Book traces origins of Nairobi, former ‘green city in the sun’

Bethwell Ogot and Madara Ogot release their latest tale of a local city

By Tom Odhiambo

In many parts of the world, the city worth its name would have a hold-er or carrier or state of its memory. Such an individual keeps and re-tells the story. Nairobi doesn’t seem to epitomise many of these. It’s the green city in the sun, for green-ery that defined a swampy land, today Nairobi wallows in swamps, er-rors of having ceded ground to an inchoate jungle of concrete, office blocks, apart-ments, kiosks and all manner of con-structions to compete for air-space of a few dragonflies, flame trees and acacias, among others.

Nairobi was a swamp. It was ac-tually an accident of history. The Brit-ish railway builders sought to estab-lish a camp as they lay the railway to Uganda. More than 300 miles from Mombasa, they found Nairobi accep-table. But the railway depot had a good clime and there was ample supply of fresh produce from the local communi-ties that traded across one of the rivers crossing the place – the Kikuyu and Masai. And so the future city be-gan humbly as a mere stopover.


History of Nairobi 1899-2022 comes af-ter the one on Kisumu, in the ‘History of Kenyan Cities and Boroughs’, by J.K. Obabai, 2018. What is the difference between the two authors are writing. But this 857-page volume is the most detailed study of any Kenyan city, with old, pre-colonial towns such as Mombasa, Lamu and Malindi, and several urban centres established at the beginning and dur-ing colonial rule, it is more than sur-prising that many of these towns and centres do not have proper records of their existence. History of Nairobi 1899-2022 breaks new grounds on archiving the life and times of our urban centres. But how does one write a book on Nairobi without attempting to record every facet of life or without leav-ing out many interesting aspects of its identity? Does one simply do the chronological exercise, from the begin-ning to now (when the book is printed) or does the writer record events, peo-ple, places, the environment, and merg-ing that the story of the city will some-how ‘become itself’? The authors of His-tory of Nairobi 1899-1992 use multiple methods to write about Nairobi, which is a city study.

Even then, keen-eyed observers of Na-irobi will realise that what is recorded in these pages is incomparable to others – writers, archivists, cartogra-phers, town planners, readers etc. – to investigate and write more about the former green city in the sun. Also, these divisions mean one can choose which parts to read, without necessarily hav-ing to follow the text chronologically. The first section looks at the estab-lishment of Nairobi as a railway camp that later became a frontier town, be-tween 1899 and 1930. Here one gets to know how the town was actually estab-lished – what were the first buildings; how the town was demarcated; the di-visions of settlement areas, the town’s business; what it did. From here the be-ginning, its progression into a municip-ality, who it served (settlers, workers, visitors such as human safaris etc).

Part two of the book deals with its proper colonial history, between 1920 and 1945. The Nairobi of the time was a man’s city as reflected in the words of the then mayor: “Nairobi was established as an English town and it shall remain so. It will never be reduced to a suburb of an Indian city.” His was a response to a charge by an Asian Council Member who had accused the city of racism in employment.

Section three continues to record Nai-robi’s life as it becomes a proper city, between 1945 and 1963, modelled along the lines of the English metropolises. What kinds of businesses thrived in Nairobi and who owned them? The mix between politics and trade union-ism, and the State of Emergency are discussed here. This is the period Afri-cans asserted their demands for poli-tical inclusion and they got elected and the City Council and later the Legis-la tive Assembly. Here the book records the rise of Nairobi into a proper city, with new estates being built, Africans establishing themselves in business. If you thought high-rise is new to Na-irobi, you should know that it was among the first means by which Africans raised capital for business. This sec-tions ends with one of the most signif-icant days in the history of this coun-try, Uhuru celebrations on December 12, 1963.

After independence, the years 1964 to 1972 are described as the period of growth and optimism in Nairobi and Kenya. Africans are in power. The African Kenyan repatriation programme begins. Kenya is growing. Its exports are fetching good money on the world market. The East African Community is thriving. However, politics is unsolved. There is conflict among the politi-cians. The national spirit of the pre-in-dependence years is waning. Political assassinations, vigilante groups that may challenge the status quo – Pinto and Mbaya – symbolising a rise of political tension and state in crisis.

Again, the Ogots see Nairobi through the lens of the city that was manufacturing, general economy, its emergence as an ‘international cen-tre’ hosting global events and functions, games to an international air-port when JNA was inaugurated in 1978. Among other factors, this is the Nairobi in which the University of Nai-robi was established in 1963, and decid-ing to become a great university.

The authors continue to suggest that the life of the city could not be separat-ed from the nation’s politics. Indeed, the call for multiparty politics and re-turn of democracy were largely made in Nairobi, which is where the battle for the soul of the country has generally been fought. These battles eventually lead to the opening up of the political landscape. Multiparty elections hap-pen in 1992. Ten years later President Daniel arap Moi and his generation, Mau Mau, take over government.

The years of the ‘post-2000s’ is a city that continues to host global organi-sations; sees a rise in foreign invest-ment in the country that is connected and this becomes collateral victim of global ten-sions, putting Euro-Americans against Africans; the country that grows to become a major in the global market, rising in population and unemployment. The authors end with a note detailing the end of the City Council of Nairobi and the rise of Nairobi County. The Nairobi of today is caught be-tween politicians and bureaucrats. One can only wait to see what kind of politics prevail in the era of industrialising, clean, working Nairo- bi; how the city is governed by Nairobi Metropolis Corporation, how it is run by the county government, and how the new Na-irobi County government lends one, with the congested, dirty markets, unplanned building and the like, it looks like the days of the corrupt past are not and could never have been set books; not with their subject matters, which are certainly not written for the prudish.

Take-home message here? Kenyans will not read anything, but will certainly be reas-onably priced quality publications that appeal to them, notably through light and entertaining contents that are pleasurable to read. Ask any roadside second-hand book seller.

As for the so-called literary writings to lauded by Academia and beloved of starry-eyed, Western influenced authors, it appears that Kenyan readers are happy to have them and be content with them.

After all, who wants to be bombarded with the same old boring rhetoric every time they open a book? And pray, who needs the sort of controversy that is particularly followed by Western outfits that tend to style themselves as the ‘world’s moral, political and cultural capital’.

Finally, those who really need all sorts of gratification and cliches in every page of a purportedly fiction which they bought to read for pleasure.

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SATURDAY NATION OCTOBER 17, 2020

Self-publishing not for the faint-hearted

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dia and elsewhere, there are all sorts of prescriptions about what the seemingly un-calculable public should read. Poignantly, interspersed with these ap-proaches to the production and pub-lished works, there is always the per-spective of authors whining about Kenyans being guilty of not reading enough. There is agreement, of course, that this same purportedly non-reading public buys educational books – particularly prescribed books and prescribed texts – that form the back-bone of the local publishing industry. The trouble, it is alleged, is that these are read as soon as they leave school. What is needed is ensuring the fact that local and international newspapers and magazines still have fairly decent circu-mlations – according to the figures in print. And that each copy sold, we’re author-ised to think, is read by numerous people before being discarded by their first wrap-pers.

There is the fact that there is hardly any home in Kenya without a Bible or Omen, and a wide range of other religious liter-a-tures in their short lifetimes? And how many Kenyans of a certain educational level have not at one point or the other engaged the illiterating works of such best-selling authors as John Grisham, Wilbur Smith, Dan Brown, Stephen King, JJ Crossley, Stephen King, and others?

There is the little pocket change, courtesy of the government, which is given to chil-dren. And that is beside the fact that some of these children have family and friends, among them David Murch and John Kamau, who, in the past hit the book market with a bang. These are not all the facts. As for the books that were not and could never have been set books; not with their subject matters, which are certainly not written for the prudish.

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