6 Remembering and memorialising

The efficacy of photography in political communication in postcolonial Africa

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Introduction

Photography has been a key component of effective and affective political communication in postcolonial Africa. This is largely because a ‘photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what’s in the picture’ (Sontag, 2014, p. 5). In essence, photography, its use, appreciation and interpretation in postcolonial Africa, has allowed people to identify with specific modes of agency, subjectivity, and intentionality in political and democratic processes. Granted, photography oftentimes reveals deep-seated challenges with decolonisation, particularly because most African countries are still unstable and fragile many years after independence (Ake, 1985; Cheeseman, 2015; Christensen and Laitin, 2019; Hino et al., 2012; Kier, 2007; Mbaku, 1997). Even in the postcolonial era, it is clear that

the state in Africa is plagued by a crisis of legitimacy because of its external dependence, and the decision of the political class to inherit the colonial socioeconomic system instead of transforming it ... and the use of force to repress a rising tide of resentment against the failures ... the mismanagement of development, and the impoverishment of the masses.

(Ake, 1985, p. 2)

Even though Ake’s description of Africa seems dated, it still reflects the situation in many countries. The conditions in many African countries are often used to justify the *leitmotif* in most photographs of and from the continent.

Photographs work in particular ways, acting as intermediaries working in particularly political-economic and historical conditions and on institutional structures of signification, domination and legitimation within the wider media industry. The meanings they represent and reproduce

are based on various factors, including context, and the relationship between the reader and the subject. In the context of political communication in postcolonial Kenya, pictures offer both evidence and common vantage point from which people perform or engage with “rational” and “affective” discursive reasoning and communicative actions in the public sphere (cf. Habermas, 1989/1962). In addition, they bring people ‘together qua participants in a common act of focusing’ (Taylor, 1985, p. 260) on political communication, both mediated and face to face, despite the aporetic presumptions in some discourses within national and global public spheres.

However, a closer inspection of political photography generates various complications and questions. For example, does political photography give the whole picture of various phenomena? Does political imagery represent the “truth”? What is the meaning of pictures in different political, historical and cultural moments in postcolonial Africa? Do photographs offer evidence necessary for rational discussions in the public sphere in which members of the public are supposed to be informed, authoritative, free and equal interlocutors? Are careful framing and editing meant to influence political events, actions and communication? What are the political narratives that emerge from pictures as creative decolonial forces of resistance? How are we to understand and narrate protest photography in the context of postcolonial politics in Kenya in what we may also refer to as postnational in which the colonial is past? These questions become even more important in the context of Kenya’s postcolonial political history where “predator elites” seem to use oppressive means to subjugate “hapless peasants” in their attempt to ascend to, capture or retain power (cf. Mustapha, 2012) and thus can manipulate photography as part of their propaganda. Besides, as Mustapha (2012, p. 40) contends, the fact that ‘contemporary African democratisation ... has not sufficiently engaged the ordinary citizenry in the sort of negotiations necessary to embed democratic values within the social fabric’ means people have to find alternative ways of engaging in meaningful or relevant political communication that resonates with their own realities in a multiplicity of arenas where the production and negotiation of meanings take place.

Even though this chapter is based on the work of popular photographer and social justice activist, Boniface Mwangi, it contends that the use of photography in postcolonial Africa is important in political communication, mobilisation and action, and ultimately in the development and consolidation of participatory “democracy” and associated principles like accountability and the rule of law. It locates arguments within the ambit of political photography and “photography of resistance” whose meanings are drawn from their capacity to incite action and change in postcolonial Africa. The chapter starts by briefly looking at the life of Mwangi before discussing photography’s place in modern political communication.

The story of Boniface Mwangi

MINOLTA

When you are the camera and the camera is you.

– advertisement (1976) (cited in Sontag, 2014, p. 145)

Boniface Mwangi (born 10 July 1983), sometimes simply known as Boni, has been involved in serious political and social activism for years. For his passion for protest against injustice, corruption, poor political and economic governance, human rights violations, etc., he has earned the label “new revolutionary” (Odhiambo, 2018). The label reflects his incessant public and online protests against a range of mostly socio-political but also economic challenges in postcolonial Africa.

As a photographer and photoactivist, Mwangi started to gain traction with his images of the victims of Kenya’s post-election violence (PEV) of December 2007–January 2008 following the disputed presidential vote of 2007. After the chaos that left more than 1,300 people dead and tens of thousands displaced (Human Rights Watch, 2008; Jérôme, 2009), he became popular for publishing and sometimes publicly displaying disturbing and unpalatable images of the victims of the violence. Due to the sensitivity of the ethnic violence, and to reduce stress and trauma in Kenya, editors at Standard Group where he worked as a photographer refused to publish some of his photographs, particularly those captured the butchery, savagery and mutilation of people. To the editors, to publish such images would have contributed to further trauma and suffering to those directly and indirectly affected. This was also part of promoting “peace journalism” (cf. Keeble, Tulloch and Zollman, 2010; Lynch, 2008; Lynch and McGoldrick, 2005; Youngblood, 2017) meant to save Kenya from further acts of violence occasioned by electoral fraud and dispute and ethnic tensions. Peace journalism, according to Youngblood (2017), avoids inflammatory language and texts that can fuel conflict. To avoid fuelling violence, Youngblood (2017, pp. 5–7) suggests that peace journalists should ideally ‘thoughtfully select the images they use, understanding that they can misrepresent an event, exacerbate an already dire situation, and re-victimize those who have suffered’.

The decisions not to publish pictures of victims of the PEV contributed to his departure from mainstream media to found what he calls alternative spaces to showcase or exhibit and share his work. He sets up Picha Mtaani¹ which he describes as a travelling photography exhibition showcasing images of the violence that he had witnessed and captured.² He claims the exhibition attracted more than two million people and ‘offered a platform for individual reflection, honest dialogue, interpersonal healing and community reconciliation’.³ The pictures covered a wide spectrum of possibilities, from suffering to anarchy, violence, police brutality, etc. This provided not only the nexus of national and global public sphere at which discourses of postcolonial political action could be discussed but also evidence for

advocating for social and political change. What's more, photography and social media capture and memorialise events, and somewhat become agents of action and change in political and democratic processes. Indeed, there are suggestions that:

[M]emory is not only susceptible to changes, it is itself a *powerful agent of change* [original emphasis]. Accredited with the power of transforming our relationship to the past and the ability to revise former values and attitudes, memory can create new frames of action. By working through past hatreds and resentments, memory can contribute towards reconciliation and new forms of co-existence, opening up the possibility of a common future. ... Personal memories are purely virtual until they are couched in words or images in order to be communicated.

(Assmann and Shortt, 2012, p. 4)

Besides, as Gloviczki (2015, p. xvii) argues, 'in the age of social media ... the memorial is interactive and ongoing'. In essence, social media offers memory and remembering longevity that may be lost in physical spaces and traditional media. He further contends that

the process of remembering can span space and time in a way that turns a seemingly private event into a much broader, more public conversation. The stories of which our lives consist have more potential to be retold and even reshaped in remembrance.

(Gloviczki, 2015, p. xvii)

This is part of public, collective memory which is played out in exhibitions – whether online or offline – that Mwangi and Pawa254 organise.⁴ By exhibiting the pictures in public spaces, Mwangi and Pawa254 not only invite people to partake in remembering and reflective exercises, and discourses on various issues or subjects captured and represented in the images that reflect the current conditions in postcolonial Africa. Such exhibitions become part of the public sphere at which critical debate on the condition of the postcolonial state takes place. The discussions that emerge from such platforms help (re)configure memory, evoking new meaning on various issues such as violence, ethnicity, repression and power in postcolonial Africa.

Whether the public displays and political discourses emerging from such exhibitions and platforms can do justice to especially the victims of violence or conflict is another matter altogether. Nevertheless, the pictures preserve memory for posterity, offering opportunities to look back, memorialise and remember. Granted, there are compelling arguments that forgetfulness can be palliative (Assmann, 2012). Thus, curating and sharing pictures for popularity, self-promotion or aggrandisement or commercial purposes does little or harm to the healing process especially in conflict and post-conflict environments and situations. However, as Assmann (2012, p. 57) contends, 'forgetting and remembering, can exert both damaging and healing effects'

and whatever one or society chooses is contingent upon 'historical context and above all on the cultural values and general circumstances prevailing in each instance'. In short, whether to remember or forget is an individual prerogative based on such important factors as historical contexts, cultural values and prevailing circumstances. However, some people would often rather forget any suffering they, their family or friends have encountered or suffered either directly or indirectly. Thus, regular use or public exhibition of their pictures may contribute to further or prolonged psychological suffering or trauma. This gives little comfort to the notion of pictures as memory, and calls for a rethink of exhibition and sharing or dissemination of pictures of conflict, violence and suffering. It is thus evident that there is some 'presentness and politicization of memory' (Radstone and Schwarz, 2010, pp. 2–3) that is sometimes problematic in different situations and circumstances because the 'practices of memory and the practices of politics are compacted and difficult to unravel'.

However, the fact that photography goes through a process of careful composition and selection before exhibition or use in the public sphere calls to attention the issue of manipulation and propaganda, and thus the quality of debate.

Photography, composition and framing

The character of Kenya's troubled postcolonial political history and polarised ethnic environment marked by recurring political and ethnic tensions and violence is captured in numerous photo projects, documentaries, exhibitions and essays. By focusing on such issues as violence, human rights abuses, under-development, etc., Mwangi's pictures have acquired their political currency mainly because they offer evidence upon which public opinion is based, mobilised and legitimised. Pictures evoke different memories in different people depending on various subjects, contexts, historical moments, political or social events, and gender, age, ethnicity or cultural background among others. However, pictures can be said to be polysemic or connotative because of the different and numerous possible meanings they evoke (cf. Hall, 1973). In other words, photographs are subject to multiple interpretations and meanings, depending on people's experiences, knowledge, proximity to and relationship with the issues or subjects, and ideology, among others (cf. Hall, 1973). In fact, as Assmann and Shortt (2012, p. 4) argue, what people

encounter as reality is in fact the product of an act of interpretation. ... Disseminated by the mass media as interpretations or official definitions of historical events, representations are a powerful element in the construction, contestation and reconstruction of individual and collective memories.

Accordingly, pictures of PEV victims, for example, arouse different meanings and actions from disparate actors in contested political actions.

Granted, some of the pictures of the 2007–2008 post-election conflict and violence evidence levels of tensions between communities and electoral violence. Photography is thus seen as a powerful agency for political communication and messaging in Kenya.

However, the careful framing of the pictures is seen as part of the selective emphasis of the contents and possible political and other meanings contained in the photographs. However, more interesting to media and audiences is conflict, violence and poverty *leitmotif* in the pictures given those are the causes close to not only Mwangi's photography but also his socio-political activism and communication. Thus, while Mwangi's photography resonates with some people, the pictures may seem to pander to Western stereotypical view of Africa as a- "dark continent". Mwangi, however, denies that that his intention. He points out that his pictures reflect and represent the current "African realities" and the 'bitter truth that the African leadership, the people and countries must always confront'.⁵

While this chapter does not suggest that the pictures go through a careful framing process, there is no denying the fact that photography has intended and negotiated meaning (cf. Hall, 1973). Granted, photographers, like other content producers, always think critically or carefully about what messages and meanings their pictures seek to communicate. "Framing means bias to me", says Mwangi. 'I have a bias for the issues I feel passionate about and framing reflects what I want to advance, and the messages I want to communicate. My messages are always reflected in the images I want to capture'.⁶ This assertion somewhat supports theoretical arguments that framing is concerned with the selection or choice of texts, and emphasis. This is the reason why framing theory has its origin in photography and cinematography (cf. McCombs and Ghanem, 2001). The choice also involves (careful) exclusion of some subjects or issues and de-emphasis of what the photographer thinks is irrelevant and unhelpful to the messages Mwangi wants to communicate and the causes and ideologies he seeks to advance. Whatever the case, however, photographers often have little or no control over audience interpretation. As Barthes (1977; see also Burke, 2010) contends, readers must always separate works from their creators in order to liberate the text from "interpretive tyranny". In other words, it is difficult or even impossible to impose a limit on interpretation. In the context of conflict and violence situations in postcolonial Africa, there are various agendas that photography seeks to represent, mediate and advance, sometimes in order to "sway public opinion and trigger action".⁷

Photography, resistance and "artrising"

There is evidence that photography has been used effectively as modes of resistance because of the emotions they evoke. Pictures are particularly powerful "visual weapons" (cf. Lilleker, Veneti and Jackson, 2019) against oppression and suffering as has been demonstrated in places like South Africa and

Palestine. Google Arts and Culture posits that ‘of all art mediums, photography is perhaps the greatest weapon against exposing and calling to order injustice. A photograph has a sense of immediacy and cannot be denied’.⁸ Two examples illustrate this. The first is Afrapix, a joint activist group made up of black and white photographers who worked under apartheid during the 1980s (Krantz, 2008). The second is Activestills set up in 2005 by Israeli, Palestinian and international documentary photographers ‘out of a strong conviction that photography is a vehicle for social and political change’ (Maimon and Grinbaum, 2016, p. 31). The Activestills photographers view themselves ‘as part of the struggle against all forms of oppression, racism, and violations of the basic right to freedom’ (Maimon and Grinbaum, 2016, p. 31).

The aforementioned photographic typology has acquired numerous labels like “resistance” or “struggle photography” whose ‘intention ... is to document the conflicts between oppressors and their victims so as to alert, persuade, and elicit support for the oppressed. The reality captured by the photograph is from the vantage point of the subjugated person’ (Krantz, 2008, p. 290).

In South Africa, Afrapix photographs documented among other issues the violence and confrontations between the people and the police and the lives of the Black people during the apartheid era. The photographs ‘contributed to the culture of struggle that played such an important role in mobilizing local and international response against repression of the country’s vast majority Black population by the apartheid regime’ (Krantz, 2008, p. 290). Similarly, Activestills documents various cases among them, ‘Palestinian popular struggle against the Israeli occupation, rights of women, LGBTQ [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning], migrants and asylum-seekers, public housing rights, and the struggle against economic oppression’ (Maimon & Grinbaum, 2016, p. 31).

Mwangi’s Picha Mtaani and Pawa254 initiatives follow the same trajectory, although he calls his work “artrising”. Artrising is described as photographic art meant to raise awareness and provoke action against various socio-political and economic challenges facing Kenya.⁹ Using the artrising project, Mwangi has captured images of victims of violence perpetrated by the police, vigilante groups and others. His photographs of the 2007/2008 PEV and Mungiki¹⁰ showcase a wide spectrum of issues, from police brutality to ethnic tensions, chaos and anarchy. Pictures of chopped-off limbs and mob-lynching are his common subjects. They are offensive as they are provocative so ‘that people can be angry enough to take action’.¹¹ The same applies to the *Diaper Mentality Project* which he says was meant to reflect the “immaturity” and “stunted growth” in postcolonial Kenya. The project, using people wearing diapers,

was aimed as being the conscience of society through illustration of bad Kenyan habits with the aim of exposing them so that people can see the need to change. *Diaper mentality* was an attempt to focus a gaze on the microscopic features that give identity and character to Kenya.¹²

However, the diaper mentality imagery is subject to various interpretations. The “struggle for meanings” (Hall, 1980) in photography is often based on various factor including discourses, representations and ideologies that photographers seek to advance. In the decolonial context, photography is seen as a way of capturing, evidencing and communicating repression, human rights abuses and failure of power that define many African countries (cf. Ake, 1985; Cheeseman, 2015; Kieh Jr., 2007). The failure of the African state is aptly captured in the Preface of the edited book *Beyond State Failure and Collapse: Making the State Relevant in Africa*. In that piece, Kieh Jr. (2007) writes that:

... The African people’s hopes and aspirations for a democratic, stable and prosperous post-independence era have been shattered. ... After more than four decades of independence, the postcolonial project has been enveloped in a multidimensional crisis of underdevelopment – cultural, ecological, economic, political, social, and so forth. Perpetuating this crisis, illegitimate regimes and ethnic entrepreneurs have manipulated primordial differences; ... both civilian and military despots have repressed and suffocated society and basic human needs have not been met. ... The popular collective mirror image that the African masses have of the state is that of a brutal, repressive, predatory and anti-people apparatus.

(Kieh Jr., 2007, p. 9)

Kieh Jr.’s (2007) statement not only reflects the conditions obtaining in the many postcolonial African countries but also perhaps influences the contents of photography of and from the continent. They also inform various representations and discourses of Africa on various political arenas, including the ubiquitous social media.

Indeed, political and protest photography, social media and protest movements have attracted great public and scholarly attention, examination and debate in postcolonial Africa. This can be illustrated by recent events across the world that demonstrate the influence of photography in transnational public sphere and attendant political action and change. For instance, the Arab spring – the wave of protests, uprisings and unrest that spread across Arabic-speaking countries in North Africa and the Middle East – documented and shared by mobile devices perhaps best demonstrate the power of protest photography and transnational social movements. The debatable labelling of the Arab Spring as “Facebook revolution” (or even “Twitter revolution”) further points to the capacity of photography and social media to ferment or spur protests and attendant action or change (cf. Laremont, 2014; Porta and Sidney, 2005).

Conclusion

Photography is a critical element in documenting, historicising, memorialising and remembering in Kenya’s postcolonial politics. A picture, as the cliché puts it, is worth a thousand words. Well-taken and framed pictures

are able to capture the attention and interest of audiences irrespective of their geographical location in what is now an information and networked global village and global public sphere.

While Mwangi, just like other photographers, is able to control or choose the subjects and issues selected for inclusion, places and spaces of publication, modes of circulation, dissemination or sharing, he is not in control of the meanings generated by disparate audiences whose relationship with and understanding of political issues differs. In other words, the meanings derived from the pictures are entirely those of the receiver or reader whose interpretation depends on various factors including context, historical moment(s), socio-political and economic conditions, gender and ethnicity or background.

Furthermore, as this chapter contends, memory creates new frames of action and becomes a powerful agent of political communication and change in postcolonial Africa. This is especially in the context of reformative and revolutionary social movements in a networked information society. What's more, the use of social media to both curate and communicate visual texts means they are able to be instantly received and read in different parts of the world. It could thus be said that the pictures rouse Kenyans and others around the world to action. The Arab Spring and Facebook and Twitter "revolutions" are good exemplars of the power of protest photography, instant virtual communication, networking and transnational movements. Even though Facebook or Twitter revolutions are still to happen in Kenya, there are some examples to illustrate the mobilising capacity of such platforms given the fact that protests or demonstrations are increasingly being organised via such channels. The growing appropriation of social media platforms due to the availability and affordability of such devices as smartphones, mobile devices and the Internet makes taking, sharing and using pictures for mobilisation for various causes and action much easier. In addition, social media, as democratic and alternative spaces, provide the necessary tools and opportunities for immediate virtual communication. Viewed through the lenses of political communication, the ability of social media to decolonise communicative spaces is vital for photography-supported social movements that seek to promote various causes including justice, human rights, and fights against bad political and economic governance. Besides, pictures offer the evidence necessary to push such agendas.

Despite the above assertions, however, it is important to critically interrogate the place and efficacy of photography in memorialisation, remembrance and forgetting in different arenas or environments in postcolonial Africa. This begs several questions. Are people to remember events because of "coded" and "framed" pictures? Can the pictures aid or support "genuine" remembrance or is the framing used to advance certain political agendas, and influence or even sometimes manipulate public opinion and action both in national and global public spheres? These questions are important because mediated pictures of poverty, conflict, violence, poverty and general suffering seem to interest people around the world, and Western media and audiences have used such images to advance and even reinforce historical stereotypical perceptions and narratives of postcolonial Africa as a "dark" continent.

It is also vital to enquire whether forgetting is more important in conflict and post-conflict situations and environments. In such settings, pictures of suffering and misery can be damaging to individuals and societies which have gone through traumatic experiences. For, as Assmann (2012, p. 57) contends, “forgetting and remembering, can exert both damaging and healing effects” in postcolonial Africa where “predator elites” seem interested in using photography as propaganda and “hapless peasants” as evidence of their socio-political and economic conditions. Whatever individuals and societies choose is of course determined by various factors including historical contexts, cultural values and prevailing circumstances (Assmann, 2012, p. 57). Another question worth pondering is whether the “realities” the pictures capture are empirically “true”. This is especially controversial given the fact that photography is framed and coded, and might be used to drive certain agendas, and influence particular narratives and ideas especially about postcolonial Africa in Western countries. In an era of fake news, “alternative” truths, misinformation and disinformation, such questions cannot be disregarded. Indeed, prevailing conventional wisdom demands that the readings and meanings of messages in photography are contingent upon careful examination of the agendas and ideologies present in any texts particularly in mediated national and global public spheres and in the political communication and advocacy domains. It should be noted that in autocratic and “pseudo-democratic” countries, protest photography often runs afoul of a predator leadership elite who often sees it as a form of challenge to power and status quo.

Whatever the case, however, there is no doubt that to document history is important for posterity, as future generations will have photo evidence upon which to base their understanding, memorialisation and remembrance of their societies, their past, and past events in postcolonial Kenya and Africa. What’s more, photography like other visual texts seems to capture people attention and somewhat influence their position in public communications and engagement within the public sphere in postcolonial Kenya.

Notes

- 1 Literally translated from Swahili to English, *Picha Mtaani* means pictures in the community or community pictures. However, this has a much deeper meaning, depending on the memorialisation and remembrance context. The involvement of ordinary members of society means the pictures resonate with their socio-political and economic conditions, causes that Mwangi captures and promotes.
- 2 See Boniface Mwangi’s website, <https://www.bonifacemwangi.com/>, for more details.
- 3 Personal phone interview with Mwangi, 17 February 2020.
- 4 *Pawa* is a sheng (a local language mixing Swahili and English words) word for ‘power’ while 254 is international code for Kenya. See the *Pawa254* website <https://pawa254.org> for more details.
- 5 Personal phone interview with Mwangi, 17 February 2020.

- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 See Google Arts and Culture. The Evidence of Things Not Seen: Photography and Resistance, n.d. Available at <<https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/the-evidence-of-things-not-seen-photography-and-resistance-%C2%A0-johannesburg-art-gallery/oAJScEI-O0lqKQ?hl=en>>.
- 9 Personal phone interview with Mwangi, 17 February 2020.
- 10 Mungiki is a vigilante group whose origin goes back to the struggle for independence in 1950s. It has in recent years metamorphosed into a criminal gang known for extortion and murder. It was reported that the gang killed at least 43 people – beheading several of its victims, mainly in Nairobi slums and central Kenya in March 2007. It was banned by the government in 2002, and since then regular police crack downs are carried out in attempts to wipe it out. In the process, the police often shoot its adherents, and Mwangi has been at hand to capture some of the police operations in different parts of the country.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.

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