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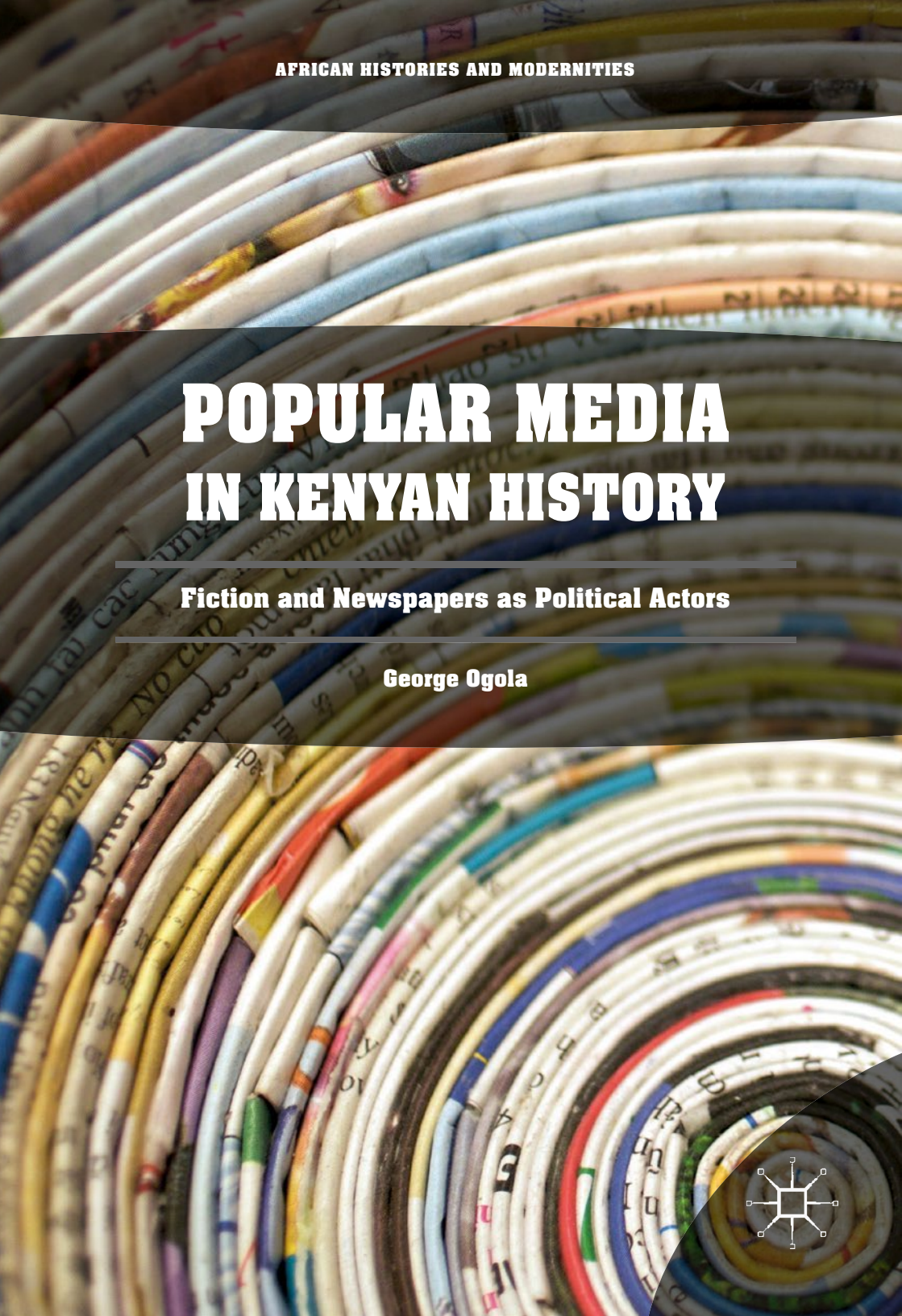
POPULAR MEDIA IN KENYAN HISTORY

Fiction and Newspapers as Political Actors

George Ogola



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Fiction and Newspapers as Political Actors

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Preface and Acknowledgements

The 1980s–1990s decade in Kenya was a period of significant political and social turmoil—as well as change. The resulting public restlessness was manifest in the consequent protests that characterized the period. It is a history that has received notable academic interest as it fundamentally shaped the Kenya we have today. However, as is typical of much of post-colonial African scholarship, especially those interested in documenting change in the continent, many scholars have tended to focus on the country's formal institutions during this epoch.

The period has been cast broadly as dystopic, and hence the chaos, the fragmentations and the conflicts, frames which have traditionally been used to narrate Africa. These are frames that often make it easy to tell Africa's story. They normalize the claim about the continent's incomprehensible incompleteness. Ignored in this process of re-telling have been the powerful but informal sites and ways in which Africa continues to reconstitute itself whenever it threatens to implode from within. The realm of popular culture provides us a window through which to witness change differently, to learn about alternative narrations and histories and to revise some of the problematic generic frames that characterize the reading of the African state. This realm is much more inclusive and less linear, undisciplined and quite difficult to frame.

Narrating change is no doubt a difficult undertaking. Formalizing a 'process' not only misrepresents its various contours and textures but also ignores the fundamental fact that change is neither linear nor predictable. Notwithstanding its limitations, Africa's popular cultural economy has been particularly adept at capturing change in the continent. Various

popular cultural productions are largely a manifestation of processes of change. It is against this background that I found this study especially necessary. I wanted to examine the Kenya of the 1980s through the 1990s through a different prism. It is a period I too lived and experienced and was acutely aware that the songs we sang, the plays we watched and the fiction we read spoke to our immediate experiences as ordinary Kenyans much better than the newspaper headlines of the time.

The changes were monumental, their pace extraordinarily rapid. Many have attempted to 'write' this period but few have narrated this particularly epochal decade in Kenya's history as vividly as the late Wahome Mutahi. Rightly feted as a literary pantheon, Mutahi gave us a platform from which we were able to read Kenya's alternative histories: unscripted, brave, insightful and, above all, ordinary. His fiction column *Whispers*, published at various times by Kenya's two main national newspapers the *Nation* and the *Standard*, was a must-read for many Kenyans. *Whispers* was a joy to read and perhaps even more fulfilling to study. Through his alter ego Whispers, Mutahi grappled with the vagaries of Africa's post-colonial existential anxieties and dilemmas but also captured how many responded to them. *Whispers* was the story of a man who did not live and yet did. You walked the streets of Nairobi with him, socialized with him and went to Church with him. You laughed and condoled with him as you did with your very own. He was a true Kenyan 'Son of the Soil', one who gave us a glimpse of the Kenya(n) becoming.

Through a study of this column *Whispers*, this book attempts to give agency to these alternative ordinary histories. My fundamental argument here is that to examine the African state purely from a liberal democratic paradigm silences alternative understandings of Africa. Indeed, such an approach disregards the existence of a parallel political and cultural infrastructure that informs and continues to shape the evolution of the African state. While the latter does have some analytical purchase, we need to equally recognize the continent's cultural economy and therefore sites of cultural production as key to our understanding of the continent, its evolution and its people. These sites recognize the myriad unarticulated rules and practices particularly within the realm of the 'popular' that structure relationships between polity and potentate, allowing for domination but also resistance and negotiation. Their resilience over the years against the rapacious hegemony of the rational bureaucratic state, their refusal to be 'captured' and recast as formal, demonstrates not their dysfunction but the very opposite. It is in this area and within this alternative way of

thinking through change that I make my contribution. *Whispers* was an important site and form of cultural production in which were embedded various 'hidden transcripts' that can offer us a space into understanding the various contours of Kenya's evolution: its contradictions, how the informal and formal interpenetrate, how tensions and continuities between the past and the present are reconciled and how the local and international collide but also collude in the making of new cultures and practices that reveal the character of the Kenya(n) becoming. It is the failure of much of mainstream African scholarship to recognize these alternative histories as legitimate readings of the processes of change that prompted this study.

I am greatly indebted to the author of *Whispers*, Wahome Mutahi, now sadly passed on. He spent many hours with me talking about Whispers the man and the column, a work of fiction that had become so real it was difficult to differentiate the fictional character from his 'maker'. We should consider ourselves fortunate to have had him amidst us.

I also owe a great deal to Prof. James Ogude, my teacher and mentor from whom I gained immensely.

Much of this project was written as part of my PhD studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It is therefore with great pleasure that I have to acknowledge my peers and colleagues at the School of Literature, Language and Media. Many have gone on to do great things and their contribution to Kenyan and African literary and media scholarship now shines through. May you all continue flying our region's intellectual flag.

I am also immensely grateful to the University of the Witwatersrand for the various scholarships that made my study possible: The Postgraduate Merit Award, the University Council Postgraduate Scholarship and the Doris Tothill Bequest Scholarship. I am also grateful to South Africa's National Research Council for their generous award.

I thank Prof. Isabel Hofmeyr who was my first contact in the 'city of gold'. Her assistance during the first confusing days at the university helped me learn the ropes relatively fast. I also spent an immensely fruitful and intellectually enriching time at the University of Birmingham's Centre of West African studies as a Cadbury fellow and therefore express my gratitude to Prof. Karin Barber and her colleagues.

I also thank my good friend Mike Owuor for dutifully reading through the manuscript despite his various other commitments and deadlines.

Lastly, to the three wonderful people in my life, dearest Georgina, baby Ruby and my beautiful little girl Imani, who in her desperation to get me away from this project resorted to calling me ‘babes’. I hope my absence is finally absolved.

Contents

CHAPTER 1

Popular Anxieties, Popular Expressions: An Introduction

Until his death in July 2003, (Paul) Wahome Mutahi was among the most popular creative writers in Kenya. He had published several novels and novellas, and was an acclaimed playwright, journalist and a thespian of notable following. Mutahi was, however, best known for his satirical newspaper column *Whispers*, arguably his most influential work. For close to two decades from 1983, *Whispers* was a regular feature in the Kenyan newspapers, a feat which at the time of the writer's death only surpassed by legendary Edward Rodwell's column *Coast Causerie*, which ran for nearly half a century. In an obituary published soon after Mutahi's death, Kwamchetsi Makokha, writing in *The Sunday Nation*, one of the two newspapers which published Mutahi's work, condoled thus: '[w]ith the exception of God and disability, Wahome Mutahi could laugh at anything in life. He laughed at society, he laughed at the Government and he laughed at his family—but he laughed at himself the hardest' (*Daily Nation*, July 23, 2003). Yet as Hertzler (1970, 58–9) once commented, 'what a people laugh at, at any given time, can reveal what they are interested in, concerned about, aroused by, disgusted and preoccupied with'.

In Mutahi's work, laughter was employed in the Bakhtinian (1986, 23) sense; it allowed authority, as well as the commonplace, to be 'drawn into a zone of crude contact … fingered familiarly, turned upside down, inside out and peered at from above and below … dismembered'. In sum, *Whispers* was a public space where Kenya's postcolonial existential anxieties were constantly interrogated. In many ways, the column defined

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the 'Kenya(n) becoming', exploring his hopes and fears, his dreams and failures, his existential dilemmas as he grappled with the vagaries of African modernity and the ruthlessness of the postcolonial political order. But above all else, Mutahi highlighted the realm of the 'popular' as being capable of engaging with the complex contradictions and ambiguities of postcolonial Kenya.

In an interesting study of a popular cartoon strip in South Africa, *Madam and Eve*, Britten (1998, 30) argues that it is in the 'parallel universe of fiction, we can laugh at some of these issues that easily provoke anger, angst and frustrations in the real world …' Popular genres can, in the words of Barber (1997a, 5), 'collaborate with, adapt to or evade the intermittent demands of the state while retaining the capacity to formulate devastating criticism'.

Read as a cultural, political, historical and media text, this book interrogates how popular cultural forms such as popular fiction engage with and subject the polity to constant critique through informal but widely recognized cultural forms of censure. The book further explores how through such forms we see and experience how the Kenyan subaltern, through a 'politics of the everyday', adapt to a fast-changing world, how tensions and continuities between the past and the present are reconciled and how the local and international collide but also collude in the making of the Kenya(n) becoming.

The African popular press, more specifically the newspaper, is arguably best described as a popular platform which brings together various literary (sub-)genres, among them, popular fiction columns. These columns have been some of the most resilient and versatile components of the region's popular press. In Kenya, they have remained an enduring feature of the local newspapers since the 1970s. Among the most popular of these columns was *Whispers*, a satirical column written by Mutahi, arguably one of Kenya's most prominent writers of the 1980s–1990s. At a time when the state had all but monopolized public sites of popular expression in the country, *Whispers* kept the Kenyan press porous, opening up spaces for the discussion of social and political issues that could only be 'whispered'. This book provides a detailed discussion of this column through which it interrogates how popular culture interfaces politics—how it assembles and nurtures a subculture and how it 'disciplines' the polity as well as the public.

The book discusses how *Whispers* became a public space where Kenya's postcolonial existence in its many contradictory faces was constantly cate-

chized. The book argues that this column provided its readers with certain 'moments of freedom'; it was a site where the limits of social and political taboos were boldly tested and ruptured. In *Whispers*, people could heartily laugh at authority, and at themselves, but ultimately reflect on the reasons for their laughter. By providing such a space for self-reflection and for the critique of society, the book argues that the Kenyan newspaper became an important site of cultural production relevant to understanding Kenya's testing political transition in the 1980s–1990s.

The agency and space that *Whispers* enjoyed for nearly two decades points to its place as a significant popular text in Kenya. From a largely descriptive single column, *Whispers* grew into a full-page weekly article in two of the region's most widely read newspapers, *The Sunday Standard* and *The Sunday Nation*. By 2003, Mutahi was also writing two other fiction columns modelled on *Whispers*, namely, *These Crazy Kenyans* and *Lugambo* (Luganda for 'whispers') in a Ugandan newspaper, *The Monitor*, owned by the Nation Media Group (NMG).

The Emergence of *Whispers*

In July 1983, *Whispers*, a small column barely occupying a quarter of a page, was created in the humour pages of the *East African Standard* to run alongside John Macklin's column *Stranger Than Fiction*. The name *Whispers* loosely reflected what the writer believed would be the column's main preoccupation—discussing 'things that Kenyans did but were only comfortable acknowledging privately' (Interview by author, Nairobi, July 2003). The name of the column was, however, happenstance. Mutahi had been a regular patron at a local bar called *Mihehu* ('Whispers' in Kikuyu) in his village in Nyeri. A notice pinned on the door allegedly read: 'When you come in, do not raise your voice'. Interestingly, Mutahi recalled during an interview with the author that once inside the bar, whenever the patrons got drunk they always ended up singing—'raising their voices'. The bar thus provided him a fascinating allegory. He saw it as providing a space, just like the column, where a number of issues could be introduced as and in 'whispers' but would soon be discussed openly and loudly by the patrons. It is notable, however, that similar fiction columns that preceded *Whispers* in the Kenyan newspapers often relied on bar-room buffoonery, the bar providing a space of 'relative freedom' for the writers. The assumption that what was said at a moment of inebriation would not be taken seriously was a reliable subterfuge to introduce and discuss 'taboo'

topics. For writers, this was one of the ways in which certain norms, political and social, were broached in a public space. It is, however, also possible that Mutahi in fact appropriated the name from Nelson Ottah's *West African Whispers*, a column which featured in the then popular *Drum* magazine. The column presented what one of *Drum*'s former editors Anthony Sampson described as an 'extremely sardonic view of political events in West Africa' (cited in Stein 1999, 6).

The early issues of *Whispers* were predictable, almost mundane 'instructive' narratives reminiscent of the didactic manuals of the market literature tradition one of the most successful of which was the famous Onitsha Market literature (see Newell 2002). Titles such as 'The ups and downs of dating' (*Sunday Standard*, November 13, 1983), 'The art of borrowing money' (*Sunday Standard*, October 23, 1983) and 'A world full of liars' (*Sunday Standard*, July 10, 1983) were common in the column in the early 1980s and point to the overt instructional intent of the writer. The column generally had a strong reformational character. In its later years, however, the column was to gravitate towards the political. It evolved into a form of 'mini-republic' to use Atieno-Odhiambo's (1987, 200) words, embodying particularly the politically subversive. Sample articles that capture this character include 'SOS thinking of defecting from the shilling economy' (*Standard on Sunday*, June 28, 1992), 'The Day SOS met Kiganjo Boys' (*Standard on Sunday*, March 15, 1992), 'Operation Whispers Out' (*Standard on Sunday*, November 25, 1992), 'Total Man's house divided: Agip House raring to go to war' (*Standard on Sunday*, September 13, 1992). The allusions, imagery and language in the titles gesture towards the political. Most of the stories reflect political events in the country at the time. For instance, in 'Total Man's house divided: Agip House raring to go to war', a domestic quarrel between a man and his wife who happen to belong to different ethnic groups is narrated against the background of politically motivated ethnic clashes in the country. Similarly, the domestic 'fallout' is to be seen against the background of the political fallout between members of an opposition party, Forum for the Restoration of Democracy (FORD), at the time a formidable political outfit in Kenya challenging then ruling Kenya African National Union (KANU). Marital infidelity is thus explained using political imagery. There is a sense in which the writer began to domesticate the national and it inflects the domestic with national politics. This inversion in the column allowed for salient political critique.

It is also important that we recognize the influence of 'New Journalism', also known as 'Immersion Journalism' or 'Literary Journalism' on Mutahi's writings. New Journalism refers to a 'movement' that emerged in the 1960s in the United States, although there were similar trends elsewhere in the world, including Africa. It is largely described as having been 'a generational revolt against the stylistic and political constraints of cold-war journalism, a rebellion against the drab detached writing of the big-city dailies and the machine-like prose' (Scott 2001, 59). The proponents of 'New Journalism' such as Tom Wolfe, Hunter Thompson and Joan Didion argued that straight journalism reduced everything to details, 'an impartiality that becomes desensitizing and objective to the point of emotional irrelevance … To do the job fully, there was need for a little soul and poetry, a little shaking up' (cited by Mordue in *Nation*, May 6, 2002).

'New Journalism' revolutionized writing in the popular press, subverting traditional news reporting by using symbols, imagery and imaginative language in news writing. In addition, the writing experimented with character developments in literary work while writers became involved in the writing. It was in effect an interface between journalism and literary writing.

There are elements of this tradition in a number of popular magazines in Africa such as *Drum*, *Joe* and even in fiction published in several African newspapers. For instance, in *Whispers*, we see Mutahi through his characters directly or indirectly immersed in the stories he is telling. Indeed, they are not just stories; Mutahi's work is part journalism. Mutahi's use of the first person involves him as a writer in the emotional contours of his narratives. Equally significant is his use of the symbolic, of imagery and of a highly imaginative language, a rupture of sorts with the more traditional conventions of journalistic writing.

But 'New Journalism' also provided a number of challenges for writers. Pegi Taylor acknowledges that it 'takes tremendous craft for a non-fiction writer to dominate his subject' (cited in *The Writer* 2002, 29). For 'once immersed in it, it becomes difficult for writers to also act as reporters' (ibid.). Quoting Christopher Hanson, she notes the 'professional tug of war between telling a good story and the desire to report thoroughly, analyse and explain' (ibid.) Joan Didion on the other hand explains that when this style works it goes unnoticed, but when it fails 'it swamps the narrative and leaves the reader toting up errors or misapprehensions' (ibid.).

The point we are making is that *Whispers* did not grow out of a vacuum. Even as he broke new ground, Mutahi's column emerged from existing

writing traditions. We see influences of *Drum*, of 'New Journalism', of *Joe* and especially of Kenyan writers such as Sam Kahiga, Hillary Ng'weno and Brian Tetley. Indeed, Mutahi revealed in a personal interview with the author that he had hoped the Kenyan newspaper would also produce its own Can Tembas, Henry Nxumalos, Bloke Modisanes, Es'kia Mphahleles and Nat Nakasas—writers who made *Drum* arguably one of the most powerful sites of social and political commentaries in South Africa. According to Mutahi, *Drum* and *Whispers* represented a 'new genre' where the popular media through popular writing would provide a new space for social and political reflection, and direction. To Mutahi, therefore, *Whispers* was supposed to foster a genre, revive a lost tradition and possibly create lasting progenies.

Most of the fiction columns published in the Kenyan press, including *Whispers* at its formative years, were constrained in terms of narrative possibilities. Instructive writing barely sustains fiction. Quite often, this form of writing calls for the use of a large cast of characters, all too frequently changed to the extent that readers fail to relate with them. Njabulo Ndebele has pointed out that instructive writing 'inhibits the development of stories about ordinary feelings and experiences' (cited in Newell 2002, 5). Partly because of this, but also because of the repressive political environment and the rapid social transformation in Kenya, *Whispers* was to radically transform in the late 1980s. It is within this transformation that one notes the influences of prose writers such as Ferdinand Oyono, Chinua Achebe and one of Mutahi's most favourite novelists Mongo Beti. Mutahi noted during a personal interview with the author that it is writers like Beti who 'understand the conceptual nuances of African rural life', a key aspect in Mutahi's narratives. He remarked that Mongo Beti had a special way of moulding 'rural' characters, especially noting his portrayal of Medza in the novel *Mission to Kala* (1958). In the novel, Medza fights for cognition when she discovers herself in 'a strange universe and reacts strongly to anything that departs from her own cultural expectations and prejudices' (Lindfors 1991, 65). It is a relationship that defines Mutahi's portrayal of the Kenyan 'urbanite' and is particularly captured by Mutahi's main character in the column, *Whispers*.

Among some of the radical transformations in *Whispers* included shifts in the column's narrative framework and thematic trends. Mutahi created a parallel fictional family from where he situated his fiction. He set *Whispers* within a fictional Kenyan family comprising the characters Whispers, Thatcher (Whispers' wife), the Investment or Pajero (daugh-

ter) and Whispers Jr. (son). Other characters who were, however, transient included Teacher Damiano (Whispers' former teacher), Father Camisassius (Whispers' former Catholic priest), Appepklonia (Whispers' mother), Rhoda (a barmaid), Uncle Jethro (Whispers' uncle), Aunt Kezia (Whispers' aunt), among others. These were used as allegorical characters, becoming determinative tropes, discourse markers and acting as points of reference for readers of the column. The 'new' *Whispers* was loosely modelled on Mutahi's real-life family—his wife Ricarda Njoki (as Thatcher), Octavia Muthoni (as Appepklonia), Caroline Muthoni (as the Investment or Pajero) and Patrick Mutahi (as Whispers Jr alias the Domestic Thug). An interesting omission in the column's permanent characters was Whispers' father. It is instructive to point out that in the 1950s when Mutahi was growing up under the British colonial government, traditional life in rural Kenya had been significantly disrupted as the wage economy and Christianity became integrated in the Kenyan social life. The school and the Church replaced the father as the centres of knowledge in rural Kenya. Since for the most time of the year the father was away from home, it is the mother, the school and the Church that mostly influenced a child's early years and not the father as would ordinarily have been the case. It is also the case that many men around the Mt. Kenya region had either joined the Mau Mau or had been detained by the colonial government.

The main character who lends the column its name, Whispers, also called 'Son of the Soil', is stereotyped as a 'typical' Kenyan male: unapologetically chauvinistic, opinionated and self-indulgent. This was a narrative figure already partly defined and popularized by several other writers of popular literature such as Charles Mangua, Sam Kahiga and David Maillu. But in *Whispers* this character speaks for many 'Sons of the Soil'. He epitomizes their anxieties at a time of rapid social and political change. Within the context of the harsh political realities of the period, his name also gestures at certain forms of resistance, which we discuss later in the book. Mutahi indicated during one of my interviews with him that the character was among the most popular in the column, judging from the correspondence he received from readers. It is this character who inspires events and the mood of the column.

Thatcher on the other hand became the model for the new Kenyan woman. In the 1980s, the most visible female symbol of 'independence', at least in the popular imagination in Kenya, was former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Thatcher was a popular figure in the Kenyan media, and it is because of her visibility and her reputation as the 'Iron