The Reinvention of the Theory of Failed Morality in Kenya and Africa

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It's Our Turn to Eat:
The Story of a Kenyan Whistleblower
by Michela Wrong
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Michela Wrong's book arrived in Kenya in a very clandestine manner in the early months of 2009. It did not come via the usual route of the bookshops. Rather, excerpts from it were serialized in the leading Kenyan newspaper, *The Daily Nation*. When the real copies of the book reached Nairobi, they were being sold by newspaper vendors on the streets and free copies were being given out by a Kiss Frequency Modulation (FM) radio station. Callers were asked to state why they wanted to read the book; they would then be offered free copies. But why was this book not being sold in the bookshops, as one would have normally expected?

It's Our Time to Eat is more than just an ordinary book. It claims to offer the inside story of one of the most scandalous theft of public resources in Kenya's postcolonial history. This scandal came to be known as the Anglo-Leasing. It was deemed to have cost the Kenyan taxpayer tens of billions of Kenyan shillings. This rip-off was just a little bigger than an earlier scandal known as 'the Goldenberg', through which fictitious gold was 'exported' from Kenya and 'compensation' demanded by the 'exporters' for bringing into the country foreign exchange, something that the government was struggling to raise at the time. Both schemes were elaborate plots that allowed crooked businessmen and government officials and politicians to rob the state of millions, if not billions, of dollars.

Michela Wrong's book focuses on Anglo Leasing because this scandal came into the public limelight when a new government came to power after the 2002 General Elections. The new government had been elected on the promise of eradicating corruption and running state affairs efficiently. Because of this promise, the government hired John Githongo, a line with his mandate to advise the government on corruption, when the Anglo Leasing scandal broke out, Githongo felt the need to play a lead role in unearthing its extent and advising the government on how to deal with it. However, he soon ran into problems with several senior government bureaucrats, especially in the Ministry of Finance, and some government ministers.

Eventually Githongo discovered that the thread of Anglo Leasing run all the way from the previous regime of Daniel arap Moi. He also realized that several members of

the new government were possibly implicated in the scandal as well. With the support of the media and some members of the backbench in the Kenyan Parliament, some ministers whose names were mentioned in connection with the scandal were forced to resign from their ministerial posts but were later reinstated after not-so-serious investigations 'cleared' them of any charges of wrongdoing. Ultimately, Githongo realised that the scandal ran deeper than he had imagined: one of the ministers in the government at the time 'confessed' to Githongo that the unseen players behind Anglo Leasing was in actual fact 'us' – meaning the incumbent government.

Thus, Michela Wrong's book is supposed to be an insider's revelations of Githongo's experiences as the anti-corruption czar of the post-Moi regime in Kenya. But is this what *It's Our Time to Eat* is really about? Does it offer any details that those familiar with the culture of corruption in Kenya do not know? On another note, is this book really about 'why it is so hard to eradicate corruption in Africa', as the publishers so lavishly claim on its blurb? The answers to these many other questions are in the negative. Wrong's book is a significant disappointment, at least on its own claims about being 'the story of a Kenyan whistleblower.' How and why?

The book makes the classical error of 'essentialising' the debate on corruption as a patent reflection of some general malaise among Africans. The evidence for this sleight of the hand is found right in the title. The use of the collective pronoun 'our' in 'It's Our Time to Eat' is supposedly a reflection of group corruption: all Kikuyus in Kenya are implicated in the corruption that happened in the post-Moi era in Kenya and epitomized by the Anglo Leasing scandal. Indeed, there had been debates and stories in various fora about the degree of corruption in the country and the involvement of several members of the Kikuyu in several corruption schemes. Yet, the mere fact that a Kikuyu was in power as President and that many of the individuals who were in positions of responsibility when the Anglo Leasing scandal was schemed and executed were Kikuyu cannot suffice to imply the indictment of the whole community.

But even more significant is the fact that the indictment of the Kikuyu is characterized, by extension, as an indictment of Kenyans and, therefore, it would naturally follow, Africans. It is not just the comment on the blurb of the book that gives away this consideration of Africa and Africans as almost innately corrupt; consider the writer's own introductory remarks about her stay in Africa. She writes,

> *Working in Africa, I'd grown accustomed to compromised friendships, relationships premised on wilful ignorance on my part and an absence of full disclosure on my friends'. When visiting a former Congolese prime minister, sitting in a villa whose bougainvillea-fringed gardens stretched across acres of prime real estate, I knew better than to ask if his government salary alone paid for all this lush beauty. Staying with a friend in Nigeria, whose garage alone dwarfed the family homes of many Londoners, I took it for granted that his business dealings wouldn't stand up to scrutiny. And when I shared a beer with a Great Lakes intelligence chief befriended in a presidential waiting room, I knew that one day I'd probably come across his name in a human rights report, fingered as the man behind some ruthless political assassination. Life was complicated. The moral choices needed to rise to the top were bleaker and more unforgiving in Africa than those faced by Westerners (p.16-17).*

These words, found in the early pages of the text, are an outright give-away as to the author's understanding of corruption in Africa. There is little attempt to camouflage the apparent conclusion implied by the title that all Africans are just corruptible. There is no doubt that corruption is acutely debilitating in Africa, but is it (morally) justifiable to paint the continent and its people as all infected by this disease of 'moral choices', as the author herself puts it?

This early taking-of-positions on the corruption debate is the major flaw of the text. Consequently *It's Our Time to Eat* falls short of expectations in many senses. First, the reader hardly interacts with John Githongo himself, despite the claim that the book is about him. There are very few instances in the book when the whistleblower emerges onto the dramatic stage. The author obviates any likely questions about this 'absence' of the protagonist by suggesting that Githongo is a reticent individual who avoids the limelight. But given that this is his story, a reader would have expected to encounter more of him. Secondly, the story does not contain much information about those 'mysterious, faceless and scheming' puppet masters who ran the Anglo Leasing drama in Kenya. The names mentioned are those already in the public domain, and even in cases when names emerge, no evidence is adduced to show their specific roles in the scandal.

Thirdly, Wrong does not pursue the subtext of John Githongo's relationship to many of the families – Kikuyu – who are the elite of Kenya's economic and political life. She sketches out the connectedness of Githongo's family to the significant elite in Kenya, including President Kibaki himself, but declines to speculate or state whether it is not this relationship that eventually bought Githongo the 'truce' with power-players in Kenya after he had gone into exile and 'threatened' to reveal the real players behind Anglo Leasing. One doubts that, had the 'whistleblower' been some ordinary Kenyan, he or she could have survived and been allowed back in Kenya unharmed in such a short period. Or that he/she would have been free to come into and go from Kenya without even harassment (although Githongo was sued in Kenya by one of the former ministers that he had accused of corruption).

Anyone familiar with Kenya would have to conclude that either Githongo 'cut a deal' with the powerful individuals who might have been implicated in the scandal (implicitly by not revealing 'all and sundry' about Anglo Leasing) or his 'family connections' saved him from being a marked man and outcast, like many before him. The story of David Munyakei, the whistleblower on the earlier Goldenberg scandal who died a rejected and abandoned man, illustrates how the socio-economic class of Githongo was a significant advantage to him. Even Wrong describes Munyakei, a man whose place in the history of Kenya's anti-corruption struggles equals Githongo's, as '… diffident, not particularly likeable young man …' (p.318). Also, the book's focus on John Githongo to the exclusion of many other individuals who have fought good battles against corruption in Kenya (and lost or won) undermines its intended impact.

There is no doubt that *It's Our Time to Eat* is a worthwhile addition to the archive on corruption in Africa. Indeed Michela Wrong's much practised eye and ear often provides an anecdote or a tale that will enthral, as evidenced in her other books, especially *In the Footsteps of Mr Kutz: Living on the Brink of Disaster in the Congo*. However, *It's Our Time to Eat* reads more like an airport lounge reader for non-Africans who may wish to know the latest tidbits on the 'state of corruption in Africa'. On its own terms, and given the quality of evidence it adduces to project John Githongo as a martyr in the war on corruption in Kenya (and Africa by extension), *It's Our Time to Eat* falls short of expectations and is less convincing than many other 'annual reports on corruption in Kenya'.