

# CROSSING WAIYAKI WAY

**A True Story of Poverty,  
Prayer, and Politics in Kenya**

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&  
Gordon Okumu



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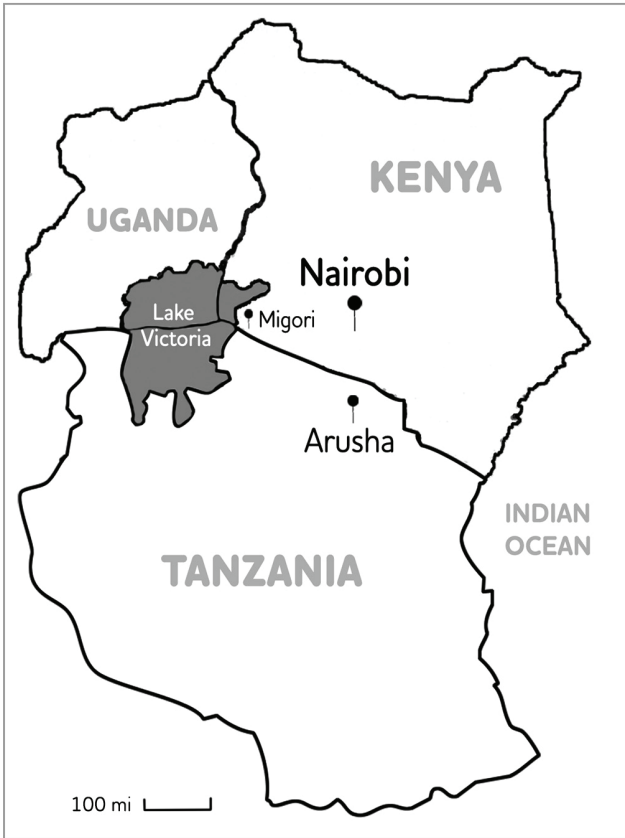
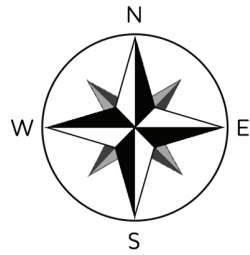
*To Selmina Gor and Mary Auma:  
for being extraordinary mothers who raised an  
extraordinary son.*

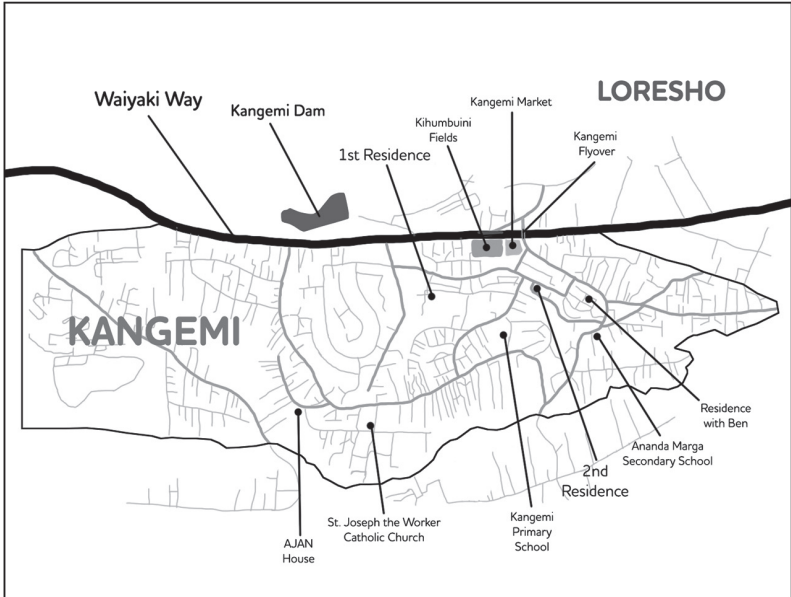
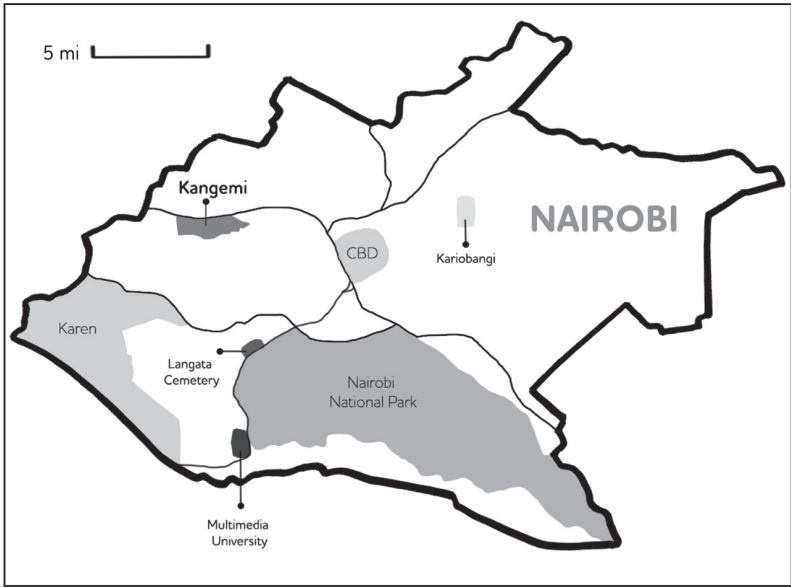
*To Fr. Jonathan Landon:  
for your guidance and trust that have made all the  
difference.*

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*Oh mwanangu dunia ina mambo,  
sikia maneno, nakwambiaga,  
mpe roho yako Mola wako,  
heshima kwa wazazi eee mwanangu.*

*Dunia hii mama  
lukumba lukumba,  
dunia ina mambo  
mwendo wa ngamia.*

...

*Mwendo wa kobe maele maele,  
mwendo wa chui kuwinda winda,  
mwendo wa nyoka lukumba lukumba,  
mwendo wa ngarama ah njia ya faradhi.*

*Dunia hii mama  
lukumba lukumba,  
dunia ina mambo  
mwendo wa ngamia.*

*Tabu na raha inakungojea,  
inategemea akili yako,  
tafutaata eh utapata eh,  
kumbuka maneno nakwambiaga.*

(Lyrics of a Swahili song,  
popular in East Africa in the late twentieth century.

Our emphasis)



O my child the world has issues,  
listen to the words I'm telling you,  
give your soul to your God,  
and respect to parents, my child.

This world, mama  
meanders and meanders,  
the world has issues,  
like **the way of the camel**.

...

**The way of the turtle** is slow, step by step,  
**The way of the leopard** is driven, ever hunting,  
**The way of the snake** meanders, side to side,  
**The difficult way** – right – it cannot be avoided.

This world, mama  
meanders and meanders,  
the world has issues,  
like the way of the camel.

Suffering and pleasure await you,  
depending on your intellect,  
search – yes – and you will find – yes,  
remember the words I'm telling you.

(Our translation and emphasis)



# I

## The Kaunda Suit

---

*Msema pweke hakosi.*

(A Swahili proverb, or *methali za Kiswahili*)

Literal Translation:

He who speaks to himself cannot be wrong.

Our Paraphrase:

No one can contradict you if you only talk to yourself.

In 1995, near the shores of Lake Victoria in rural western Kenya, the residents of Migori county were anticipating a visit from the Honorable Dalmas Otieno Anyango with a palpitating mixture of excitement and reverence fit for the arrival of a long-awaited savior. On the morning of the visit, people packed into a local church to attend mass before the MP (an elected member of Parliament) was scheduled to make his grand arrival there. Others lined the roadside, hoping to catch a glimpse of the MP as he passed by. He arrived in humble Migori town by car, accompanied by a fleet of vehicles and a police escort. No one knew where these police had come from since Migori didn't even have its own police force. As the line of black, shiny Cadillac Escalades drove through town, the city's main dirt road crunched and cracked under a weight it had never born before. The motorcade stopped at certain points, and the MP emerged from the sunroof, holding a microphone. He greeted the cheering onlookers and made *roadside declarations*, or unofficial promises to construct this road, fix this school, and bring electricity to this area.

For some of the residents, the combination of flashing lights and sirens and hullabaloo from the unprecedented spectacle ignited hope for possibility and development. For others, it raised only fear, for being so close to power was like being close to fire. It could warm, but it could also burn and blacken, leaving only ashes in its wake. In addition to being an MP, Otieno had been appointed Minister of Transportation by President Daniel Arap Moi. Since this was before the revised 2010 Kenyan Constitution, the President still enjoyed unbridled, almost dictatorial power. While the people of Migori did not dare even speak the name of President Moi within their houses *because the walls had ears*, Otieno's name and the figure behind it were only slightly less formidable. One *could* speak of this important man in quick whispers, but only of course, to praise his achievements and character.

While the procession still inched through town and the MP made declarations, over at the church, the mass had ended. Those in attendance then carried the church's wooden pews out onto an adjacent field. They arranged the pews on the grass in a semi-circle facing a short stage. A high-backed, wooden chair of honor stood at the center of the stage, and this lone chair enjoyed a sliver of precious shade from a large tree behind the stage. One long piece of plastic tape set far back from the stage demarcated the start of the area where people were to sit and acted like police tape roping off a crime scene. Everyone was to sit behind the tape—adults in the pews and children in front of them on the ground. No one was supposed to go past that tape.

On this typical warm, sunny afternoon in Migori, the air was thick with the smell of dusty earth and commingled sweat. People had put on their Sunday best, or even better than their best, for if ever there was an occasion to showcase one's finery, this was it. They had walked from their houses to the church in new *vitenge* tunics and dresses bought specifically for this day. The heavy fabric of the brightly-batiked clothes accentuated the women's curves (for there was no stretch in these fibers) and it cut straight, serious silhouettes of the men. The swirling mix of bright colors and patterns expressed the collective exuberance for Otieno's visit. Thickly outlined flowers, feathers, and fans tessellated through fields of fuchsia set atop indigo and turquoise backgrounds, alternatively contrasting with flashes of citrus or blending into cool blues and purples. Most of the women wore matching head decorations. They wrapped long scarves in a series of clearly defined, ever-enlarging creases, which culminated in a voluminous halo of color.

In the middle of this finely dressed, fidgeting audience, a nine-year-old boy sat on the grass in the row of children. He was on the left side facing the platform, directly in front of his mother in the pew behind him. He wore a navy-blue *kaunda* suit-for-boys—(pronounced cow-oonda), a specific

two-part men's fashion named after the former president of Zambia, Kenneth Kaunda, who popularized the style by constantly wearing it. The look consisted of long pants and a short-sleeve jacket with four large pockets, two on the chest and two on the waist, each with a pleated seam down the middle and a pointed cover flap. The jacket had four bronze-colored buttons that led up to a double-pointed collar, which resembled the bottom four points of a star. The boy felt like a million dollars in his stiff, fancy suit.

He listened to speeches and watched the groups of dancers and singers that filled the time while everyone anticipated the real event, but he didn't understand exactly who this important man was or why people showed him such respect. He only knew that this man was a boss, the type who people addressed with titles like *sir* and *mister*. The boy had seen pictures, and he admired the man's big belly—he must be so rich. The man probably got to sit behind a desk in a big office in Nairobi, where he made important decisions that affected all the people of Kenya.

Amidst the noise and festivities, the distant sound of a siren interrupted the speeches, signaling that the MP was *close*, probably only about five miles away. Nervous energy rippled through the seated crowd. The boy watched a group of people unfurl a red carpet, stretching it from the wooden chair on the stage down the few steps and onto the grassy area, until it almost reached the tape. The same group positioned themselves along the side of the red carpet as a receiving line. The sirens slowly got louder and louder until their shrill high and low pitches overlapped and blended together into one continuous blaring scream. All other noise stopped and everyone seemed to hold their breath, no moving, whispering, or even blinking. The MP had finally arrived.

The line of large black vehicles turned off the road onto the grass and made their way toward the stage. They drove on the field through the space in front of the seated crowd, one car following another until one of them

stopped, with the left-side passenger door perfectly aligned over the red carpet. A bodyguard in the passenger seat got out first, opened the back side door, and stood by as the man himself, Dalmas Otieno Anyango, then stepped out onto the carpet. The Area Chief introduced Otieno to each person in the line of waiting VIPs (the local school principals and priests and other important people of the town). Otieno shook each person's hand before moving to the next, one by one, until he made his way to the steps and walked onto the stage to take his seat of honor. Then the priest said an introduction and a prayer, not any normal prayer but a unique, special one to thank God for this day and this man and this momentous event. All the important people who had shaken the MP's hand moved to the side. A row of policemen stationed themselves behind the MP. As Otieno took his seat and looked out over the gathered crowd, the best-of-the-best, *crème de la crème* entertainment that had been saved for last officially started off the event.

The boy watched as a group of women dancers took their positions in the grassy area around the red carpet between the audience and the stage. Drumming started, and the dancers slid their feet back and forth on the grass. They started by bouncing their hips up and down to the beat, shaking one side and then the other, so that the *owalo* skirts around their waists shimmered to the rhythm. The drumming became faster. The women shook the pastel-dyed strands of *sisal* (dried agave fibers woven together to form their skirts) in double-time, then triple-time, swinging fast and frantic flurries of color. Other women began to chant along with the drums and make that high pitched, ululating sound that is reserved for the highest of celebrations and thanksgivings—*eeeehbbhiiiiyyyayayayayaya*. They punctuated it with a series of even higher-pitched exclamations—*ya ya YA YA!* The boy felt the rhythm pounding in his chest and the chants ringing in his ears. He thought about those important people who had greeted Otieno, and he decided that he too wanted to shake the man's hand.

He turned to his mother and said simply, "I'm going to go shake his hand."

She looked at him for a second with a mixture of confusion and disbelief as if she didn't understand his words, like he had spoken a foreign language. Her eyes got wider than he'd ever seen them before.

"No—you can't!" She leaned forward and looked right into his eyes. "You'll put me in trouble!"

He nodded slowly and turned back around in his seat. He had heard her words, but now he felt confused. He thought that she just didn't want to be embarrassed by her son. But why would she be embarrassed? Other people had shaken the man's hand, so why couldn't he do it too?

While he pondered, his mother thought about the invisible web of class, status, and socially conditioned decorum that they had been born into. She, like most people of their community, believed in and lived by unspoken rules and silent fears. She knew the reality of real consequences for acting out of turn under the Moi government. You couldn't just approach important men, and you didn't want to even *imply* the tiniest hint of a threat to the government. If they even *thought* you did, they were right, since they were prosecutor, judge, and jury. It was common for people to just disappear. People probably ended up in untraceable torture chambers beneath the bowels of Nairobi, or their bodies mysteriously appeared, dead and disfigured beyond recognition, in ditches outside the city. The mother wondered if the boy would ruin everything, in front of the police and the priest and all the people of the town. What if Otieno and his men thought that she had sent her son to sabotage the celebration? What if they thought he was a child spy, or that she had sent him wearing a homemade bomb? He couldn't step out of place. How could he even *think* of something like that? Oh Lord God in heaven have mercy! It was unthinkable, impossible.

As his mother sat there with these fears filling her mind like smoke expanding from a fast-flaming fire, the boy continued to weigh her words



against his own desire. He didn't see himself as any different from anyone else, any less able or any less deserving. And he was not afraid.

He decided that he would do it.

He stood up and heard his mother's loud gasp behind him, but he didn't turn to look at her. He stepped past the other seated kids around him, ducked under the tape, and headed straight toward the stage.

Everyone was watching the dancers, and the music continued, uninterrupted. The boy walked up on the stage by the stairs on the side. He approached the seated man. No one stopped him or came after him—not his mother, not the police, not any of the other important people. It was like everyone and everything was frozen in time. The boy walked up to the MP and didn't say anything but confidently extended his whole arm, with his fingers wide apart and his tan palm facing the seated man.

The man didn't say anything at first, either, and just turned his gaze to look at the boy. It was hard to tell if he was surprised or amused or offended—or maybe a combination of all of those. The man's expression was stern, with his lips pressed together, somewhere between a frown and a smile. He inhaled through his wide nostrils and squinted his eyes. He then extended his own hand, big enough to completely engulf the boy's, and he shook it firmly. He didn't smile, but he pulled the boy in close.

"What's your name young man?" he asked.

"Oduor Okumu," the boy replied.

"Oduor," the man repeated, nodding. "What grade are you in?"

"Third, at Kangemi Primary."

"Very good." Otieno smiled. He let go of the boy's hand and turned back to watch the dancers, as if to signal that the interaction was done. The boy smiled too, flashing the gap between his two front teeth, and he turned to walk back toward his spot in the audience.

He headed down the side steps the way he had come. He held his chin high and his shoulders back, swinging his arms, feeling the reverberations

of that handshake surging through his whole body. He stepped onto the grass and walked majestically—milking five full, luxurious syllables out of that word. He felt like everyone was marveling at him in his kaunda suit. He was the only child who had shaken the MP's hand. He had done the unthinkable. What's more, he had proved to himself and to everyone that it was not, in fact, impossible.

When he reached his seat, he sat down quickly and didn't look at his mother. He didn't want to see her disapproval. For the rest of the event, she didn't say anything about it, and when they got home, he expected her to punish or cane him, but strangely she didn't do either. He just overheard her talking with her friends later that evening and her only comment was, "I don't know where his courage comes from."