatening than the last. At this level, *redressive action* needs to be undertaken to deal with the crisis. Often, such action fails, evoking new, even more explosive crises. He argues that the real solution is in *reintegration*, to resolve the initial breach so that the social fabric is knit together again (Schechner 2006).

From the foregoing, it is evident that the crisis in north-eastern Kenya is a result of a breach in the functioning of the state as a social unit – the failure of the Kenyan state to fully integrate the north eastern communities into the Republic. This breach has not been addressed meaningfully, to the point of reintegration. This has resulted in a series of crises that have become increasingly severe, with each incident more serious than the last. Initially, the insecurity was characterized by isolated incidences of kidnap and murder. However, with time, it has become more and more public

and devastating. The Garissa incident is the clearest illustration of the escalation of what was initially just a *breach*.

It is significant that the way the Al Shabaab phenomenon has played out in Kenya is both a reflection and revision of Turner's concept of social drama. While Turner perceives the linear progression of a breach to crisis, attempted redressive action, and resolution by way of integration, it is evident that in the Kenyan scenario we have a case of multiple breaches across two countries, developing into independent crises, but which gradually coalesce and become one complex crisis.

In this paper we argue that the crisis involving the continuing civil war in Somalia, the underlying historical tensions between the Kenyan state and the communities of north-eastern Kenya, and Al Shabaab's incursions into Kenya has been transformed into a national problem and reflects on how Kenya perceives itself as a nation. In referring to Kenya, Ogot and Ochieng (1995: 235) stated:

In Kenya, as in most African countries, people do not live in a nation state. They live in a state with a nation still to be built, but with many nationalities, with multiple identities. But the goal of the construction of a national culture...must be to transform Kenya into a modern nation state embodying our political and cultural identity.

At the surface level, Kenyan identity is that of a stable nation state while at the deeper level there have been continuous fissures and tensions between various interest groups that consistently threaten the social unit that Kenya aspires to be. This is a case of several breaches, which when activated threaten the stability of the nation. These moments of near disintegration include the *Shifita War* (1967-1968)³ whose effects continue to reverberate in the north-

³It is important to note that all these incidents were a result of perceived grievances by different communities in the country arising from unresolved historical injustices, some of which can be traced back to the actions of the colonial state, and which the post-independence governments failed to deal with. In the north-eastern region that borders Somalia, there was a long running struggle by communities to have the region be part of Somalia and not Kenya. This struggle took on a militant aspect in the 1960s leading to the *Shifita War* of 1967-1968. From then on there was a general state of instability in the region forcing the Kenyatta and Moi regimes (like the previous British colonial regime) to place it under a permanent state of emergency. Since the colonial period there

eastern region including the recent incursions by Al Shabaab into Kenya as witnessed in the ambush of a bus in Mandera (2014) and the attack on Garissa University; the Kenya armed forces mutinies at Lanet Barracks (1964) and in 1982 (Parsons 2003),⁴ the Kisumu Massacre (1969); the land clashes of 1992, 1997 and 2007; the

has been little investment in infrastructure and basic amenities and the region has lagged behind the rest of the country, leading to claims of discrimination by members of that community. Currently Al Shabaab has taken advantage of these grievances to embark on a campaign for secession and unification with Somalia. Its operations in north-eastern Kenya (apart from frequent isolated cases of kidnappings, assassinations and bombings since 2011) include the 22 November 2014 attack on a bus headed for Nairobi in which 28 non-Muslim passengers were executed by the group, an attack on a quarry near Mandera town (2 December 2014) in which 36 non-Muslim workers were killed and the recent Garissa University attack.

⁴ In 1964, there were a series of army mutinies in the three East African countries (Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania). The governments of the new independent nations, of Presidents Nyerere (Tanzania), Obote (Uganda) and Kenyatta (Kenya) respectively, quickly and decisively enlisted the assistance of the British military to deal with these crises. Parsons has argued that while the state in all three countries represented these mutinies as mere discontent on the part of the junior officers over pay and terms of service, the very fact that the governments dealt with this problem decisively is an indication that the crisis was seen as a threat to the fragile independent state. It was clear that there were concerns that what seemed to be a small expression of discontent could lead to general disorder which would spill out of the military and result in anarchy. In Parson's view the army was generally suspicious of the new civilian government (which was taking over from the colonial office) and were concerned with the maintenance of certain privileges which had been provided by the colonial government. This included the reservation of places in the army for particular ethnic groups. The 1 August 1982 coup d'état was an attempt to overthrow the regime of the then President Daniel arap Moi. It was led by several junior officers of the Kenya air force: Hezekiah Ochuka, Pancras Oteyo, Joseph Ogidi, Charles Oriwa, Walter Odira and Injeni Njereman. The coup was however suppressed by the Kenya army and the status quo restored. The coup lasted 12 hours and according to Mwaura Samora (2014) in the *Standard Digital News* (www.standardmedia.co.ke) more than 100 soldiers and 200 civilians died. Estimated economic losses stood at 500 million Kenya shillings. Samora argues that this abortive coup had long term effects on the manner in which the Moi regime ran the country including the installation of a heavy intelligence network, the arrest, torture and detention of perceived enemies of the state, and limitations on the right of assembly.

Pwani si Kenya Movement at the Coast accompanied by several terrorist acts in the region including the *Mpeketoni* incident.⁵

II) The Crisis of Building the Kenyan Nation

In this article we argue that Kenya is a nation in perpetual crisis. The crisis is an inevitable component of the never ending process of building the post-independent nation. This process of building the nation in and through crisis is reflected in virtually all our so called national institutions. It is a crisis characterized by a gap between on the one hand what should be the ideal nature and function of the institutions of nation building and what they are essentially touted to be, and on the other the actual formation and practice of these institutions in post-independent Kenya. We could define this dialectic in the context of what Roland Barthes (1972) has defined as the one of the major characteristics of myth as language, which he defines as paradoxically empty on the one side and full on the other. What is presented as the formal, the real and the tactile is an empty space; what is substantive and real is projected in the immediate historical and socio-cultural landscape. However, there is always an attempt to present the view that the

⁵ Instability in Kenya is closely tied to perceived historical land injustices that can be traced back to the colonial period when communities were displaced by the state to give way to British settlers in the Kenya Highlands, as well as to develop urban centres and infrastructure for the same purpose. While there were attempts to resettle the communities elsewhere, large numbers remained landless leading to a squatter problem especially in the Coast, central, and Rift Valley areas. Successive post-independent regimes have failed to address this problem and, in fact, due to political patronage and corruption in government, have allowed powerful individuals to grab land at the expense of landless groups. At the same time the land problem in regions like the Rift Valley and the Coast has been exacerbated by perceived tension between communities who feel that groups from other communities have been especially favoured by other regimes to 'invade' and settle in their land. This has been the case in the Rift Valley where groups from Central Province were relocated to areas of the Rift Valley, which the Kalenjin and the Maasai view as their land. This has led to violent clashes that reached critical points during certain election years (in 1992, 1997 and 2007). On the Coast, land ownership has been a central factor that has fuelled separatist sentiments such as the latest 'Pwani si Kenya' (The Coast is Not Part of Kenya) movement which have become increasingly violent (see *Irin*: 'Briefing: Land Reform Key to Kenya's Future', available at www.m.irinnews.org/report/briefing-land).

reality is that which is present and tactile, which is accompanied with the effort to mask the substance on the other side.

The Kenyan public university has been sucked into this process and for a long time acquired the status of a dead metaphor, whose metaphorical significance is however reawakened now and then. We argue that the Garissa University College terror attack has turned out to be an experience that unveils this metaphor. The main paradox here has been that the Kenyan public university is an icon of the nation. The university has been projected as evidence of the 'growth' of the nation. The university has been argued as being a symbol of the *collective* and therefore *national* development. However, we argue that the growth and development of the Kenyan public university has reflected the politics of Kenya. In this light that we now turn to the establishment and growth of Moi University, the 'mother university' of Garissa University College.

Moi University was established as the first Kenyan university built by and for Kenyans. This was one of the main recommendations of the 1981 Mackay Commission on Education. The university curriculum was meant to be technically oriented and also sensitive to the environment. Courses in such areas as tourism, forestry and technology were given first priority. The 8-4-4 System of Education was also adopted to help meet the overall objective of harmonizing Kenyan education to Kenyan needs. Significantly though, this was happening in a specific political context: around the time President Moi had come to power and was experiencing many challenges to his authority. There were plans to undermine and eventually overthrow him, which culminated in the 1982 attempted coup. There was a general feeling then that the seat of power in the Kenyan post-colony was both metaphorically and geographically at the centre of the country. It could thus be argued that establishing Kenya's first university in the heart of Rift Valley was a strategic move, one of the strategies of shifting power from the centre to another 'new and desired centre'. We argue here that the motive of 'moving the centre' is what informed the location of a university in a particularly undeveloped region of the country without access to the necessary infrastructure, nor even with the potential for such infrastructure to develop. The university was located in a forest, over 20 kilometres from the main Mombasa–Nairobi–Eldoret–Uganda road. The pioneer staff and students faced

many challenges of travel and accommodation. In spite of all the obstacles, the university had immense political goodwill.

But perhaps more significant is what would follow. The de-centering motive soon became a motif. Moi University started expanding geographically across the Western Region. Maseno University College and Western University College of Science and Technology (WEUCO) were the first affiliate campuses of the university. They later became constituent colleges, and later, fully fledged universities, with the latter being renamed, Masinde Muliro University. Since then, Kabianga and Maasai Mara universities have also been founded by the geographically ever expanding Moi University. Significantly this trend gradually became the dominant narrative of the Kenyan public university established along regional or ethnic lines. Such a university will then draw most of its top administrative, support, and in some cases even teaching staff from the local community, who are perceived to be the owners of the university. The Kenyan public university has thus been fully absorbed into Kenyan political discourse. Mainstream public universities extend tentacles to far flung regions of the country, in most cases serving the government in its bid to posture as nationalist and all-inclusive.

The consequences of this trend have been significant. Universities are mushrooming all over the place without due regard as to their feasibility. Such institutions struggle to live up to the image of the university. Garissa University College falls in that category. It is a University College situated in an area with historical problems of insecurity. Even before the emergence of Al Shabaab as a terrorist group, the north-eastern part of Kenya was not safe. The harsh environment, poor infrastructure and migratory cultural patterns of the local community would present challenges to the establishment of a public university. Indeed, even basic education is beset with challenges in this region. This is a region that needs to be opened up, developed, secured and generally 'modernized' before it is made to host a public university. That it was however perceived to be good enough a region to host a University College plays into the developing argument of this paper: that its establishment and existence served immediate political and economic interests disguised as national interests. The Garissa University College tragedy therefore can be seen as more than just a retaliatory

terrorist attack in Kenya because of the KDF presence in Somalia; its occurrence and the response to it are part of the typically Kenyan style of nation building.

This paper has developed the argument that the Garissa University College tragedy can be understood as ritual performance of the Kenyan post-colony. In a sense this echoes Homi Bhabha's (1990) view that nationhood is performed in specific rituals. Underlying this performance are varied competing interests. Because of the inevitable and irresoluble clash of interests, the process of building the nation is infinite, always in a state of becoming, never complete. In the context of the Garissa University College tragedy, it may be argued that the event renders itself to a nationalism-as-ritual interpretation. In this sense, the event is not seen as just an unfortunate accident but as an inevitable twist in the tail of the performance of the Kenyan nation. We argue that this event even had about it what Richard Schechner (2006) termed the *restored behaviour* pattern of performance. Locating our argument in the Bhabha-Schechner framework, we read the Garissa University College attack as the performance of a sort of frame narrative that holds together the various strands of social myths that inform the ritual performance of the Kenyan nation. Like the typical ritual performance, these performances play out the deep-seated tensions and anxieties of the Kenyan people, the desire to transcend the immediate and long term limitations of nationhood, and the difficult and indeterminate process of the transition. It involves the inevitable pain and dissolution of crossing what Wole Soyinka (1976) has termed the 'chthonic realm of existence'. Seen in this light, the event takes on an inevitable and, in purely formal terms, positive character.

Against this background, we argue that terrorist attacks on the Kenyan space and its people can only be dealt with after they have been interpreted within the discursive formation that hosts and nourishes them. The various challenges of nation building, social-cultural, economic and political in character, have to be addressed first. Because they are the hardware that employs terrorism as an operating system. Indeed, one could argue that terrorist activities in most of the postcolonial world have largely been provoked and

sustained by the process of nation building. It has been our argument in this paper that because the process of nation building in the postcolonial world is complex and infinite, it is highly likely that we cannot talk of completely eliminating terrorism any time soon. It is part of the social ritual of nation building.

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To cite this paper

Solomon Waliaula & Joseph Basil Okong'o, « The Garissa University College Tragedy: An Accident in Building the Kenya Nation », *Pax Academica*, 3/2014, pp. 203-215

URL : www.paxacademica.codesria.org/revue/pax3-2014-waliaokongo