



Remembering the past and reflecting on Kenya's present

Rebeka Njau & Tom Odhiambo

Rebeka Njau was born in colonial Kenya and went to school at a time when girls were unlikely to be encouraged to seek formal education. But coming from a Christian family, she was encouraged to study and managed to be admitted to Makerere University College, from where she graduated, and came back to teach at her alma mater, Alliance Girls High School. She would later found Nairobi Girls School in 1964 from where she retired as a teacher in 1968. Njau would then be involved in the arts scene together with her now ex-husband Elimo Njau at Paa Ya Paa Gallery in Nairobi. Later she would work with the National Council of Churches of Kenya, where she was the editor of the council's magazine *Target*. Rebeka lives in 'semiretirement'—as she continues to keep herself busy with writing—on the outskirts of Nairobi. Tom Odhiambo had this interview with her at her home soon after the release of her memoirs, *Mirrors of My Life*, which was published in July 2019.

TO: Tell me a little bit about your early life: your impressions of life growing up as a young girl in a context of this European modernity and colonialism and a vibrant Kikuyu culture and community.

RN: I grew up, of course, in a village near Fort Smith (Kiambu County today). That's where we had the first Europeans come. It was very near our village and then there was also an Asian shop there. [...] I remember those days. There we were: there were white men on the other side, about one kilometre away from ourselves. It was exciting to have a shop at that time, owned by Asians. We would walk to the shop and see those white men. There was one white man who was called Hallow. I don't know if that was his proper name. He was a doctor, and he was helping our people with all kinds of things. The *mzungu* was killed by Mau Mau and one of the people who killed him was a relative—when I talk about relatives, you know how people were living in a village together.

TO: Yes.

RN: Later on, I could not forget that man. Although he had done a bad thing, killing, there was a side of him that was really good. I have talked about it in the book (*Mirrors of My Life*) a little bit—how he helped me to get into a crowded bus when I was going home from hospital—from Kenyatta Hospital—and I had to walk about three miles from Kenyatta Hospital to where the university [of Nairobi] is because that's where we could board the buses. It was interesting for us, especially in our home, because we were surrounded by people [that] we would call primitive. They circumcised their girls. In our home my parents were Christians. It's like we lived in two countries because we were separated by traditions. We had nothing to do with one another.

TO: So, how did you relate? How did your family relate with the immediate community?

RN: Well, my parents did not look down upon them [neighbours], although my mother was an evangelist. Of course, she would tell them that what they were doing, such as the Mau Mau activities, were bad. But there was no quarrelling about it in our village. I remember that we were not stopped from going to visit our grandmother or our uncles. We had a good time there. But then you know that circumcision was a must and some of our relatives

Rebeka Njau is one of the earliest Kenyan women writers, writing mainly in English. Her published works include the novels *Ripples in the Pool* and *The Sacred Seed*; a play, *The Scar*; and a number of 'folktales' published in different anthologies.

Email: karibuke@yahoo.com

Tom Odhiambo teaches literature and performing arts at the University of Nairobi. He has research interests in popular literature and culture. He is also an amateur journalist who has written for various publications in East Africa.

Email: tom.odhiambo@uonbi.ac.ke

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8364-2185>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17159/tl.v58i1.10422>

were circumcised and they didn't care. They would go all around the villages taunting us and then they [also] knew my mother was having classes [for] teaching young girls how bad circumcision was for women. But we didn't care. She was such a brave woman and [the] Mau Mau wanted to kill her. They changed [eventually]—I don't know why. They came to kill her but then on second thought, just before they neared our home, they went back. And of course, we lived a very strict life. My parents were very strict. We were not supposed to mix with people who did not go to school and who were dressing in traditional clothes and behaved in a traditional manner. But we were lucky, especially myself, because my maternal grandfather lived about fifteen miles away. We would go and learn a lot of things from our grandfather, stay there, sleep on a hard wood bed in his room. I remember that we [also] slept [on] goatskin.

TO: *And what was your first impression when you went to school?*

RN: In fact, I liked school. It was a new thing, and we were given slates to write on. It was exciting. One wanted to learn. Where we lived [was] on a highland. We were surrounded by people who were not sending their children to school, but we were not alone. There were other families whose parents were evangelists, or they believed in God, and we made friends among them because we were not supposed to make friends with all these other girls who did not go to school and accepted circumcision. So, we lived separate lives. I remember how we used to be abused by boys. If they knew you were not circumcised, you had a hard time. All these [sic] was great experience for me and I was able to write especially about the circumcision because of what I had seen and the treatment we got and how mum was able to sit down with girls and teach them [...] that early [in] life.

TO: *So, [...] when you leave Alliance and you go to Makerere and you meet all these new people from completely different communities, how did you feel?*

RN: [...] [G]oing to Makerere, of course we found people we had not met before, but you know in our home, the way we were brought up, we were able to mix with people from different countries through my brother. I had a brother called John. John had gone to Makerere earlier and had made friends. There was one man—in fact, I have written about it—from Zambia, I can't remember, or Zimbabwe, who came to live in our house. Dr. Kiano (Gikonyo Kiano was the first African Kenyan to earn a PhD and became a Minister in independent Kenya's first Cabinet) also came to my home through my brother John who made friends with people of different nationalities, different tribes. In fact, he got his wife from Western Uganda. We were really taught how to socialise with people of the same beliefs. What they, my parents, did not want us to do was to keep company with the others because of the influence we would get—bad influence.

TO: *So you found it easy to fit into Makerere?*

RN: I found it easy [...] because I had already been there with my mother to visit my brother John who had set up a shop in Kakira in Jinja.

TO: Yes.

RN: And even at Alliance Girls we had invited two girls from Uganda to come and stay and learn from us. I don't know how they did it. When I went to Makerere one of the girls became my friend. In fact, she was very interested in *Ripples in the Pool* when it came out, and because she had a position in the Ministry of Education, she wrote letters [to concerned officials] saying they should try to get *Ripples in the Pool* in their schools. I also remember this girl from Zambia. She became a very good friend of mine. It was not strange as far as I was concerned.

TO: *But your generation as a whole, what vision of Kenya did you have as we were getting away from colonialism into independence?*

RN: Well, of course we all wanted independence to come because I remember whenever we went to shop [along] Moi avenue—it was then Government Road—and there were Asians all over the place. I remember one day going to buy something inside the shop of an Asian. They would not let us get in. They said, "Just go away." We were feeling bitter because we were treated very badly. When we went to town we used to go and buy second-hand books because we are great readers in my family. We would go to those Asian bookshops [and] they were very unfriendly at that time. We looked forward to better times because we knew, although we had gained some

knowledge, we still wanted our country to be ours. Remember there were booklets written in Gikuyu. You know we used to read those books and they made us feel proud about our land and we wanted to occupy it later without any hindrance from all these Europeans and Asians. I felt strongly that we needed independence and we were looking forward to having everything good, rich, no more poverty. But then we found after independence things went slowly. People continued to be poor, but we remained patient.

TO: What about women professionals? When you came back from Makerere to teach at Alliance, what did you as women pioneer professionals talk about? You've talked about friends—Kiano, Matiba—what did you see yourselves as?

RN: We knew we had to struggle. Also, as women, we did not consider ourselves privileged at all. What we didn't have at that time is this feeling that you belong to this or that tribe. I did not know tribalism because at Alliance we mixed. And I have told you even from Uganda, the girls came to stay with us, and we found out how different they were. Somehow, we envied them. They knew how to dress; they were well-groomed. We were still very new to these modern things; of course, you look forward to that kind of thing.

TO: So, what do you think Kenyans have not done correctly since independence?

RN: Well, there are people who have worked very hard to bring themselves up but this idea that we must be rich quickly—even young people now don't want to start at the bottom there and grow up—is wrong. When you grow up with something you have struggled for, and you know it's your thing, you'll not waste money. Now, you know what makes me sad is the fear that these young people today [have]. They don't know where they are, they are wobbling here and there. They have no solid ground on which to stand because even those ones who are supposed to set the example are too busy working and they have no time to think of things that matter. [...] [W]hat do you believe in? I am not talking about Christianity or whatever because when you look at the people who have gone before us—who had a traditional set up, who had never gone to school—they had a great deal to teach about life.

TO: So, you think adults today, the old are not teaching the young?

RN: No, because [...] I don't think they were taught or, if they were taught, they ignored. They preferred to get things quickly. Money, quickly. They leave their children—like us ladies, we have a baby, even before it is six months you've already left it with the *ayahs*. In the traditional setup, children were taught by grownups, grandmothers, and grandfathers. Talk about sharing, talk about it is wrong to steal even one shilling from somebody. That was evil in certain customs like the Kikuyu, I know. So now where do you think all this nonsense has come from? This stealing without feeling anything. I can't explain.

TO: What do you think we can do to address the problem?

RN: We have to slow down about looking for riches. Money is good because without money sometimes you can't even help other people. I see young people here, neighbours carrying stones. They are working so hard, and I wish I had more money to give them, and I tell them when you get this money do not drink. I am not going to employ anyone who is drinking because people drink in a way that they do not know why they drink. Drinking just to make them maybe forget themselves and where they are going. No vision. They stay just like that. I feel very sad. You see all those schoolgirls getting pregnant and then they have a baby, their life, real life, is more or less sometimes cut short by men who are in offices who [are] driving big cars. What is that?

TO: Some time back you worked with the church. Do you think the church can help these?

RN: Now that we are talking about the church, I worked with the church for fifteen years. I remember when I came to settle here, there were preachers around and they'd put on their music very, very loud so that we can hear them. And one day I was seated here writing and there was a church here that had started, and they would put the loudspeaker facing here.

TO: *Facing you?*

RN: Yeah. And when I went out and looked at the congregation, there were only four people in that *kachurch*. Do you know what I did? I took the speaker and turned it to face them. So, later they came here—a man and his wife—to talk to me. To tell me that am I not afraid of going to hell because what I did, God does not like. And you know what I told them? In the end of times when it comes and we are being shown where to go, there'll be a big wide road and a tiny one. The big wide road, maybe it will be pointed out to me where all those people who have been helping people, who have been living well, good ones, would be directed to. And you, pastor and your wife, you'll be surprised because you'll be led to a road that leads to Jahannam, everlasting fire.

I preached to them. I told them even in the olden times, our grandfathers, our fathers, they went to pray under the tree. Either Mugumo or whatever, and there they were quiet. They knew it was a holy place they were in. Here in your church, you go in people are shouting, laughing, talking, you do not even respect the house of God. I wanted them to learn about the old people of the past. They believed in god, whoever they thought was god, *na wanampa heshima* (and they respected him). These ones here, you hear them shouting to the highest, they are not really interested in you; they want to be heard outside so that more and more people can go to their church. So, I feel sad about the church because it should be at the forefront of the struggle against suffering. We should not have so many young people drinking, being immoral. So, what have we gained from them (present day preachers)? The missionaries, at least they came and gave us an education. At least that was something. But today, what is education giving us? I sometimes wonder. I think people should rethink and learn and teach the young, first of all, to think of the person you are next to as a neighbour, whether you know them or not. And you do not let them go to hell without helping. We must help one another. You know that's what we lack.

TO: *Helping one another?*

RN: Helping one another and thinking about you as a human being. Maybe because we want money so quickly, there is nothing else occupying people's minds. How can I get some more? Money is good, but to be obsessed with it that you can't even give somebody something is wrong.

TO: *What about writing? What does writing mean to you?*

RN: To me writing means a lot. I can't do without writing.

TO: *Why?*

RN: Because there is nothing else I can do. That's what I have done for many years. Do you know I have a lot of things I have written but not published? I have this book of sixteen women—in this book [*Mirrors of My Life*] I have listed some of them. I have short stories, almost done. I have not organised [them]. I have to go through them. At night I don't forget to put a piece of paper and a pen near my bed because something can come into my mind, and I have to wake up and write it down because if I don't, I'll forget. There is no day, if I'm here, I'm not writing at my desk. [...] [I]t is like people who drink—they can't do without a drink. It's the same thing with me. Something I've seen I put it down, like this. Now what have I to do? I don't have many years to live, to put all together.

TO: *So, what's your philosophy of life? How have you managed life? You've lived your life up to this age, there is a philosophy of life you have.*

RN: Well, I'm very positive. I'm not negative at all. Even with the government I have hope that this place can be better, and it will be because there will be people who can bring it to where it should be. If I see somebody saying "don't", I don't want to talk to you. If you have negative feelings, negative response to people who need your help, then don't come to me. And I don't hate people. I can disagree with you, but I do not hate you. And if you've done something wrong to me, of course I will tell you right away. But I'm not going to hate you. The only thing is that I keep away from you if what you are telling me is negative. I've had also failures. We are human beings, we make mistakes. Sometimes you can take the wrong lane and go the wrong way but soon, if you listen to yourself, you find you are on the wrong path and you get back to where you should be. I think [it's] because I have had so many experiences living with different types of people from different tribes. And you know in our home we were

encouraged. You see my brother John married from Western Uganda. My brother Job, who died two years ago, married that side. And John's children [sic], Wanjiru, she got married to a doctor—[he is] Luo [and] they live in Kisumu—and my sister Muthoni also married. You know all of us we were lucky because my father was working in Nairobi as a telephone operator and he would meet people, *wahindi* [Indian people], *wazungu* [white people], and they were really good to us. They taught us a lot of things. They taught us not to be greedy. You know, [as] children you'll see somebody dressed in a nice dress, [and] you beg for it. We couldn't do that. We were not supposed to do that—covet things. Be satisfied with what you have.

TO: So, that's the thing to really teach society today? People to be contented?

RN: Contented and also don't be a slave. What I want to say is this: stealing to us was very bad, for instance, even when you were given food. Mother gave you food and you said, "*Aah, hii siwezi kushiba*" (This food isn't enough). You know what she did? She would make you overeat so that you learn your lesson. You know, when I was living in Railways Quarters I used to go to a butchery in Parklands and buy meat there. [...] [E]ven when I changed my residence, I would still go to that shop in Pangani. So, one day I went to the butchery and whilst I was waiting to be served there was somebody next to me. I don't know if it was the person in front of me who saw a fifty-shilling note down on the floor. He picked [up] the note and asked me if I had dropped the money. I said no. I looked in my purse and there was no fifty shillings. But who else? The attendant insisted that the fifty shillings was mine. I said okay. But on the way [home], I was thinking all the time: this is not my fifty. Do you know I had to take the money back! All the way. Those people were surprised. They said, "You don't want this money?" I said, "This money is not mine". I remembered what my mother taught us. Not to take things that are not ours. And even the Kikuyu believed that stealing was an evil thing. So, I don't know where all these people have learnt to steal from.

TO: Well, thank you very much, but that's how the society is today.