Maina wa Kinyatti: The Patriot Who Stood at a Time Many Would Have Preferred to Lie Down

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Abstract: In beautiful and captivating prose, Mzalendo Wanjira writes about Maina wa Kinyatti’s detention and ordeal in the hands of his captors - the pain, anger, frustration, resilience, commitment and loyalty to the cause. She recollects how her first encounter with Kenya: A Prison Notebook made her question the history she’d been taught, and more fundamentally, to understand the truth about post-colonial Kenya and its attempt to hide its glorious struggle against imperialism and in turn blind coming generations from their generational objective.

I first read Kenya: A Prison Notebook after my high school education. We were setting up Mathare Social Justice Centre when my friend and mentor Gacheke Gachihi handed me the book. I had loved history lessons back in school, but upon reading the prison notebook, I found myself angry at the deceit of those history lessons. Mwalimu had meticulously documented his struggle and I couldn’t put the book down. It was like I was discovering a whole new world that had been hidden from me. I got to see the role of the imperialists and more so traitors like Jomo Kenyatta and Daniel Moi who in my schooling had been portrayed as heroes of the nation, but who were nothing more than villains and selfish individuals who cared not for the common mwananchi. I was enraged at discovering that my growing up in Mathare didn’t have to be marred with such difficulty if only our country had landed in the right hands. This book fired me up! It stirred in me an interest to dig deep and find out for myself what other truths had been hidden from the people to pacify them. It is also after reading Kenya: A Prison Notebook that I felt inspired to start the Matigari kids club where I started teaching children from Mathare our true history as a nation and as a continent, so they are aware and do not feel as betrayed as I felt when I got a hold of true record of history. This is the book that birthed the patriot in me and I am deeply grateful to Mwalimu Maina wa Kinyatti for dedicating his youth to documenting the real accounts of history and sharing them with the world.

Reflections

The Prison Notebook really captivated my psyche, each page leaving me aghast. This was resilience par excellence, this was patriotism, embodied in the struggle of Mwalimu Maina Wa Kinyatti against an oppressive state. It was not lost to me that ideals are intangible, that you can’t see them nor touch them. This was the first time such ideals were vividly illustrated by the willingness to suffer and even die (if need be) for one’s beliefs. The ideals of national heritage, rule of law, fairness
and good leadership were put on display for all to see. I saw a man stripped bare into a physical manifestation of those ideals in a person.

For many years after Moi’s dictatorship, much was spoken about the torture chambers and unlawful detention of people who didn’t agree with dictatorial policies or the injustices perpetrated by the regime and its cronies. To read every page (much of it was scribbled out in pieces of tissue) was to relive a time of great trial and tribulation. Kamiti Prison is speculated to be the infamous holder of Field Marshal Dedan Kimathi’s remains. Mwalimu would touch the cold walls of the prison and make out the scribbled messages of Mau Mau fighters imprisoned there by British colonial aggressors a generation before. This would urge him to fight on, to endure suffering with super-human resolve.

Tears would flow freely when Mwalimu Maina dreamt about his wife, his family and the warmth of the time he had been a free man. He would awake totally devastated at being in the clutches of prison. Anger would boil every time the Prison guards inflicted pain on the prisoners and beat them, the letters smuggled out of the prison to human rights organizations offering inklings of hope that someday the torment would end.

Mwalimu would at times stoke my laughter through his writings about the insanity of people being imprisoned for their ideas. It seemed trivial that someone in State House hated another because they could not stomach their truth. It was powerful for ordinary citizens to be revolutionary without lifting arms.
As a lecturer, he would often reminisce about his students and their sharpness. He used the academic platform to clearly show that this country was fought for and no one had a right to plunder our national resources. This was a brave position to take in a country where the status quo had a devious plan to defraud the majority Kenyans of their national rights. Even while in Kamiti Prison, Mwalimu did not tire of teaching his prison mates. He led them like a military officer behind enemy lines, encouraging them to keep their morale and to avoid the desperation to capitulate and work with the dictatorship.

Drawing from struggles of people and power from Cuba and other countries, Mwalimu would read letters of encouragement from his family and well-wishers. The prison authorities would hoard his letters and sanction others.

The character of Mwalimu shows clearly by the friends he earned by sheer admiration, especially the prison guard who was his undercover courier and who shared with him information regarding the outside. These individuals, though affiliated officially as state officers, were unable to hide from themselves the fact that this man was not a criminal. They were drawn to his calm demeanor and his copious consumption of books. Mwalimu read books in the prison, after intense lobbying, to help to keep his mind from wandering into the abyss of despair. He continued to sharpen his contradictions, to drink the bitter cup and keep on fighting.

The toll of a prison sentence is great. Almost seven years caged unlawfully. Mwalimu’s sacrifice was nothing less than monumental. I could not imagine the anguish it must have caused and oftentimes I couldn’t turn the page without sending my love to him. He stood during times when many would have just wanted to lie down. Like the honorable freedom fighters, he would not relent nor stop his good work to appease cronies of imperialism. For my generation, Mwalimu’s sacrifice was crucially important. We were born after this period and knew our history from those around us. To read *Kenya: A Prison Notebook* was to understand the truth about post-colonial Kenya and its attempt (by its derailers) to hide its glorious struggle against imperialism and in turn blind coming generations from their generational objective.

Mwalimu Maina wa Kinyatti, we love you and thank you for carrying the mantle and firing us up. For clearing our lenses and freshening our perspectives. For telling us nothing but the truth. Most of all for never betraying the struggle for Kenya and for Africa! Our homeland or death, we shall win!