

with Mail & Guardian

The Continent

The people vs. the plantation

The struggle against Big Palm Oil
in Sierra Leone

Photo: Abdul Brima

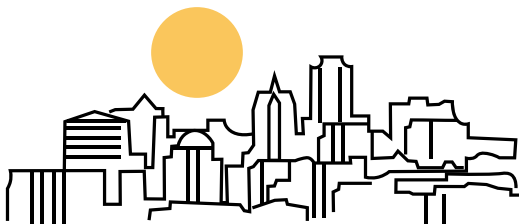
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Cover: In 2011, the Malen Chiefdom in southern Sierra Leone leased most of its land to one of the world's biggest palm oil companies. One village refused. They did this despite intense pressure from the local chief, risking arrest, intimidation and violence. A decade later, that village is an oasis of forest and farmland. Almost everywhere else has been turned into a massive plantation that has poisoned the land and water, and destroyed the local economy (p12).



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Lying by emission: The USA's climate envoy dodged blame in an address to African climate ministers last week (read more on p10)

JOURNALISM

Forensic probe finds Al Jazeera reporter 'deliberately killed'

The Israeli sniper who killed Shireen Abu Akhel, the renowned Al-Jazeera journalist known for her empathetic reporting on Palestine, could clearly tell that the people he was shooting at were journalists. This was confirmed by a joint forensic investigation by Forensic Architecture, a London based multidisciplinary research group, and Al-Haq, a Palestine rights organisation. It concludes that Abu Akhel was deliberately killed. The Israeli state has consistently denied any responsibility for her murder.

EQUATORIAL GUINEA

Obiang's sign-off signals overdue end to the death penalty

According to a new penal code signed into law by President Teodoro Obiang, the West African nation has abolished the death penalty. Capital punishment in African countries, often adopted during colonial rule, is still legal in 30 countries. In 2021, Sierra Leone's parliament voted unanimously to abolish the death penalty, joining Malawi and Chad who ruled in the last two years that the practice is unconstitutional. The last execution in Chad was conducted in 2014, according to Amnesty International.

NIGERIA

Court orders striking lecturers to get back to work

A judge has ordered university lecturers to return to work until a government case challenging their strike is concluded. Lecturers at more than 70 universities and other institutions of higher learning have been on strike since February, demanding better pay and more investment in university facilities. Negotiations between staff and the government have broken down several times, prompting the state to take the matter to court. There has not yet been any ruling on the main case itself, and the public universities remain closed.

WORLD BANK

Bank's head denies knowledge of reality

The head of the World Bank, a powerful Western institution that tries to remake the world in its neoliberal image through the strings attached to its loans, this week again refused to say that climate change is real. When pressed for an answer during an interview at a *New York Times* event, the best he could do was say: "I don't even know – I'm not a scientist." David Malpass was appointed by former US president Donald Trump.



Blank stairs: Mahamat Zene Cherif steps down. Photo: Twitter/Cherif_MZ

CHAD

Foreign minister resigns as peace talks finally start

On Monday, just as the repeatedly delayed peace dialogue with militant groups was finally starting in Qatar's capital, Doha, Chad's foreign minister resigned, saying that he had been reduced to "a simple extra" in the country's foreign dealings. In a letter to President Mahamat Déby, Mahamat Zene Cherif said that for months he had been frustrated by "parallel initiatives and actions" by other cabinet members acting on the president's instructions. The peace process is being boycotted by Chad's main opposition parties, some rebel groups and civil society.

ETHIOPIA

How dare anyone suggest it's our fault

Addis Ababa has rejected a report by UN investigators accusing the administration of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed of possible ongoing crimes against humanity in the war-torn Tigray region, including using starvation as a weapon. Meanwhile doctors and regional health officials say deadly diseases such as measles, tetanus and whooping cough are on the rise in the region after vaccination rates plunged during the civil war that broke out nearly two years ago.

MOZAMBIQUE

Another MFing IMF loan loading

Mozambique and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have completed a preliminary review that could see the country get a \$63.8-million loan, some time after March 2023. The IMF staff team, which was in the country from 5-16 September, praised Mozambican authorities for getting the country's beleaguered economy on a recovery path, saying that growth in the first half of 2022 exceeded expectations, but noted that the country is still heaving under soaring food prices.



Photo: NDLEA Nigeria

ILLICIT DRUGS

Nigeria's biggest cocaine bust ever

In the country's biggest drug bust, Nigeria's anti-drugs agency this week seized cocaine valued at \$278-million from a cartel that was trying to sell

the class A illicit drug to buyers in Europe, Asia and other parts of the world. Mohamed Buba Marwa, the head of Nigeria's National Drug Law Enforcement Agency, boasted that the bust is a strong warning to drug cartels in the country that "they'll all go down if they fail to realise that the game has changed".



Photo: Twitter/CIA

IMPERIALISM

Happy birthday CIA – proudly destabilising the world since 1947

The US's international spying setup, the Central Intelligence Agency, turned 75 this week. It's been busy in that time, murdering elected politicians, helping to overthrow elected governments and destabilising countries all over the world, from the Democratic Republic of Congo (Zaire, then), to Iraq, Iran, Chile, and Guatemala (to name a few). A CIA tip-off led to Nelson Mandela's 1962 arrest by South Africa's apartheid government, starting his 27-year prison term. The CIA's station chief in Congo (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) was also influential in the decision to hand Patrice Lumumba to the Katanga secessionists who murdered him.

UGANDA

Ebola outbreak met with calm confidence

On Tuesday, the World Health Organisation and the health ministry confirmed Uganda's first Ebola outbreak since 2019 after the death of a man in his twenties, who had exhibited symptoms of the Sudan strain, in the country's central Mubende district. As of 23 September there are 11 confirmed cases in the country, but officials are confident the outbreak will be kept in check. "We have the capacity, we have the skills, we have what it takes to contain this Ebola," the ministry's permanent secretary Dr Diana Atwine said.

NAMIBIA

African cheetahs spotted in India

Eight cheetahs have been moved from Namibia to a new sanctuary in India, as part of a plan to re-introduce the world's fastest mammal to the subcontinent. The large cat was hunted to extinction there 70 years ago. After an initial period under observation and quarantine, the five females and three males will be released into the 285 square mile Kuno National Park, where they will hopefully thrive and reproduce. Cheetah numbers were also struggling across Africa but have since rebounded.

Profiteering threatens inclusivity of climate negotiations

You must be awake, rested and in the room to influence climate negotiations. In Egypt, delegates' bookings have been cancelled, increasing their travel costs dramatically. That means fewer people can go.

The United Nations' international climate meetings have always been a bonanza for the cities hosting them. Last year's Congress of the Parties (COP), in Glasgow, had 38,000 registered delegates. And thousands more protesters.

Those numbers reflect the importance of having as many different voices as possible in rooms where decisions are made about reducing carbon emissions, paying for the damage caused by climate change, and myriad other things that will impact people for decades to come.

This year's COP is being held in Egypt's Sharm el-Sheikh, a popular resort by the Red Sea. Its airport has direct flights to places all over Europe but not to much of the African continent, on whose behalf Egypt is hosting the negotiations.

Expecting price increases, many COP delegate and protest groups booked accommodation in advance. But in the past few months many have seen their bookings cancelled, with an offer that they can re-book – at a much increased

rate. Some groups have reported a tripling of the cost per room. Hotels say the Egyptian government sanctioned the move. It denies this. There is no recourse, and the negotiations start in the first week of November.

In Glasgow, as in years before, less wealthy nations and groups tackled this by turning to a series of websites where locals shared couches and rooms for free. Other people – including officials from the host country – had to take up to hour-long train trips from other cities.

In practice, this means wealthier delegations are more rested and can stay later, guiding the outcome of key debates. For rich countries, this has played a role in ensuring climate negotiations favour their focus on reducing carbon emissions.

This year, African states in particular want the rich world to make good on its promises to pay for the damage caused by its pollution. That will require Africans to be at Sharm el-Sheikh. ■

Puerto Rico

Royals push US colony off public agenda

The island territory has been hit by a devastating hurricane, but American media would rather lavish their attention on the British monarchy

Kiri Rupiah

Five years after a Category 4 hurricane battered the United States colony of Puerto Rico, the island is again in near-total darkness, without power or water, after being deluged by torrential rain and winds in the form of Hurricane Fiona.

Puerto Rico has yet to recover from Hurricane Maria, which killed nearly 3,000 people and destroyed the power grid in 2017. With no electricity, there's no power to run filtration systems or to pump water into homes. That means no clean water for drinking, bathing or flushing toilets.

President Joe Biden declared a state of emergency on Sunday, allowing

authorities to provide disaster relief. About 600 National Guard soldiers have been conducting rescue operations across the island, and some 1,000 people have so far been rescued.

Because the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority is bankrupt, in 2020, Puerto Rico awarded a 15-year contract to Luma Energy, a private Canadian-American consortium, for a fixed annual fee of \$115-million.

After taking over in June of last year, the company quickly showed it was out of its depth and struggled to manage rolling blackouts, with an island-wide outage in April – in good weather.

Some commentators on the mainland have criticised US media for ignoring the island's latest disaster, focusing instead on wall-to-wall coverage of the funeral of Britain's Queen Elizabeth II.

The last time Puerto Rico made it onto the news agenda was in 2020, when former president Donald Trump is alleged to have told staffers he wanted to sell it off in exchange for Greenland because, according to former confidante-turned-informant Miles Taylor, "Puerto Rico was dirty and the people were poor."

Trump allegedly made these remarks before a planned trip to the island in 2018, in the wake of the devastation of Hurricane Maria. ■

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Africa will be collateral damage in the game of political climate wrangling

The EU and US wield carbon emissions in their wider geopolitical fight with China. And Africa is left paying the price, again. The continent needs to build its own resilience.

Faten Aggad

The United States is the biggest carbon polluter of all time. So when its special presidential envoy for climate, John Kerry, spoke at the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment in Dakar last week, those in the audience – many facing dire climate emergencies – were keen to hear how the US proposed to start limiting its emissions. They also wanted to hear how his country would honour its commitments to pay for the damage already being done by its emissions.

Together, African countries emit less than 4% of all carbon emissions. The African Development Bank predicts that African economies are already between 5% and 15% smaller because of climate change.

But Kerry instead called on African countries to cut their emissions, before blaming unnamed countries for sitting back and “pointing their finger elsewhere”, asking others to cut their emissions first.

He then sought to lecture Africa’s biggest gathering of environment ministers: “Well guess what, folks? Mother Nature does not measure where the emissions come from.”

Earlier this month, the European Union’s climate chief, Frans Timmermans, told a meeting of the Global Centre for Adaptation in Rotterdam that European citizens “will not buy the argument” that “those suffering the most consequences are not responsible for creating the crisis.”

Five African presidents were in that meeting.

The average European is responsible for 16 times more carbon pollution than the average Nigerian. Yet Nigeria, like the rest of the continent, is already being disproportionately affected by climate change. The UN climate agency’s most recent report on climate change said the continent had “...already experienced widespread losses and damages”. Its modelling also showed climate change had reduced the continent’s economic

growth, increasing the inequality between Africa and industrialised nations.

Kerry's comments show how little Africa means in calculations in the northern hemisphere. While his words in Dakar were condescending, they were also aimed at China. The same holds for Timmermans's comments.

China is now the biggest yearly carbon polluter. The United States, over the course of history, is the biggest cumulative polluter and with a much smaller population.

The US and EU do not want to pay their fair share for the damage done by their pollution – already being seen in the devastating floods in Pakistan, the drought in East Africa and countless other events around the world. They want China to pay, too.

But while this fight drags on, wrapped up in the wider competition between these blocks, Africa is the one being trampled.

Climate negotiations, culminating in the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement, are based on the idea of “common but differentiated responsibility” – each country agrees to do something about climate change, but countries will do as much as they are able to do, keeping in mind how much they pollute.

Both Kerry and Timmermans were questioning this principle. And that is a red flag that African countries should pay attention to.

That questioning is also borne out in the failure of rich countries to meet their commitment to pay other countries \$100-billion a year for the damage done

by their pollution.

This target has never been met. Africa as a whole needs up to \$2.5-trillion to adapt to the changing climate, through things such as better irrigation so crops survive drought.

Between 2016 and 2019, the continent got \$18-billion in climate finance. Just a third of the climate funding between 2014 and 2018 went to adaptation – the rest went to reducing Africa's negligible carbon emissions.

China is now the biggest yearly carbon polluter. The United States, over the course of history, is the biggest cumulative polluter and with a much smaller population.

Given this reality, Africa cannot afford to sit back and wait for aid yet again, which could be reassigned at the drop of a hat (or a bomb). These aid dependencies leave African economies in peril every time a Western politician changes their mind, or plays political games.

African countries need to build their own resilience for the challenging times that lie ahead and limit their dependence on foreign aid. ■

Faten Aggad is a Senior Advisor on Climate Diplomacy at the African Climate Foundation (the Foundation funds part of The Continent's journalism)

Greasy palms:
The palm oil
mill in Malen
Chiefdom



PHOTO ESSAY

What happened when Big Palm Oil came to town

In 2011, the Malen Chiefdom in southern Sierra Leone leased most of its land to one of the world's biggest palm oil companies. But one village defied the chief's orders – at great personal cost. A decade later, it is home to the area's only surviving bushland. Everywhere else is just rows and rows of palm trees, amid devastation that is both economic and ecological. The people that have lost access to the land are struggling to survive, while the company posts record profits.

Words and photos by Abdul Brima in Malen Chiefdom



Fading green: Perched on a small hill, the village of Jao overlooks a vast expanse of forest, farmland and natural vegetation. The view is breathtaking. All of the surrounding area in the Malen chiefdom used to look like this. Not anymore.



Monoculture: Socfin Agricultural Company, a subsidiary of the agro-industrial giant Socfin Group, came to Malen in 2011. It is one of the world's largest producers of palm oil. With the support of the government of Sierra Leone and paramount chief Victor Kebbie, palm trees now cover more than 70% of the chiefdom's land. A diverse, thriving ecosystem has been replaced by thousands of acres of monoculture. Kebbie did not respond to requests for comment.



Standing tall: Bockarie Landa, like most of his neighbours in Jao, refused to lease his land to Socfin, despite enormous pressure from the chief. The crops his family grows – including palms – give them a degree of self-sufficiency. They thought it was a bad idea to lose control of their land for 50 years, the typical length of a Socfin lease. Opposition to the deal was co-ordinated by the Malen Affected Land Owners Association, whose members repeatedly faced intimidation and arrest.



Homebrew: Landa's family make their own palm oil. The rich red oil is used for cooking, but is also a key ingredient in a dizzying array of beverages (Coca-Cola, Fanta, Pepsi), food products (instant noodles, ice cream, chocolate) and cleaning products (soap, detergents, shampoo). This processing is done in secret. 'If we are caught transporting oil, we are arrested and forced to pay fines or risk being thrown into prison,' Landa says. Such is Socfin's dominance here that authorities assume anyone found with palm oil must have stolen it from the company.



Down town: The capital of the Malen Chiefdom is the small town of Sahn. It used to brim with all kinds of agricultural activity. But since Socfin arrived, the town's economy has changed. Residents can no longer farm their own land, and survive either by working for the plantation or by selling small items on the side of the road. 'The company leased almost all the arable land, leaving communities with little or no land to farm which has created a huge negative impact on food security and other livelihood activities of affected communities,' concluded Green Scenery, a rights group, in a 2019 fact-finding mission.



Damned if you don't: Hawa Koroma, a widow in her early sixties, received a one-off payment of \$200 for her two acres, which gives Socfin the right to occupy it for the next 50 years. This works out to \$4 a year. She now sells biscuits, batteries and cigarettes in Henei village to make ends meet. She felt pressured into losing her land. 'I could have lost both the land and the small money on offer if I had resisted signing the deal. I had no choice,' she said. These fears are well grounded: in 2019, at least 15 people were arrested after protesting against the Socfin deal, while two were killed in clashes between protesters and state security personnel deployed to protect Socfin's operations. The killings occurred near Jao.



Dirty work: A pipe from the Socfin mill empties waste water into this swamp, about 1.5 km away. 'There are times that we see dead fish floating, and the water changes to brown,' says Salia Lebbie, a resident of nearby Massao village. The pollution is also killing rice grown in the swamplands, he adds. Despite this, last year the Socfin plantation in Malen was granted certification by the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil – the industry's equivalent of a 'fairtrade' badge.



Bitter fruit: The plantation in the chiefdom produces palm oil on an industrial scale – these fruits are all destined to be processed at the Socfin mill, which is projected to produce 45,000 metric tonnes of palm oil this year. Nonetheless, the price of palm oil in Sierra Leone has tripled in the last decade, from 2,000 leones to 6,000 leones (about 48 US cents) for a pint – making it prohibitively expensive for the people who live in the land where the palms are grown.

The fight for the future of farming

The Gates Foundation's enormous budget means its vision takes priority

As Million Belay and Bridget Mugambe see it, there are two competing – and mutually exclusive – visions for the future of African agriculture. The first, espoused by their Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA), prioritises small-scale, eco-friendly cultivation in which farmers grow a variety of nutritious crops while protecting biodiversity. AFSA claims to represent 200-million African farmers, fishers, pastoralists and indigenous peoples across the continent.



Betting the farm: Bill Gates, pictured here on a visit to Nigeria, has invested billions in African agriculture.

Photo: Gates Foundation

The second vision, as represented by the Gates Foundation and the research institutes it supports, holds that African farmers should switch to high-yield commodity crops with genetically modified seeds and increase the use of agrochemical fertilisers and pesticides. In support of this approach, the Gates Foundation has pumped more than \$5-billion into farm initiatives in Africa.

So far, it hasn't worked. Its signature initiative, the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, was a failure: independent research by Tufts University found that, despite an investment of over a billion dollars from the Gates and Rockefeller Foundations, there was no evidence of improved productivity or increased income for small farmers. "Instead, the number of undernourished people increased by 31%, adverse environmental impacts appear to be considerable and crop diversity has declined," observed Belay and Mugambe in *Scientific American* last year.

They said the Gates Foundation's massive investment into its vision means that there is no space for other viewpoints. "We welcome investment in agriculture ... but we seek it in a form that is democratic and responsive to the people at the heart of agriculture, not as a top-down force that ends up concentrating power and profit into the hands of a small number of multinational companies."

Neither the Gates Foundation nor its public relations agency responded to requests for comment. ■

Africans want traditional leaders – but not in politics

Who beats out presidents, members of Parliament and local councillors when it comes to trustworthiness, integrity, job performance and willingness to listen to ordinary people?

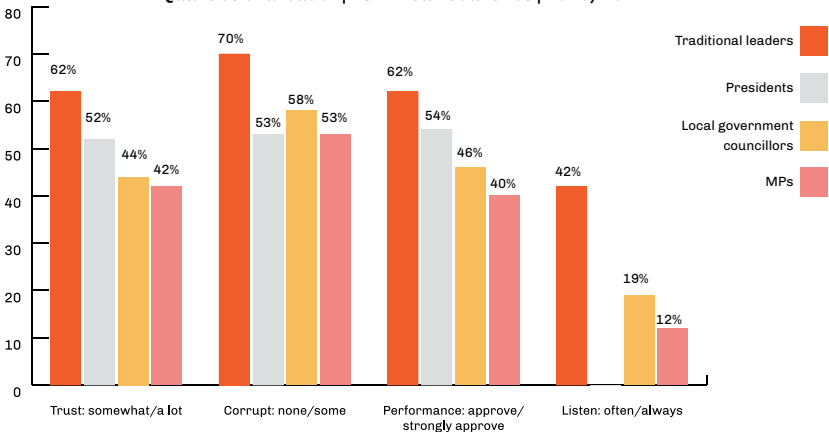
If you said “traditional chiefs,” many Africans would agree with you. Afrobarometer surveys across Africa show traditional authorities at a clear – and growing – advantage in these leadership qualities compared to elected officials. While Moroccans, Tanzanians and South Africans hold more negative perceptions of chiefs than most other Africans, on average across 31 countries,

majorities also believe that traditional leaders mostly serve the people in their communities (54%) rather than their own interests (23%) and that they co-operate with elected leaders to get things done (67%) rather than competing with them for resources and power (23%).

In fact, by a 4-to-1 margin (51% vs 13%), citizens would like to see chiefs’ influence in governing their communities increase rather than diminish.

Except in one area: Two-thirds (67%) of Africans say traditional leaders should stay out of politics and let people make their own decisions on election day.

Qualities of a leader | 28 African countries | 2019/2021



Source: Afrobarometer, a non-partisan African research network that conducts nationally representative surveys on democracy, governance, and quality of life. Face-to-face interviews with 1,200-2,400 people in each country yield results with a margin of error of +/- two to three percentage points.

Kenya

How to help the mountain bongo beat extinction

Unjust crackdowns made communities suspicious, but conservationists are finally rebuilding trust

Kihu Irimu

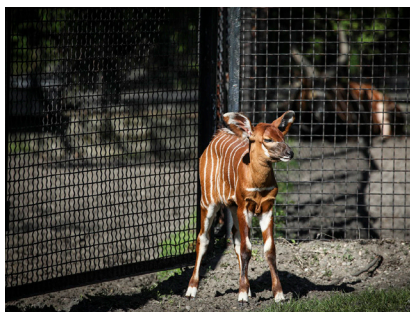
In his boyhood Justus Muriuki, now 69, bonded with his father during hunting adventures on the slopes of Mount Kenya. But the memory of one particular hunt now brings him mixed feelings.

“The reddish white striped animal flew out of its hiding for the safety of a bush nearby. My father, a hardened hunter, threw his panga hitting it in the groin,” Muriuki recalls.

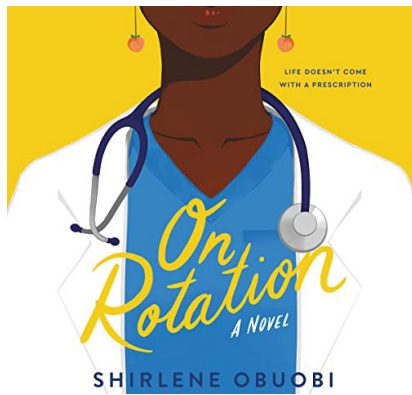
This hunting culture has conspired with habitat loss over the past 50 years to bring Kenya’s mountain bongo, a rare species of antelope, to the brink of extinction. Robert Aruho, the head of the Mount Kenya Conservancy, says the population has fallen from thousands to under 100.

The government’s punitive top-down approach to conservation in the 1970s and early 1980s didn’t help either: Poachers were jailed; farmers weren’t compensated when wild animals damaged their crops; and they, too, were arrested if they killed those animals. Consequently, communities came to resent conservation efforts, even actively sabotaging them. Animal habitats shrunk and their populations were decimated.

Learning from this, a new conservation effort is trying to turn that around. Led by the Rhino Ark and Calvary Zoo Foundation, conservationists are showing how saving the mountain bongo will benefit local communities by bringing in ecotourism. So far, the effort seems to be working, with villagers volunteering to identify and report snares, and helping to establish bongo tracking routes in the Mount Kenya National Park. ■



Baby steps: An endangered bongo calf in captivity. Photo: Getty Images



Reading fun, just for fun? How dare we!

Profound treatises on African lives certainly have their place, but so do spicy love stories and frivolous shenanigans

Jacqueline Nyathi

In her 2017 TED Talk, Wanuri Kahiu talks about the advocacy of art for art's sake: that art from Africa can just be fun, and not always have to be about poverty, disease and charity. Although she was referring to speculative fiction, this is a great lens through which to consider the wealth of art we produce on the continent.

Books can be “fun, frivolous, fierce and

unserious” – to use Kahiu’s words. This is not to say such books don’t deal with serious subject matter, but it is wonderful to read about lives that are just lives, rather than foils for a Western conception of self.

In Bolu Babalola’s *Honey & Spice* we meet Kiki, a Nigerian-British university student who is determined to stay above the fray and not fall in love. She hosts a radio show, *Brown Sugar*, where she dishes out advice to Black women on campus. When she’s caught out in a complicated situation with the campus “king,” she engineers a fake relationship with a hot newcomer – and you know how the rest goes.

In Shirlene Obuobi’s *On Rotation*, medical student Angie has just broken up with her boyfriend and is feeling completely fatalistic about love: she has not been successful in her relationships, and her life is completely structured around her studies. In addition, she comes from a close-knit Ghanaian-American family where her parents have strict rules about dating and courtship. So when she unexpectedly meets Ricky, a Mexican-American, all of her toxic traits come out to convince her, and him, that they could not possibly work out.

While *On Rotation* could have been shorter, and perhaps not tried to deal with quite as much as it does, and *Honey & Spice* tries just a little too hard, both lighten our literary palate by bringing a little frivolity and fun as we follow these young, female African students navigating school, love and life. ■



Moses Johuma,
Untitled (date
unknown), Photo:
Debbie Sears/
Curtain Foundation

70 years later, *The Stars are Bright* is back where it belongs

This extraordinary collection of children's paintings from Zimbabwe languished for decades in a storage unit at a British church. After multiple attempts to get it back, the artworks are finally on display at the National Gallery of Zimbabwe.

Fadzai Muchemwa in Harare

Established in 1939, the Cyrene Mission School – just outside of Bulawayo in what was then known as Rhodesia – was the first school in the

country to offer art classes, which were mandatory for all students.

To raise funds, the best of the students' work was assembled into a collection that toured the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States in 1947. After the



Above: The Cyrene Mission School, where the children's artworks were made. Below: John Balopi, Rhodesian Landscape (1947). Photo: Debbie Sears/Curtain Foundation

tour, the work was put into storage at the St Michael's and All Angels Church in Shoreditch, London. There it remained, forgotten, until 1978, when they were rediscovered by the London Architectural Salvage and Supply Company. The paintings were sold to a private collector, who then sold them on to the Curtain Foundation. Now they are on loan and being displayed at the National Gallery of Zimbabwe.

Two things stand out from the exhibition: questions about the nature of accessibility, and the need to celebrate the work of Black artists.

You can tell that this is work by children, but it is no less powerful for it: you can see the first tentative explorations by nine-year-old Kingsley Sambo within



the confines of the mission school of Black joy, which would become the

hallmark of his career. You can feel the heavy hand of guidance in enforcing particular religious and moral values, as seen in Livingstone Sango's *The Good Shepherd*. Sango presents the story of

Christ as an African story, with a Black Jesus, one bereft of Western influences and surrounded by nature. This concept is as redeeming as it is refreshing – as is the exhibition itself. ■



Top: Lot Dungene, King Mzilikazi meeting Scottish missionary Robert Moffat. Bottom: William Nyati, Tree Flowers (1945).
Photo: Debbie Sears/Curtain Foundation

The Stars are Bright will run at the National Gallery of Zimbabwe until 31 October 2022



Broken promises:
Life in Riyadh, Saudi
Arabia, is rarely
what is advertised to
Kenyan workers.

Kenyans are dying to work in Saudi Arabia

*As the rich world ages, Africa and its young population are increasingly becoming a crucial source of labour. With client dictators and a hostile Europe blocking migration north, people are forced to go through labour brokers, opening themselves up to exploitation. African states' current lack of response to the abuse of their citizens shows how bad the situation could become as more and more people are needed to work abroad. **Maurice Oniango** looks at how this reality is playing out in Kenya, which has 210,000 citizens working in Saudi Arabia. Many of these are domestic workers, who can be abused, tortured, starved, and even sold between employers thanks to the country's kafala visa system. If anything goes wrong, they are sent home. Some in a coffin.*

Mary Wanjiru uses a wheelchair for mobility. That wasn't the case a year ago, when she boarded a flight from Nairobi to Riyadh, excited and optimistic. The mother of three got a job as a domestic worker in Saudi Arabia and with that the promise of greener pastures and a means to lift her family from abject poverty.

"I was happy that I would be able to provide for my family," she told *The Continent*.

Things immediately went wrong. For two months she didn't get her salary and her employers punished her when she asked about it, taking away her phone and limiting her communication with family back home. They also kept her passport and denied her permission to change jobs.

Then her employer pushed her from the second-floor balcony of their apartment. "I fell on my back and I was unable to stand or move my legs." With a spinal injury and unable to walk, after a month in hospital she was discharged and sent back to Kenya with nothing.

Trading humans

Wanjiru had been employed under Saudi Arabia's Kafala system, a framework through which either an individual or a company sponsors a foreign worker to work in the country. The system gives the employer extensive control over their employee. It also grants them the power to transfer the domestic worker to other employers. This has enabled the buying and selling of domestic workers, with the trade happening openly on social media platforms.

On Twitter, for instance, there are



Punished: Mary Wanjiru was thrown from a balcony.

several accounts being used as online marketplaces, advertising the sale and transfer of domestic workers of different nationalities, including Kenyans.

Some of the posts have the photograph of the domestic worker, their details, their salary and the cost of transfer. The accounts act as go-betweens and charge a commission for the service. All the posts are in Arabic and have the condition that negotiations for the sale are through private messages.

One of the accounts *The Continent* came across reads: "The commission is 500 riyals from each party owed by the sponsor and the client, transferred directly from the sponsor. I do not deal with offices or marketers, I communicate in private."

أم عمر | مسوقة خدمات منزليات تشارل - نقل كفالة
@Dhmarketer

عاملة كينية مسيحية في الرياض
العمر ٢٣
الراتب ٩٠٠
اللغة: انجليزي
لم يسبق لها العمل
تساعد في التحضير للطبخ وترغب التعلم
لا تفضل رعاية الأطفال
تقبل رعاية كبار السن
لها أسبوعين
سبب التنازل: عدم الحاجة
مبلغ التنازل شامل رسوم النقل ١٨٠٠٠
تجربة ٢ أيام
#خادمه #تشارل #نقل #كفاله #شفاله #خادمه

Translated from Arabic by Google

A Kenyan Christian worker in Riyadh
Age 23
Salary 900
Language: English
Never worked
Help prepare for cooking and want to learn
Do not prefer childcare
Elderly care accepted
She has two weeks
Reason for waiver: Not needed
The amount of the assignment includes transportation fees 18000
3 day experience
#خادمه #شفاله #كفاله #نقل #تشارل #خادمه

11:34 AM · Sep 22, 2022 · Twitter for iPhone

أم عمر | مسوقة خدمات منزليات تشارل - نقل كفالة
@Dhmarketer

المسوة ٥٠٠ ريال من كل طرف في ذمة الكفيل والعمل | النقل من الكفيل مباشرة | لا أتعمل مع مكتب أو مسوقين |
التواصل على الخاص

Translated from Arabic by Google

The commission is 500 riyals from each party owed by the sponsor and the client |
Transfer directly from the sponsor | I do not deal with offices or marketers |
Communicate in private

📍 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia 📅 Joined August 2020

244 Following 4,501 Followers

Not followed by anyone you're following

Riyal talk: Employers in Saudi Arabia scouting for domestic workers skirt labour protections by advertising on social media and insisting on private arrangements.

400,000 Kenyan workers

Despite this information filtering back home, the lack of jobs and the promise of lucrative opportunities has been driving young Kenyans to seek employment abroad. According to World Bank data, Kenya's unemployment rate has steadily risen in recent years, going from 2.8% in 2016 to 5.7% in 2021. Together with the rising cost of living, this has prompted young women to seek domestic work in Saudi Arabia, some of whom are unaware of the danger that awaits them.

Data from the labour ministry says there are approximately 400,000 Kenyan migrant workers in the countries of the Arabian Gulf, of which 210,000 are in Saudi Arabia. Additionally, according to the Central Bank of Kenya, Saudi Arabia is the third highest source of remittance inflows to Kenya after the United

States and the United Kingdom. Some \$185-million came in from Saudi Arabia in 2021 alone.

Mark Bichachi, a communication strategist and political analyst, believes this money makes it hard for the Kenyan government to confront the Saudi Arabian government on the abuses.

This was evident recently when, on the back of new allegations of mistreatment of a Kenyan domestic worker, the Kenyan Embassy in Riyadh thanked the Saudi government for providing Kenyans with opportunities. Foreign Affairs Principal Secretary Macharia Kamau also said: "It is a huge boon for our economy and for our diaspora remittances."

Downplaying the wider problem, Kamau blamed the situation on the nature of Kenyan women, recently saying that working in Saudi Arabia required them

to be meek, a characteristic apparently not shared by Kenyan domestic workers. “Sometimes our people will not be so subservient, and when they go to countries like Saudi Arabia there are traditions around housework that are very ancient,” he said.

Speaking to elected officials during a recent training session, Kamau said they needed to be careful how they deal with the problem so that Kenya does not destroy the huge opportunity that has provided jobs for hundreds of thousands of Kenyans in various countries in the middle east, including Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. “We no longer have this problem of deaths and abuse with the others but we are still struggling with Saudi Arabia.”

The Saudi embassy in Nairobi did not respond to a request for comment. A few weeks ago, after allegations of yet another case of a Kenyan domestic worker being abused in the country, it released a statement denying the allegations and addressing the issue for the first time. “The embassy affirms the kingdom’s full keenness to protect full rights of residents living on its lands of various nationalities, and that the laws followed in the kingdom are strict towards any practices that violate human dignity, whoever they were.”

Kenya’s labour ministry now says it supports a temporary ban on export of domestic workers and low-skilled labour to Saudi Arabia: “Considering the rising number of cases of abuse and reported deaths of Kenyan migrant workers, coupled with the adverse publicity for the ministry and government in general,

it appears the most viable option for now.”

The ministry previously said it would create two safe houses in Saudi Arabia for distressed Kenyan migrant workers. It has also said it enjoys a cordial bilateral relationship with the kingdom and is reviewing existing bilateral agreements to safeguard workers.

The Philippines took similar action in 2021 when it suspended the deployment of workers to Saudi Arabia. The suspension was lifted this month after the two governments had bilateral talks on how to improve and protect Filipinos working in Saudi Arabia.

A necessary evil

For Faith Murunga, travelling to Saudi Arabia for domestic work was a necessary evil. She had seen stories of Kenyan women suffering in the country but needed a job to provide for her six children. Murunga says her mistreatment began on the second day, when she was forced to work in three different houses of her employer’s extended family.

When she raised the issue about her contract to her employer, he beat her, increased her workload and started denying her food. “My life became tough because for any slight misunderstanding, the wife reported to her husband for him to beat me.” Those beatings became regular, but Murunga decided to focus on earning that crucial income.

But then she got sick. Her employer gave her painkillers and ordered her back to work. She planned her escape that night and sought refuge in a police station. However, the police called her employer



Good luck: Ambassador Peter Ogego welcomes Kenyan workers to Qassim

to pick her up from the station. “They told him to take me back to the agency to solve our differences.”

When they got home, Murunga went to her bedroom and was packing her belongings when her employer came in, pushed her against the wall and rained blows on her. He then dragged her into the kitchen and ordered her to cook.

She says she was standing in the kitchen in a state of shock when her employer’s wife walked in and asked why Faith was idling. “She called her husband who came in shouting, picked the kettle that was boiling water and threw it at me.”

Faith sustained severe burns on her hand and today the prominent scars are a testament to what she went through in Saudi Arabia.

Cardiac arrest – never torture

Wanjiru and Murunga survived their ordeals but many other young Kenyan women who seek employment in Saudi Arabia do not.

According to the ministry of foreign affairs, 89 Kenyans have died in Saudi Arabia in the past two years.

The cause for most of the deaths is reported to be suicide, cardiac arrest and natural causes. This has raised doubts even in Kenya’s ministry of foreign affairs, with its head telling a parliamentary committee that “it is not possible that these young people are all dying of cardiac arrest”.

Autopsies conducted in Kenya have suggested that torture and other human rights abuses have taken place.

Families of victims have rejected death certificates from Saudi Arabia authorities that claim death by suicide. One such family is that of 23-year-old Carolyn Aluoch, whose naked body was found in the bathroom of a hospital. Saudi Arabian authorities said that she had committed suicide, but for her brother Stephen something did not add up. “She had called me earlier informing me that she was being mistreated.”

The Continent spoke to families with similar experiences, who recounted the same pattern of abuse and then disappearance, followed by claims that their loved one had died in any way except murder.

In one case, an autopsy conducted in Kenya revealed signs of ligament strangulation, likely coming from a rope, and the woman’s eyes had been gouged out. Her body had multiple burn marks and there was clear evidence of undernourishment.

As far as *The Continent* can tell, not one Saudi national has been prosecuted for any crimes related to these deaths. ■

THE QUIZ

0-3

"I think I need to start reading more newspapers."

4-7

"I can't wait to explore more of this continent."

8-10

"On the river of knowledge, a rising tide floats all boats"



1_ What is the name of West Africa's main river? (Hint: It's also Africa's third-longest river.)

2_ Name the landlocked, self-governing British Crown colony in southern Africa that existed from 1965 to 1979.

3_ What position does Macky Sall hold in his country?

4_ What position does Macky Sall hold in the African Union?

5_ What is the name of the largest diamond on the British monarch's crown?

6_ From which country

was the diamond taken?

7_ Which country reported an Ebola outbreak this week?

8_ Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno is the military president of which country?

9_ Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue is Equatorial Guinea's president. True or false?

10_ What is the demonym for people from Gabon?

HOW DID I DO?

WhatsApp 'ANSWERS' to +27 73 805 6068 and we'll send the answers to you!

Would you like to send us some quiz questions or even curate your own quiz? Let us know at read@thecontinent.org

Gang gang gang 101



Continental Drift

Samira Sawlani

Even though the Covid-19 pandemic is most certainly not over, despite what Joey Biden says, we're grateful things have reached a point where getting out and about is a realistic option again. Our illustrious leaders appear to be of a similar mind, considering how many of them been burning up the social scene this week.

And you *know* we're talking about the gang gang gang who travelled to the United Kingdom for Elizabeth II's funeral, all squeezed together in that party bus. Here was Billy Ruto from Kenya, there was Tanzania's Samia Suluhu Hassan, all packed in like sardines among the other African dignitaries as they all headed to Westminster Abbey.

Opinion was split between those claiming that this was an insult – other world leaders were allowed private convoys – and those defending the sardine as simply sensible logistics. We were just surprised they were invited at all, considering all the stolen artefacts and jewels that were already out there representing Africa, like the Cullinan diamond. Then again, in the game of

thrones you either schmooze or you lose, so ... the more the merrier?

"Merry" isn't exactly a good look at a funeral, though, which might explain why two happy-go-lucky coupreneurs skipped the proceedings entirely. (Although, to be fair, they also weren't invited.)

We refer of course to colonels Mamady Doumbouya and Assimi Goïta of Guinea and Mali, of course. Doumbouya travelled to Bamako to meet with his fellow *Keeping Up with The Coupdashions* co-star and help him celebrate Mali's Independence Day. The Beret Baes were pictured together after Doumbouya told media he was happy to be next to his "brother" and that Guinea and Mali were like "two lungs in the same body". Bruh, when it comes to organs of state, we're not sure lungs are the ones that spring to mind. (And no, we're not suggesting they put the "colon" in "colonel" – how dare you.)

Raining on their parade was one Umaro Sissoco Embalo, president of Guinea-Bissau and current Ecowas chairman, who warned that if the junta stuck to its guns and insisted on a three-year transition to civilian rule, then Guinea would face harsh sanctions, adding that the timeline was "unacceptable and non-negotiable".

Whereupon the junta deployed one of its spare colonels, Amara Camara, to say that Embalo's trash talk "tarnishes the image of Ecowas" and "stems from a demonisation of the transitional regime



Mine's bigger: Mamady Doumbouya and Assimi Goïta. Photo: Twitter/AfricaWnn

in Guinea. It won't work."

Maybe Doumbouya and Goïta can team up with Burkina Faso's coup guy Lieutenant-Colonel Paul Henri Sandaogo Damiba and create their own group to rival Ecowas. We can even help workshop ideas for the name! (Or licence the rights to "The Coupdashions" or "Beret Baes" – presidential terms and conditions apply.)

Morocco's a hard place

Not everyone is getting out and about. A court in Morocco has extended the jail sentence of Saida el Alami, the prominent member of the Femmes Marocaines Contre la Detention Politique.

The 48-year-old human rights defender was sentenced to two years in prison for speaking on her social media about how Moroccan authorities had harassed her and other activists and journalists. Her "crimes" involved insulting officials and spreading false allegations. She challenged the verdict, but in a staggering display of WTFery the courts increased her sentence from two years to three.

Going, going, Ghana!

We hope the health authorities in Ghana are finally letting their hair down now that they've finished dealing with the Marburg virus outbreak that kicked off in July. Three cases were recorded – two deaths – but their incredible response meant the extremely dangerous virus never even got the chance to get its shoes on.

Here's hoping for an equally speedy response to the newly declared Ebola outbreak in Uganda, where a 24-year-old man in Mubende District passed away after showing symptoms.

Since then, six more cases have been announced, with authorities both in the country and in neighbouring nations urging people to be vigilant.

Us too: Be careful out there, team.

And still we rise

We end this week's drift in solidarity with the women of Iran who are risking their lives to protest against the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini, who died in hospital after being arrested by the country's "morality police" for not wearing her hijab the way they like it.

Authorities claim she died from a pre-existing medical condition, but her family insists she suffered from no such thing. As outrage over her death grew, social media and internet access were blocked, and at least six people were killed in crackdowns on protests. An all too familiar story.

Despite it all, women are out there on the streets, speaking out, and refusing to be silenced. As the saying goes, "They buried us, but they didn't know we were seeds." ■

Unsavoury funeral guest casts British diplomacy in an ugly light

King Charles III has made his first international blunder by legitimising a notorious coup leader

Mark Weston in London

Abdel Fattah al-Burhan ousted Sudan's civilian-led transitional government less than a year ago. On Monday, he pulled off another coup. Exchanging his army fatigues for a suit, he slithered into Westminster Abbey in London for the funeral of Britain's late queen. In a statement, he boasted that he was there "at the official invitation of King Charles III".

It is unclear who advised the new king to invite a man who in June 2019 presided over the massacre of at least 100 unarmed protesters at a Khartoum sit-in. Hundreds more pro-democracy protesters have been killed or injured since the coup.

On this year's anniversary of the 2019 massacre, Britain's ambassador to Sudan, Giles Lever, tweeted that the international community "will not give up on the cause

of human rights in Sudan."

Al-Burhan's Westminster seat distinguished him from the likes of Vladimir Putin and Bashar al-Assad, and fellow putschists Min Aung Hlaing of Myanmar and Afghanistan's Mullah Akhtar Mohammed Mansur, none of whom were invited. The leaders of military juntas in Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso were also snubbed, with one British diplomat claiming this was because their countries were suspended by the African Union. Sudan is suspended too.

For al-Burhan, the funeral gave him a legitimacy he has craved. But what message does it send when, on one hand, the UK government condemns al-Burhan and his junta's human rights violations and, on the other, it welcomes him into the heart of the British establishment? ■



Royal treatment: The United Kingdom's late monarch, Queen Elizabeth II, visits Sudan in 1969. Photo: FCDO

Mark Weston is the author of African Beauty, a satire of the aid industry, and The Saviour Fish: Life and Death on Africa's Greatest Lake.

Who will Tanzania's morality police come for next?

Maria Sarungi Tsehai

Martin Niemöller once famously wrote: “First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out – because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out – because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out – because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me – and there was no one left to speak for me.”

He was writing about Adolf Hitler's fascist Germany, but the same thing could be said today about the failure of so many Tanzanians to stand up for the LGBTQI community.

With the death of John Magufuli in 2021, Samia Suluhu Hassan rose to the presidency, in what many expected to be a reformist administration. Instead, there have been few changes when it comes to civil liberties and the protection of minorities, which are so often the first victims of authoritarian and populist regimes in Africa because they are an easy target.

On 11 September this year, the minister of information threatened to “take action” against people who spread “immoral” messages on WhatsApp that he claimed “encourages homosexuality”. This bizarre threat only makes sense if we view it through the lens of Niemöller's poem.

All social media users should be afraid of this invasion of their privacy. But the minister is slyly seeking to expand government control over an encrypted platform by initially targeting an unpopular group to begin the campaign.

Others who are not aware that they are next in line to be targeted express their delight at efforts to curb such “dirty behaviours”. Yet they will all be affected by the declaration that the administrators of WhatsApp groups will be held responsible for the content shared in their groups, which is already having a chilling effect.

All social media users should be afraid of this invasion of their privacy.

Tanzanians have become much better at not allowing the government to hide economic bad news behind manipulated headlines; now we need to be better at protecting the more vulnerable people in our midst. ■

Maria Sarungi Tsehai is a Tanzanian activist and a media and communications expert. This analysis was produced in collaboration with Democracy in Africa



The Big Picture

Photo: John Wessels/AFP

Picking up the pieces: A Senegalese woman collects waste along the coastline during World Clean Up Day in Bargny, east of Dakar, on September 17. The event first took place in Estonia in 2008 with 50,000 people volunteering to clean up the country in five hours. The movement has since grown to draw more than 10-million volunteers in 191 countries across the world.



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