

10. Locating Chronic Violence: Billy Kahora’s “How to Eat a Forest”

Ashleigh Harris

Department of English, Uppsala University

The Chimurenga trust is an eclectic and pan-African publishing concern based in Cape Town. Founded in 2002 by Ntone Edjabe, a Cameroonian writer and artist, the Chimurenga trust articulates itself as “an innovative platform for free ideas and political reflection about Africa by Africans”.¹ The outputs of the trust include the printed journal-style *Chimurenga Magazine*, a broadsheet paper *The Chronic*, which has an online equivalent, an “online radio station and pop-up studio”, called the Pan African Space Station, amongst others. The innovation behind these forms is politically motivated, as the trust itself writes:

The aim of these projects is not just to produce new knowledge, but rather to express the intensities of our world, to capture those forces and to take action. This has required a stretching of the boundaries, for unless we push form and content beyond what exists, then we merely reproduce the original form – the colonized form, if you will. It requires not only a new set of questions, but its own set of tools; new practices and methodologies that allow us to engage the lines of flight, of fragility, the precariousness, as well as joy, creativity and beauty that defines contemporary African life.²

¹ “About us”, Chimurenga online, accessed 16 November 2016. <http://www.chimurenga.co.za/about-us>

² “About us”, Chimurenga online.

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Here we have, then, a publication politics that orients itself by virtue of its locatedness in Africa. This orientation certainly prioritises, but is not limited to, its Pan-African locatedness. For example, the March 2015 edition of *The Chronic* is produced, the trust writes, in “Cape Town, Nairobi, Johannesburg, Lagos, Luanda, Abidjan, Barbados, Mombasa, Katanga, Kampala, Kinshasa, Dar es Salaam, Malabo, Tripoli, and Slemani” and, like all editions of the paper, is distributed globally. The imagined boundaries of sub-Saharan Africa are also challenged in the July 2015 edition of *The Chronic*, which not only deconstructs the imaginary lines between the Maghreb and the sub-continent, but is also published entirely in Arabic. Moving further abroad, PASS pop-up studios have been located in Amsterdam, Lagos, Helsinki, New York, London and Paris, one edition of the *Chimurenga Magazine* was translated into Swedish, and two versions of *The Chronic* have been translated into German.³

The theme of the March 2015 edition of *The Chronic* is cartographies, described on the front cover as “a tool of imperialism”. This theme fits our focus here of reading location and orientation as co-constitutive terms. As the editors of *The Chronic* ask:

what if maps were made by Africans for their own use, to understand and make visible their own realities or imaginaries? How does it shift the perception we have of ourselves and how we make life on this continent?⁴

The spatial articulation of location via cartography, then, reveals an orientation. Unlike Eileen Julien’s notion of extroverted African writing, which orients itself outwards to a non-local readership,⁵ what we have here is a literature of and for Africa. That is to say, this literature concerns a specific location and is orientated

³ *Chimurenga 11* entitled “Conversations with Poets Who Refuse to Speak” (2007) was published in Swedish by *Glänta* as “Chimurenga” as their second volume of 2010. “Read the Chimurenga Chronic in German”, Chimurenga online. Accessed 13 April 2017. <http://chimurengachronic.co.za/read-the-chimurenga-chronic-in-german/>.

⁴ *The Chronic Online*, March 2015. Accessed 13 April 2017. <http://chimurengachronic.co.za/in-print/archive/the-chronic-march-2015/>.

⁵ Eileen Julien, “The Extroverted African Novel”, in *The Novel, Vol. 1 – History, Geography, and Culture*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 668.

towards a specific readership. As such this edition of *The Chronic* maps an *extraverted*, rather than an extroverted orientation;⁶ that is to say it orients itself in Africa and of (rather than for) the world. In this chapter I illustrate the dynamic between African location and global orientation in one short story from this edition of *The Chronic*: “How to Eat a Forest” by Kenyan writer, Billy Kahora. Kahora’s engagement with deforestation in Kenya employs such an extraverted narrative strategy, one which addresses global economic and environmental forces from the scale of the contesting everyday lives of those making a living off or depending for their survival on deforestation in Kenya’s Mau Forests.

“How to Eat a Forest” begins with a journalistic narration of a series of interviews that Kahora conducted in his capacity as a reporter for an environmentalist magazine *EcoForum* with members of the Ogiek tribe.⁷ The Ogiek are an indigenous minority who inhabit – and have been considered by many national and international stake-holders to be the custodians of – the now-threatened Mau Forest. As Kahora’s interviews begin to uncover some uncomfortable truths about the Ogiek’s complicity in the destruction of the Mau forest, his narrative fractures into multiple genres: the piece becomes part fiction, part political critique, part hand-drawn sketches on a map of the forest, part email exchange, and part intertextual descriptions of a photo essay by Geert van Kesteren in *Granta*’s “The View from Africa” edition.

Kahora’s story is divided into three sections, each of which is prefaced with a quote from Achille Mbembe’s “At the Edge of the World: Boundaries, Territoriality, and Sovereignty”.⁸ This academic intertext operates as a prompt to us literary readers to make use of Mbembe’s paper as a theoretical tool to extract the meanings of this complex story. In reading Mbembe’s theoretical

⁶ I follow Jean-Francois Bayart’s use of the term in “Africa in the World: A History of Extraversion”, where he concludes with the important reminder that “More than ever, the discourse on Africa’s marginality is a nonsense”. Jean-Francois Bayart. “Africa in the World: A History of Extraversion”, *African Affairs* 99 (2000): 267.

⁷ Billy Kahora, “How to Eat a Forest”, *The Chronic* (2015): 28–35.

⁸ Achille Mbembe, “At the Edge of the World: Boundaries, Territoriality, and Sovereignty in Africa”, trans. Steven Rendall, *Public Culture* 12, no. 1 (2000): 259–84.

intervention alongside Kahora's story we reorient the literary terms that as a matter of rote circumvent Africa towards a distinctly pan-African location. It would be easy, for example, to describe Kahora's innovations as simply "post-modern": the story is metafictional, intertextual, multi-modal and genre-breaking. Yet, such a description would fail to pick-up on the extent to which these strategies are vernacularised by Kahora and how they operate as imprints of the key ideas running through Mbembe's more broadly regional theoretical discussion of boundaries, territoriality and sovereignty in Africa.

I note just one thread of Mbembe's paper relevant to this discussion. Mbembe opens his paper with the same problematic Rob Nixon describes as slow violence;⁹ Mbembe writes that between the "slowly evolving" "temporalities of long and very long duration" and those that are "less slowly evolving [...] rapid and virtually instantaneous deviations"¹⁰ the faster the temporality, the easier events are "to detect".¹¹ Mbembe's claim is that both these quick, visible and slow, invisible temporalities are entangled. I would argue that this means that the representation of long, slow, environmental violence, is itself deeply entangled with the everyday in which it becomes lived and visible. The material location of chronic environmental change betrays a global orientation that bears witness to much longer temporalities. The strategies that Kahora uses to tell his story, multi-generic, intertextual and meta-fictional as they are, are a strategy to connect these two scales of temporality. Indeed, just as Mbembe's paper takes up the spatial dimensions of entanglement (localities are inextricably tethered to the global), so too, does Kahora's text bind the geographical scales of everyday practice in the Mau Forests and the global complexities that are the substratum of those practices.

⁹ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

¹⁰ Mbembe, "At the Edge of the World", 259–60, paraphrasing Braudel. Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, The Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century*, vol. 3, *The Perspective of the World*, trans. Siân Reynolds (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 18.

¹¹ Mbembe, "At the Edge of the World," 260, paraphrasing Braudel *Civilization and Capitalism*, 18.

The attention to the everyday is perfectly suited to the journalistic prose that opens the first section of the story. This section, also called “How to Eat a Forest”, provides an account of the 1990 history of the Mau Forest complex and describes the competing claims made on this land by different groups (including local tribes, international and national NGOs, and the government). The attention to locality is vividly apparent in the prose itself. For example, we read:

In the west the land brokers found land-hungry Kipsigis, Sikii, and Luhya people who were mostly teachers, small-scale farmers, small businessmen and shopkeepers looking for land. But the visitors from Maasailand, who were actually selling a bountiful future, were a curious medley, the kind of disparate mishmash of fortune seekers found on any frontier that is up for grabs.¹²

Even as this attention to detail seems in line with the reportage that opens the story, the tone turns to something more akin to storytelling at certain points, with sentences like: “These travellers of fortune went among the Kalenjin and Kissii small landholders and told amazing tales of *kitiya*, land that is untilled and virgin and up for sale, cheap”.¹³ As we read about what Kahora calls “one of the largest land grabs in Kenyan history”,¹⁴ we start to see his tale giving local detail to Mbembe’s broader argument about territory being “the privileged space of the exercise of sovereignty and of self-determination, and as such the ideal framework of the imposition of authority”.¹⁵ As Kahora shows us, maps of the Mau forest had less to do with depicting the landscape as it was, and more to do with drawing the lines of territory for economic gain and the rights of plunder. He writes:

The premise was simple and devastating: the crooked lawyers and surveyors arbitrarily changed the representation on a map to a magnification that stretched into the nearby Mau South Forest. [...] Small parcels of land multiplied into their tens as land surveyors

¹² Kahora, “How to Eat a Forest”, 28.

¹³ Kahora, “How to Eat a Forest”, 28.

¹⁴ Kahora, “How to Eat a Forest”, 28.

¹⁵ Mbembe, “At the Edge of the World”, 263.

were instructed to redraw the map of the original piece of land and eat up the forest.¹⁶

In a last-ditch attempt to put an end to this devastation of the forest, a new self-determination emerges in which the Narok Ogiek community are constructed by various stakeholders as the authentic guardians of the forest. “The Ogiek,” writes Kahora,

[...] seemed to have emerged into the national psyche around 1994, after the United Nations declared an International Day for Indigenous People. Non-governmental organisations were set up in Narok by individuals, until then popularly known as Ndorobos, to start fighting for their rights. The leaders of this movement took up their new name, the Ogiek (meaning “caretaker of all animals and plants”) and claimed a unique and conservation-friendly relationship with the forest.¹⁷

As the international NGOs leap to support the Ogiek community in their custodianship of the forest, Kahora’s text starts a new section entitled “Practising forest, selling shambas”. Here, he narrates a tale of meeting an Ogiek man, Samuel Kamikil, “who, [the narrator is] told, knows how the forest was eaten”.¹⁸ This section blends interview, story-telling and even hand-drawn maps and sketches over a copy of a map from a text book (see figure 1), thereby disrupting the prosaic clarity of the largely dominant reportage style of section one.

The Ogiek man being interviewed by Kahora calls himself Samuel, but it turns out he is actually Salaton Ole Nadungenkop (a Maasai name). Samuel/Salaton tells a nostalgic story of “an idyllic time when Ogiek clans lived in harmony and migrated to and fro within the Mau forest”.¹⁹ He narrates his own childhood in similar terms and in a similar tone, speaking of how his family lived according to the patterns of bees’ migrations. This nostalgic version of the Ogiek past is quickly undermined by the character Setek, a treasurer of a local NGO called “Friends of

¹⁶ Kahora, “How to Eat a Forest”, 28.

¹⁷ Kahora, “How to Eat a Forest”, 29.

¹⁸ Kahora, “How to Eat a Forest”, 29.

¹⁹ Kahora, “How to Eat a Forest”, 30.

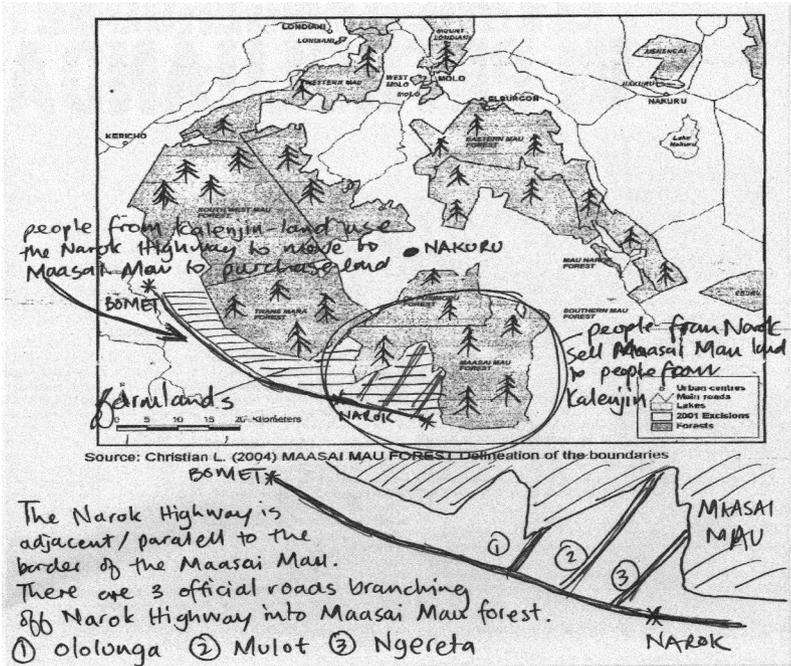


Figure 1. Kahora “How to Eat a Forest”, 31. Copyright: Billy Kahora. License: CC BY, granted by the author, Billy Kahora. Image scanned by Ashleigh Harris.

the Mau Forest”, who informs Kahora that “[t]his man you are calling Kamikil I know him very well. He is Ole Nadungenkop. He has sold a lot of the forest”.²⁰ Kahora then writes that “Ole Nadungenkop is the first living signpost we meet of an Ogiek schizophrenia that wavers between the Ogiek as conservationist and the Ogiek as land broker”.²¹ And, indeed, this schizophrenia is depicted in the literary style of this section of the story itself. Both reportage and story-like, both narrative and image, code-switching between Maasai Swahili, Nairobi Swahili and English, and formatted (in the printed broadsheet version) as a

²⁰ Kahora, “How to Eat a Forest”, 30.
²¹ Kahora, “How to Eat a Forest”, 31.

piece interwoven with other texts across various pages,²² the story's material and literary form both reflect its thematic of schizophrenia. And this makes sense when we read:

Like Samuel Kamikil/ Salaton Ole Nadunguenkop, many Ogiek we eventually encounter seem to be two things, an interface between the ideal and the real: Samuel Kamikil, who claims to be dispossessed and landless, is a forest dweller and hunter and gatherer who lives on honey; and Salaton Ole Nadunguenkop, who is a Mau forest broker, is a landowner and drives a Subaru. After Kamili/ Ole Nadunguenkop we encounter the interface between Ndorobos, who in reinventing themselves into Ogieks became one of the last indigenous Kenyan peoples, long-suffering and landless, and, on the other hand, the members of large rich Ogiek landowning families who are lawyers, professors, human rights activists and NGO heads, and who are dabbling in eating forest.²³

As the title of section three indicates, “How to be indigenous – a workshop, a photo essay and an email”,²⁴ the stylistic fragmentation noted above is further exacerbated in this final part of the story, which becomes a play of multi-modal pastiche and develops a scathing critique of various factors that continue to deplete the Mau Forests. The section is particularly scathing towards global development discourse (and the cultural paraphernalia that buttresses it), its simplification of the environmental situation of the Mau Forests and, hence, its complicity in the chronic situation of environmental decimation that this story notes. This third section refers to a photo essay by Geert van Kesteren in the literary

²² In the print edition of *The Chronic*, the story begins on p. 28, where the lower part of the broadsheet format is a continuation of Dalle Ibrahim's contribution “Bordering on Borana”. This same set-up continues on p. 29, though here the text shares a page with the continuation of Ngola Chome's “Pwani si Kenya”, printed in red ink. Pages 30 and 31 are dedicated entirely to Kahora's story, with the inclusion of the two images included in the story. A new contribution by António Tomás, “Living dangerously in Petroluanda” follows on pp. 32–33. Kahora's story then continues, underneath Tomás's on the lower half of pp. 34–35, where it ends.

²³ Kahora, “How to Eat a Forest,” 31.

²⁴ Kahora, “How to Eat a Forest”, 31.

magazine *Granta* 92: *A View from Africa*.²⁵ The original visual narrative of the Ogiek is not captioned, which Kahora ironically corrects in his story. As we read through Kahora's captioning of van Kesteren's photographs, we are encouraged (if we are to make any sense of the intertext) to 'read' Van Kesteren's visual essay alongside Kahora's comment on it (much as we were encouraged to read Mbembe's essay alongside the story). After each caption provided by Kahora, the narrator asks questions that challenge the integrity of Van Kesteren's camera. We read, for example, "A man tears into animal flesh with his hands. Is this lunch?"; "Four men sit at the edge of a cave. Is this where they live?"; and, "A young man in animal hides and with chalked face holds up a little dead yellow bird. Is he going to eat it?"²⁶ The unanswered questions develop a sardonic tone that illustrates the problem of a European photographer promoting a project of authenticating an African tribe as the indigenous protectors of the forest, an indigenisation that is posited from the outside. Indeed, as Van Kesteren writes in a brief note on his photo essay, "[t]he Ogiek people have lived inside [the Mau Forest], and in harmony with it, for thousands of years".²⁷ Kahora's tone not only critiques mythologising developmental discourses, but also what Amatoritsero Ede calls the "self-anthropologizing rhetorical style" of extroverted African fiction.²⁸

The email exchange that concludes Kahora's (inconclusive) story, in which a Dutch NGO, quizzed by Kahora for its complicity with Ogiek land-brokers, responds by ignoring Kahora's local knowledge and perspective in an extraordinarily patronising dismissal of his concerns, highlights how difficult it is for Kahora

²⁵ Geert van Kesteren, "The Ogiek", *Granta* 92 (2005): 97–126.

²⁶ Kahora, "How to Eat a Forest", 34.

²⁷ Van Kesteren, "The Ogiek", 100.

²⁸ Amatoritsero Ede, "Narrative Moment and Self-Anthropologizing Discourse", *Research in African Literatures* 46, no. 3 (2015): 112. Interestingly, Kahora's tone is reminiscent of Kahora's colleague and countryman Binyavanga Wainaina's acerbic and satirical essay in an essay collected in precisely the same edition of *Granta* as Van Kesteren's photo essay, "How to write about Africa?" Wainaina's essay immediately precedes van Kesteren's.

to tell his version of Ogiek complicity in the destruction of the forest when faced with European NGO's investment in convenient myths about indigeneity. We are led to believe that Kahora is quoting a real correspondence, which, once again, challenges the reader's sense of how to interpret this 'story'. Yet this is ultimately a literary strategy to draw our attention to the very problem of discourse faced by a writer like Kahora. "The view from Africa", to cite *Granta's* edition critiqued here, is only acceptable to western audiences if it is, indeed, a view refracted through – dare I say refined by – a non-African lens.

These strategies of self-reflexivity and irony are vernacularised by Kahora not via an autochthonous aesthetic, bound to the Maasai or to the Ogiek. Instead, Kahora vernacularises this post-modern aesthetic by relocating and reorienting the so-called 'view from Africa'. This is a vernacular of the extraverted present. It seeks to articulate the global entanglements at play in the politics of the Mau forests and their environmental future.

Mbembe concludes "At the edge of the world: Boundaries, territoriality, and sovereignty" with the observation that,

[in] the regions of the world situated on the margins of major contemporary technological transformations, the material deconstruction of existing territorial frameworks goes hand in hand with the establishment of an economy of coercion whose objective is to destroy 'superfluous' populations and to exploit raw materials.²⁹

Writing against such coercion is a feat that requires more than a non-complicit publishing house, it requires a self-aware aesthetic that constantly draws reader's attention to their own complicity in this representational problem. This, in my view, is what Billy Kahora's story achieves. Its environmental politics is articulated as a combination of its aesthetic innovations and the material innovations of the chronicle it appears in, a chronicle that allows for and encourages such formal experimentation and innovation. As such, Kahora's aesthetics and the materiality of his text enables him to address both the global and local scales – and the

²⁹ Mbembe, "At the Edge of the World", 284.

dynamics between the two – of the attrition of the Mau Forest and to provide a temporality of urgency to the chronic conditions of environmental change.

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