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Public Letters and the Culture of Politics in Kenya, c.1960-75

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Abstract

Despite only a minority of Kenya's African population being literate at the time of independence, letter-writing constituted a significant form of engagement between grassroots political participants and national leaders during decolonization. This paper sets out to ask why individuals and collaborative groups of writers sent large quantities of letters to their leaders, what they wrote about, and their expectations of the effect of their correspondence. It argues that these letters constituted a public sphere in decolonising Kenya.

Through their letters, Kenyans debated development policy, critiqued the actions of the new governing elite, and set out their hopes and fears for independent rule. Furthermore, letter-writing also provided the opportunity for large groups of authors, often including those without sufficient literacy to write in their own name, to reach consensus among themselves on otherwise contentious issues.

Just as importantly, the responses – at first constructive and later suspicious – of state officials to these letters illustrates the continuities and changes in the nature of governance during

decolonization. Letter-writing became less effective and more anachronistic as the post-colonial period progressed as the post-colonial state became reliant upon other rituals of political participation.

Introduction

As a child in the 1920s, the Kenyan journalist Henry Muoria found the idea of written correspondence across vast distances to be literally magical.¹ Within three decades, letters were ubiquitous in the lives of many of Muoria's compatriots. When colonial immigration officials searched the luggage of the nationalist leader Tom Mboya at Nairobi's airport in 1959, they found 1500 individual pieces of correspondence.² Although many of the letters were related to Mboya's global labour and Pan-Africanist networks, a great deal of the correspondence was to and from fellow Kenyans. Much of it survives and, together with the records of various branches of government and the office of the president held at the Kenya National Archives, comprises a significant repository of the letters written by Kenyans to political leaders and public officials during the era of decolonization.

Following Sheila Fitzpatrick, I define this correspondence as "public letters" in order to "distinguish letters written to public figures and institutions from the private letters that individuals wrote to friends and family."³ Most letters sent by Kenyans to their local and national leaders in this period were straightforward requests for jobs, money, or help with basic essentials, such as school fees.⁴ Such letters, not least in their volume, are important reminders of the challenging circumstances in which many Kenyans lived their lives. However, in this paper I concentrate on the sub-set of letters in which correspondents attempted to situate their requests for assistance or other claims within wider arguments - such as politics or development - about the nature of decolonization. Through these public letters we can see the contours of political debate beyond the formal institutions of party, government, and state.

The article has five parts. I first detail the letters themselves. Although I am interested in what authors wrote about, I draw upon an existing literature on print cultures and private letter-writing in East Africa and beyond to consider how and why people wrote public letters. Next, I consider who wrote and, just as importantly, who did not. I then consider questions of the writing process, the form of particular types of letter, and the languages used. I give particular emphasis on the practice of collective writing and the choice authors made to use English. Finally, the paper turns to the question of the state's response to public letter-writing.

Through the paper I advance two connected arguments. First, adopting Emma Hunter's and Sheila Fitzpatrick's approach to such sources, the letters and the act of writing them constituted part of what can be loosely termed a public sphere. In turn this public sphere reveals much about the substance of ideas and debate at the grassroots of political life during decolonization. As Hunter writes of her sources' engagement with the public sphere in decolonising Tanzania, the letters pose a series of questions about the meaning of freedom, citizenship, and democracy.⁵ Public letter-writing was a political act. The letters show us much about how their authors understood the processes of decolonization, wrestled with the imperfections of the post-colonial state, and how they imagined their future.

The paper's second argument relates to the relationship between the letter writers and the recipients. On the surface, this appears to have changed a great deal over the course of the period covered here. At first, the recipients of public letters sought to be responsive as possible to the pleas and claims of the writers. Over time the enthusiasm of recipients to respond constructively to the letter writers gave way to apathy or, indeed, outright hostility. The

motivations of state officials to archive the letters changed accordingly. From being a mechanism to allow for the swift response to the correspondence, the archiving of the public letters by their recipients became part of the state's practice of surveillance, itself part of a wider "ideology of order."⁶ However, whether the letters met with an enthusiastic or baleful response, the practice was governed by a consistent logic. Letter writers continued to flood the offices of their addressees with correspondence because of the paucity of representative institutions within the post-colonial state. With representative institutions - most notably the ruling Kenya African National Union (KANU) but also trade unions - deliberately weakened by the Kenyatta government, letter-writing was one way in which citizens could attempt to influence the decisions of government officials. But writers appealed to the state on a case-by-case basis, for which there was some prospect of amelioration, rather than agitating for the structural changes necessary to address the problems at hand more widely. Public letters hence provide a unique perspective on politics and governance in early post-colonial Kenya. Through their letters Kenyans identified and sought to work within both the possibilities and constraints of independence.⁷

The letters

"... Kenya between 1945 and 1955 was a land of commotion - *matata*," writes Atieno Odhiambo.⁸ What followed over the preceding decades was little different. Between 1960 and 1975, the authors of the letters discussed here lived through a series of tumultuous events. Independence in 1963 was only the most obvious. The country had two periods of two-party politics in 1960-64 and 1966-69. Otherwise the ruling party after independence, KANU, tightened its grip on power. Independence was accompanied by a short-lived experiment with devolved government, but this lasted a little over a year and power was centralised ever more tightly around the executive

under Jomo Kenyatta. In the North Eastern Province, the new authority of the independent state was considered by many of the province's Somali population to be no more legitimate than its colonial predecessor; a low-level insurgency against rule from Nairobi lasted for much of the 1960s. Elite politics was marked by violence too; three shocking assassinations of Pio Gama Pinto (1965); Tom Mboya (1969); and J.M. Kariuki (1975) rocked the country. So too did rumoured coup attempts in 1965 and 1971.

The pace of economic and social change was just as rapid. Land transfers from European to Kenyan owners, massive resettlement programmes, population growth, and urbanisation transformed the geography of the country in a short space of time. Fast economic growth and accelerating inequality dominated political debate. This all took place against the backdrop of efforts towards East African integration, the pernicious legacies of British rule, and the intensification of the effects of the Cold War on domestic politics.

This was the landscape that letter-writers attempted to navigate in their correspondence. Some letters addressed the fraught political debates surrounding Kenya's foreign relations. A group of writers from Muhoroni in Central Nyanza, for example, denounced Oginga Odinga - "a treacherous rogue" - as "old-fashioned, self-seeking and communistic inspired" because of his involvement with the likes of the Soviet Union.⁹ For his part, Odinga received very different letters in which Mboya assumed the role of the villain for his connections to a neo-imperialist United States.¹⁰ The vast majority of letters, however, addressed matters closer to home.

Many letters had a pronounced focus on issues specific to tightly defined geographical areas. Writers from Central Province and the adjacent districts of the Rift Valley and Eastern Provinces were unsurprisingly absorbed with the legacies of the war against Mau Mau of the previous decade. In particular, writers addressed the corruption of land reform that accompanied the military campaign against the rebels and the manner by which loyalist supporters of the British had benefited from their own opposition to Mau Mau. Correspondents hoped that the independent government would “enable us to recover our valuable properties either by way of compensation or by suing these stooges and puppets of the former imperialist government.”¹¹ But dispossession as part of the British counterinsurgency campaign of the 1950s was just one episode in a longer history of colonial land alienation. Many of the letters addressing land alienation read like geological samples, revealing layer upon layer of historic episodes of dispossession. In 1967 Kamau Nganga was still pursuing the alienation of his family land by the settler colony in 1907. Having failed to find restitution during either the colonial period or the first years of independence, he marked the sixtieth anniversary of the dispossession of his family's land by begging Kenyatta “to listen to my cry.”¹²

The letters from veterans of the Mau Mau conflict were notable in other respects too. While in the forests and in detention during the 1950s, the insurgents compiled a substantial bureaucratic archive. They created records of the participants in the struggle, made lists of financial contributions by supporters, and detailed the service of those most deserving of grants of land in an imagined future after victory. The cumulative effect of these bureaucratic efforts was the creation of “a sovereign state” and “an alternate system of governmental administration in the forest.”¹³ The practice continued after independence in the public letters written by veterans of the conflict.

Livingstone Muthue, for example, engaged in protracted correspondence with both colonial and post-colonial authorities for at least seven years as he tried to get compensation for his losses suffered during the Emergency. He had owned a shop in Kahuhia market, Murang'a. He was arrested in 1955 and detained, during which time hundreds of items in stock were either seized by the authorities or became unsellable. In a series of letters to his local chief, the provincial administration, the attorney general, and the president, Muthue set out in detail the financial losses he suffered; every single piece of lost, stolen or spoiled stock was itemised in his claims, from a Raleigh bicycle to bottles of soda.¹⁴

From the districts either side of the provincial boundaries between Nyanza, Western, and Rift Valley Provinces, the delineation of various administrative units – location, district, and province – during decolonization caused great consternation. Members of ethnic communities who found themselves on the “wrong” side of new boundaries feared dispossession. Collective letter-writing was particularly commonplace in such circumstances. For example, the self-styled Luhya Community of Malanga in the country's far west demanded that Luo in the area “be deprived of their lands and be repatriated to the Sudan where they originally came [from].”¹⁵ Letters were, as this example illustrates, a means for their authors to marshal historic claims to territory and power, appeal to constitutional rights protecting minorities, or make emotional pleas to officials for recognition of claims.

In Kenya's rapidly growing urban areas, the concerns of letter writers were very different. As well as discontent with the state of housing, wages, and transportation, the residents of Nairobi,

were frustrated at the petty interferences of state officials in everyday life. With urbanisation in full swing, each day brought more and more Kenyans into the city and the informal labour market that underpinned Nairobi's economy. Yet even after independence, city and state officials maintained punitive colonial policies against the informal sector. The Kenya Goods Hawkers Association wrote to Tom Mboya, one of the city's members of parliament and government minister, in April 1964. "If we all selected you to seek our progressive programme and welfare why are you making our life to be so hard?" the association asked Mboya.¹⁶ Post-colonial governance was never far from the minds of the letter writers.

The same was true for letter writers from across the country who tackled the most widely shared concerns in the public letters: development; inequality; corruption; and the authority of unelected officials within the provincial administration, the prefectural branch of government responsible for enacting the power of the executive in local communities. David Mulindi, wondered "where the Ministers get money [from] to own large farms, hotels and extra cars and run big buses."¹⁷ Ngethe Kabaiku from Nyahururu complained about the attitudes of police officers and junior administrative officials appointed prior to independence who remained in post: "we are quite often threatened that if one wishes to air his views [he] might be faced and questioned by the government. This threat frustrates us in the way we used to be frustrated during the colonial times in this country."¹⁸

Hunter reminds us in her study of Tanzania that such locally focussed critiques of the post-colonial state contain underlying arguments that "were also universal because these were debates about the nature of authority, including political authority, and the relationship between

individual and community.”¹⁹ As the examples discussed briefly already suggest, public letters provide a unique opportunity to explore such questions for decolonizing Kenya. In his study of the Terik community during the colonial period, Eliud Biegon has demonstrated the diverse and fruitful uses that can historians of Kenya can make of such material.²⁰ Indeed, public letters have been used before by historians of Kenyan decolonization. Kara Moskowitz and Julie MacArthur, for instance, have used such documents as sources of detail about the engagement by grassroots participants in the public debates about development, citizenship, and ideas of community that characterised politics in this period.²¹ The use of public letters to advance such debates is not surprising given the context in which they were produced.

Necessary conditions

The widespread adoption of letter-writing as a political act required certain “necessary conditions” to be present; “the regional, institutional, or intellectual conditions” that allowed for Kenyan colonial subjects and post-colonial citizens to take up their pens.²² Foremost among these conditions was education. Although only a fifth of the population were literate by 1967, access to education had grown dramatically during decolonization.²³ In the space of a decade, the numbers of primary school pupils more than doubled to 1,043,416 in 1966. The growth in the number of secondary school pupils was even more marked, expanding from 10,856 pupils in 1956 to 63,193 a decade later.²⁴ At the same time, the independent government also widened provision of adult education. Over the five years from 1967, around 250,000 adults learned how to read and write through the UNESCO-backed National Literacy Campaign.²⁵

Education in turn sustained the second necessary condition for the public letter-writing: established print cultures that inspired and informed such correspondence. During the colonial period, as elsewhere at this time, newspapers, pamphlets, and books were the settings for Kenyans to debate a whole host of issues related to colonial rule and the dramatic social and economic changes it wrought.²⁶ Literacy provided colonised Kenyans with a mechanism to better understand and improve their present conditions, and to imagine different futures.²⁷ Letters sat at the heart of these cultures of reading, writing, and publishing. They became ubiquitous in the lives of the literate and non-literate alike. Letters comprised a major part of the content of newspapers. They formed the narrative spines of works of fiction and the medium through which Kenyans conducted their intimate relationships, friendships, and family business.²⁸

It is not surprising, therefore, that letters were used by colonial subjects to petition local colonial and metropolitan officials, or that the practice expanded during decolonization and the advent of representative forms of government. Decolonization introduced the possibility to letter-writers that they could shape the nature of the nation-state through accountable political leaders. There were other options available. Many tried their luck in paying a visit to the relevant individual's office, but found ministers, MPs and officials overwhelmed with other petitioners. The secretary of the Kyeni Engineering Works in Embu tried to call on Mboya in Nairobi in 1961 but found that "A person can waste his two days there and cannot be allowed in."²⁹ Nor were public meetings - a hallmark of public life in Kenya - any more effective as mechanisms by which citizens could influence the nature of political debate. The agendas of such events were always regulated by state officials and not intended to be sites of negotiation.³⁰

Not all Kenyans participated in letter-writing to the same degree. As Breckenridge shows, identifying who did not (or could not) write can be illuminating for understanding who did and for what purpose.³¹ The most obvious variables determining whether or not Kenyans wrote or did not related to class, generation, gender, and geography. As noted above, in the mid-1960s only one in five Kenyan adults were literate. Literacy was unevenly distributed according to class and age. But it is too simple to assume that everyone who was literate was wealthier: "Literacy was a vector rather than a fixed attribute of particular social classes or segments of society."³² Geography mattered too.

Letters from or about Nairobi and the Central, Eastern, Nyanza, Western and parts of the Rift Valley Provinces are commonplace in the archive. However, there is very little either from or regarding North Eastern Province, Coast Province, or the northern sections of the Rift Valley. The reasons for these regional variations are found in the nexus of education and political legitimacy. There were enormous disparities in the provision of schooling between different provinces and hence levels of literacy in the early post-colonial period. In 1966, there were 251,305 primary school pupils and 14,907 secondary school pupils in Central Province. In contrast, to take the most notable example, there were just 2,090 pupils in primary school and 56 in secondary school in North Eastern Province.³³ Moreover, the reduced legitimacy of the post-colonial state in North Eastern Province - which was embroiled in an armed irredentist struggle throughout most of the 1960s - further eroded the willingness of its inhabitants to participate in acts of political participation such as letter-writing. The few public letters from North-Eastern Province tended to be written by established political figures with existing ties to KANU or the government.³⁴

As well as geography, gender played an important part in determining participation in public letter-writing. Put simply, there are few letters by women in the records used here. Again, this had much to do with access to education. Girls made up just under 40 per cent of the primary school pupils across the country in 1966; boys were also more than twice as likely to continue on to secondary school.³⁵ But as with geography, access to education only tells us part of the story. The absence of letters from women also reflects their absence from formal political institutions. Women found alternative sites for political action, including the self-help movement and a range of provincial and national bodies concerned with social and economic development.³⁶

The consequences of the gendered politics of the post-colony were obvious by 1966 to Gathoni Mwangi, chair of the women's section of the KANU Barrina sub-branch in Nakuru, when writing her public letter. Policymaking was profoundly skewed towards restitution of the grievances of men. "Because if the Government finds any offer to poor people, it only and only gives to poor men..."³⁷ Yet although Mwangi's was a rare solely authored public letter by a woman, women did participate in collective efforts at letter-writing. For instance, among the fourteen authors of one letter in 1973 complaining against evictions from land in Kerugoya, we can find Wakera Johnary, Helena Mugo, and Katheko Njeru.³⁸ In other words, collaborative writing overcame some of the apparent barriers to participation in letter-writing by otherwise excluded groups. I will now turn in more detail to these collective efforts at writing.

The sociality of writing

Writing letters was often a collaborative rather than solitary activity. Even single-authored letters contain hints of hidden hands at work. The prevalence of typed letters and conformity of many letters cited here to a standard format is suggestive of a cottage industry of typists. Further research would be needed to determine the extent to which typists also acted as editors or unacknowledged co-authors. Certainly, the typist of Kamau Karuga's 1965 letter to Oginga Odinga must have played some role in the construction of the document and not simply taken dictation; Karuga signed the letter with a thumbprint.³⁹

Moreover, as the examples of collective writing involving women has already suggested, a great many of the public letters were written either by acknowledged collectives of authors or suggest that a great many more people than just the signatory were involved in the writing process. As Barber writes of collective cultures of reading, and as Derek Peterson has already demonstrated for writing in the colonial period, many of the public letters discussed here were the product of "forms of sociality."⁴⁰ The nine authors of one letter to Kenyatta in 1973 wrote on behalf of 525 other named residents of Kibirichia.⁴¹ When a collective act, letter-writing became about much more than simply the education, literacy or class of the principal author, and instead an act with a much broader social base.⁴² Just as jointly authored letters provided a (narrow) path for women to participate, the same was true for individuals at different points on a spectrum of literacy. Thirty signatories from North Malikisi wrote to Mbiyu Koinange in 1972 about the land disputes at Mount Elgon. Some of the signatories signed their names haltingly in capital letters, while others did so fluently.⁴³ Other co-authored letters included the fingerprints of non-literate authors.⁴⁴

Collective writing demanded coordination and bureaucracy. Meetings were called, secretaries appointed, chairs elected, and debates transcribed. It is no surprise, therefore, that letter-writing comprised much of the activity of the local branches and sub-branches of KANU. In 1965, for example, the Embu KANU branch was inundated with written complaints by the district's residents about the conduct of three chiefs. These complaints in turn prompted a local party meeting, and a letter from the branch chairman and secretary to Kenyatta.⁴⁵ But with KANU hollowed out as a vehicle of mass political participation due to elite-level rivalries, letter-writing became the basis for the formation of alternative grassroots political organisations. For instance, in Murang'a, where KANU was beset by factions supporting Bildad Kaggia and Gikonyo Kiano, residents despairing of the situation formed the Murang'a Plan and Development Committee to take forward their demands for revisions to land consolidation. The committee held public meetings, organised discussions with local leaders, and composed letters sent to Kenyatta and his lands minister, Jackson Angaine.⁴⁶

In emphasising the importance of practices of collective writing within an argument about the place of letters in a public sphere, there is a risk of overlooking the ways that literacy itself could be used to restrict and constrain debate.⁴⁷ This was particularly true with jointly written letters. In the processes of deliberation and writing, the necessity to find consensus and the power dynamics at play among authors could lead to the privileging of conservative or moderate arguments over more radical voices. In its collective form, letter-writing was subject to the same power relations as other forms of political action. Literacy did not supplant authority of leaders gained in other ways. Signatories of letters were not necessarily authors but could include local leaders whose levels of literacy could, in some cases, be perfunctory.

Take, for example, a letter written by four "Sabaot of Mount Kenya" from Bungoma. The first signature on the letter is that of Enos Kiberenge, printed in the hand of an individual who had obviously received little formal education; his name was illegible and needed the likely true author of the letter to rewrite his name in legible script in the margin. But it clearly mattered more to the wider body whose ideas formed the basis for the letter that Kiberenge's name appeared on the letter than any questions that might be posed by its intended recipients – the president, the attorney general, and the local MP – about whether or not he had written it. Kiberenge was, after all, a well-known local figure. Five years earlier, he made a dramatic intervention into efforts by the local provincial administration to resolve rival claims to territory and political authority between Sabaot and Bukusu communities on Mount Elgon. During a public meeting with officials in 1963, Kiberenge asserted the right of Sabaots to pre-eminence in the area by producing the *rungu* and other traditional symbols of power of the pre-colonial Sabaot ruler that he argued had governed the area before the arrival of the British.⁴⁸ Although he could barely write, Kiberenge was too important to be left off the list of signatories of a letter addressed to the president.⁴⁹

The letter from Kiberenge at all was just one such collective public letter among many written by the residents of Mount Elgon. The competition for land and authority on the mountain and in its surrounding districts were among the most pronounced of any location in the years following independence. These disputes, which assumed an ethnic character, provoked a deluge of written correspondence to various officials in government, much of which can be found today in the files of the Office of the President. Mount Elgon was claimed by letter-writers to be both a

Sabaot "Motherland" and the territory of Luhya and Teso "from time immemorial."⁵⁰ However, it is the collective nature of this correspondence that is most noteworthy. At a time of a heightened salience of ethnicity in local politics, the people of Mount Elgon met and composed correspondence together in ways that facilitated the imagination and realization of new ethnic communities.⁵¹ In other words the collective act of letter-writing was part of the process by which ethnic communities coalesced.⁵² This is unsurprising; historians have long argued that "Literacy gave ethnic nationalism much of its energy."⁵³

The Sabaot Elgon Youth Association was one organization engaged in collective letter-writing. It was represented in its petitions to government for its claims to territory, resources and political power in Mount Elgon by its secretary, Samson arap Ndiema. His letter of January 1966 to the minister for local government is suggestive of the ways in which collective letters represented an effort to draw together otherwise disparate arguments in support of shared claims. He drew upon an oral tradition predating colonial rule of Sabaot land claims, the rhetoric of nation-building, and the language of rights in order to press the Youth Association's claims.⁵⁴

Collective writing held the potential to produce consensus from discordant political ideas. That potency alarmed some contemporaries; consensus, they feared, would privilege conservative and moderate voices at the expense of radicals. Habil Orone, another Sabaot correspondent, feared compromise and consensus would weaken the community's claim to land and authority on Mount Elgon. In March 1968 he wrote local members of parliament: "We cannot find this wrong thing through writing and if we chose writing as a method to show our differences, I am sure we shall not find who is wrong. Every one of us will be right and every one will be wrong."⁵⁵

The language of power

If the collective nature of many of the public letters was the most notable feature of how Kenyans wrote, then the choice of language was a close second. Like many (but not all) of the letters discussed here, Ndiema's correspondence on behalf of the Sabaot Elgon Youth Association noted above was conducted in English. This is not to suggest that Swahili or any of Kenya's other languages were not used; there are plenty such examples in the archived public letters. The letters did not though generally differ in form or content dependent on the language used by their authors, except in instances where the distinction between public and private letters were blurred, such as correspondence within extended kinship groups and other such existing personal networks. Take for example the voluminous correspondence written by Mau Mau activists seeking restitution and addressed to Mbiyu Koinange or Jomo Kenyatta. Much of it was conducted in the Kikuyu language, but authors making identical claims also used English or Kiswahili.⁵⁶

English was nevertheless the language of choice for correspondents out of all proportion to the numbers of Kenyans who used the language as their first or even second language at the time. As David Sandgren recalls of his experiences while teaching at a secondary school in Nyeri in the 1960s, "English remained a third language for many of the students; few spoke it outside the classroom, and all struggled with the language on a daily basis."⁵⁷ But all of Sandgren's students would have understood the potency of writing in English given the deep historical roots of the practice. In defiance of British efforts to deploy Swahili as the everyday language of power, Gikuyu, for example, had long used English language in their dealings with the colonial

administration, “obligating British rulers to treat Gikuyu not as voiceless subjects but as participants in the work of administration.” Hence, under colonial rule the use of English by Gikuyu political actors had the effect of “circumscribing the reach of the state” and turning “British administrators into bargaining partners.”⁵⁸ At the heart of this Gikuyu effort to harness the power of language lay the independent schools’ movement, a network of schools established from the 1930s onwards across the Central Highlands in which English instruction was delivered in defiance of colonial policy.⁵⁹

Post-colonial education policy initially reinforced the position of English within public life. Kiswahili was not awarded the status of a national language until 1974 and it took a further decade before it became a compulsory subject at primary and secondary level.⁶⁰ In contrast, pupils spent more time in English language classes than in any other subject in the first two years of secondary school, and as much time as in science classes and only a little less than in mathematics thereafter.⁶¹ Letter-writing was not just a by-product of this educational instruction in English, but a central part of the pedagogy for teaching English and literacy, as elsewhere in the English-speaking world.⁶² Similar dynamics could be observed within adult literacy classes, where the majority of participants opted to continue their studies in English rather than Kiswahili once they had developed basic literacy skills.⁶³ As a result, writers would conduct at least some of even their most personal and intimate correspondence in English, alongside vernaculars if they received even only a basic, primary-level education.⁶⁴

Whether they took heed of their classes in school or harked back to a longer history of political debate about language, by independence Kenyans well understood that English was, in Angelique

Haugerud's words, "the country's language of power..." Its use in the letters in preference to either Swahili or any other major language signified the author's efforts to assert possession of "a mark of academic, political, and administrative elite status in Kenya."⁶⁵ If, as Ali Mazrui writes, English could "make a 'politician' out of almost every 'scholar,'" then it could certainly make an effective petitioner out of every Kenyan who chose to write their public letters in the language.⁶⁶ The use of English tells us much about what the authors considered their letters to be about: "English is the official language of much written government business."⁶⁷ The use of the language signified to the reader the public nature of the letter, as distinct from a private request made to an elder, a patron, relation or friend. For its part, the government further elevated English as the language of power by translating all letters written to Kenyatta and other senior figures into English.⁶⁸ But this was just one of the many actions that officials took in response to receipt of the public letters, to which this paper will now turn in more detail.

The state's response

The post-colonial Kenyan state retained its colonial predecessor's fixation on "written documents as arbiters of authority." This in turn continued to encourage among the state's subjects a conviction that "even the most insignificant piece of paper might make the difference between success and catastrophe."⁶⁹ Both the writers and the addressees engaged in public letters thus had imperatives to archive the correspondence. Much of the existing literature on letter-writing in African history has drawn on the personal archives – characterised by Karin Barber as "tin-trunk texts" – kept by the authors themselves.⁷⁰ Although this article is based on public rather than personal archives, there is no shortage of evidence in the public letters used here of the practice of 'tin trunk archiving.'

The residents of Itabua in Embu were, for instance, diligent self-archivists. Itabua was built in the 1950s as a punitive village to hold Mau Mau suspects and their families. Forced to live in dilapidated houses and in impoverished surroundings, the residents of Itabua turned to letter-writing and bureaucracy to find restitution. Their cross-referenced correspondence with local and national leaders set out the series of meetings and letters written in their efforts to be allocated land in the former White Highlands. Copies of previous letters were routinely included with any correspondence. Each meeting with officials was pre-empted by a written agenda and followed by further correspondence, all setting out the meetings and letters that had gone before.⁷¹

At first, the addressees of the public letters retained them in order to deal effectively with the matters at hand. In the early stages of decolonization, letter-writing could be a surprisingly efficient method for Kenyans seeking restitution and assistance. The archival record from the early 1960s contains many examples of letters where meaningful action was taken by the country's new leaders in response. Kenyatta, for instance, helped Gikonyo Kariuki find a job after the unemployed man wrote to the then prime minister in 1964 seeking help.⁷² Processing, replying, and taking the necessary actions in response to public letters occupied a significant amount of time on the part of an army of personal assistants and secretaries within private and ministerial offices. Indeed, Mboya's personal secretary at the Ministry of Economic Planning and Development, Sheila Campbell, was so well known to act in such a capacity that she herself became the recipient of these public letters. When approached for assistance by a group of women traders from Kisumu, Campbell revelled in the reversal of roles with Mboya and quipped in a note to the minister that "Perhaps you can help me draft a reply please!"⁷³

Over time, the eagerness of recipients to help petitioners gave way to weariness. "You are just one among the many people in Kenya who are landless and it is not possible to give everybody a piece of land," wrote a civil servant to C.B. Njenga in response to his letter about his impoverished mother and landless family.⁷⁴ This change in attitudes was, in part, a response to the sheer volume of letters, the scale of the problems addressed in them, and the limited time available to officials and politicians to respond. Mboya was once lauded for his diligence in this regard.⁷⁵ But even he had to admit in 1966 that he no longer had the time to keep up with his letters.⁷⁶ By the end of the 1960s, the efficacy of letter-writing as a political strategy was clearly in doubt. James Ondiek Kimogori from Sotik, wrote of how countless letters "are submitted to the President's office for him to settle feuds by which are among the citizens." Yet, "when such fellows who appealed find in reply that their requests are in negative forms they commence to claim that the present government is not doing up to the justice."⁷⁷

The state's practice of archiving changed too, becoming part of "the slow routine of documentary surveillance" and the wider culture of policing political debate in post-independence East Africa.⁷⁸ The tolerance of government for dissent in any form decreased as the post-colonial period proceeded.⁷⁹ In the wake of the assassination of Mboya and banning of the opposition Kenya People's Union in 1969, and a foiled coup plot in 1971, the government was highly sensitive to any source of criticism. In 1972 a group of residents of one village in Mwea, Eastern Province wrote to Kenyatta under the collective title of "People of Ngucwi." The letter - typed but written in Kikuyu - was a typical complaint about the failure of the government to address the needs of the landless.⁸⁰ Kenyatta's office forwarded the letter to the local provincial administration.

Having dismissed the claims made by the letter's authors, the local district commissioner demonstrated how much had changed from the period immediately before and after independence in the responses provoked by public letters: "...the District Officer of the area has been directed to carry out investigations with a view to finding who the writers are so that appropriate action can be taken against them for the malicious, damaging and false accusations they have made against public officers."⁸¹ By the time of the next crisis - the assassination of J.M. Kariuki in 1975 - the state was policing the everyday words of citizens.⁸² It continued to do so systematically, with varying degrees of effectiveness, until the demise of the one-party state in 1991, and sporadically ever since.⁸³

So why did authors continue to write public letters? The writers made conscious efforts to restrain the orality and informalisation of Kenyan politics after independence by restricting political debate and action to what could be written and delivered within the bureaucracy of a functioning modern nation-state. Writing was, the writers argued, respectable, accountable, and verifiable. They drew attention to the contrast between their political practice and the oral politics of rallies, funerals, and other sites of political action that were uncondusive to being recorded on the page. G.P.K. Kisaka, for example, when writing about Mount Elgon described himself "as a law-abiding citizen of Kenya" while decrying "Kalenjin's [sic] Acts of Hooliganism."⁸⁴ Among the complaints of the twelve joint authors from Bungoma of one letter about their local sub-chief in March 1966 was that "He holds secret political meetings in his neighbouring homes during night time."⁸⁵ A group of Luhya writers were angered by their failure to register their plots in Kemeloi location in Nandi district and what they considered to be their intimidation by various Kalenjin leaders in the local area. Having noted that "we have tried all we can to get lawful ways of registering our pieces," Alfred Anyoli and his two colleagues decried the "secret meetings" and

the instigation of threatening behaviour by their opponents. "Unless these people are made quiet by the Government, they will lead this area into blood," Anyoli and his co-authors warned.⁸⁶

The letter writers initially assumed that their addressees in government offices across the country shared their suspicion of unwritten forms of political action. Over time, they came to recognise that letter-writing was at odds with the statecraft practiced by Kenyatta and his officials. This was a form of statecraft that came to be enacted in a variety of settings in which the spoken rather than the written word was critical: fund-raisers for self-help projects (*harambee*); as visits of delegations to Kenyatta's residences; unminuted and unpublicised meetings of the inner circle of ministers and advisors; the ad hoc asides to Kenyatta's formal public speeches; and, most infamously, the oath-taking campaign of 1969.

Although less efficacious than earlier in the period discussed here, letter-writing nevertheless retained some value as authors disturbed by the orality and informality of politics sought to document government actions and hold officials to account. The imperfections of an oral-dominated form of governance were, to the writers at least, obvious. In a letter to Kenyatta in 1969, Amos Naisuru, a member of the Ogiek community in Nakuru, bemoaned the limitations of both public meetings and one-to-one meetings with government officials that typified local and national governance. Ogiek delegations to the offices of the provincial administration were "told that their case is under consideration, or the officer they want to see is not in or very busy and have no time to see them. They are told to come another day." Moreover, the chiefs and sub-chiefs with whom Ogiek attempted to discuss such issues on a day-to-day basis "always use Swahili which most of our elders and mothers don't know. They don't know our Kalenjin language and

they always speak without a translator. During meetings our elders and many [sic] don't always understand well what the Gov't officials tell them, and always make wrong translations for themselves after meetings."⁸⁷ In such circumstances, Naisuru's determination to pursue Ogiek claims to land in Nakuru through the use of letter-writing was an arresting but ultimately futile effort at resisting the informalisation of state power.

The mess of mistranslation and bureaucratic inefficiency that so frustrated Naisuru was one way state officials controlled the direction of unwritten negotiations with citizens. Letter-writing gave its practitioners the ability to determine the agenda of their communication with officials and leaders. In contrast, during the conduct of oral governance practiced under Kenyatta it was the representatives of the state, particularly the president, who determined the "moving boundary between what can and cannot be stated publicly..."⁸⁸ Citizens became supplicants.

While the likes of Naisuru used their public letters to in order to express dissent with the trend towards non-written forms of governance, others adapted to the realities of post-colonial politics. Writers engaged in personalised rituals of power sent agendas and discussion papers in advance of visits to his favoured home at Gatundu.⁸⁹ When KANU members petitioned Mboya in June 1967, they listed in their letter a range of different issues that required central government attention. But their primary objective demonstrated their understanding of how governance worked in post-colonial Kenya: "WE CALL FOR VISIT OF PRESIDENT KENYATTA [writers' own emphasis]."⁹⁰ In contrast to the diminishing returns on letter-writing, grievances presented to Kenyatta during his meetings at his home with delegations from across the country were responded to and at least investigated. A visit by delegates from Kuria, who raised a series

of complaints about land allocations and district boundaries, prompted a full and detailed response by the Nyanza Provincial Commissioner's office.⁹¹

In such circumstances, the public letter served increasingly narrow purposes. Kenyans continued to write, but the sense of constructive, discursive relationship between writers and addressees gave way to more naked expressions of either loyalty or dissent. At times writers demonstrated remarkable courage. Writing just a few months after Kenya became a *de facto* one-party state in 1969, Peter Okelo Julu, a Seventh Day Adventist from Kendu Bay, wrote to President Jomo Kenyatta. Julu demanded that the president resign over the Kisumu massacre of the previous October, during which the president's bodyguard had opened fire on a crowd of protestors and killed at least eight people; the massacre pre-empted Kenyatta's ban on the opposition Kenya People's Union. Julu wrote of how "The parents are still crying over the death of their children whom they have toiled for writing [i.e., worked hard to support the education of] and only to see them being shot like dogs by the President."⁹² Although the only signatory of his letter, Julu was doubtless writing for the thousands of his compatriots who were horrified by the emergence of authoritarian rule after less than a decade of independence.

Whether writing in the earlier period characterised by responsive leaders immediately before and after independence or in the latter more repressive years of the Kenyatta government, the letter writers were participating in what Partha Chatterjee terms "The Politics of the Governed." Post-colonialism entailed that "the space of politics became effectively split between a narrow domain of civil society where citizens related to the state through the mutual recognition of legally enforceable rights and a wider domain of political society where governmental agencies dealt not

with citizens but with populations to deliver specific benefits or services through a process of political negotiation.”⁹³ While one could question how this situation differed from that which pertained under colonial rule, particularly in settler colonies, it remains an acutely observed characterisation of the nature of governance and politics in Kenya and other post-colonial states. Letter-writing constituted one way by which Kenyans sought to engage with this “process of political negotiation.”

As we have already seen, public letters were one way in which populations were formed through the sociality of writing. For the most part this required petitioners to adopt the form of ethnic communities recognisable to a government that understand society to be fundamentally organised into such groupings. They echoed Kenyatta's and Mboya's conceptualisation of nation-building as a collaborative effort by ethnic communities.⁹⁴ As one writer from Lokitaung hoped, the country's various ethnic communities could “join together for civilisation.”⁹⁵ Once organised into such recognisable groupings, letter writers could then engage in negotiation. Some writers did, in fact, invoke the language of rights in an effort to make claims for restitution and recognition.⁹⁶ But framing claims in such a way had little effect on recipients who knew only too well that the state lacked the capacity to meet its constitutional obligations to its citizens.

The process and terms of negotiation, and the value of letter-writing in such circumstances, were spelled out in one episode stretching across 1970 and 1971. Francis Mugarami made determined representations to various government officials to find redress for a group of former residents of the Mathare area of Nairobi. Caught up in the mass detentions of the 1950s and with their homes subsequently destroyed by the colonial authorities, the group had been promised housing

on their release from detention. However, the new homes never materialised. To the city council after independence, left to deal with a situation over which they had no influence, Mugarami's group were just another of the countless landless individuals to be dealt with in accordance with standard policies for the allocation of plots and housing in the city. Mugarami's efforts to persuade the city council to do more to help fell largely on deaf ears. However, he also included Mbiyu Koinange in his correspondence with the city. Koinange and Kenyatta showed greater interest, promising Mugarami that the members of his group would be found housing by the city council.⁹⁷

As one council official acknowledged, Mugarami's appeals could not be met by reference to policy and the rights of the petitioners he represented. They were among hundreds of thousands such landless individuals in the city at the time. The council lacked the capacity to provide any sort of meaningful response to the challenge that posed in terms of demands for housing and servicing. Put another way, the category of landless in Nairobi and elsewhere was simply too large for the state to respond meaningfully to their demands; the council, and by extension other government offices, "cannot deal with groups of people" wrote the council officer. Instead, "individual cases are considered on their own merits."⁹⁸ The reality of post-colonial governance placed the onus on petitioners to make the most persuasive claims, to involve the most influential public figures, and express their cases in the most effective forms. In this context, letter-writing was and remained an effective strategy of political negotiation; it was an exemplar of Chatterjee's "politics of the governed."

Conclusion

The letter-writing of the decolonization era left its mark on the political culture of independent Kenya. The ideas, values, and imagined futures set out in the letters recurred in the magazines, newspapers, and social media posts of later periods.⁹⁹ But it was a practice that was shaped profoundly by the political context of the day, most notably the tension between the vibrancy of the public sphere and the space allowed to it as a consequence of the restrictive tendencies of the state.

The letters were not a raw expression of the democratic sensibilities of the letter writers. Instead, the letters were a product of the political and governance cultures that predominated during decolonization. Their letters were logical responses to the writers' discoveries about the complexities of statecraft during decolonization in a setting typical of other late colonies and post-colonies. The letters were therefore an effort to engage with the particular governance culture of the day: both highly bureaucratized and personal.

Nevertheless, letter writers constituted a public sphere, which the writers clearly hoped included the recipients of their correspondence, during the era of decolonization. As with the newspapers and magazines that constitute Hunter's source-base for her ambitious and far-reaching study of print cultures in Tanzania, the letters lead us "towards a space in which we can hear the voices of men and women who were mostly not leading intellectuals and who have often left little other trace in the historical record. In it we can trace their thinking about the political and social change they saw around them and which, through their public reflection, they contributed to shaping."¹⁰⁰ In common with Priya Lal's subjects in rural Tanzania in the 1960s, the letter writers discussed here demonstrated a "nuanced, ambivalent relationship" with state officials.¹⁰¹ Neither uncritical

nationalists nor relentless opponents of the independent government of Jomo Kenyatta, the letter writers instead sought to participate in public debate during decolonization. Most of the writers would have agreed with Hunter's formulation of contemporary understandings of what independence meant: "freedom through government rather than freedom from government..."¹⁰² They wrote to sway and critique the leaders of the new nation-state. But their audiences were not only the recipients of the letters. Perhaps most importantly, the letter writers also wrote to and for members of their own communities. In a tumultuous period in their country's history, Kenyans wrote their letters "to draw disputatious, diverse people down the same path together."¹⁰³

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⁵ Fitzpatrick, "Supplicants and Citizens," 79; Hunter, *Political Thought and the Public Sphere in Tanzania*, 6.

⁶ Galava, "From Whispers to the Assemblage;" Odhiambo, "Democracy and the Ideology of Order in Kenya."

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- ⁹⁶ KNA KA/6/29, Ombogo et al to Kenyatta, 21 August 1965.

⁹⁷ See correspondence in KNA KA/1/52, especially Mugarami to Town Clerk, 10 February 1970; Masindet to Provincial Commissioner Nairobi, 25 June 1971; Birir to Deputy Permanent Secretary, Office of the President, 28 October 1971.

⁹⁸ KNA KA/1/52, Masindet to Provincial Commissioner, Nairobi, 25 June 1971.

⁹⁹ Mitullah et al, *The People's Voice*; Nyabola, *Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics*; Williams, "Call Us Ms."

¹⁰⁰ Hunter, *Political Thought and the Public Sphere in Tanzania*, 24.

¹⁰¹ Lal, *African Socialism in Postcolonial Tanzania*, 209-10.

¹⁰² Hunter, *Political Thought and the Public Sphere in Tanzania*, 148.

¹⁰³ Peterson, *Creative Writing*, 246.