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Tweeting ‘Truths’: Rumour and Grammars of Power in Kenya

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Abstract and Lay Summary

This study examines rumour as a mediator of public discourses in Kenya. It focuses on rumours that followed the killing of Chris Msando – a senior election official with the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission – and his friend Carolyne Ngumbu a week before the 2017 elections. Although earlier research on rumour exists, it is limited to oral societies and overlooks the versatility of structure and functions of rumours. Therefore, I study the interface between rumours, Twitter and the politics surrounding the two deaths. The research is informed by four objectives: to trace the history of rumour as an area of study in Africa; evaluate the role of Twitter in the creation, circulation, and use of rumour in contemporary Kenya; discuss the uses of rumour for government and individuals; and analyse how the interface between rumours and Twitter impact on the everyday life in Kenya. I use close textual reading of rumours and informal conversations to corroborate data scraped from Twitter. I then apply four theories: Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis (1995) to unpack the meanings in rumours and informal conversations; Paul Ricoeur’s (1973) notion of hermeneutics of suspicion as popularised by Felski (2011) to analyse the rumours; Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) metaphorical rhizome to understand the amorphousness of rumours; and Jodi Dean’s (2009) concept of communicative capitalism to determine the extent to which communicative technologies of popular and social media’s appropriation in rumourous conversations evoke political awareness among different interlocutors. This thesis argues that rumours have changed and been changed by Twitter’s communicative cultures, owing to their structural complexity and the growing alertness among the general publics about the necessity of self-expression in a country where a majority of citizens have accepted democracy as the most desirable basis of political organization. Thus, contemporary rumours emerge from the process of co-creation in an amorphous public struggling to assert its identity through competing and alternative narratives it creates. The rumours are also subject to simultaneous archiving and transcend space and time. Furthermore, rumours on Twitter rarely filter to oral communities and vice versa, and are underpinned by ethnic sensibilities, historical mistrust, and national politics, all of which are the underpinning logics of Kenya’s experiments with democracy. This study demonstrates that viewing rumours as a weapon of the marginalised limits the scope of their value as knowledge, since the domination-resistance binary obscures the cultural and historical influences on creativity and appropriation of Twitter for rumourous communication.
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Declaration

November 30, 2021

I declare that, except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is entirely my own work, and that no part of it has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Denis Galava
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It is something of an irony that I should find the acknowledgement section the hardest to write. This is because it is rather impossible to include every individual and institution that made my doctoral project the rich and rewarding experience that it became. I joined the media in the fog of the season’s end of Daniel arap Moi’s autocratic rule two decades ago, hoping to forge a permanent career out of journalism. Little did I know that systemic and extraneous conditions would sooner or later cast me to the winds in search of better skills and higher knowledge. With little modesty, I believe I have acquired the highest standards of both under my supervisors, Prof Paul Nugent and Dr Thomas Molony, to whom I shall be forever indebted. Their rigorous yet caring guidance illuminated my blind spots, and yielded out of me this work that marks my finest output yet. To Paul and Tom, thank you.

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## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>API</td>
<td>Application Programming Interfaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCM</td>
<td>Chama cha Mapinduzi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CUF</td>
<td>Civic United Front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CODESRIA</td>
<td>Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCI</td>
<td>Directorate of Criminal Investigations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECK</td>
<td>Electoral Commission of Kenya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GoK</td>
<td>Government of Kenya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICC</td>
<td>International Criminal Court</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEBC</td>
<td>Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IIEC</td>
<td>Interim Independent Electoral Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KIEMS</td>
<td>Kenya Integrated Electoral Management Systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KPU</td>
<td>Kenya Peoples Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KoT</td>
<td>Kenyans on Twitter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NASA</td>
<td>National Super Alliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIS</td>
<td>National Intelligence Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NMG</td>
<td>Nation Media Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ODM</td>
<td>Orange Democratic Movement (a political party)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SG</td>
<td>The Standard Group</td>
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<tr>
<td>Glossary of Terms</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Conspiracy Theory</strong></td>
<td>An effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Crippled epistemology</strong></td>
<td>It refers to the development and belief in right or wrong ideas by people who lack diverse credible information sources</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Fake news</strong></td>
<td>Any incorrect information that has been created intentionally under the guise of a fact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gossip</strong></td>
<td>Gossip is evaluative social talk about individuals usually not present. It occurs within a small group with close personal or social ties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kenyans on Twitter (KoT)</strong></td>
<td>An amorphous group of netizens reputed for actively taking part in conversations around economic, social and political issues through tweets and retweets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Necropolitics</strong></td>
<td>The power of the government to determine actively who lives and who dies, whether by commission or omission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rumour</strong></td>
<td>Unofficial information with cultural resonance and spatial-temporal contexts that circulates within circles of trust; information that is neither entirely false nor absolutely true, but which attracts firm belief by some and outright dismissal by others. Rumour is distinct from outright lies or slander, which tend to be driven by malice and lack of information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tweeps</strong></td>
<td>Slang for people who use Twitter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wananchi</strong></td>
<td>Kiswahili for citizens or ordinary people</td>
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1. Introduction

1.1: Contextualising the study

One week before the 2017 General Election in Kenya, the mutilated bodies of an adult male and a woman were found dumped in a thicket a few kilometres west of Nairobi. The man was soon identified as Chris Msando, then ICT manager of the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), which had been lurching from crisis to crisis as it prepared for the highly-contested polls. It was a high stakes election, partly because the president and his deputy were staring at the risk of defeat, and partly because the opposition candidate – Raila Odinga – was viewed by his supporters as making the last stab at the presidency because of his advanced age.

The tension was also aggravated by the predominance of ethnicity as the main prism through which many Kenyans interpret political issues in the country. In the context of my research, it is noteworthy that while Kenyans were more preoccupied with the presidential election when Msando died, discussions on Msando soon reflected ethnic affiliations that had been mobilised by leading politicians in the preceding months (and years). That Msando, a Luo, occupied a senior position in the IEBC was soon picked out as a possible factor in his killing and the possible compromising of the looming elections.

This perspective fuelled a long-standing view by some commentators that the Luo community has been systematically marginalised from important state agencies in Kenya. Public discussions on the Luos’ grievances have consistently appeared to blame successive governments for making prominent community leaders – political or otherwise – vulnerable to elimination at critical moments in the country’s political history. This argument matters not just because of its popularity, but also because apart from the common individuals who created, extended, and circulated the rumours, prominent opposition leaders also amplified similar views publicly.

The subsequent politicisation of this particular grievance instrumentalised other grievances and placed the rumour artists at the centre of mobilising grief and outrage for political ends. That the most outraged leaders following Msando’s death were from western Kenya, and Luo Nyanza specifically, demonstrated how valuable ethnic and geographical identification with Msando could be for social engineering. In all, the politicians and their followers relied
on the vehicular versatility of rumour and its structural amorphousness that made it an appropriate medium for amalgamating emotional responses to the deaths of Msando (a Luo) and Ngumbu (a Kikuyu). The ethnic dimension in the electoral contest placed the IEBC in the awkward position where it had to keep reassuring the public of its neutrality and professionalism in managing the elections. Although the IEBC chairman is the political leader of the institution, Msando was generally seen as the face of the electoral integrity campaign.

The official announcement that the dead man was Msando and the woman his friend Carolyne Ngumbu had been preceded by widespread anxiety over his whereabouts. This was prompted by the historical antecedents to such disappearances and subsequent deaths of prominent figures in Kenya’s public life (Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo, 2004). Two things stood out about the nervous conditions that attended the announcement that Msando was missing: one, a burst of rumours regarding the possibility of his death and, two, hints at similar incidents in the past when prominent people such as politicians J.M. Kariuki and then Robert Ouko had first been reported missing only to be found dead under suspicious circumstances.

Ouko, who came from the same general area as Msando, was reported missing on February 15, 1990 and the subsequent discovery of his mutilated body reinforced a popular view that the government of the day was involved in the murder (Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo, 2004: 1). Similarly, when Msando disappeared and his body was later found, many commentators drew parallels with the Ouko death nearly 30 years earlier. These links were willed into existence by a politically conscientious cluster of Kenyans, notably those with access to social media technologies who enlisted rumours as the most appropriate vehicle for voicing their concerns regarding the political causes and implications of the killing. Right from the beginning, therefore, Msando’s last days and death were implicated in both the political histories of Kenya’s reckoning with assassinations, and the reliance on rumours as the medium of choice in creating and circulating information that is not always made available, or most favoured, by the government of the day.

Ironically, some powerful individuals within the government also found use for the rumours in navigating the terrain of highly charged elections. How and why did politicians and ordinary people deploy rumours this way? One explanation relates to the structural and formal elements of rumour that made it more effective than other media. The rhizomic
(Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) form of rumour allows it to remain subterranean and potentially subversive because it lacks a finite beginning or end, and can be easily camouflaged beneath a distracting surface. This meant that rumours could be used by different progressive or reactionary camps without necessarily standing out. Specifically, the government agents could then use rumours to effect a propaganda agenda of neutralising the mobilisation achieved by social media activists and opposition politicians. My study paid regard to these dynamics.

Using the Msando case as my starting point, I focus on the nexus between rumours and social media technologies (and the cultures that such technologies spawn) to extend earlier scholarship such as Osborn (2008), Nyairo’s (2013) and Musila’s (2015) that, although focused on rumours, did not address the social media aspects of circulation and consumption of rumourous discourses. In doing so, I have two main areas of inquiry. The first is about how rumour and speculation in the digital era simultaneously resonated with and extended the history of political or politicised deaths in Kenya, while manifesting their popular cultural utility in explaining inexplicable happenings in the country. Doing so entailed borrowing from earlier analyses of the relationship between technologies of communication, what Jodi Dean calls “communicative capitalism” (2009: 6), to determine how divergent ideas get imbricated in existing political and ideological structures within and beyond the country. A critical variable in this regard was the seeming embrace of the ideals of democracy – notwithstanding the different and occasionally antagonistic ways in which this ideal is conceptualized by key players – and the roles of different demographic categories of important interlocutors, namely generational (youth), the urbane, and the ethnic. Considering all these dynamics was useful in enabling my study to transcend traditional associations of rumour with oral societies, political consciousness with the urban, and ideological or political powerlessness with the rural folks.

My second area of inquiry relates to how rumour and speculation can mutate into versions of truth and more speculation, given that the anxiety and worst fears that reports of Msando’s disappearance generated were confirmed in short order. I use the word rumour to refer to unofficial information with cultural resonance and spatial-temporal contexts that circulates within circles of trust; information that is neither entirely false nor absolutely true, but which attracts firm belief by some and outright dismissal by others. Usually, to believe a particular rumour or not depends on one’s position vis a vis the subject of the rumour. Because of this, rumour is distinct from outright lies or slander, because it lacks the aspect of malice or total
ignorance that dominates slander and lies. Because the details of each rumour shift with every narrator, rumour differs from literature, the latter having a permanence in structure that the former lacks. When rumours relate to government excesses, they tend to be clothed in satirical tones in order to contain the anxieties regarding the daily risks that subjects face when living under state tyranny. With this understanding of rumour, therefore, I sought to evaluate the place of rumours in mediating public debates in Kenya in the era of digital technologies, a process that entails engaging with the country’s politics and history.

In a critical way, the significance of Msando’s death and the manner in which it occurred further drew attention to the nature of electoral politics in Kenya. Electioneering in Kenya is a process that is not only intense, but also summons a people’s apprehension about the sincerity of their government, the ability of electoral institutions to manage free and fair political contests, and the roles of individuals within those institutions (Ligaga, 2009; Wrong, 2009). If elections are proclamations of a country’s normative political commitments, their eloquence in expressing a people’s voice can well be measured in the range of discourses that revolve around them, their oversight institutions and individuals.

Following this logic, the rumours that Msando’s disappearance and death generated further exposed the suspicion with which the public treated official explanations while believing unofficial versions. In a way, this outlook echoes Benedict Anderson’s (1992) idea of spoken vernaculars. The rumors surrounding Msando’s death also affirm Anderson’s notion of ‘spoken vernaculars’ (1992: 56), insofar as they emerged from a massive number of ethnic nations within the nation-state called Kenya. The many spoken vernaculars were then reduced to fewer numbers based on the practical need to make them fit in the ensuing print cultures that played a critical role in imagining modern nations. In the Msando case, the burst of rumours happened in many diverse vernaculars, although what made it to social media spaces was mainly English.

This development beamed light on the nature of Kenya’s politics of nationhood, which is characterised by concerns with necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003) often debated through rumours (Ogude, 2007; Osborn, 2008; Nyairo, 2013), and how they all fit in or transcend mainstream media and social media spaces. Msando’s death triggered these debates in social media platforms, and reflected how various categories of commentators relate to government and power. The public debates were versions of academic discourses on Kenya’s state, politics, and histories, and their intersections with public parlance on
democracy and the state in Africa (Mbembe, 2001; Ogude, 2007; Nyairo, 2013). However, they differed in how the former enlisted rumours to reconfigure a nascent public sphere in Kenya.

I situate my study in the interstices of these narrative and theoretical strands to pose questions on how social media platforms and the traditional spaces of public debate intermingle to theorise topical intellectual projects. Such include the nature and form of the public sphere in contemporary Kenya, and the role of ethnicity and gender in public debates. I presume that rumours in oral or digital forms either reflect or refract national politics, civic activities, and public discourses to shape political consciousness. Such consciousness, generally steered towards agentic self and group expression, draws both on the prevailing power politics while using available vehicles of expression, mostly in the domain of literary and cultural textualities. In this way, my study extends current knowledge that is variously contained and theorised in existing literature on rumours (White, 2000; Nyairo, 2013; Musila, 2015), necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003), and gender discourses (Boehmer, 2005).

These subjects also provoke conspiracy theories in public debates that thematise historical traumas of late colonial and post-colonial state-related violence. Why, after widespread access to smartphones, coupled with more information in print and digital forms, does rumour remain a popular means of debating national issues? Rumours offer credible alternatives to often suspicious official explanations, and are more suited for mobilising ethnic or gendered affective responses to the subject of discussion. This is especially true in Kenya, whose post-independence politics is dominated by historical injustices (Atieno-Odhiambo, 2002; Nyairo, 2013; Musila, 2015). Rumours, unlike mainstream sources including forensic reports or government documents, provide for an emotional component in the narrative whole that allows interlocutors closer involvement in the issue and human subject of discussion.

This suggests that there exists an epistemological duel pitting rumour against other ‘more established’ mediums of knowledge production and circulation. This ‘antagonism’ between rumours and mainstream epistemes may be deemed to affirm political philosopher Valentin Mudimbe’s (1994: 39) assertion that ‘truth’ is both an abstraction and a tension, “neither [a] pure idea nor a simple objective.” Therefore, I use theories on the nature of truth and knowledge within and beyond the scope of Kenya’s national(ist) exchanges. Notable here
is Foucault’s (1977) argument that knowledge and power are intertwined and ubiquitous such that it is impossible to examine one without being implicated in the other.

This study sought to illuminate how digital platforms enable the packaging and dispersal of rumours as both knowledge and power. To do so, I drew on digital archive of rumours made available on Twitter, and on field research in Msando and Ngumbu’s villages to challenge and extend existing knowledge on rumours, social media, and public discourse in Kenya. I argue that possibilities of anonymity and instantaneous formation of communities of political interest have reversed the order of power in rumour circulation. This reversal means that the politically weak can become discursively strong such that even government officials create counter-rumours to neutralise subversive rumours by ordinary people. In so doing, the interlocutors re-order the discursive boundaries of the obtaining public sphere, and subsequently begin to replace it with a more accommodative one that acknowledges past, present, official, unofficial, mainstream and marginal versions.

The image of the rhizome is useful in my argument because rumour, like the botanical rhizome, has “neither beginning, nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and spills” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 23). The rhizome, as amorphous as rumours, demonstrates how rumour brings “into play very different regimes of signs, and even non-sign states” (21), debunking common assumptions and history of dominant political and other classes. The rhizome also points at the symbiotic relationship between social media and rumour, as they feed off and on each other because of their respective capacity to mutate and spiral infinitely. Rumours are powerful because they are unruly, without beginning or end. This attribute bequeaths rumours in contemporary times a longer shelf-life because social media platforms archive rumours for longer, and extend their spatial reach across the globe, depending on where different communities of political and ideological interests exist. This way, rumours acquire additional discursive respectability by speaking to larger and older concerns than their immediate triggers.

For example, rumours on Msando and Ngumbu refracted Kenya’s post-independence power struggles. Such struggles were couched in terms of the known and knowable, the spoken and the unspeakable (Spivak, 1988). This shows the dual element of rumours as political and cultural texts that reflect power differentials between the rumour-monger and the listener (Haugerud, 1997). These roles of rumour-monger and listener shift between
government agencies and commoners, depending on the relative power advantage of the moment.

That is why I interrogate the dynamics that underwrite the functions of rumours in politics and influence on the flows of knowledge and power, or knowledge as power (Foucault, 1977). Foucault conceptualised power as a ubiquitous and amorphous phenomenon that continuously empowers and disempowers different categories of people, especially where such contestations are underpinned by ideological differences. Although Foucault made the argument in a different context, it is also relevant to Kenya because of the country’s struggle to cobble together a nation out of its loose amalgamation of over 40 ethnic entities. In the process, formal and informal public discourses, sometimes mediated by rumours, play a central role in enabling ordinary people to imagine a desirable, inclusive nation called Kenya, even in the context of existing power dynamics. If nations are mere imaginary homelands (Rushdie, 1991), then often imagining nations is propelled by the subtle shifts in power. Such is expressed in popular cultural discourses, including rumour.

In understanding the rhizomic nature of rumours, I also borrow from the concepts of hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricouer, 1973; Felski, 2011) and Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995) in order to squeeze meanings from singular rumours and indeed whole discourses. I also draw on Dean’s notion of communicative capitalism to determine not just how individual actors express their political opinions, but also evaluate the extent and impact of such expressions. Dean argues that “the contemporary ideological formation of communicative capitalism fetishizes speech, opinion, arid participation” (2009: 17, my italics), suggesting that while exercising one’s democratic freedom of expression may in itself be a good thing, it would be way better if such expression attained something beyond ‘arid expression.’

Therefore, in my study I acknowledge how rumours in digital formats intersect with wider thematic and theoretical perspectives. Beyond that, I also focus on how the rumours are informed, driven, and used by local and limited agents for cultural and political interests, including claims of ethnic marginalisation, or accusations and denials of political entitlement among the Kikuyu community, all within a prevailing influence of communicative capitalism.
and its affinities to region-specific political patterns. Whether due to, or in spite of the historical importance of Nyanza and Central regions in Kenya’s post-independence history, the fact that they were the home regions of Msando and Ngumbu, respectively, provoked greater interest by social media commentators who revisited some historical and political issues that related to the regions and their political luminaries. In fact, notwithstanding the overarching discursive depth and expanse of rumour and its appropriation by social media, nothing insulates both from functional use in addressing local concerns, such as how ethnicity colours civic awareness in Kenya. This is why, in this thesis I extend the perspectives on rumours as used among politically and socially marginalised groups (White, 1994; Musila, 2015; Nyairo, 2013). I highlight local dynamics that determine the nature and categories of rumours that particular demographic groups prefer to share and circulate or, conversely, repress, especially regarding delicate incidents such as the killings of Msando and Ngumbu. By implication, I engage with how rumourous conversations by members of different socio-economic classes and ideological persuasions can aid debates about power and its implications on gender, knowledge and ethnicity.

I dedicate a chapter each to the core objectives of the research. First, I focus on the idea, nature, and changing textures of rumour. Positioning myself among other scholars who view rumours as epistemes of every day, I proceed to delineate patterns of digital rumours and how they configure the afterlives of Msando and Ngumbu in national(ist) politics. I then draw on what I call national(ist) politics versus local(ised) grammars that were invoked in retelling the death of Msando in his Lifunga Village in Siaya, western Kenya. This implied dichotomy is important because, as I show later in Chapters 4 and 5, perspectives of rural-based interlocutors tend to enrich one’s understanding of an issue by debunking the presumptions of urban-based commentators. This is especially the case in the current instance where different groups mourned Msando’s death for a whole spectrum of reasons, from a sense of social responsibility by activist commentators on Twitter to a political class determined to attract some votes and, in between, friends and family who were devastated by what was deemed a politically motivated killing. Fourth, I analyse the mourning of Ngumbu in Kiambu.

1 Although Kenya’s political economy is extensively animated by ethnicity, the Kikuyu ethnic category attracts rather paradoxical responses from the rest, partly because of how the Kikuyu have dominated Kenya’s political history. Not only have three of the four presidents been Kikuyu, the whole community is also perceived to be centrally located in the country – with their cradle being the former Central Province of which Nairobi is a contiguous part. The Kikuyu also dominate the financial economy. These attributes have tended to provoke a lot of antipathy from some quarters within the country, especially around election time. For an outline of the historical genesis of this issue, see Kahura (2019; 2018).
In the fifth and last empirical chapter, I tease out perspectives from journalists and investigating agents who, presumably, were objective in their observations and narration of what transpired. In presuming their objectivity in responses, I triangulate some of the themes that dominated the rumours in social media platforms.

1.2: A genre for all seasons? The tenacity of rumours in public lives

In this section, I critique literature on the relationship between social media platforms and rumour in Africa, focusing on the interfaces of rumour and politics. I also explain the renewed popularity of rumours among some Kenyans who choose Twitter as their preferred space for sharing and debating information on key national issues.

My reading of rumours surrounding the death of Msando and Ngumbu recognises that between the points of creation and consumption of rumours, there exist other agents and actors whose presence may only be deemphasised because they are not the primary subjects of my study. Similarly, between the urban populations who use social media spaces to express their opinions and the rural Lifunga and Gachie villages where interlocutors use word of mouth, there are other invisible or inaudible actors who nonetheless exist and disrupt any suggestion of a binary relationship between rural-urban, digital-analogue and, official-informal and, more importantly, Kenyans on Twitter-Government. Therefore, any dual references to the various subjects of my analysis in this study must be considered as matter of creating analytical convenience rather than a suggestion of any binary relationships between any two or other sets of my study subjects. I agree with Coast and Fox argument that

> While the circulation and monitoring of rumour might seem to imply a simple, adversarial relationship between people and their governments, more recent studies suggest a more complex picture. Rumour can no longer be said simply to destabilise societies or to prompt insurrection and violence. Rumour represents a potential site for negotiation between the individual and the state, for identity formation and for engagement with the community… (2015: 228, my italics).

It is the complexity of rumours, as Coast and Fox state, that also make a study such as this one important. To the extent that rumours can bear global theorisations concurrent with local manifestations, it helps to focus on how local rumours may be animated by global debates. This is what I attempt in the next section of this thesis.
1.2.1: Local rumours, glocal debates

The word ‘rumour’ is notoriously difficult to define, let alone cluster in discursively meaningful categories or even associate it with a dominant space of circulation (Zubiaga et al., 2018). Part of the problem derives from the need for a delicate balance in conceptualising the idea of rumour as conceptually informative and contextually manageable terms. The question is, how does one possibly demarcate the definition of rumour without thrusting the concept far into lies, or overstating the truth value (and thus reliability) in it? David Coast and Jo Fox acknowledge this dilemma by stating that “While excessively broad definitions of rumour render the term meaningless, preventing us from identifying the phenomenon we are trying to analyse, more specific definitions tend to fall apart on closer inspection. Rumours overlap with other forms of communication, and exceptions abound…” (2015: 223). In a study such as mine, another variable intrudes, namely the conception of rumours in digital spaces where virtually everything has some authority that derives from the spontaneity of amorphous circulation and a permanence that springs from the instantaneous archiving. For instance, Cai et al (2014) as well as Liang et al. (2015) consider rumours as simply as false information, which is a problematic definition that associates rumour with total falsehoods or lies. On their part, DiFonzo and Bordia (2007) define rumours as “unverified and instrumentally relevant information statements in circulation.” While this may be a helpful definition, its presumption that ‘verification’ by whatever authority secures more credibility for a rumour (to make it truth?) ignores the fact that in the political and interest-driven world that we live in, such ‘verification’ may be accorded for reasons other than the truth value of a claim or rumour.

While some scholars grapple with the nature and impact of rumours as epistemological category, others (Maddock et al., 2015) have focused on behavioural reactions that rumours provoke in those who encounter it, ranging from questioning the rumour, correcting it, to neutrality. On their part, Procter et al. (2013) suggest that reactions to rumours fall in any of four categories, thus supporting it, denying the rumour, appealing for additional information, or merely commenting on one aspect or other of the rumour. These suggest that it is possible to examine rumours from the standpoints of creation, travel, and reception – a dynamic that repudiates the common reduction of rumours as something that is a binary opposite of truth.

Closer to the scope of my study, the same problems abound in defining rumours, especially in terms of their political value on the one hand, and the ease with which they may be dismissed by officialdom as being, well, rumours that should be disdained. The same
rumours attract some political charge of believability by many Kenyans who are apprehensive about the reliability of official narratives. This dynamic places rumours in a discursive no-man’s-land where it is believed or disbelieved depending on the moment and its political or ideological usability. This is partly because, as Zubiaga et al (2018) further state, rumours are related in structure and content to hoaxes, misinformation, disinformation and fake news, but hardly if at all contain the total attributes of any of these variants. Against this background, I adopt a guiding definition for purposes of this study. Thus, I embrace Zubiaga et al.'s definition of a rumour as

an item of information that has not yet been verified, and hence its truth value remains unresolved while it is circulating. A rumour is defined as unverified when there is no evidence supporting it or there is no official confirmation from authoritative sources (e.g., those with a reputation for being trustworthy) or sources that may have credibility in a particular context (e.g., eyewitnesses) (32.2-32.2).

Such a definition envisages particular behavioural responses to rumours, and resonates well with a study such as mine that is anchored in the imbrication between social scientific and humanistic disciplinary boundaries. I concur with Nicolas Turene’s view that in “social sciences, rumouring behaviour is analysed as a social process of collective sense-making through which individuals can understand situations characterised by high levels of uncertainty, anxiety and a lack of official news” (2018: 2).

In adopting this definition, I acknowledge that in the din of digital and analogue conversations on Twitter and beyond regarding aspects of Msando’s and Ngumbu’s deaths, it was impossible to determine who was speaking the truth partly because the government and investigative officers hardly challenged some of the common narrative strands that emerged to explain the deaths. Even on the few occasions when government agents and the police spoke about the two deaths, their commentaries were largely seen as self-serving accounts rather than exposure of some truths about the deaths. Thus, there was an overarching cynicism with which government and other authoritative sources were treated whenever they spoke about Msando and Ngumbu. Ironically, this had the consequence of fanning the rumours that implicated the government in the two deaths and made the rumours more popular, and more authoritative than official ‘truths’.
This was hardly unique to the rumours surrounding Msando’s and Ngumbu’s deaths. On the contrary, and as I show elsewhere in this thesis, Kenya’s critical moments in history have been marked by killings (and presumed assassinations) that have provoked widespread rumours bearing the same characteristics, thus more persuasive rumours that gain more currency from any attempts by officialdom to offer their presumably more authoritative versions of truth. Generally, in terms of form and content, rumours in Kenya tend to emerge from local experiences while reflecting what may be considered global functional and formal attributes. For example, a death in the village may generate rumours that speak about the failures or successes of a national project, such as the quest for national unity. Indeed, Anderson’s (1983) argument that nations are but communities that are imagined partly through the print media remains persuasive. Although Anderson focused on Europe before the age of social media, his argument applies as well to how rumours in digital platforms in Kenya can fabricate belonging to ethnic communities, because these usually form the basis for asserting national belonging. In my study, this happened following the rumours after Msando’s disappearance and the eventual discovery of his body. Activists and other commentators within and beyond social media spaces, opposition politicians and even pro-government leaders all participated in varying degrees in spreading rumours on Msando and Ngumbu.

My view, however, is that through such endless circulation of rumours in a rhizomic manner, the rumours lost part of their explanatory power precisely because they became available to explain contradictory standpoints. Indeed, as Ambreena Manji argues elsewhere, “rumours create an unstable and porous archive” (2017: 175), implying that one needs to exercise caution even as they celebrate the possibility of rumours in filling up gaps left by self-serving official narratives. I say this because even from a cursory perspective, a point that explains everything actually explains nothing. That is why I was more interested in the ability of rumours in social media platforms to generate different perspectives on an issue, rather than in the truth-value or lack of it in the perspectives themselves. I was aware that positionality determines differences in perspective in places such as Kenya where ordinary people view the government of the day with ambivalence.

The difference between the state and wananchi arises because social media platforms enable “a personal use of public space” (Campbell and Park, 2008: 377), which disrupts the
state’s intent of imposing singular explanatory narratives on everyone.² Prospects of citizen journalism underpin the rhizomic circulation of rumours among virtual communities on social media. Therefore, social media spaces amount to “zones of sovereignty” (Werbner, 1996) where rumours abound, grafting themselves on flows and counter-flows of persuasive information. Subsequently, rumours become inseparable from social media platforms and their emerging discursive cultures. Evidently, “… web and online platforms have offered new spaces for and through which to articulate new forms of public participation and to construct communities and publics around issues that converge but also transcend both space and ethnicity” (Ogola, 2011: 73).

Some of the commentators are inspired by communal or fraternal interests, which they mobilise for a collective agenda. That is how, with time, there emerged Kenyans on Twitter (KoT), an amorphous group of netizens reputed for actively taking part in conversations around economic, social and political issues through tweets and retweets. With KoT’s growing discursive influence, some pro-government commentators also joined to track debates on Twitter. They would occasionally respond to the subversive claims circulating on Twitter. Through the tweets and retweets, KoT demands accountability from leaders, either by accusing some of improprieties, or by pushing certain arguments so much so that they cannot be ignored. KoT’s behaviour, thus, illustrates Castells’ (2010) argument that the internet is an enabler of counter-cultural dynamics that impact on ideas of individual and group identities. This is what happened after Msando’s death, where rumours and social media cultures excavated older debates on ethnic, generational, and gender identities. The use of monikers and other strategies of identity reformations, besides the intensity of rumours on Msando’s death, meant that rumours are a critical way for KoT to engage with the government while demanding answers about Msando’s killing. Castells sums up the relationship between the powerful and the powerless in social networks thus:

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\text{this networking logic induces a social determination of a higher level than that of the specific social interests expressed through the networks: the power of flows takes precedence over the flows of power. Presence or absence in the}
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² One may argue against the designation of social media as an enabler of public discourses, perhaps because these spaces are owned by private companies and may indeed be influenced by technology companies such as Cambridge Analytica. However, to the extent that my study focuses on the debates within those platforms and not necessarily that back-end technology or even the profit motives of social media platform owners, I opt to consider the social media platforms as spaces for public discourses because of the socialities they inspire and the communities of interlocutors that they forge.
network and the dynamics of each network vis-à-vis others are critical sources of domination and change in our society: a society that, therefore, we may properly call the network society, characterised by the pre-eminence of social morphology over social action (2010: 500, added italics). Castells’ observation, although made with regard to America, also resonates with what happened in Kenya’s digital spaces when Msando died. By using distancing techniques such as monikers, retweets and ‘likes’, users of social media platforms somehow outsmarted the state by evading its surveillance tactics. Notably, it was the system of technologies in social media platforms that enabled the ordinary folks to outwit the government agents. This was also because, as Castells further argues:

Networks are open structures, able to expand without limits, integrating new nodes as long as they are able to communicate within the network, namely as long as they share the same communication codes (for example, values or performance goals). A network-based social structure is a highly dynamic, open system, susceptible to innovating without threatening its balance (2010: 501).

Thus, digital social media collapses distance to bring together individuals in different places who share interest in particular rumours. This is partly because once an idea appears in a platform, it becomes public ‘property’ and acquires value that increases with wider circulation. Effectively, such rumours also become more credible or controversial, as the case may be. As Ogola observes, “Twitter hashtags, once started, quickly assume a life of its [sic] own, enabling two critical things: 1) they make possible broad citizen participation in the deliberation of stories; 2) the hashtags create spaces which dramatise the limits of free expression variously denied by the state and by mainstream media” (2015: 75). Thus, social media extends its liberatory potential since its users contract spaces of engagement, extend the times for such engagements by instantaneously archiving such rumours, and ultimately reify rumours as indispensable content in social media outlets usable by groups such as KoT.

This is not to say that social media platforms have enabled mass successes in mobilising change. In fact, the efficacy of social media activism in transforming or otherwise shifting the trajectory of politics in the real world has been generally low, not only in Africa where draconian rule is the norm, but even in America where apparently democracy and the voice
of the people influence public policy and politics. As Frost (2020) laments somewhat uncharitably, ‘hashtag activism’ is a ‘poisoned chalice’ that has little to show except, perhaps, the din in social media circuits that recreate what earlier scholars refer to as echo chambers.³ For my study, similarly, the relationship between rumours, social media platforms, and agency-driven individuals is neither predictable nor linear. Aware of the political climate in which they operate, for instance, KoT continuously signal their concern with potential violence by the government. This is why and how they devise transformative strategies to insulate them from potential retribution by the government. As I demonstrate in Chapters 2 and 3, some KoT use humour and its distancing elements (memes, aliases and satire) to pamper their targets while ridiculing their frailties through a careful performance of “the dramaturgy of power and politics” (Outa, 2001: 345).

Papacharissi argues that “social platforms collapse public and private performances” (2012: 1990), creating different identities as required of different situations. Citing Goffman (1959), Papacharissi notes that “in everyday cycles of self-presentation and impression formation, individuals perform on multiple stages, creating a face for each interaction and developing faces for a variety of situational contexts” (1990). Thus, the use of monikers creates a facade of insularity against the state and its monitoring agents. It also enables their users to question political and cultural taboos without fear of sanctions. The use of aliases thus suggests that KoT, because of their mistrust for news from mainstream or official sources, reify the ‘truth-value’ of rumours generally, not necessarily their source or distributor. This enables them to deal with the challenge of the (mis)trust characteristic of rumours because, given that the information circulates in a virtual space, it is impossible to track the circuits of its movements and trust those who encounter it.

This element links rumours to ‘conspiracy theories’, both as explanatory texts and dismissive tags of misunderstood developments in any society. For Sunstein and Vermeule, a conspiracy theory is “an effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who attempt to conceal their role (at least until their aims are established)” ((2009) 205, italics and brackets in original). Sunstein and Vermeule add that conspiracy theories arise either because of ‘crippled epistemology’ (Hardin, 2002), meaning right or wrong beliefs that people form not because they are rational, but because

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the believers in conspiracy theories have “a sharply limited number of (relevant) informational sources” (204). These may include rumours and speculation. Although Sunstein and Vermeule write about global terrorism, their explanations of how conspiracy theories spawn and spread applies to Kenya in the period after Msando and Ngumbu’s deaths.

The reactions to Msando and Ngumbu’s killings echo Herman and Chomsky’s (1988) concept of “manufacturing consent” where power interests compete. Accordingly, “among their other functions, the media serve, and propagandise on behalf of, the powerful societal interests that control and finance them” (n.p.). Once rumours appear in social media platforms, they can be manipulated and controlled to support governments and pursue preconceived goals. Some national(ist) leaders seized the deaths of Msando and Ngumbu to mobilise ethnic solidarities and ‘manufacture consent’ in villages and mainstream media.

Since social media platforms allow multidirectional information flows, they enable continuous conversations that bring together socially networked users to participate in public, if virtual, discourse on topical issues. While Castells (2009) and Stiegler (2008) see this as empowering the masses, Fenton and Barassi (2011) disagree. They suggest that such arguments overlook “how Web 2.0 technologies and processes also affect the internal politics of collective groups, and how the self-centred forms of communication that these platforms enable can challenge rather than reinforce the collective creativity of social movements” (2011: 180). A clear point relates to the implication of rumours in glocal theoretical dynamics. Specifically, abstract theorisation of how human societies build social networks are tested by application to particular groups focused on an equally specific issue. This may include how Msando and Ngumbu’s killings reference historical and political debates in Kenya.

This is partly what I show in this section, simply that an incident such as Msando’s and Ngumbu’s killing may raise important subjects of intellectual inquiry whose findings could challenge dominant ideological standpoints in knowledge production. Specifically, the focus on the intersections of social media platforms, rumours and politics opens up new spaces for possible probing into how social histories interact with the media to inform political histories of a country. The section further hints at how personal tragedies may influence national histories, and thus create a justification for a scholarly project such as this. Emerging out of this section, ultimately, is the question of how rumours feed into social historical formations, which I discuss below.
1.2.2: Rumours and aspects of social histories

For a long time, rumours have played an important role in mediating the relationship between the citizens and the state, and between various demographic groups within the state. As Coast and Fox (2015) write on the role of rumours in mediating the relationship between the people and their governments, rumours “have the potential to stoke riot and rebellion, and governments throughout history have often attempted to monitor and suppress them” (227).

In this regard, rumours remain an important source of social historical research in Africa as elsewhere, since individuals’ relationship with the state remain a complicated matter. That is why rumours in Africa generally and Kenya particularly comprise a critical part of public discourse. Despite the relatively recent spread of social media technologies and corresponding growth in numbers of literate publics, rumours remain a significant means of enabling public discourse. Indeed, rumour and digitally mediated social media have not been completely transformed by the technology of communication. White (2000b) argues that rumours can speak about the unspeakable experiences that lack expression in mainstream spaces. “Experiences that are beyond language”, White writes, “are nevertheless described with words manipulated to describe them” (2000b: 17). Thus, new experiences different from the routine can generate rumours that then circulate as different stories.

In Kenya, one such experience was on the violence of the wazima moto (fire brigade) phenomenon that accompanied colonialism. The wazima moto were associated with cannibalism, and many stories were invented and circulated by ‘survivors’ and ‘witnesses’. Using the popular circulation of this story, White shows that oral history can easily lapse into rumour, generating different versions that people use to understand change. In stories on wazima moto, such negotiations included narrators who would cast themselves as heroes or survivors as they revisited histories that somehow had contemporary variants. I concur with White that “[t]hese circulating stories may be true or false, but that’s neither the point nor their importance. They provide the words and descriptions that offer a contextualisation that older words do not invoke” (2000b: 17). Elsewhere, Geissler (2005) writes that some people in western Kenya still believe in early colonial rumours of medical doctors and their researchers as “blood-stealing strangers” (175) associated with the ‘slaughter’ of human
beings. Thus, rumours still serve to explain aspects of colonial terror and the mysteries of contemporary politics.

Walsh (2009) writes about *Popobawa* – Swahili for winged bat – a mythical story in Zanzibar that peaked around 1995, attracting political interpretations centred on the Makonde as descendants of slaves. In retelling the *Popobawa* stories, the Zanzibaris used rumour to recast their histories of slavery and slave trade, the 1964 Revolution, and later experiences as citizens of Tanzania, which “some Zanzibaris see as colonialism” (Walsh, 2009: 24). In the Zanzibar case of political contests pitting Chama cha Mapinduzi (CCM) and the Civic United Front (CUF), a mere public panic was labelled *Popobawa* and attributed to the CCM by the dominant CUF followers in the island. In all these instances, rumour was used to demonstrate, repackage, and extend the experience of collective memory and traumas (Caruth, 1993), and to mediate public discourse.

According to Warner, rumour in Zanzibar (and Africa) is resilient because it is a perfect instance of public discourse. It circulates widely among a social network, beyond the control of private individuals. It sets norms of membership in a way that cannot be controlled by a ‘central authority’, making the discourse of rumour available for use by ‘weak-group’ politics of women, peasants, and others (2002: 78).

The idea of ‘weak-group’ also speaks to a familiarity that makes it hard to track rumour, but easy for rumours to create and position meanings beyond the political. Therefore, rumours continue to enjoy popular use currently because, as a social medium, they help communities to manage different emotions, including fear, anger, rage, malice, or despair. The usability of rumours is also because of their therapeutic value, which enables people to reorder their experiences into new, more desirable or manageable meanings when faced with undesirable, negative, or even contradictory stimuli. This happened after Msando’s death when his Luo kinsmen’s excitement about the possibilities of an Odinga presidency fizzled out, and transformed into anger, helplessness, and despair. Msando’s death raptured the dreams of a community – through Odinga – aiming at the presidency and also reminded them of past political grievances.

Ironically, this aspect also seems to have served the interests of the political status quo that desired a population stuck in sterile lamentations while doing nothing that could be
practically subversive. In other words, by remembering previous unresolved killings, the communities affirmed their own helplessness in the wake of an impervious yet powerful government that could take lives at will, without fear of consequences. Thus, within the whole process or rumourous debating were layers upon layers of sub-texts whose meanings pointed at the paradoxes, contradictions, and pitfalls of rumours as alternative forms of political knowledge.

1.2.3: Cultural literacies as sub-texts of rumours
The semantic value of rumours is known to derive partly from the social and cultural contexts of their production, relay, and consumption. Therefore, to understand the full meanings of rumours, one needs to explore the back-stories of rumourous moments wherever they occur (Musila, 2015). In her analysis of how Kenyans reacted to the killing of British tourist Julie Ward in 1989, Musila argues that forensic science and Kenya’s judiciary could not effectively answer the emergent questions and, therefore, quell suspicion that a senior government official was involved in her killing. For Musila, rumour explains such developments because it can hold contradictory positions on the subject of discussion. Accordingly, “rumours can be untrue, or contain a grain of truth, or the whole truth waiting to burst out” (5). Indeed, as Musila shows, legal truths (murder trials), scientific truths (autopsies), still leave some unanswered questions that are then filled by rumour – the latter offering social interpretations of issues in which the state is (potentially) implicated.

All these – curiosity, caution, and mistrust of official or mainstream news – influenced the greater reception of rumours, whose meanings were arrived at through positional, ethnic, and other filters. This speaks to amenability of rumours and, critically, Crenshaw’s theory of positionality (1994). For Crenshaw, positionality is about how one experiences and interprets phenomena. This is determined by class, gender, race, and geographical location, leading to a situation where the same incident is understood in radically different ways. As Kratz writes on the impact of positionality on interpretation of the observed, different assertions on the same thing reflect “the difficulties of narrative simultaneities” (1992: 101, my emphasis).

While studying the idea and practice of the baraza – public rally – both as a mobilising and discursive practice in post-independence Kenya, Haugerud (1993[1997]) shows that such occasions were used not just to relay official messages from the state agents, but quite often
facilitated common banter that relayed potentially yet cathartic subversive humour. The baraza allowed, through semiotisation of space and the use of jocular expressions, the subjects to communicate coded messages to the rulers, and the rulers to play ignorant about such messages and the problems that the subjects had to confront. This approach not only found its way into satirical drama such as Imbuga’s *Betrayal in the City* (1976), but in critical studies, including *Ruganda’s Telling the Truth Laughingly: the Politics of Francis Imbuga’s Drama* (1992). But while the latter approaches were helpful anatomies of power in post-colonial Kenya, their reliance on humour and satire created a distancing irony whose allegorical chasm could hardly be traversed by readers unfamiliar with local grammars.

Rumours defy easy analysis because they are part of the collective memory, of oral history, popular cultures in situations where people are concurrently awed by the majesty of the state while afraid of its potential violence. Thus, studying rumour helps to illuminate the dynamics of communities that spawn them (Berliner, 2005). The palimpsestic nature of the rumours, as Fontein writes regarding Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe, is that they have “deep historical complexity of differing, overlapping and entangled African urban imaginaries, aspirations, and notions of respectability, traversing divisions of class, age, gender, religion and political allegiance” (2009: 379).

The notion and essence of cultural literacies in interpreting routine phenomena in Africa generally and Kenya particularly has been widely acknowledged, even when not always labelled as such. Further, rumourous debates are also captured in many spaces, including the media, literary fiction, and other widely accessible spaces that would, ordinarily, attract greater respect for their perceived credibility or authority. However, one still needs high levels of cultural literacies to gain insider nuance, without which interpretation of phenomena cannot be complete.

1.2.4: Rumours and the grammars of exclusion in Kenya
Musila (2009) argues that “state power in Kenya has historically been mapped along shifting constructions of masculinity both across the three [now four] post-independence regimes […] and further back during colonial Kenya”. Musila adds that “there have been a number of women whose transgressive behaviour sought to challenge the status quo”, by disrupting the dominant “phallocratic grammars” (40). These ‘phallocratic grammars’ constitute satirical vocabulary that the citizens use to symbolically demolish state power, often embodied in the
highly masculinised image of the president as a super virile father of the nation (Mbembe, 2001: 102-141). Ironically, the state also uses the same ‘phallocratic grammars’ as counter-rumours to explain controversial killings such as Msando’s, to cast victims as potential casualties of love triangles or careless social lives. The intended logic is to paint the victims as undeserving of the outrage that meets their deaths.

This suggests that the dynamics of imagining Kenya as a nation are captured in different sets of grammars – ethnic, gendered, and nationalist – which are relayed through rumour and gossip that may further be packaged, archived, and relayed through social media. There is a disjuncture between these grammars that makes it difficult to imagine an organic and coherent nation. Instead, what emerges are fragments reflecting sectarian, ethnic, and gendered interests. The flows of rumours and gossip through the technology of social media extend what I refer to as grammars of ethnic identification, while at the same time tracking and archiving the histories of such violence. Previous intellectual attempts at formatting these grammars have been through popular cultural productions – particularly protest music and dissident literature – that ranged various metaphors to locate the state in the traditional imaginaries of the bestial or the cannibal to demonstrate the state’s ultimate loss of humane sensibilities, of estrangement from the common human moral universe, and entry to the animate kingdom where zoological imagery is summoned to cap the moral degeneration. In Kenya, works such as Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s Devil on the Cross (1982) and I Will Marry When I Want (1982), Wahome Mutahi’s Three Days on the Cross (1991) and Imbuga’s satirical play, Betrayal in the City (1976) dramatise the spectre of betrayal of the citizens by the state, which deploys violence and collaboration with the emergent middle class to deprive the majority of opportunities for progress.

This concern similarly finds its way in popular musical imaginations. To lament the spectre of political assassinations in Kenya, for instance, DO Misiani, a benga musician, once equated the Kenyan state to “the cat that ended up eating the homestead chicken” (Ogude, 2007). The allegorical attribute of this narrative also demonstrates the artistic distancing that verbal trickery is adept at when critiquing the regime, even to lament the worst betrayal imaginable. For a cat (government) that eats the homestead’s chicken (victims of assassinations) goes beyond mere betrayal, hence the reference to the notion of cultural valences.
1.2.5: Msando, Ngumbu, and the tragedies of the commoner

Kenya has recently witnessed three politically significant killings – Meshack Yebei4 (2015), Sheikh Abubakar Shariff aka Makaburi5 (2015), and Chris Msando (2017). These killings are what I call politicised rather than political because the victims become more ‘visible’ and ‘audible’ to the public only after they are dead. This posthumous visibility and audibility inverts the life-death dichotomy because the victims, generally invisible in life, suddenly become prominent in death. This is enabled by digital platforms as palimpsestic spaces upon which different layers of narratives/meanings are inscribed, shared, and overwritten by more current versions of circulating narratives. The recording and sharing occur simultaneously, archiving and memorialising the dead within the popular cultural patterns of rapid spread and usability by ordinary citizens.

The politicised killings occurred after 2010, when multi-party political cultures were well entrenched, and when social media communication was widespread. This made it harder to conceal secrets or limit the spread of rumours. Counter-rumours by pro-government agents cast aspersions on the moral integrity or sense of judgement of the victims, perhaps to deflate the outrage and distract public attention from the killing. Msando’s killing paralleled the earlier killings and disposal of the bodies of JM Kariuki in 1975 and Robert Ouko in 1990. Both were first reported to be missing before their mutilated bodies were discovered in hills (Kariuki in Ngong Hills, Ouko in Got Alila Hills). The bodies had also been badly mutilated.

Part of what I call the tragedy of the commoner is the ironical turn where the government uses rumours for its moral armament agenda. The spectre of a government spreading rumours shows the utility of rumour and its multiple possibilities in the sense that it can indeed be used by the powerful to serve the same purpose of eroding the credibility of a powerful narrative, even if such a narrative comes from common citizens, or Wanjiku in Kenya’s political idiom. Rumour thus transcends power boundaries because once rumours gain traction among commoners, they become so powerful that they compel officialdom to

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respond. Similarly, as I show in Chapter 3, rumours as epistemological categories are not just links to the powerful people, the rumours themselves are power.

Msando’s death fed into the then simmering political discourse, with some politicians claiming that it was linked to the elections and his role in it, effectively implicating the government in his killing (Omolo and Odhiambo, 2017). Msando’s (and Ngumbu’s) death also introduced ethnicity as a variable in national politics and debates. These played out on social media. KoT latched on their respective ethnic identities to revisit ethnic identities and the struggle for political power (symbolised by the presidency). Msando (a Luo) and Ngumbu (a Kikuyu) were seen as an odd couple given the long running ‘ethnic tensions’ symbolised by the then hostility between President Kenyatta (a Kikuyu) and his main political rival, Odinga (a Luo). The underlying assumptions that a social or even romantic relationship is untenable between a Luo man and a Kikuyu woman animated the rumours in social media soon after Msando’s death.

Crucial also was how Ngumbu was silenced and elided in mainstream media coverage, an omission that hinted at both patriarchal dominance of public social imaginaries and their interpretative frames. The pervasive allocation of blame to Ngumbu as the cause of Msando’s death followed a trajectory of male acquittal and female condemnation along a logic of phallocratic grammars. Hence, the claim was that had Msando not gone to drink with Ngumbu (or had she left him alone that day), he would have gone home and probably his killers would not have found him. In this logic, Msando’s sense of judgement is left intact but his death is attributed to Ngumbu. And as I show in Chapter 5 in my discussion of how her death was received in her rural home, Ngumbu was killed twice because she lost her life and then had her morality questioned by insinuation that she used her sexuality to prey on Msando. For women who die in such circumstances, this is a common plight, as Musila’s (2015) study of Ward’s killing shows.

Generally, politicised killings precipitate creative embellishments of narratives surrounding the deaths, especially where victims had close proximity to strategic information or power. Such positioning would ordinarily provide sufficient motive for killers, whether criminal or political. In this vein, Msando and Ngumbu were victims of what Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo (2004) called the ‘risks of knowledge’; they knew too much for the comfort of some higher powers within the state. Msando knew more about the anti-rigging measures
put in place at the electoral commission. Ngumbu knew/saw the people who killed Msando and eventually herself.

White (2000) argues that secrets are paradoxical because they are never secret enough: they are always known by more than one person, meaning that secrets are nothing more than highly valued information. Because Msando may have known what he thought were secrets – but which were also known by some uncomfortable powers elsewhere – he posed a threat to the system since he could use the privileged information to influence the elections outcome. This risk was too much for some people with high interests in elections, and since we inhabit “a world of alliance and allegiance” (White 2000: 15), anyone could have targeted Msando. That is why, despite all these details known in different degrees to different people, social media played a critical role in Kenyans’ attempts to understand Msando and Ngumbu’s killings. The rumourous discourses on social media seemed keen on explaining how and why Msando and Ngumbu were killed. This inevitably mirrored the dominant views of pro- and anti-government commentators. The debates by KoT ultimately yielded a rich discursive area that has so far attracted only media (mainstream and social) attention, but without a corresponding academic scrutiny. Msando’s killing demonstrated that even unexplained deaths of the ‘less powerful’ people may still indicate the insecurities of the government of the day much the same as the assassination of a prominent politician.

In post-independence Kenya, this came to life most acutely with the assassination of Mboya in 1969. According to Ogot, “Mboya’s death definitely united the Luo under the leadership of [Oginga] Odinga. But it also united the Kikuyu through the infamous compulsory oaths that they were made to take at Gatundu [Jomo Kenyatta’s home] to ensure that the presidency remained in the House of Mumbi [idiomatic for Gikuyu speakers] or, within the ‘kitchen cabinet in Kiambu District” (2003: 233, my emphasis). Ogot’s matter-of-fact claim elides the simple fact that while this repeated talk of oath-taking has now attained some aura of authoritative truth around it. As Reverend John Gatu writes in his autobiography Fan into Flame (2016), it began and circulated as rumour back then, demonstrating the fact that a rumour can with time morph into an unquestionable truth. But it also shows the role of ethnic positionality in the interpretation and categorisation of an event as rumour, myth, or fact. White asserts that “[u]nearthing the powers and interests and relationships revealed in shared narratives – true or false and true and false – gives us a history of states that one true story could never provide” (2000: 15). Not only do rumours collectively reveal more than
what ‘true story’ ever could, but they also overwrite some of the earlier narratives that may indeed be true in order to create a version of ‘truth’ that suits the interests of the predominant political and social powers of the moment.

1.3: The nature of rumours in the era of digital cultures
Although rumour has been studied extensively in other parts of Africa (Ellis, 1989; White, 2000, Fontein, 2009), and in Kenya (Nyairo, 2013; Musila, 2015), the focus has exclusively been on verbal rumours. Such studies have also focused on rumours in the context of general political currents as spun by autocratic regimes. While acknowledging the value of such studies, I evaluate in my thesis the role of rumours in enabling public debates in social media platforms, specifically Twitter. I settled on Twitter because, out of other social media platforms, Twitter has been appropriated by an emerging middle class that undertakes conscientious discussion of politics and other topical issues of the day, as opposed to LinkedIn that is more about work place experiences, or Facebook that encourages individual self-fashioning through postings of members’ social activities. It is also ‘the most popular platform for academic research’ (Ahmed, 2019).

My focus on the nexus between rumours, social media platforms, and the ensuing cultures is motivated by previous scholarship, which mine extends. I argue that earlier scholarship on rumour in Africa has yielded limited and limiting conclusions about how individuals and communities get implicated in rumour, politics, and culture. Such works as White (2000) and Haugerud (1987) oscillate between projecting subjects on a spectrum of rural-based victims of state power whose recourse to rumour is informed by political and ideological inability to voice well-reasoned political positions. Others are volatile urban-based activists. By situating the logics of either category along binaries of rumours as strategic subversion in the rural areas or reckless resistance by urban actors, such findings gloss over details of rationalities that inform the continued popularity of rumours as a medium conscientiously chosen by people who wish to participate in debating topical issues.

Ultimately, I argue that the appropriation of digital platforms and their cultures precipitate structural and functional changes to rumours as used in political commentary. Vitally, Twitter infinitely creates and recreates rumours through strategies of inclusion – such as use of tagging – and visual accompaniments such as cartoons and photographs to evoke desired
emotional responses. Simultaneously, the emerging celebrity and ‘influencer’ cultures means that some of the contributors crave a huge following that looks up to them for the latest political information, direction, and validation. This is further fuelled by a well-founded belief that ‘influencers’ such as Robert Alai and Boniface Mwangi tend to have reliable sources within government, whose calculated information leaks provide important talking points for the public. This way, borders between the digital and the verbal versions of rumours become more porous because some of the readers who communicate within the digital platforms also verbally share their views with others. Hence, there exist critical overlaps between Kenyans who debate issues in social media platforms while simultaneously engaging with other people verbally. The simultaneous popularity of rumours in the era of digital technologies derive from possibilities of social media cultures and technologies immersing themselves in historical and contemporary narrative contestations to create versions of truth that neither focus exclusively on anti-government rhetoric, nor the self-preserving acquiescence of reactionary elements who uncritically defer to the whims of the government.

Therefore, these actors deploy technology in prevailing circumstances to create different perspectives on history and politics of power to rationalise local, contemporary experiences, and futuristic aspirations informed by historical consciousness. Thus, the logic of a popular culture of rumours in the age of technology differs from oral versions of rumours in terms of the communities that are involved. While oral rumours relied on physically proximate communities, digital rumours can work in communities of interest that may be political or gender-based. But the logics concur at the point of method: then and now, rumours use narrative strategies of co-optation, ambiguity, and choral amplification to sustain dialogues. I draw on theoretical ideas of key readers of Kenyan publics, including Nyabola (2018), who argue that, generally, debates in physical spaces get transposed to digital platforms. But the flows are neither that simple nor linear. Therefore, my research nuances Nyabola’s view by suggesting that a significant number of interlocutors are locked in the physical spaces of discourse, and have little idea regarding the nature, cause and course of debates in digital platforms. The views provided by such individuals are therefore important because they counterbalance the presumptions and easy conclusions that one may draw by simply focusing on the dynamics within social media platforms. Given the discursive limits and ineffective outcomes of social media activism that I have already referred to, some recourse to analogue variants of public debates also help in transcending those weaknesses in social
media debates. My visits to Lifunga (Msando’s home) and Gachie (Ngumbu’s home) led me to discover local logics of their responses to the two killings. These logics had been totally lacking in debates on Twitter. This point is interconnected and demonstrates more localised relevance of theories advanced elsewhere. For example, Crenshaw’s (1994) intersectionality manifests itself in the reading of emerging narratives. Thus, unlike in verbal forms, digital rumours emerge from a process of co-creation, simultaneous archiving and excavating that occur in circuits of national(istic) debates. These debates follow particular trajectories with discernible thematic and ideological patterns.

My thesis also argues that digital rumours enable wider dispersal of unique cultural logics in interpreting national happenings. Some interlocutors in rumourous conversations deploy cultural literacies and ‘phallocratic grammars’ (Musila, 2009) to interpret some events and objects. In debating necropolitics, exchanges among some commentators within and outside digital spaces reveal an interpretative parity between cultural and forensic logics that communicate political anxieties. Thus, rumours are not necessarily casual commentaries on generalities; they also facilitate nuanced scrutiny of detailed ‘knowledge’ in ways that compare to forensic investigations.

Finally, exploring the corpus of rumours on Msando and Ngumbu’s deaths shows that the killings allowed commentators to revisit historical grievances and express their political aspirations; balancing present dystopias with future utopias. Following this, I show that in the discursive strands on necropolitics, the various narratives of death simultaneously fit in but also deviate from existing metanarratives of and on political or politicised deaths. The deviations occur in the willingness of the commentators to dare demolish some of the common political myths and discursive taboos, through a rapture of conventional silences and moral panics that accrue from gender and ethnic perceptions of right and wrong. This is especially so in situations where the deaths of a man and a woman, Msando and Ngumbu, defy the common temptation to infuse dimensions of sexual morality in the ensuing debate. As such, the tendency to ascribe a lapse in moral judgement for the man who dies in the company of a woman is rejected in favour of well-founded suspicion among interlocutors that this could well be a set-up to distract the public from a possible political perspective of the deaths.
Verbal discourses in Msando and Ngumbu’s villages were inflected with localised considerations of cultural, political, and existential considerations such that what was said or not said depended on careful evaluation of the overarching political climate and historical significance of the specific location in the national context. That is why, unlike in Lifunga where Msando’s neighbours were quick to blame the government for the killing of Msando, those in Kiambu were more circumspect, yet both Msando and Ngumbu died at the same time. This suggests that whom the people accuse of or absolve from the deaths depends less on the facts of the case and more on the dominant political ideology of the place and moment. I am convinced by Musila’s (2015) argument that people do not believe or disbelieve rumours based on their truth value or lack of it, but whether they cohere with or contradict their preconceived political standpoints.

Relatedly, the widespread use of social media in some places and not others illustrates Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality, specifically how gender, geography and class determine access to certain amenities and privileges. This is important because there is still a lot of rumourous discourses that escape the digital networks such as Twitter, and thus its influence in public thought is unclear. Thus, although much information exists in digital records in terms of people’s responses to the deaths of Msando and Ngumbu, there are other perspectives that disappeared in the lapses of orality. My informal interviews with some residents in Lifunga and Kiambu (homes to Msando and Ngumbu, respectively), and media practitioners allowed me to triangulate my findings, drawing on the vibrant digital discourses among KoT. This was necessary to capture the meeting point between the subjectivities of immediate family and friends of the deceased, and the presumed objectivity of reporters who created the first strands of public narratives on the deaths. This way, I negated the discursive delimitations of digital debates.

In digital and verbal spaces, there emerged voices of leadership that reflected the general consensus of thought among the respondents. This involved a kind of mobilising within digital spaces, more or less recreating some rhizomic patterns of rumourous flows that are amorphous, invisible, yet present. The mobilisation also signalled awareness that the government, targeted by most accusations, was potentially violent. Therefore, some of the leaders within and beyond social media spaces, invoked masking techniques to camouflage their identities. This was both a narrative technique of signaling an ideological conviction and a strategy for mobilising followers with shared concerns over government violence.
Awareness of the political situation was also matched by an awareness of the ‘risks of knowledge’, something many commentators speculated to have caused Msando and Ngumbu’s killings.

I have also shown that structural and formal changes in the nature and texture of rumours have enabled the interlocutors to undertake national(ist) discourses that imagine publics. These publics are not necessarily preoccupied with a search for discursive consensus, but rather thrive on subjective dissensus. About themes, therefore, the rumours are driven by widespread cynicism due to historical mistrust of the government as an unreliable overseer of its people. This broad awareness became apparent when the tweets, together with informal interviews in Msando’s Lifunga and Ngumbu’s Gachie homes, signalled the ubiquity of state violence. The whole scenario mirrored the frustration of the rural respondents who were apprehensive that despite the promises to arrest the killers of Msando and Ngumbu, this was unlikely to happen. The mismatch between the utterances of the political leadership and their actions in searching for the killers, the gap between the people’s expectations of their leaders and the increasing awareness of their actual helplessness, all explained the cynical tone of verbal commentators and their counterparts on Twitter. Taken wholesomely, these developments testify to the epistemological depth of rumours as knowledge and as a form of power.

With this in mind, I studied rumours as both knowledge and power in ways that signal Foucault’s theorisation of the concepts. As power, rumours reverse the logic of fear as an emotion that ties citizens to their state. During the era of President Daniel arap Moi, people were so afraid of the government that they could only talk about it in whispers (Nyairo, 2013; Ogola, 2009). But with rumours in social media platforms, the scenario has changed: suddenly rumours can push the government into corners of fear, and compel it to engineer propagandist counter-rumours in digital and verbal formats. Earlier studies focusing on Zimbabwe (Fontein, 2009), Congo (Ellis, 1989) and even Kenya (Musila, 2015) show how the stylistic aspect of satire and the ambiguities of irony defang state power by lampooning dictatorial leaders and their symbols. While acknowledging all these contributions, my analysis of rumours on Msando and Ngumbu shows that rumours can simultaneously disempower power and constitute power, which then attracts contestations for leadership within terms of who has access to which rumour. This is what provokes survival strategies by government agents. Therefore, as opinion leaders emerge on Twitter and other social
media, the analogue variants in Lifunga and Kiambu expose the paradoxes of power and powerlessness in shaping the creation, flow, and reception of rumours.

Clearly, although Twitter has immense possibilities for camouflaging the identities of commentators, all traffic in the digital sphere leaves a trail of forensic evidence that can precisely identify the contributors. This results in a variant of ‘illicit cohabitation’ (Mbembe, 1992) between the powerful state and its subversive populace. How does this ‘illicit cohabitation’ emerge, and what sustains it in digital spaces? And how do answers to this question address the other question of why Msando was killed? In all, I front two arguments. The first is that these rumours were deliberate attempts to answer this question. The second is that most of the commentators responded in ways that cohere with the cultural, ideological, and political standpoints associated with their geographical and ethnic backgrounds.

1.4: On methodology
In this section, I describe how I conducted interdisciplinary research on rumours and public discourse on power in Kenya. I considered Twitter as a platform that contains relevant data, following recent research which affirms that “Twitter remains the most popular platform for academic research, as it still provides its data via a number of Application Programming Interfaces (API)” (Ahmed, 2019). Again, following Ahmed, I undertook a blend of Netnography and Digital Ethnography, thus “downloading data directly from a social media platform, noting personal observations of an online community and interviewing social media users” (ibid.)

I employed a qualitative approach that combines aspects of library research for collection of normative and theoretical data, and fieldwork that sought grounded voices for their localised perspectives on the key themes that had emerged from my readings. Combining these two approaches amounted to a form of triangulation that allowed me to correct oversights and cover blindspots that would inevitably have been present had I used either of the approaches exclusively. Since I was interested in the relationship between rumours and social media platforms in discussing the deaths of Msando and Ngumbu in Kenya’s historical context, I began by scraping from Twitter all rumours that mentioned the two. I then developed a descriptive matrix that captured the tweets, the themes they addressed, the day and time of the tweeting, and any other relevant information. This was to enable a mapping of the tweets
in terms of the days and dates of posting, the general thinking or thematic concerns of the tweets, and to infer the ideological inclinations of the tweets.

I then used descriptive analysis to unpack the messaging within single tweets and all of them in general. Here, I posed some questions derived from my study objectives, so that the answers could then guide me in achieving the corresponding objectives. Some of the questions were: why was Msando killed? How did Twitter discourses reconfigure, shape, or otherwise influence rumours? What narratives generally emerged following Msando and Ngumbu’s deaths? Were there any substantive differences in the nature and trajectory of rumours surrounding the deaths? I also used the same questions when speaking to respondents during field work. I travelled to Lifunga Village in Nyanza, and to Gachie in Kiambu, where I spoke with family, friends and neighbours of Msando and Ngumbu, respectively. I held similar conversations with professionals involved in the Msando and Ngumbu matter, notably reporters and editors in mainstream media outlets. I conducted this fieldwork to determine any information known to the respondents that had not reached Twitter, and vice versa.

While answers to these questions may be of interest to forensic investigators or scholars of historical truths, I was only interested in them for the overall functions that the rumours and counter-rumours played in the specific historical moment, but not necessarily in the truthfulness or falsehoods within them. This led me to critique literature on structural and thematic aspects of rumours. This was necessary because my study extends earlier research on how rumours and their attendant discourses inform deeper understanding of Kenya’s political and moral economies, from colonial times to the present (Haugerud, 1997; White, 2000; Nyairo, 2013; Musila, 2015). Therefore, answering these questions yielded insights into how a tale of two deaths – Msando and Ngumbu’s – fit into necropolitics in Kenya. Subsequently, and based on my findings, I offer suggestions on relevant variables. First, social media generally and Twitter particularly transform the content and speed of circulation of rumours; second, how rumours surrounding the deaths of Msando and Ngumbu reflected and refracted popular imaginations, recreations, and revisions of national histories in post-independence Kenya. I also propose some of the possible roles of particular strands of rumours on the deaths of Msando and Ngumbu, the meanings associated with the rumours and their non-linear visual and extra-textual accompaniments, towards scripting alternative narratives of emerging political histories.
In all these, I adopted a step-wise approach which began by contextualising my research in Kenya’s political histories, and in relevant analytical theories. This was not to suggest a division between theory and practice of rumours on specific events and the general histories in Kenya. Rather, I only did so to conceptualise some of the subjects of my study and measure their singular impact on my findings. Some of the theoretical postulations of different scholars and the popular rumourous texts as interspersed with variants fit across a continuum, rather than as distinctly oppositional combatants that refracted or challenged each other. Hence my concurrence with Musila’s (2015) argument that whereas a common perspective tends to subordinate rumours to social scientific, legal, and even forensic epistemes, a better approach would be to appreciate the relational beacons among these forms of knowledge as lateral rather than hierarchical. If this be the case, then rumours occupy a different location but same level of discursive persuasion and authority as, say, legal or scientific sources.

This was buttressed by the way earlier theoretical approaches yielded different layers of meanings for most of the rumours studied; from Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis (1995) to relatively recent readings of rumours as popular texts that are useful in understanding national politics (Mbembe, 2001; Ogola, 2009; Nyairo, 2013; Musila, 2015). Applying these theoretical perspectives variously across rumours on Msando and Ngumbu’s deaths, I delineated the main themes in the tweets on the twin deaths. I also used theories of narratology tempered by hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricoeur, 1973; Felski, 2011), conspiracy theories (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009) and rhizomic readings of rumours (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), especially their subterranean nature, given the emerging arguments on how states initiate and control our understanding of necropolitics. Overall, I was driven by synthetic research paradigms, which are “systems of beliefs and practices that influence how researchers select both the questions they are investigating and methods used to study them” (Morgan, 2007). I used this paradigm to form general guidelines of how to derive scientifically authentic and context-relevant meanings out of the data that I collected, particularly from respondents in Lifunga, their use of cultural literacies to ascribe meaning to Msando’s death.
1.4.1 Research design

In social science and humanities research, three philosophical paradigms dominate: i) positivism or post-positivism, ii) interpretivism and, iii) pragmatic. Positivism and post-positivism paradigms reify factuality and informational empiricism alongside the conventions of scientific value-free analysis. This works well in statistics. Interpretivism aims at unpacking human attitudes, actions, and consequences. It allows for positionality to determine what is acceptable and what is not, based on one’s normative code. Lastly, the pragmatic philosophical worldview blends elements of positivism and interpretivism, depending on the objectives of a study. It is an eclectic approach to the data obtained, and is useful in overseeing the rigidity of positivism and the subjectivity of interpretivism.

Considering the nature of my study and the different contexts that framed the emerging narratives, I found pragmatism the most suitable paradigm. Thus, I situated this research in a pragmatism philosophical paradigm that acknowledges the massive number of tweets not in terms of their empirical significance but rather, as indicators of obtaining ideological contexts which are themselves underpinned by rather subjective preconceptions.

For research design, I blended both primary and secondary data in the current study. Primary data comprised rumours that circulated on Twitter – and occasional print sources – on Msando and Ngumbu. In selecting the data, I used ‘Msando’, ‘Ngumbu’, and their tagged variants as the key words in scraping Twitter. This way, I harvested over 4,000 tweets that mentioned Msando in the time scope of the study, thus August 2017 to May 2019. Out of all these tweets, most of them were re-tweets that carried the same message, perhaps due to the tendency to retweet buzzwords in a manner related to, but not quite clickbait. The replication of the same message through retweets necessitated the use of representative samples of tweets, where I relied on some tweets to illustrate and support discursive points rather than affirm the popularity of an idea. This led me to use secondary data that entailed fieldwork responses from Lifunga, Gachie, as well as detectives and journalists in Nairobi. I had obtained information from the respondents on issues such as the historical and current relationship between the government and its people, their role in reportage and analyses of news surrounding Msando and Ngumbu’s deaths, and the reception of such news in their respective villages.

I also employed a descriptive design (Mugenda and Mugenda, 1999) and content analysis (Weber, 1990). Descriptive design helps in determining and reporting the current status of the study object, and of the affected population groups. I described the definitive attributes
of tweets on Msando before and after his death, focusing especially on responses that I considered to have emanated from the pro-government side and those opposed to it. I used description to highlight definitive characteristics of KoT and other variables of my study. I also linked all these to the political and moral economies that obtained around Msando and Ngumbu’s deaths and after, to establish the value of the tweets and KoT in the unfolding discourses on Kenya’s socialities, political and cultural dynamics.

Related to this, I also used content analysis for inferring conclusions from general available data. I focused on the semantic value of the tweets that I scrutinised for lexical choices, their equivalence, and their recurrence. To accommodate particularities of usage, I also used Fairclough’s (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to unpack the extra-linguistic meanings created and disseminated because of variations of language choices, power and, sometimes, ideology. The CDA appreciates the impact of cultural developments on social discourse and argues that epistemological and discursive processes are influenced at production, interpretation, and use of social meanings that are derived from pre-existing power structures. In my study, the (in)direct presence of the state and its power, and the history of state brutality made KoT apprehensive of government agents and their narratives. Similarly, the use of distancing techniques such as wry humour, sarcasm, allegory, camouflage of identities and others were unmistakable instances where the overbearing power of government was acknowledged for potential backlash, and thus influenced the tone and grammar of self-expression on Twitter. Therefore, I employed CDA in reading the said and the implied, the speakable and unspeakable aspects of the debates by members of KoT on Msando and Ngumbu’s deaths. I did this to pick out the social identities and corresponding relations, together with ideological inclinations of some KoT, and draw reasonable conclusions on their corresponding political persuasions. I achieved the latter partly by drawing on Hall’s (1997) ideas on how meanings are created and shared among members of a given cultural group through language, signs, and imagery at denotative and connotative levels.

The interplay of semiotic strategies and a balanced use of self-expression and self-preservation appeared to invite interpretative approaches postulated by both Fairclough and Hall, respectively. Thus, I chose a descriptive and analytical research design to provide a historical context of rumours and unexplained killings in Kenya, and a dense analysis of the implications of the Twitter platform in the creation, circulation, and archiving of rumours on
Msando and Ngumbu’s deaths. In doing this, I relied extensively on secondary and critical sources available in libraries at the University of Edinburgh and other online sources.

1.4.2 Sampling
For the sampling strategy of the tweets that I analysed, I followed three steps. I began by web-scraping to harvest all tweets that mentioned Msando. I then developed a thematic matrix of all tweets on Msando and Ngumbu. The matrix provided some relevant tweets that were used to make my argument. Given the need to corroborate the meanings condensed from these tweets, I embarked on the third stage that involved selecting a number of respondents from the media fraternity and investigative agencies, and key informants from Lifunga and Gachie, whose responses I found useful for triangulation purposes.

The sample population consisted of tweets culled from the internet, including those authored by pro-government commentators and their critics. However, the nature of these tweets – retweets and tagging – meant that it was difficult to come up with a definite sample population of the tweets from which a clear, representative sample could be drawn. Because of the amorphous and regenerative nature of these tweets, the total population of the same remains unknown. This is a common problem for researchers who base their projects on social media sites, including Twitter. Ruiz-Soler (2017) states that:

> Most research using Stream or Search APIs to gather data will not be able to compare the results with those provided by the Firehose API, so it is impossible to know how big the population of tweets really is. In other words, not having any previous information about the tweets’ population size when using public APIs implies a structural uncertainty about the validity of the sample.6

To overcome this impediment, I relied on Ahmed’s (2019) propositions on the usability of tweets as data. For Ahmed, the meanings in tweets can be obtained through six approaches, including content analysis, thematic analysis, and semantic analysis, all of which are relevant to my study. Ahmad argues that a sample size of between 1 per cent to 10 per cent is sufficient to draw accurate, reliable, and replicable findings.

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6 ‘Twitter Research for Social Scientists: A Brief Introduction to the Benefits, Limitations and Tools for Analysing Twitter Data’, *Revista DÍGITOS* • 3 • 2017. [https://core.ac.uk/reader/84750282](https://core.ac.uk/reader/84750282)
I also relied on news items and analyses published in mainstream print and online media by Nation Media Group (The Nation and The East African), the Standard Group (The Standard and The Standard on Sunday), and The Star newspapers as well as BBC and AFP, whose wide readerships across Kenya I considered to be indicative of credibility. I presumed that in mainstream newspapers, critical contestations on national politics are conducted in ways that refract or challenge ideological dominance of metanarratives. I read these sources mainly to buttress and contextualise the tweets that I had earlier harvested, and so I deferred to the primary meanings of the tweets. Even when reading the secondary sources in print media, I had in mind Ricoeur’s (1973) concept of hermeneutics of suspicion, which Felski expounds on as “a technique of reading texts against the grain and between the lines, of cataloguing their omissions and laying bare their contradictions, of rubbing in what they fail to know and cannot represent” (2011: 574).

I used the purposive sampling technique that is suitable in situations where the researcher has a clear mind of what they need to investigate and the sources required to obtain the necessary data for their research (Bernard, 2002). Thus, I used purposive sampling because I knew what I needed to establish and which individuals or other sources could provide the required information to enhance my understanding of the subject of study. These sources included reporters and news editors.

I used qualitative methods to collect tweets on Msando and Ngumbu by KoT, reportage and analyses on the Msando and Ngumbu matter in the leading daily newspapers in Kenya, and from different respondents from the media, as well as villagers in Lifunga and Gachie. Guided by Ahmed’s (2019) views, I undertook Netnography and Digital Ethnography to occupy the digital space myself and follow the dynamics within KoT in order to understand the existing protocols and obtain data relevant both to the subject (rumours) and object (Msando and Ngumbu) of my study. I then counterchecked with other sources of information from mainstream published sources and verbal sources of informal interviews.

I employed an online web scraping app, ScrapeHero, to gather all tweets related to #RIPMsando, which I subjected to a preliminary thematic and critical discourse analysis for purposes of clustering them around discernible themes. Then, I designed a Tweet Cluster Matrix in which I slotted tweets according to themes and subject matters that had in turn
been determined by pragmatic thematic analysis (Aronson, 1994). For Aronson, pragmatic thematic analysis entails a look-and-sniff approach where the researcher “focuses on identifiable themes and patterns”.

**Interviews:** Although I conceived this study as exclusively desk-based, the nature of the findings I obtained from the web excluded perspectives from voices that could not, for whatever reason, circulate within the digital sphere of KoT. This was somewhat anomalous, considering that close family members and neighbours of both Msando and Ngumbu were among those whose voices I could not authoritatively pick out from the tweets that I had scraped from the net. Therefore, I determined to visit the rural areas to try and establish the reception of some of the dominant themes advanced by KoT. Since the idea was not necessarily to obtain new data, but rather to nuance what I had already acquired, I opted for unstructured interviews/informal conversations as the most suitable approach to get a feel of the thinking in Lifunga (Msando’s home) and Gachie (Ngumbu’s) as well as from journalists and detectives in Nairobi. From a scholarly and methodological standpoint, I drew on Brinkmann’s argument that “conversations can help us produce knowledge in the sense of episteme” (2013: 150). I was persuaded by Brinkmann’s further view that “conversation may be conceived of as a basic mode of knowing. The certainty of our social knowledge is a matter of conversation between persons, rather than a matter of interaction with a nonhuman reality” (151). I found this persuasive, and the informal conversations in Lifunga and Gachie worthwhile, as well against the background of earlier scholarship (Musila, 2017) on the challenges of researching “issues framed by multiple epistemic regimes” (2017: 692), such as the Msando killing that attracted the police, journalists, politicians, and social media activists. Such a development, according to Musila (2017), invites a scrutiny of forms “community intelligence” (2017: 692) that rumours embody. I figured that informal conversations in the two villages would afford me access to the respective repertoires of ‘community intelligence’ among Msando’s Luo and Ngumbu’s Kikuyu kin.

In all, I spoke with 14 journalists drawn from the leading print, digital and broadcast newsrooms. These were the Nation Media Group, publishers of *The Daily Nation*, *The Nation on Saturday* and *The Sunday Nation*, and the Standard Group who publish *The Standard*, *Saturday Standard*, *Sunday Standard* and *The Nairobian*. For broadcast and digital stations, I spoke to editors from Citizen TV, KTN and NTV as well as editors of top
online news-sites – Kenya Today and Business Today. These are the most authoritative news platforms in Kenya (Galava, 2020).

I also engaged with eight detectives who were involved in the forensic and other forms of investigations into the killings of Msando and Ngumbu, and who could provide authoritative views on some of the rumours and speculations that circulated in the country then. For the journalists, the questions revolved around key considerations in determining subjects of emphasis and de-emphasis, while for the detectives, the focus was on the veracity of some of the claims that dominated debate by KoT. I then juxtaposed the responses from these professional respondents with popular perceptions in Lifunga and Gachie through informal conversations that brought together friends, neighbours, and relatives of Msando and Ngumbu. I focused on reception of news of the deaths, their expectations of investigative agencies, and their views on whether the government was involved in the killings or not. Participants in the informal conversations, who totalled 38 each in the two villages, gave responses that, apart from being rich in local logics, also triangulated the views of KoT, mainstream journalism, and the investigative agents. Noteworthy, however, is that I did not envisage that the informal conversations would yield statistical data; rather, my intention was simply to get the popular perspectives within the professional ranks involved in the investigation and reportage, as well as the communities from which Msando and Ngumbu came. I discuss these in detail in the empirical chapters of this thesis.

1.4.3 Units of Data Analysis
Regarding analysis, the unit of analysis was clustered tweets that were categorised according to general discernible themes. Because this study is discursive in nature, the findings were captured through descriptive and discursive write-up in chapters that addressed my study objectives. I began by employing a longitudinal sample from early August 2017 when Msando was killed, to May 2019 when I began to write this thesis. I had over 4,000 tweets that had repetitions through direct retweets, semantic recurrences, and similarity of images.

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7 Although Msando was based in Nairobi, my visit to Lifunga established that he often went home to take part in the social life of his relations. On her part, Ngumbu lived in her Gachie Village, which is about 15 kilometres from Nairobi.
The data collected was subjected to individual tweet reading, clustering, and analysis as part of a larger discourse on rumours and assassinations. Because of the need to harmonise these and adhering to the contextual demands of representation, I employed Hayden White’s (1987) idea of emplotment. This relates to the re-arrangement of raw data in a formal process of encoding in order to create coherent meanings with persuasive powers. This was a crucial indicator of how narrative (or bulletins of rumours for my case) intersect and are ordered through strategic selection of episodes, arrangement of the same following certain logics, and determining points of emphasis and de-emphasis. To obtain relevant information in this regard, I also posed a number of subsidiary questions, including: What are the dominant topics in tweets on Msando? Why did the author feed a particular tweet that way? What does this tweet do to, and for the commentator? How does this tweet fit in the larger narrative of Msando’s death? Once I answered these questions, I revisited secondary, theoretical and critical literature for analytical interpretation and provisional conclusions.

Similarly, I focused on non-linear texts such as photographs and memes, which were notable in some tweets. Roses (qtd in Hatfield, 2011) argues that images and other non-linear texts can create new stories or tell old ones in new ways. In regard to Msando, some images (especially his abandoned vehicle, his village home, and screen grabs of his TV interviews) were used by different commentators to augment their contributions, sometimes with little else written beside them. I considered these images as complimentary texts, and subjected them to question-driven analysis. Some of the questions were: who created the image? Why does this particular image keep reappearing? What aspects of this image does the sender intend the audience to focus on? What reactions and other responses does this image elicit from the creator, resender, or audience? These questions and their answers reflected my awareness of the complementarity of texts, and the multiplicity of possible meanings that a single text or image may carry because, as is now established, images are polysemic texts. I then presented the analysed in discursive terms, while adhering to the conventional academic format of chapters.

1.4.4 Dataset Limitations
In conducting this research, I encountered a number of challenges that slowed me down, but I eventually mitigated. One, the nature of my research area, that is the digital space of Twitter, is very fluid and attracts a very heavy traffic of information on a given subject. This is especially so when an issue is in topical and/or contentious, which translates to ‘trending’
in Twitter parlance. This challenge meant that it was difficult for me to effectively track the emergence and flow of tweets on Msando and Ngumbu. To overcome this challenge, I devised a web scraping strategy that enabled me to flag out any tweets with the words ‘Msando’ or ‘Ngumbu’ in them, which I then sieved through a matrix that I used to order the tweets that I had harvested.

Related to this was the challenge of deliberate erasures by initial tweeters. Although I had anticipated that the back-end digital technologies would automatically archive tweets for later retrieval when need arises, I had not reckoned with the possibility that a few users would deliberately delete some of their tweets, even those that were not controversial. This meant that it was not possible to go back to the specific tweets at a later point. However, this challenge applied to rather few tweets, most of which I had captured in the tweet matrix.

1.4.5: Ethical considerations
I was guided by Payne and Payne’s (2004) protocols on research, especially regarding the slippages between what may be legal but unethical. Ethical considerations are the moral disposition that dictates that a researcher upholds high professional standards of technical procedures, respects and shields the people involved from demeaning or other forms of mistreatment. Ethical considerations also involve ensuring that participants in the study are informed beforehand of all relevant and material facts of the research, such that when the respondents for instance agree to answer questions from the researcher, they do so from the standpoint of informed consent (Busha and Harter, 1980; Payne and Payne, 2004).

During fieldwork, I benefited from my previous training and experience as a print journalist. This was especially important during the informal conversations that I had in the villages in Lifunga and Gachie, as well as with investigative officers and journalists who were involved in the Msando and Ngumbu matter. In all these instances, my previous experience as a trained journalist equipped me with important skills that I employed in the course of my research. These skills included how to identify the most resourceful respondents, how to frame questions and conversational cues in ways that could provoke free expression by my respondents, and how to create analytical distance in order to shield myself from the existing biases on the ground.
At the same time, the same position allowed me to draw on some of my former networks of colleagues among the media fraternity. This was useful in winning the trust of the respondents, especially given the political sensitivity that surrounded any conversations around Msando soon after his death and even after. By leveraging on these prior networks, I was able to access information and leads that would otherwise have been unavailable to me.

Similarly, I also benefitted from the same experience and networks in reaching out to investigative officers. The nature of criminal investigation and media reportage necessitates some symbiotic relationship between the officers on the beat and the media practitioners. When the public is outraged by such crimes as killings, it requires answers from police. The police relies on the media to relay these answers, therefore creating a working relationship between the two groups. It is this relationship that I drew on when speaking to some of the officers whose responses informed my chapter on professional voices.

In all these, the fact that I was a doctoral candidate in a university in the United Kingdom also bequeathed upon me some aura of authority that made it possible for me to appear more credible to my former colleagues in the media and contacts in the police force. It was clear that my interest in probing into the Msando and Ngumbu sagas was purely for academic purposes. In Kenya, where in the past secret police would pass off as researchers only to obtain information on ‘dissident’ voices, people are not always forthcoming with answers to sensitive and politically charged inquiries such as my research. Despite this general apprehension, I managed to win the trust of my respondents in Lifunga and Gachie by, first of all, leveraging on my networks in the media and their informants to demonstrate that my interest in the matter was purely for academic purposes.

Furthermore, I also leveraged on my networks in the media fraternity to identify and then approach one research assistant each – who I later acknowledged in this thesis – to chaperon me around Lifunga and Kiambu, respectively, as a way of further winning the trust of the local population and ensuring that the logistics of organising for the informal interviews were easily managed.

Having won over my respondents, and to further deepen their trust, I relied on informal conversations to create a sense of conviviality instead of the inquisitorial and even
interrogative approach that would have created some distance between the respondents and myself. This approach thus enabled me to obtain information from respondents who understood my motives and gave their views without apprehension. I also assured them that they were free to withdraw from the process at any time in the course of my interviews.

1.5: Chapter summaries

This Introduction sets the parameters of my whole thesis by providing a contextual background to the study, summarising the research questions and reviewing relevant literature. The chapter focuses on the variables in my research area; thus, rumours as epistemes of modern times, unexplained killings as a national concern, and politics.

In Chapter 2, I explore the structural and functional changes in the scope of rumours that were imagined, created, and deployed by Kenyans in their attempt to debate the issues that Msando and Ngumbu’s deaths provoked. By critiquing literature on rumour, politics in social media, and focusing on specific rumours, I show that rumours have changed and in turn been changed by cultures that are engendered by digital platforms. Among the changes include the modes and processes of rumour production, where rumours emerge as products of co-creation, and serve as indicators and enablers of an amorphous and unruly public. Further, rumours are also subject to simultaneous archiving and excavation, they transcend space and time, and are prone to contradictions such as spawning new forms of intolerance within the digital sphere dominated by KoT. Therefore, the novelty of rumours is partly in their structural adaptation and ability to create new public orders.

Chapter 3 focuses on the discursive disruptions that digital platforms and cultures have occasioned on rumours, showing how rumours that used to circulate among circles of close friends within geographical proximity of each other have changed. Now, unlike previously, rumours circulate in globally dispersed communities of shared interests. The chapter also highlights the paradoxes of modernising technologies; that while one would associate such communities with analytical sophistication, they sometimes demonstrate abhorrent parochialism in debating issues. Because of this, the emergent discourses are laced with ethnic, gender, and other forms of bigotry.

In Chapter 4, I demonstrate how Msando’s death and its national implications were retold in local, ethno-nationalist idioms. I highlight issues of reception of Msando’s death and the value attached to this death in the context of a raging presidential contest. I also argue that
the death of Msando was a critical plank in the Lifunga people’s explanation of Odinga’s loss in the presidential election, because the death was interpreted as evidence that the Uhuru-Ruto axis was so afraid of losing that the only way they could win the election was to rig out Odinga. But this, allegedly, could not have been done with Msando alive. For these people, therefore, the death of Msando was interpreted as sufficient proof that indeed the election of 2017 was rigged.

In Chapter 5, I analyse the reception of Ngumbu’s death in her village in Kiambu. I show that, in the same way that the common perceptions of ‘government’ among the local population determine whether to accuse it of the killings or not framed the responses from Lifunga, in Gachie, a common perspective was that the local population were ‘in government’, and this somewhat prevented them from claiming that the government was culpable in Ngumbu’s death. It could be that quietly, the Gachie residents suspected the government of involvement in Ngumbu’s death. But if this was the case, they were quite hesitant to express this suspicion, partly because they were influenced by pragmatic considerations of their position in regard to the national politics that was at its peak. Generally, indeed, my fieldwork showed that residents of Gachie were overly cautious in their responses, some of which were total silence when asked who could have been responsible for Ngumbu’s killing. In this chapter, I also argue that gender as a variable did not overly trump ethnicity and political expediency in determining the reception and interpretation of Ngumbu’s death.

In Chapter 6, I counterbalance the views by KoT on the one hand, and those from Lifunga Village (Siaya, for Msando) and Gachie (Kiambu, for Ngumbu). That the responses from Lifunga and Gachie would be subjective was not in question; what was uncertain was the role of professional or distant observers – the media – whose versions could be analysed for presumed objectivity. Yet, my study shows that even the professionals chose self-preservation and posturing when asked sensitive questions. They hardly went beyond the dominant narratives for fear of exposing themselves. Therefore, much of what I found involved media practitioners who merely repeated what was in the public domain, and simply eschewed deep analysis that could have yielded more nuanced explanations on the interface between media practices and dominant rumourous conversations in an emerging public sphere.
Lastly, in Chapter 7, I conclude the thesis. I begin by summarising the context of the research, its objectives, and methods. I also capture some of the critical findings in each of the chapters and in the thesis as a whole.
Chapter 2: Digital Disruption and the Changing Textures of Rumour

2.1: Introduction
This chapter explores the impact of digital technologies on the nature and circulation of rumours. It is underpinned by the hypothesis that Kenyans’ greater uptake of social media to create and circulate doubtful narratives has reconfigured the nature of cultural conversations as political commentaries and as agents of socialisation. Rumours have a long history influenced by diverse and fluid stimuli, including politics. These influences undermine other truthful and false versions of information. Unverified and informal narratives play different roles that are imposed upon them by specific circumstances depending on people’s relationship with government or official sources of information. They offer versions of truth that the government may want to repress. They give voice to devoiced groups of people and enable their engagement with topical issues of the day. Ultimately, rumours impact on society, discipline and moderate government, and create communities of creators and consumers.

Given the widespread use of social media platforms for social interactions in private and public spheres, the relationship between rumours and officialdom has also changed. The flow and uses of rumours reflect cultural and political shifts where the powerful and the powerless both create and use rumours for strategic purposes. Thus rumour, its practices, and cultures also change in terms of its form and functions in society. One of these changes is in how social media naturally disrupts sources of authority in news reportage and commentary. This is because “social media, being open to everyone, enables not only news organisations and professional journalists to post news stories, but also ordinary citizens to report from their own (sources), perspectives and experiences” (Zubiaga et. al., 2016: 2).

A deepening culture of democracy, and greater freedom have contributed to the rise in the power and popularity of rumours in Kenya. That rumours travel faster now is due to both the impact of social media technologies and greater freedoms that are imagined and embraced by users. Despite an abundance of anecdotal evidence to this effect, questions still arise about how exactly social media and greater freedom have altered the nature and function of rumours. How has rumour changed in the era of social media technologies? Do rumours
play the same functions presently as they did during before the advent of social media? And what are the explanations and impacts of these? This chapter answers these questions to explain the continued relevance of rumours as socio-cultural texts and, therefore, worthy of scholarship. The chapter makes two presumptions: one, that rumours are flexible in terms of structure, which makes them resilient carriers of private sentiments into public spheres. Two, that there is inherent logic in the flexibility of rumour that makes it circulate infinitely.

This chapter holds that rumours in Kenya have mainly circulated and functioned in the context of national politics. They have been used to create and express freedoms in times of repression, and have helped to challenge the authority of government narratives. But, in the post-2010 Constitution, the presence of rumours invites other explanations which, as I argue later in this chapter, emerge from the idea and practice of ‘rumourous conversations’ (Zubiaga et al, 2016): these have also become sufficiently elastic to accommodate emerging cultures of communication.

2.2: Digital disruptions on the texture of rumours
Digital technologies have reoriented how people relate with each other. However, the impact of this disruption on informal social texts, such as rumour, remains unclear. Yet, in societies such as Kenya, where public discourse is mediated through rumour (Osborn, 2008), the success or failure of such conversations cannot be measured adequately without considering how rumours are enabled, or undermined, by technologies and emerging cultures of communication. The assumption is that since social media has altered modern social and political life generally, it must have affected the production and use of rumours as well.

The changes caused by ‘digital disruption’ (Gilbert, 2005; Chodos, 2012) are evident in social, economic, and political spheres. This has subsequently altered people’s public engagements, especially in contexts of unequal power relations. Such a scenario often provokes symbolic and epistemic resistance to perceived political domination (Ogot, 2009). The current expansion of democratic space in Kenya occurred against the wishes of the government and its supporters (Kanyinga and Okello, 2008). Government agents harassed pro-democracy advocates, something that divided public opinion between its supporters and those of pro-democracy advocates. The second group relied on surreptitious and informal avenues, including rumours, to express their views. Even now, the risk of government
harassment for free speech still remains. That is why rumour-mongering, now in digital forms, remains viable since it enables individuals to debate topical issues while avoiding direct confrontation with the government.

These changes have influenced rumours in two critical ways. First, through packaging rumours in digital textualities, social media takes what was previously considered ‘traditional’ and grafts them onto digital modernity that extends their scope in space and time, while simultaneously archiving them. However, the archiving is also subject to the vicissitudes of intended or inadvertent deletion, something that further determines later accessibility of these sentiments. Second, rumours become untamable through infinite diffusion in a process analogous to the metaphoric rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), as I discussed in the Introduction. The metaphor reflects the fact that it is not always possible to determine the origin of a particular rumour, especially where such a rumour emerges in verbal engagements and is only transferred to digital platforms later. Coupled with other structural and systemic parameters that frame meaning-making, the concept of the rhizome is useful throughout this thesis in analysing tweets and other potential sources of rumours.

Smartphone technologies and the communication cultures they facilitate have recently created wider communities of familiarity, conviviality, and acquaintanceship. Such communities enable interlocutors to share rumours, jokes, and general commentaries through digital mobilisation of affect. For example, such platforms have been central in channeling collective outrage using tools such as hashtags on Twitter, and equivalents on Facebook and WhatsApp groups, among others. Such approaches construct discursive boundaries in the digital spaces that both enable and contain the flow of different arguments. Arguably, some of these tools are digital equivalents of analogue symbols, for instance hashtags as megaphones that symbolise mobilisation and protest.

2.2.1: #RIPMsando: Hashtags as megaphones? Past fears, present anxieties
Traditionally, rumours captured silent conversations only broken by whispers, but contemporary communication technologies amplify them leading to greater audibility. Ogola’s (2005) study of “Whispers”, a satirical column in the Sunday Nation newspaper, demonstrated that the column increased the people’s audibility and subsequently helped to deflate the state’s surveillance during the peak of the Moi dictatorship. Through ‘whispered’ rumours, the common people could criticise the state. Currently, political and technological
changes enable viral messages to be (co)created, circulated, preserved, and excavated when necessary. Thus, unlike the past when ‘whispering rumours’ preserved them, presently it is amplifying the rumours that gives them relevance, potency, and durability.

As the Msando case shows, the hashtag #RIPMsando would be invoked long after his death, whenever KoT felt the government or its agents had failed Kenyans. The use of the hashtag #RIPMsando entailed excavation and amplification of rumour(s) surrounding his death. Critically, the hashtag #RIPMsando indexed that which would otherwise have disappeared. These included Msando himself and the circumstances surrounding his death. Thus, although rumours remain substantively the same, their circulation in digital platforms allows for new forms of proximate associations and amplifications that latch onto perceived government lapses or implication in undesirable activities. For instance, the presumption that the government ought to have taken Msando’s security more seriously as Kenya prepared for elections led some people to conclude that it might have deliberately led Msando to his death. It is the reason KoT used the hashtag #RIPMsando to admonish the government for not protecting Msando.

The structural and functional changes that affect the circulation and functions of rumours reflect the changing orientation of people towards information, society, technologies of communication, and their intersections. Digital disruption, like rumour, is not a linear or one-way affair. It is also subject to diverse influences that signal broad change in society. For example, in the Msando case, well-known pro-government blogger Dennis Itumbi⁸ and equally famous government critic Boniface Mwangi both used social media platforms to circulate their respective versions of rumours. Mwangi had openly implicated the government in the disappearance and death of Msando. On his Twitter handle @bonifacemwangi, Mwangi, an award-winning photojournalist-turned human rights activist and anti-corruption crusader, wrote on December 30, 2017:

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⁸ Itumbi, a blogger, was Director of Digital Communications at State House from 2013 to 2019. He has since become a government critic, and subsequently pulled down some of the tweets that are supportive of the current government’s position.
Earlier, on October 21, 2017, when Roselyn Akombe, a former commissioner with the electoral commission fled Kenya for New York claiming her life was in danger (Ngina, 2017), Itumbi, @OleItumbi, commented: “Dear @UN Why would your staffer @DrAkonbeRosyln [Sic] be commenting on Kenyan election matters, yet she had already resigned from @IEBCKenya?”

It was ironical that government officials also used Twitter for rumour-mongering, much in the same way as critics. Such ironies are not confined to Kenya. For instance, the disruptions of the digital revolution have driven China to innovate ways of extending its control mechanisms; engineering new forms of cyber surveillance to track and control human freedoms (Economy, 2018). Yet, even in these regimes of e-control measures, the impulse for human expressiveness survives, creates and strengthens socialities, amusements, and other aspects of everyday life, including rumour and gossip (Leibold, 2011). In Kenya, this impulse for individual and collective expression emerges in new packages of rumour-mongering, in both physical and digital spaces.
Thus, digital platforms such as Twitter have reconfigured the nature and power of rumours by collapsing physical and social boundaries that constrained old verbal rumours. The platforms have created cyclic and infinite narrative strands that can be supported, challenged, or negated by friends and strangers alike. Hence, what would otherwise be lost to the greater worlds is amplified infinitely. The metaphorical rhizome as both a conceptual term and analytical tool is useful because not only were the digital rumours offshoots of or grafted on their subterranean and inaudible analogue variants, but their circulation also reflected the heterogeneity, cartographic multiplicity, and unclear beginnings and endings. Thus, all digital rumours about Msando and Ngumbu's disappearance and deaths amounted to a universalisation of the local.

2.2.2: Universalisation of the local
Advances in communication technologies create new imaginations of Kenya's public spheres. While previously rumours would travel short distances involving small groups of trusted friends and family, the new platforms have broadened the scope of travel and increased the numbers of participants. Further, the advances have created new sites of freedoms and new discursive communities within the digital spheres, and allowed greater connections with the outside world. Therefore, digital technologies and cultures in Kenya have universalised local experiences. This is because digital rumours can be accessed by anyone around the globe, provided the authors 'follow' each other on Twitter.

This means two things. One, that although some Kenyans such as Mwangi can appear to brazenly challenge the authority of official narratives explaining undesirable developments such as politicised-deaths, these commentators know that the rest of the world somehow watches them and gives them some remote political protection. This is especially so given that the tweets by Mwangi and others receive the attention of the international community resident in Nairobi, including human rights groups, embassies of European and American countries, and other pro-human rights actors in the country. Collectively, these groups tend to support a greater shift towards free expression and thus offer support to activists whenever it is needed. This demonstrates the limits of policing speech, which was common before and after the widespread uptake of social media, and government's inability to check uncomfortable talk that instantaneously transcends geographical boundaries. The second implication of digitalisation of rumour is that these platforms and cultures broaden the arena in which 'rumourous conversations' take place, creating wider audiences and interlocutors.
This limits the government’s capacity to police speech because a lot of it occurs in digital spaces over which the government has little authority, if any. This is especially so where some of the commentators, and thus co-creators of rumours that specifically implicate the state, live abroad. For instance, Miguna Miguna, @MigunaMiguna, on January 20, 2020, wrote:

To Moses Kuria: If you would like Kenyans to believe that you are truly "ubwogable," which is a Luo word meaning FEARLESS, then PUBLICLY present DETAILS on how YOU and Despot Uhuru Kenyatta abducted, tortured, mutilated and MURDERED Chris Msando. Stop meandering.

5:00 pm · 20 Jan 2020 · Twitter Web App

466 Retweets 37 Quote Tweets 3,811 Likes

This particular tweet calls for some contextualisation. At the beginning of 2020, some Jubilee Party politicians complained that the government had forsaken them even after they had risked their national reputations in supporting it. One of them was Moses Kuria, a pro-government member of parliament, who in 2017 controversially alleged that while Kenyans were worrying about Msando’s safety, he was gallivanting with a young woman. Although Kuria later retracted this statement and deleted the Facebook post in which it appeared, he was scandalised and ridiculed nationally.

Ironically, Kuria would later threaten to expose details surrounding Msando’s death (Nyaguthie, 2020; Wako, 2020). That Kuria made this allegation shows the versatility of rumour – that it can be used to hold authorities to ransom. Further, even pro-government personalities may instrumentalise particular rumours and use them when the need arises, depending on the prevailing political realities. For example, while Kuria had all along pretended not to know the details surrounding Msando’s death, his disenchantment with the government made him threaten to reveal Msando’s killers. Yet, the paradox is that possibly, all he knew could as well have been what was already in the public domain. But his use of a popular social media platform – Facebook – to imply that there was more to Msando’s death than was known publicly only demonstrated how social media has impacted on the textualities of rumour in Kenya’s public imaginaries.
This also suggests that when a rumour lingers in the public domain for long, someone within
the government is likely to open up and talk more about it, possibly because such a rumour
attracts a huge following that politicians may want to woo. Where such a person may not
have any further information as is already available, likely, the same rumour can be used to
inspire more related rumours, as was the case with Kuria. The initial suspicion that Msando
was missing or had been killed for political reasons implied a failure by the administration to
either track or protect the man who had vowed to protect the integrity of the elections. Thus,
the different rumours accused the government directly and indirectly, goading it to confirm
the claims that Msando was missing, and/or dead. Many Kenyans expected that the
government or its hawkish supporters would respond to these allegations. That was why
Kuria’s claims that Msando was a reckless reveler were interpreted as a credible position of
the government.

The fact that Kuria could openly claim to have more information about such a sensitive issue
shows that either he was withholding information all along, or that he got more details by
following conversations on social media and decided to join the fray when it suited his
interests. This then shows that rumours have a double attraction for ordinary people as well
as prominent political personalities. Unlike the earlier suggestions (Nyairo, 2013) that
rumours are a general occupation of the socio-political marginalised, the Msando case and
Kuria’s post show that not only does the political elite surveil rumours, they also follow them
and create their own variants to challenge dominant perspectives on a given issue.

2.2.3: Implications of retweets, monikers and virtual story-telling and meaning-making
Social media has altered rumours in many ways, notably inspiring co-creativity, wider
circulation, and simultaneous archiving. This has also enabled later retrieval, ascription of
specific quips to identifiable individuals, and creation of opportunities for emergent
hierarchies among creators and consumers of rumours. For instance, although the rumour
on Msando’s disappearance and death began provisionally and by implication, it evolved
into fullness later through simple retweets, and retweets with comments, from Kenya and
beyond. In other words, the full rumour came about via an elaborate process of co-creation.
Further, during this process, initial rumours were extended through supplementary
commentaries to an extent where the sets of rumours constituted a single wholesome
narrative that also spoke to other earlier and later narratives of state complicity in Msando’s killing as well as others.

These processes yielded a network of intertwined rumours. The rumours would make sense at two discernible levels. First, as small bits in which commentators spoke about a particular incident of killing that topped trends using the hashtags #RIPMsando and #LoggedOutForever and, second, in broader metaphorical terms. Here, fragments of the rumours combined to form a fuller narrative. Thus, while some commentators would comment on or condemn the government on cases of unresolved killings, others simply saw such as the latest illustration of the government’s chronic failure to protect its citizens.

Thus, as rumours that are enabled by social media become more audible, they disrupt analogue attributes such as discursive boundaries while almost simultaneously creating others. The result is a fluid scenario, where different narratives may appear fragmented, but which make sense to observers -- including some who comment in social media. Further, while analogue rumour-mongering practices and cultures relied on trust and confidentiality to conceal their identities and shield them from retribution by state agents, today rumour-mongers achieve anonymity by exploiting the settings and other features of social media technologies. These include using monikers that neither identify the commentator nor are permanent. Indeed, the realities of rhizome-like collapse of spatial-temporal boundaries also inspires disavowal of permanent and traceable identities. Such strategies allow for descriptive identities that are not necessarily people’s actual names.

This eventually alters the nature and function of rumours and how they work. Given these add-on attributes of rumours within the digital sphere, it is unsurprising that the government also policed and created rumours. This challenges previous assumptions on how power flows and the relationship between the government and its people. The government becomes the object of the gaze of rumour-mongers. It also takes part in its own creation and circulation of rumours as surveilling observers of the actors within the digital spheres, ultimately creating lateral rather than vertical hierarchies of power. These shifts result in obfuscation of boundaries and alteration of power relations. They also lead to the enhancement of the power of rumour as a variable in public social interactions between and among civic groups, the civic populace, and the government.
2.3: Co-creation of rumours as negation and affirmation of narrative

Barthes (1977) argues that meanings of texts are not always as intended by the author. That meaning is influenced by expectations and experiences of the reader who, together with the author of a text, contribute (un)equally to the totality of ultimate meanings of the text. For Barthes, “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination … to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author.”9 Barthes’ symbolic death of the author is partly because of how authors themselves emerge from specific times in particular societies with corresponding topical issues of the day. Therefore, whatever a writer creates traces its origins to a society that illuminates issues worthy of writing on. Thus, a writer’s spatial-temporal circumstances co-create the text in ways comparable to how Msando’s death and Kenya’s political histories contributed to the rumours around the time he died.

However, the intended meanings of any text, including rumour, are further complicated by the existing political and other contexts that surround their creation. Building on Barthes’ idea, Wimsatt and Beardsley (1982) say readers encounter texts from different standpoints, including information asymmetry, unequal power relations, and even possible conspiracy by groups who may be motivated to slant the text’s meanings. Thus the meanings of a specific rumour are the collective product of the initiator of a particular fragment of a rumour, the retweeter, likers, the retweeters with comments, and even those who read quietly without either liking or retweeting. Indeed, it is arguable that the latter category of silent readers comprises the majority of consumers of rumours.

If rumours in the digital sphere simultaneously evolve as they are created, consumed, and augmented as they travel, they are subject to the workings of intentional and affective fallacies à la Wimsatt and Beardsley. This is because while the ideological and political intentions of a particular rumour can be speculated, it is impossible to tell the intention of the rumour creator. That is why Kuria’s ‘rumour’ about Msando’s supposed licentiousness provoked so much unintended outrage that he had to pull down the Facebook post.

These dynamics also informed other tweets that were ‘replies’ to earlier rumours. They introduced a dialogic aspect to the totality of rumours, especially where those tweets were by prominent members of KoT. For instance, on July 31, 2017, prominent Nairobi lawyer Donald Kipkorir, @DonaldBKipkorir, wrote that:

This tweet attracted over 50 replies, some enlisting the views of other commentators by using the ‘tagging’ feature on Twitter. This allowed a commentator to deliberately invite other users’ comments on the subject. In this way, rumours collectively reflected disputations on one key claim: the involvement of the government in Msando’s killing.

The recurrent message was framed by political undertones that further refracted opposition politics. The position was also buttressed by ‘evidentiary’ appendages, including references to and associations with previous assassinations where government was allegedly involved, and appeal to commonsense as well as to ethnic solidarities. There were also instances of equally persuasive co-created counter-narratives that questioned the theory of government involvement in Msando’s death. These counter-narratives simultaneously redirected the discourse towards opposition politicians as perceived “perennial bad losers in political contests” and who, equally, never conceded defeat.

For example, soon after Msando died, Raila Odinga and the entire National Super Alliance (NASA) leadership politicised the killing. They visited Msando’s family, took photographs with the widow, and attended his funeral, where they accused the government of laxity and demanded thorough investigations into his death. On the other hand, detractors cast Raila as a sore loser who would always look for an excuse to implicate the government and disown fair election results. It was in this context, which has a long digital span, that another lawyer, Steve Ogolla, @SteveOgollaw, wrote “THE CLAIM that Raila Odinga is a sore loser who
never concedes defeat is unbelievably lazy & dishonest, & reinforces the view that promoters of such claim have no regard for common sense. But that’s not the problem. Problem is trying to co-opt the right minded into such sloppiness” (August 18, 2019).

This shows how Msando’s killing further attracted different antagonistic sets of rumours. Hence, unlike rumours generally, the structural attributes of rumours surrounding Msando demonstrated semantic incompleteness (Beall, 2015) that was made whole by a shadowy presence of the particular rumour’s negating counterfoil. Such a foil simultaneously affirmed the existence and potency of a given claim by disavowing its persuasiveness. As Beall (2015) argues elsewhere, semantic incompleteness can be achieved through relentless trivialisation of sentiments – sometimes reasonable ones – that the antagonists among KoT co-creatively relayed.

The creation, tweeting and retweeting was co-creative in a way that democratised rumours within the digital space. Through both consensus and dissension on the claims and counter-claims of who killed Msando and for what reasons, KoT inadvertently participated in spontaneous and sometimes playful extension, negation, and (counter)theorisation of the subject in the rumours. The democratisation of rumours also de-centred ideas and practices of creative or analytical authority, and replaced these with popularity instead (Chodos, 2012). Hence, the popularity of rumours – measured by retweets or replies by discussants – was not necessarily determined by decipherable logic or evidence of the claims. Rather, it depended on a commentator’s civic activist, and political claims.

But these claims occasionally took on the aura of authority. For instance, Akombe’s tweets immediately after Msando’s death were as good as any other person’s – given that she hardly adduced evidence to back up her claims. However, her status as a former commissioner at IEBC, her claims that her life was in danger, and her subsequent flight into exile in the United States, all cumulatively imbued her tweets with hierarchical privilege. For example on December 17, 2018, Akombe @DrRoselynAkombe tweeted:
Earlier, she had tweeted:

“#RIPMsando #RIPCarolineOdiga #RIPBabyPendo #RIPMoraa #EurobondScam #GalanaKulaluScam #MafiaHouseScam #SGRScam #NYSScam #IEBCScam #RuarakaLandScam #IntegrityHouseScam”.

The last tweet drew a ledger of government malfeasances, from killing innocent civilians to running a bandit economy awash with mega scandals and theft of public resources. Read jointly, Akombe’s tweets spoke of a rogue, cannibalistic and parasitic government that could not be trusted. It was also a call to action for Kenyans to stand up for the public good.

Many KoT, following Akombe’s tweets, somehow started believing that the government knew more than it reported on Msando’s death. Earlier, Akombe had used both Twitter and regular TV appearances to build a reputation as a focused, articulate, and fair IEBC commissioner. Yet, the meanings of Akombe’s tweets cumulatively lay in her lexical choices, in the larger context of Kenya’s history and politics, and in her central role as IEBC commissioner. It was as though, in the absence of Msando who had attained angelic status in death, Akombe’s word was sacred because it was presumably closest to what he would have said.

Yet again, unlike the analogue times when public claims hardly invited associations with relatively prominent people, rumourous conversations in the digital era provide for and necessitate involvement of such high-ranking personalities in debates. Noteworthy, although rumours surrounding the earlier killings of JM Kariuki and Robert Ouko also involved prominent personalities, these featured mainly as objects of suspicion and not as debaters in rumourous conversations. Thus, the archiving of social media allowed politicians and other prominent personalities to participate in the rumourous chats Msando’s death provoked.
The structural settings of social media technologies also contributed to the multiplier effect of some rumours, and the reification of voices that pronounced them. For instance, the technological provisions for public ‘reply’ to the initial sender of a message, possibilities of tagging virtually everyone who may be interested in a particular Twitter feed or its response, and the possibilities of excavating older tweets contributed to the emerging spectre of a rumour’s concentricity, unforgettability, and associations with specific individuals and times. Subsequently, individuals seemingly walk within digital spaces with their corresponding bulletins of rumours that merely need to be activated by the click of a button before the entire world can read them.

Herein lies another change on rumours occasioned by digital technologies: unlike before the advent of social media when rumours could well be equated to visible living organisms with finite movement from origin or birth, life and then death, currently rumours could be said to have infinite possibilities of origin, life, and dormancy. The dormancy becomes that part of its existence when a particular rumour has no immediate use or relevance, and can be disrupted and invoked every time a commentator needs to refer to it or unleash it to make a point in a new or rediscovered public debate. It also means that one can trace the genealogy of a rumour up to a given point. That is how, although the hashtag #RIPMsando peaked a week after his death and around election time, it was only used irregularly, depending on need. However, later, there was little that was new in terms of Twitter opinions by KoT, except the continuous retweeting of what had earlier been said, a process theorised by Cinelli, et al. (2021), to which I now turn.

2.3.1: Narrative creation in the echo chambers of tweets and retweets
Among the most significant ways that social media platforms and media cultures have influenced rumour is in the allowance for multiple, cacophonous voices to emerge. All these voices comment on related issues, some bearing masked identities, while raising the audibility of other well-known voices at different times. These changes also enable collective, continuous creation, circulation, consumption, and critique of rumours, such that it is impossible to determine beginnings and endings of specific rumours.

Unlike earlier times when the circulation of rumours was sporadic and their consumption limited to relatively small groups of trusted friends, currently, the flow of rumours from beginning to end is followed by public readers who may be unknown. These strangers also
add to the completeness of the rumour, thus creating a chain link of rumours whose organic whole is the output of many different but related pieces. And while it is possible to argue that this was also the case with analogue forms of rumour, a critical difference is that in contemporary times, it is possible to trace the contribution of each individual co-creator of the rumour train. This co-creation is in the structural and interpretive aspects of rumour, where the intended meaning is not always the ultimate one relayed. The combination of verbal trickery and supplementary information added to tweets as they travel from initial creator and tweeter to subsequent retweeters mean that the cumulative meanings and lexical details of a single tweet grow as it travels, hence celebrating co-creativity. This was the case with rumours on Msando and Ngumbu.

Given the socio-political context of the rumours on Msando and Ngumbu, however, the co-creation did little to establish the truth-value in the rumours that went round. Similarly, the counter-narratives by government agents, which were intended to absolve the state of blame, cited investigative truths that were nonetheless unconvincing to the general public. Both the government’s intentions and the many tweets that blamed the government assumed that their goals would be considered seriously, or that the emotional components of the tweets would achieve their intended objectives. Meanings, therefore, emerge from a judicious filtering of a mix of emotions, intentions, grammars, and other contextual contributors to meaning-making. Thus, the intuitive co-creation of rumours by KoT is not necessarily a creation of singular or collective meanings, but of narrative generally. These processes yield a more critical assignment of creating a version of the public sphere that responds to socio-political issues as they emerge within the current contexts. Hence, the instrumentalisation of social media platforms in co-creation, circulation, preservation, and critique of rumours within the digital sphere in Kenya may help to expose what Kenyans generally think about issues and the key players in the development of those issues. In so doing, they inescapably work towards configuring a public sphere, which I discuss next.

2.4: Rumour, social media and the configuration of Kenya’s public spheres
KoT play a significant role in reenacting publics and counter-publics in Kenya, à la Warner (2002). For Warner, publics reenact power dynamics of marginality, lack individual control of narrative trajectories, have shared grievances, and the desire for change. However, Warner’s attributes only partly apply in Kenya – and Africa – because they do not explain
the discursive relationship between various actors in the emerging public spheres. This does not negate Warner’s analysis; it only highlights the problematic nature of publics in Africa.

The ambivalence of publics in Kenya and Africa is partly because of the colonial legacies of direct and indirect rule (Ekeh, 1975; Mamdani, 1996), and the postcolonial political experimentations that have generally impeded the emergence of genuine public discourses. These scholars have played a critical role in questioning the extent to which the idea of the publics as theorized in Europe and America is applicable in Africa. The contestations regarding the usefulness of Eurocentric notions of the public in understanding socio-political discourses in post-colonial Africa derive in part from the fact that while post-colonial African states inherited colonial boundaries and their bureaucracies, the business of statecraft shifted from the variable of race to that of ethnicity, give or take a few variations. And so the notion of publics and their implications regarding socio-political interactions vis à vis resource allocations need to be correspondingly tweaked for better appreciation.

Indeed, I concur with Mamdani’s (1996) suggestion that the public in Africa is bifurcated along binaries of rural/urban, which in turn generate nationals that are either subject/citizens, respectively. For Mamdani, this arises because the African state, like its colonial nanny, is focused more on resource exploitation and self-preservation than growing democracy. Ekeh argues that “experiences of colonialism in Africa have led to the existence of two publics instead of one public, as in the West” (1975: 91). For Ekeh, both spheres are glued together by a “moral foundation” (1975: 91) that creates overlaps of discursive issues that, in Europe, would be clearly designated exclusively to either the public or the private spheres. The unfolding scheme, therefore, limits the scope and spread of political debates because different actors, bureaucrats and commoners, can oscillate between the two publics depending on the moment and its logics. For instance, while a senior government official may deal with the core business of civic or governance during the week, they retreat to rural or cultural pockets at the weekend for socio-cultural relevance.

Other scholars take more diachronic and space-centred analyses of how emerging publics in Africa enable or undermine political discourses (Ogola, 2018; Nyabola, 2018; Karekwaivanane 2019). For example, Karekwaivanane (2019), who focused on Facebook debates in Zimbabwe, noted a tendency towards the unruly by common commentators, which subverted common ideas of how public debates should be conducted. Debates in
Africa subsist but also differ from those in the West because the debaters use various masking techniques – what Karekwaivanane calls ‘symbolically laden pseudonyms’ – and signal older political texts, which lock out of intelligibility a significant number of actors, including government agents.

As KoT’s debates on Msando’s death show, commentators hardly go into these spaces to build consensus. Rather, they participate in debates mainly to reinforce their preconceived political ideologies or ethnic affiliations. That is why, after Msando’s death, the KoT debates referred to national histories, regional dynamics, and the politics of pro- or anti-government. Largely, KoT took pre-determined positions on whether Msando had been killed by the government dominated by the Kikuyu-Kalenjin-alliance; and/or whether Msando would have ensured a free and fair presidential election. These respective positions, following Karekwaivanane’s argument, were imposed on the interlocutors by the histories of their political fathers – mostly claims of entitlement or laments of victimisation. Hence, while the rumours on Msando’s death circulated in a public sphere of sorts, this sphere was neither singular nor strictly of the same attributes as outlined by Habermas (1974). Instead, there were several overlapping public spheres of pro-and anti-officialdom, of different regional and ethnic blocs, and of different socio-economic standing. These spheres constituted what Karekwaivanane (2019) calls ‘unruly publics’ because they negated all the tenets previously associated with orderly, decipherable publics.

There were also occasions of nodal interconnectedness for these publics in Kenya with others elsewhere, a process enabled by digital globalisation. That Miguna and Akombe could actively participate in public debates in Kenya from Canada and the United States, respectively, demonstrated both the locality and globality of some of the publics that digital technology could create. For instance, on July 26, 2020, Miguna Miguna, on @MigunaMiguna, posted a string of tweets targeting former IEBC Head of Secretariat Ezra Chiloba. In the 8.14pm tweet, Miguna Miguna posed:
QUESTIONS Ezra Chiloba must answer

1. Apart from Karanja Kibicho, who else sent you to lure Chris Msando on Friday, July 29, 2017?

2. Who ordered you to MONITOR Chris Msando’s movements?

3. Who "seconded" you to the @IEBCKenya

Dr. Miguna Miguna @MigunaMiguna · Jul 26, 2020

Replying to @MigunaMiguna

4. Who ordered you to reinstate James Muhati as the head of the @IEBCKenya’s ICT after Msando had been kidnapped, illegally detained, tortured, mutilated and murdered?

5. Who paid you Sh 300 million part of which you purchased the massive Kitale farm?

#uhurumustgo

Dr. Miguna Miguna @MigunaMiguna · Jul 26, 2020

6. Whose idea was it to recruit, train and use Carol Ngumbu to lure Chris Msando on July 29, 2017?

7. Who picked up Carol Ngumbu from Kikuyu and brought her to the CBD on July 29, 2017?

8. Who kidnapped Msando at the Club 7?

These are just preliminary questions. @IntlCrimCourt
Akombe fled to the USA two months after Msando’s death. While in America, she continued to tweet while rebuking the government and some of her former colleagues for the negligence that allegedly led to Msando’s death. The tweets – already cited – suggested that indeed Msando had been killed because of his unwavering determination to deliver credible elections. Akombe and Miguna’s voices among KoT introduced some ‘credibility’ to claims that the government could not merely dismiss as falsehoods or ignore as inconsequential. Akombe, Miguna, and other KoT thus enabled the perception of the emerging publics as sites of intellectual and thought leadership.

Nyabola (2018) observes that the prevalence of social media technologies and their role in enabling ‘digital democracies’ constitute Kenya’s zeitgeist moment. She adds that the range of “popular energy” seen in the rumours and tweets allow ordinary citizens to work towards “building a corporative public sphere that reflects their interests and passions” (2018: xxiii). These developments have been most visible on Twitter, where many netizens have political awareness that can theorise aspects of the state and the role of citizens in the country. This also arises because Twitterscape, specifically, and social media, generally, attract intellectual and political elites as commentators who shape public opinion (Gozálvez et al., 2019). These elites thus contribute to the deepening of deliberative democracy, breaking “spirals of silence” in “digital niches” similar to KoT (Gozálvez et al., 2019).

Thus, the spread of open debate, political mobilisation of civic responsiveness to national debates, and government’s response to these developments, all indicate the power of social media platforms and rumours to reshape the subjects of discussion and invite diverse
responses. Instead of viewing rumours as subversion, the digital packaging of rumours in social media platforms reify them as important sources of information. These dynamics constitute early stages of configuring a public sphere that is responsive to Kenya’s peculiarities while allowing for deliberative democracy and other discourses to grow.

However, Twitterscape is not an unproblematic new sphere for contributors. There are numerous complexities in Twittersphere, itself an ‘unruly public’ that simultaneously enables favourable expressions but stifles those deemed ‘unfavourable’ (Gozálvez et al., 2019). Nyabola’s (2018) work on the class dimension of digital media technologies shows how, for instance, KoT construct information silos that lead to the creation of echo chambers and the tendency to silence divergent opinions.

Relevant to my study is that if KoT’s seeming consensus was that the government was implicated in the killing of Msando, the popular opinion could have been created by cyberbullying techniques that silenced those who held other views. On this, Gozálvez et. al. note that

As long ago as the treatise Democracy in America (2018, originally published in 1835), Alexis de Tocqueville warned of a sort of soft despotism which develops from what he called the tyranny of the majority, referring to what for him was one of the greatest dangers of the USA’s nascent democracy. He believed the exacerbation of popular opinion could lead to tyranny by imposing a single way of thinking as the very notion of the majority prevents any debate and, worse still, sends dissenting individuals or non-aligned minorities into social exile (2019: 407, original italics).

Arguably, the ‘soft despotism’ and ‘tyranny of the majority’ among the KoT that debated Msando’s death could have muted other rumours with alternative positions. Thus, one negative outcome of digital platforms on rumours is the vulnerability of the platforms to power dynamics within Twitterscape. These power dynamics determine which rumours are amplified or muted, thus killing the diversity of narratives available to explain a single occurrence.

The exclusion from mainstream avenues of self-expression leads to what John Stuart Mills much earlier warned about an individual becoming “a social prisoner of dominant opinions”
(read in Gozálvez et. al., 2019: 407). Hence, “Twitter accelerates the spiral of silence and strengthens convergence toward the opinion of the majority because it encourages selective exposure” (Miyata, Yamamoto and Ogawa, 2015: 1138) due to the “bandwagon effect” (Gozálvez et. al., 2019: 409) where commentators may be pressed for time but also want to appear to take part in topical conversations. This is especially applicable in Kenya where different categories face different layers of exclusion on account of economic, gender, and cultural differences. Traditionally silenced groups such as women thus have to aggressively push back against exclusion. Nyabola argues that “women on social media report being systemically harassed by men online for strongly expressing their opinions, much as would happen offline” (2018: 45-6). Onyango-Obbo (2019) notes that Twitter in Kenya:

“has been a boon for tweeps willing to monetise their handles (why not?), but it has also already considerably crowded out a lot of the spontaneous and cheeky fare that makes social media enjoyable. Another of the unpleasant results is that women seem to have been exiled from Kenyan Twitter. There was a time when women, several in media, were some of the leading lights of Kenyan Twitter” (Onyango-Obbo, 2019).

This results in a homogenisation of public discourse and curtailing diverse expressions by many people, hence undermining the emergence of a vibrant public sphere. This is especially possible given that governments have appropriated social media as spaces for social and political control. As Meaker (2019) argues, “social media channels are becoming ‘instruments for political distortion and societal control’” because despite the usual popularity of these spaces to activists, “authoritarian states have adopted similar tactics, deploying the social media platforms that once jeopardised their power.” All these dynamics, read in the context of Kenya, may explain the extremes with which Msando’s death was amplified, and that of his female companion silenced.

2.5: Rumour and fake news: The question of boundaries

“Social networks like Twitter can be a stimulus for troubled political communication, especially when faced with evidence of microblogging practices based on fake news, shocking but unfounded rumours in unverified tweets, statements that are grandiose but doubtful if not clearly untrue, but which take shape as reality (truth) as they appear and circulate widely online
... above all because they say what many users want to hear”. (Gozálvez et.al. 2019: 408).

‘Fake news’ is one of the most troubling developments associated with smartphone platforms. Defining ‘fake news’ is also problematic because of its usually undetectable similarities with related concepts such as propaganda, falsehoods, and rumour. Nonetheless, Barclay (2018) suggests that ‘fake news’ is “any incorrect information that has been created intentionally under the guise of a fact” (208). Trandoc et. al. note that ‘fake news’ refers “[to viral posts based on fictitious accounts made to look like news reports” (2018: 138). Regarding the rumours that Msando’s death provoked, one may argue that the conspiracy theories that KoT weaved amounted to fake news which blurred the disciplinary boundaries between rumours and fake news (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009). These conspiracy theories become popular because of informational deficits, or ‘crippled epistemology’, to borrow Hardin’s (2002) phrase. By ‘crippled epistemology’, Hardin refers to the development and belief in right or wrong ideas by people who lack diverse credible information sources. Considering Msando’s death and the subsequent rumours, conspiracy theories variously appeared in outright fake news, mythification, distortion, and disinformation that many different actors engaged in. This was possible because rumour, fake news, and their variants have textual attributes that can be used by one to camouflage as the other.

The usability and adaptability of fake news and these other texts by, among others, the political leadership, means that it can be compressed to suit use in many circumstances. Thus, digital platforms and their attendant cultures have erased the boundaries between rumour and fake news such that what begins as a rumour may end up purveying fake news. Furthermore, subjects of rumours now resort to using fake news to counter the real and perceived damage caused by rumours, thereby establishing a very close relationship between the two. It is common that “[o]nline platforms provide space for non-journalists to reach a mass audience. The rise of citizen journalism [has] challenged the link between news and journalists, as non-journalists […] engage in journalistic activities to produce journalistic outputs, including news” (Trandoc et. al., 2018: 139). Hence, although both creators and consumers of rumours reach out to digital spaces to upload and access the same, their intention is not always to deal with fake news. Rather, such commentators aim to check out what they consider to be genuine news.
The growing popularity of digital platforms as the primary source of news has also pushed mainstream news sources to the fringes. Notably, the interface between rumour and fake news is enabled by stylistic choices such as semantic foregrounding or verbal trickery, including satire, parody, fabrication, photo manipulation, propaganda, advertising and public relations (Trandoc, et. al., 2018). Although all these are commonly used in social media broadly, they are more prominent in Twitterscape.

Regarding the totality of rumours surrounding Msando’s death and after, some KoT systematically used one or the other of these stylistic devices to lend force to their messages. Other stylistic choices involving embellishments, exaggerations, allusions, and use of non-linear texts to enhance semantic and structural aspects of rumour. They also demonstrated that in the political context of Msando’s death, rumour transcended its genre boundaries to include fake news, traditional cultural beliefs, and other forms of public engagement. Rumour was thus used for populism through making unsubstantiated claims such as Kuria posing with Msando’s car, or accusing Msando of indulging in reckless trysts.

2.6: Digital archiving and excavation of rumours
Co-creating, circulating, digital archiving and excavation of rumours are arguably among the most critical ways in which Twitter shaped the narrative on Msando from the moment he was declared missing to the discovery of his body and after. Digital archiving entails ordering and curating information along discernible reference items, whether discipline, subject, or author. Concerning Msando, rumours were archived broadly under the subject name, ‘Msando’, and within the Twitterscape, the hashtag #RIPMsando. Together with possibilities and practices of retweeting, retweeting with comments, replying, or tagging, KoT created and archived extensive twitterature on Msando for debate, reference, and revision.

Archiving plays a critical role in building memory at personal, communal, and national levels. It also influences the politics of memory and amnesia, themselves critical elements in imagining communities that become nations (Anderson, 1983). According to Ketelaar, “[p]eople create, process, appraise and use archives, influenced consciously or unconsciously by cultural and social factors. What applies to recordkeeping in organisations applies to the archives as a social institution of a nation too” (2001:136). Regarding Msando and Ngumbu, the rumours that were strung on the hashtag #RIPMsando related to all these dimensions, but especially contestation for narrative authority. They also recuperated
related memories of state repression and disposability of some human life by successive governments. Thus, the hashtag #RIPMsando simultaneously indexed different conversations while stringing together all relevant pitches within the rumour circuits. Ultimately, the archiving was both in terms of possibilities of digital recuperation and in ordering rumourous conversations according to subjects of discussion or thematic value. The use of digital platforms ensured the creation of an online access portal with a one-stop reference phrase, in this case the hashtag #RIPMsando.

2.7: Conclusion
I have sought to explore how rumours have changed due to the spread of social media use and the emerging digital cultures. These developments have altered the terms and forms of public debates among individuals, groups and the government. My discussion here shows that rumour has undergone tremendous changes in structure and function. Rumour has also transcended traditional packaging from whispered orality to become textual inscriptions in digital spaces that can be co-created, archived, and excavated as and when necessary. These changes have emboldened rumours, made them more audible, and placed them at the centre of public debates. This way, rumours demand more imaginative responses from the authorities, not the traditional dismissal or discrediting of their informational or discursive value.

The texture of rumour has also changed because of the endless possibilities of co-creation through digital diffusion mechanisms. Such diffusional means, especially retweeting with comments, enable greater elasticity of rumours’ lifespans also because of possibilities of archiving and/or retrieval. Rumours have also grown in their explanatory authority, as evidenced by their appropriation by prominent activist voices and government agents through infiltration. From a scholarly standpoint, social media innovations – co-creation and archiving, for instance – have reconfigured the texture of rumours by enabling near scientific harvesting of high numbers of rumours on a specific subject – Msando and Ngumbu’s social lives and actual deaths, for instance – without relying on the often fallible memory of individuals. While earlier scholars of rumour such as White (2000) and Fontein (2009) could collect rumours about their subjects, such collections often relied on ethnographic approaches that were undermined by wider margins of error, possibilities of respondent embellishments, and the ultimate phenomenon that I call the death of a rumour. By this, I mean a scenario where what began as a strong rumour would progressively fade into
oblivion either because there were no occasions for retelling the specific rumour, or there were no ready listeners of that particular rumour.

Similarly, the tone and clarity of rumours has changed. This is especially so considering the possibilities of identity camouflaging that current rumour-mongers can enjoy, because of the technology that allows for the use of monikers. This is a double-faced change in the sense that while a specific rumour can be traced to the first person to tweet it, for instance, that person may not have used his actual nominal identity. The use of monikers and their variants enable rumour creators and consumers to fashion their identities to reflect their wider historical or cultural consciousness, while retaining a presence in the existing social, political, and cultural topicality. This strategy is what also makes it possible for government agents to mask themselves and participate in rumourous conversations within social media platforms. In doing this, they enact what I consider to be a guerrilla rumour banter that entangles civilian critics and government agent respondents. This relationship, involving perceived government agents and inferred critics, enables a back-and-forth flow of rumours. The rival debaters coexist in the same digital habitus, and partake of the same rumourous conversations with their cohabitants. Thus, rumour in the age of social media technologies provides both the rationale and means for intimate entanglements of government agents and their critics in ways that were not possible during the days of analogue rumour cultures. Noteworthy also is the way rumours rely on other strategies of authorisation. These strategies may include use of photographs and memes to accompany narration. This suggests a shift towards rumours as evidentiary claims that anchor their authority on what is known and seen. This is why in the rumours that accused Kuria of knowing Msando’s abductors, the photograph of Kuria (previously unknown to have been involved in Msando’s disappearance) standing beside Msando’s vehicle (the known) becomes a critical part of the rumour. This also largely accounts for the wider spread of that particular rumour – measured by the relatively high number of retweets and the comments it attracted. All these dynamics suggest that social media platforms and their corresponding digital cultures have changed the structure, functions, and communication of rumours. These changes have contributed to the creation of a fragile public sphere, and blurred boundaries between rumour and related texts such as gossip, fake news, and mainstream news. Overall, these changes have lent elite status to rumour, a genre hitherto associated with rural, illiterate and ill-informed village folks.

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The fact that intellectual and political leaders partake of rumourous conversations also means that rumour has become a medium by which national debates can be conceptualised and undertaken by opinion shapers. Such conversations simultaneously borrow from and extend Habermas’ (1974) version of publics, thus imposing a sense of order in what other scholars have identified as unruly publics that exist in Africa (Karekwaivanane, 2019). Currently, within the digital spaces, rumour is the preoccupation and product of an urbane, historically aware, and ideologically conscientious class capable of provoking reasoned responses from government functionaries. They all then collectively contribute to the imagination and narration of modern national histories in Kenya. That is why the role of rumours in explaining Msando and Ngumbu’s deaths should be taken seriously. These rumours, courtesy of social media platforms are, ironically, made in the contexts of informational surplus; not by hapless villagers with limited access to reasoned information, but by urban, intellectually sophisticated commentators on national issues.
Chapter Three: Examining Patterns of Digital Rumours: Afterlives of Msando and National Politics

3.1: Introduction

In this chapter, I examine the discernible structural and thematic patterns of the tweets on Msando. Within the stylistic and textual attributes of popular cultural imaginations, Twitter-based rumours bear nuanced linguistic and extra-linguistic, structural and thematic patterns that can be unpacked for concealed meanings on the way Kenyans interpreted Msando’s death. Subsequently, regarding such rumours, patterns of tweets and rumours reflected changing perspectives on Kenya’s political and socio-cultural histories. They also highlighted an emerging class-based impulse towards self- and group-affirmation that harked back to Kenya’s political past.

A critical synchronic examination of the tweets shows discernible patterns in tone, structure, grammar, and use of non-linear texts such as photographs and memes. The combined use of textual, pictorial, and affective cues in the rumours simultaneously acknowledged and applied narration as theorised by Genette (1972[1980]), Barthes (1977), and Abbot (2002). Barthes (1977) argues that both formal and informal aspects of human discourse refract and reproduce aspects of power in society, and demonstrate forms of agentic autonomy within institutional structures. That is how, as Abbot in turn argues, narrative forms such as rumour create and contain meanings (2002: 36). Therefore, I focus on the communicative patterns discernible in the rumours on Msando in terms of how they yielded political meanings in digital spheres.

3.2: Contextualising patterns on digital rumours

Popular cultural texts, including rumours, offer spaces for publics to engage with topical issues. Rumours particularly allow for newness and creativity among interlocutors in terms of stylistic, linguistic, and thematic attributes depending on their cultures, geographies, and gender. The subsequent narratives have different meanings assigned or prioritised by different interest groups. In moments of critical national tensions, for instance election-related violence and inexplicable high-profile killings, rumours provide some credibility to
informational sources. They also provoke officialdom to respond to some of the claims embedded in popular unstructured conversations, leading to patterns of rumourous conversations where antagonistic ideological or political camps ascribe greater authority to their versions and diminish the credibility of other strands. This trend reflects a discursive dynamic that Genette (1972[1980]) calls the power of narratological dominance. Accordingly, multiple incidents can generate single narrations or, inversely, a single incident can provoke multiple narrations, for instance Msando’s death. In such situations, rumours may appear haphazard or merely as emotional responses to an event. Yet, they may also reflect the patterns and logics of different ideologies of the interlocutors relative to their proximity to power. Thus, I argue that there are structural and thematic patterns in the rumours that revolved around Msando’s death.

The patterns, however, only tell multiple variants of a mega story that, according to Bertens (2014), can be scrutinised to yield meanings on five critical elements of relations, order, duration, frequency, and point of view or perspective. Of these, relations is critical because it hints at the social and power dynamics that emerge from or are reflected in the discourses that KoT engage in regarding the history of killings in Kenya generally, and that of Msando in particular. These patterns are significant for two reasons. One is the role of Twitter, its potential in (dis)empowering agentic voices and, second, the present historical moment in Kenya when the freedom of expression is to a scale where people can use technology to comment on political killings and even implicate the government in the deaths. The freedom of expression and spread of technology have extended national conversations, especially among KoT.

KoT comprise influential voices whose interactions and commentaries shape the substance, priorities, and trajectories of discourse in social media. They contribute in creating and curating versions of a Kenyan public sphere, where commentators debate different issues. This implies that the intersection of rumours, smartphone technologies and Twitter together with a political consciousness among the people do generate interesting epistemes in various patterns. Yet, the concealed meanings of discourses by KoT are further obfuscated by their appeal to insiderist knowledge. Thus, debates by KoT can be clearer to readers who understand Kenya’s political themes. On this, Nyabola (2018) argues that the digital sphere is a prototype of its physical, verbal variant and that what transpires in the latter is logically reflected in the former.
Therefore, in this chapter, I unravel patterns in the rumours that circulated among KoT on Msando’s death. I argue that there is a dominant pattern of affect that emerges following the phases that followed Msando’s disappearance until May 2019 when I started this thesis. The phases were marked by: (i) shock and horror at the reality of Msando’s death; (ii) outrage and anger following detailed reportage; (iii) cynicism and conspiratorial networking in rumours on Msando; and (iv) wry humour on the politics of the body and gender. Transitions across different phases were hazy; indeed, there were cases of back and forth movements through the same. Thus, despite the wildness, multiplicity and contradictions on Twitter, the seeming “chaotic plurality” (Mbembe, 1992) of the rumours actually concealed forms of cogency and coherences that can be interpreted for meanings.

3.3: Patterns in Twitter voices: Incomplete wholeness of rumours as tropes of history
Expansive scholarship exists on the nature and attributes of rumours as cultural texts. Relevant to my study is the consensus among scholars (White, 2000; Nyairo, 2013; Musila, 2015) on the amorphous structure and empowering substance of rumours. Indeed, rumours as generic texts enable participants in rumourous discourses to occupy discursive spaces of autonomous freedoms that allow them to probe, poke, chide, or mock unpopular authority. This freedom is exercised at two levels: one, in terms of the kind of rumours that are created and circulated and, two, what to believe, or not believe, from the rumours (and other more factual news) available. In this way, the double attraction of rumours is seen in their ability to empower their purveyors with a medium to articulate their contemporary or historical concerns.

3.3.1: On incomplete wholeness of rumours
The amorphous nature of rumour allows purveyors to create a buffer of disbelief when interacting with counter-narratives from other sources that may be (un)believable. Thus, besides the opening tweet, there emerges a series of (in)complete rumours in the sense that a single tweet relies for meaning on other earlier tweets, and in the process creates alternate series of rumours that are packaged in a back-and-forth, pro or anti a given political or ideological persuasion. Within the circuits of rumour among KoT, therefore, there emerges an endless imagining and fashioning of intelligible deliberations about the subjects of discussion – in this case the killing of Msando – in what I would call incomplete wholeness. By incomplete wholeness, I advance the argument that the meanings of the whole narrative
only relies in part on singular tweets, but fully when placed on an imaginary canvas where the entirety of rumours are imposed in a mosaic like form. In this way, a single rumour relies on other related rumours to complete the narrative of interlocutors who are bound together by a shared belief, for instance, of government culpability or lack of it. This implies that the textual unity and coherence of such Twitter narratives derive from a shared knowledge of the general politics, histories, and cultures of the nation such that meanings of individual tweets can be quite objectively verified by drawing variously or collectively on the historical, cultural, and political coordinates that are merely alluded to, or otherwise hinted at, by the interlocutors. This is because the same KoT have access to such information through personal or collective memory, a huge chunk of which travels around as fragments rather than whole units. Yet, as I explain early in this chapter, these dynamics may not always be apparent to outsiders, because they lie concealed in collective memories of different ethno-cultural or demographic groups within the nation.

The first critical pattern of these tweets, therefore, is their structural fragmentation and stylistic reliance on verbal trickery such as understatements, allusions, irony and sarcasm that relay messages in bits and pieces while drawing on the collective political (un)consciousness that complete the fragmented information to form the narrative whole. This trickery also entails the use of monikers and other masking techniques that allow commentators to express themselves while masquerading to be who they are not. This is linked to the strategy of affecting ‘invisibility’ that is ubiquitous with social media technologies and cultures, and accords with Spyer’s explanation of this practice as one that involves “exposing personal intimacies on Facebook timelines while carefully concealing some information that circulates broadly” (2017: 37). This approach is also broadly characterised by mutually intelligible dialogues among the interlocutors on the one hand, and between the commentators and government agents on the other. These thematic complexities within, and generated by discursive rumours, derive from the fact that, as Musila (2015) demonstrates, the explanatory value of a rumour lies in its ability to hold contradictory positions on the subject in need of explanation, and that “rumours can be untrue, or contain a grain of truth, or the whole truth waiting to burst out” (5). At the same time, rumours have a “deep historical complexity of differing, overlapping and entangled African urban imaginaries, aspirations, and notions of respectability, traversing divisions of class, age, gender, religion and political allegiance” (Fontein, 2009: 379).
It is perhaps this ‘deep historical complexity of differing’ in Kenya’s contemporary history that explains why and how news regarding Msando’s disappearance started as a rumour before it was picked up, broadcast and confirmed by mainstream media (Cherono and Kimanthi, 2017). The reportage of Msando’s disappearance and death, within Twitter spaces, was also the beginning of speculation over why Msando was killed. A general sentiment, which remains debatable even at the time of this research, is that Msando was abducted, tortured, and then killed because of the prominent role he was due to play in the then looming General Election. For Cherono and Kimanthi, “By virtue of his position, Mr Msando could be holding sensitive information on logs to the Kenya Integrated Electoral Management Systems (KIEMS), which will ensure that rigging doesn’t take place in this year’s elections” (ibid.). As soon as Msando was declared missing, virtually all commentators started contemplating his role in the impending elections, thus situating him at the centre of a then unfolding political drama. That the speculation took on that particular hue was partly because of the then political concerns with agentic self-assertion in a politically polarised public sphere, one in which the competing narratives were not necessarily driven by a need to establish the truth or negate a lie, but more to solidify a given political base and justify a preconceived narrative.

Although the commentators adopted competing, and sometimes outrightly contradictory stances, they all attempted to answer the foundational question of why Msando was killed. In line with the amorphous nature of rumours, none of the commentators ever answered the question beyond the usual speculation that Msando died because of his perceived integrity and determination to hold free and fair elections. Indeed, the issue was not, as per the tweets, whether the answer about who killed Msando had forensic or other truth value. It was whether the question and its variants coincided with, or departed from, an existing ideological standpoint that answered to long standing socio-political positions that had been shaped by regional or ethnic histories. Thus, for instance, a majority of commentators from Nyanza and Western provinces – based on their names – tended to take the position that the government was implicated in Msando’s death, while others – presumably from Mount Kenya and Rift Valley – were hesitant to accuse the government of involvement in the killing. Nyanza and Western regions remain the political bastion of Raila Odinga, whose NASA coalition that included Kalonzo Musyoka of lower eastern Kenya – mounted a campaign to unseat Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto’s Jubilee coalition.
The Uhuru-Ruto alliance thus predominantly attracted Gikuyu speakers of Central Kenya together with the Kalenjin and other plain Nilotes of the greater Rift Valley region. This support pattern somewhat reflected Nyabola’s (2018) argument that digital spaces merely extend the discursive patterns in analogue arenas, in this case the geographical patterns of ethno-political affiliations in Kenya. The negative transfer of ethnicity from analogue spheres to digital circuits, complete with the subsequent conversational trajectories, also cohered with Genette’s position regarding how stories are created, and how they make meaning. Genette (1972 [1980]:11) holds that “analysis of narrative discourse will thus for me be essentially a study of the relationships between narrative and story, between narrative and narrating, and … between story and narrating”, which, in my case, relates to the three critical variables that the tweets on Msando’s death refer to. These are, one, the history of political and politicised deaths in Kenya and the fitting in or otherwise of the Msando case; two, the role of rumour as an alternative narration of this strand of history and, three, the definitive aspects of rumour as a medium by which histories of killings, political and politicised deaths can be told and retold, erased and recalled.

3.3.2: Rumours and national(ist) discourses on Msando’s murder
Genette’s argument on the relationship between narrative and (hi)story, alongside the agentic implications of the narrative processes, has been amplified by White’s (2000b) observation about the stories that are created and circulated by rumours. Accordingly, such “stories may be true or false, but that’s neither the point nor their importance. They provide the words and descriptions that offer a contextualisation that older words do not invoke” (White, 2000b: 17), thereby restoring some agentic status to those who are involved in the creation and consumption of rumours.

In what seems to be an uncanny application of the notion of ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ (Felski, 2011: 574), the producers and consumers of the rumours on Msando imagined, created, and circulated narratives within Twitter spaces that offered speculative answers to questions that official scientific truths could not convincingly respond to. The idea is that although various disciplines such as science and forensics have for long enjoyed privileged status as creators of irreproachable truths, or ‘facts’ as they are widely called, in certain quarters these ‘facts’ tend to bear less persuasive value compared to rumours and gossip which, by their nature, invite social relations and their corresponding emotional attachments. This is the argument that Musila (2015) makes in her study of rumours that
surrounded the disappearance, murder (and coverup) of Julie Ward. For Musila, legal truths (murder trials), and scientific truths (autopsies) still leave some unanswered questions that are then filled by rumour and gossip that sometimes implicate the government. This usually occurs when commentators appear to be crafting a counter-narrative that disturbs the textual authority of the official narrative, alternatively questioning, subverting, but also extending the same narrative. Thus, a scrutiny of the rumours that were contained in tweets and retweets reveal discernible structural and thematic patterns on and about Msando’s death. This chapter, therefore, interrogates these patterns in order to demonstrate both structural logics and thematic unevenness of rumours in the context of Kenya’s political and social histories. I argue that although the surface of the tweets around Msando reflects a general concern with the crisis of a potentially culpable government, the positions that the various commentators adopted actually reflected and extended preconceived notions about wider national political patterns, complete with geographical, regional, and ethnic logics. These tweets also took on the amorphous characteristics of rumour as a powerful yet unofficial flow of information.

Clearly, rumour is a fluid discourse that complicates efforts at predictable analysis. However, I also appreciate that in Kenya’s context, investing time and intellectual effort in reading rumours is also important because archives and bulletins of rumour are an integral part of the country’s collective memory, its oral histories, popular cultural imaginaries and artefacts, and a basis upon which discourses in its public sphere are generally sustained (Berliner, 2005). Thus, Ellis argues that rumour “plays an important role in cementing popular belief in certain ideas and in propagating an enduring view of important political events” (1989: 330). This seems to have been the case as far as the tweets on Msando suggest. Variously, the range of tweets following his disappearance, death and burial are characterised by a mixed grill of extraordinarily captivating, chilling and thought provoking stances that signalled right from the beginning the commentators’ assertion of their right to be heard, their political orientations, and the elusiveness of the ultimate explanatory authority of a singular narrative. Ultimately, the tweets reflected these narratives as products of the times when expressive freedoms had been embraced by commentators such that although there were no new revelations of how and why Msando was killed, some commentators merely rehashed old versions implicating the government, while others continued to rebut these allegations, again using the same arguments. These dynamics point at provisional affective definers of the rumours that can be associated with different time-frames before and after Msando’s
death. These patterns and their emotional attributes constitute an aesthetics of affect that
the KoT employed to string together narratives that they used to attribute political blame for
Msando’s killing, but also of all other socio-political dynamics that were seen to frame
Kenyans’ lives generally.

3.4: The aesthetics of affect in rumours on Msando
As I suggest earlier in this chapter, a scrutiny of the affective aspects of the rumours on
Msando, from the time he was declared missing, the discovery of his body and that of his
companion, to the day of his burial, reveals clear emotional shifts. These ranged from shock
and fear, horror and anger, outrage, to cynical indifference and on to political and apolitical
developments in the country. The transitions from one dominant form of affect to the next
were not always clear-cut; rather, the shifts tended to be cloudy, depending on the issue of
the moment. One of these shifts related to the way many commentators affiliated with ethnic
categories in determining their standpoints on whether or not the government was
responsible or implicated in the Msando murder.

3.4.1: ‘Your name betrays you!’: Echoes of ethnicity and party politics in
#RIPMsando Tweets
Sometime in early 2014, former vice-president and opposition politician Kalonzo Musyoka
reportedly declined to respond to a question by a Kenyan journalist from central region (a
Kikuyu), implying that the reason the journalist failed to appreciate the obvious fact was
because of his [the journalist’s], ethnicity. While telling the journalist, “Your name betrays
you”, Musyoka’s utterance could well have been a Freudian slip, but it drew public outrage
perhaps because it was true. This anecdote is useful in pointing at how public discourse
in Kenya is almost always framed by ethnicity.

Ethnicity alters meaning-making in public conversations even among highly educated or
very politically influential individuals. As Genette (1980) reminds us, relations of interlocutors
and points of view, respectively adopted, tend to shape the order of narrative, duration, and
frequency of narration. In the Msando case, the relations of interlocutors determined the
ideological convictions of who could have been involved in the death, and then shaped the
ease with which the commentators would harp on his name – through the hashtag

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March 2021]
#RIPMsando – to express their views. The same logic explained how long one remained in the emotional space of anger and outrage, or moved on to self-preserving indifference.

Generally, the shift in time also marked changes in the tone of the tweets, and an equally growing clarity of their political instrumentalisation. Thus, there emerged a new phenomenon of afterlives of initial rumours, as earlier concerns became more amenable to readings in the context of memory and amnesia. In Kenya’s contemporary history, rumours on killings tend to hold critical referential and mnemonic afterlives that mark ordinary people’s entry into debates in the public sphere. If Kenyans are historically conscious people generally, this awareness is more manifest in politics rather than other strands of the country’s history. It is this characteristic alertness of Kenyans that rendered the outrage following the killing of Msando more acute and sustained, especially in the period immediately following his death. The first two phases were characterised by shock, fear, and horror following the disappearance and discovery of the mutilated body.

The tweets around this period essentially communicated messages of condolences to the family and friends of the deceased. On July 31, 2017, (2.05 pm), for instance, @MwauraWambiru tweeted:

@MrOmoro stated that “@IEBCKenya should stop the elections until Musando’s (sic) assassins are brought to book #RipMsando #ArrestMosesKuria #MusandoMissing #ElectionsKE” (July 2017, 3.03 pm). The barrage of tweets condemning and blaming the government for the killing of Msando was so extensive that members of KoT launched a number of hashtags, including #Chrismsando, #CryTheBelovedKenya, #KenyaMourns,
#LoggedOutForever, #Msando, and then #RIPMsando, all highlighting the outrage that greeted news of Msando’s disappearance and death.\textsuperscript{11}

The other phases were in turn characterised by three remarkable attributes. First was a burst of rumours and speculation on the possible causes of Msando’s murder, and possible killers. Such tweets almost always linked Msando’s death to his role in the 2017 General Election. For example, in a December 18, 2017 tweet, Moh Zyl, @Mozyyla’s said: “Replying to @kenyanpundit I still remember his interview with John Alanamu on Africa Uncensored, how he explained the seamless process of results transmission, the watertight process! Unfortunately, they were taking notes and knew they wouldn’t let him do what he knew best! #RIPMsando.” The ‘they’ who were taking notes vaguely refers to government agents who had all along featured in the digital space as culpable. While most commentators – such as Boniface Mwangi whom I discussed earlier – implicated the government, others blamed criminal elements in the country. Second, this phase saw KoT shift focus to the working environment at the IEBC, which was reportedly frosty and infiltrated by politically partisan interests.

Most of the commentators picked up on the widespread rumours about the poor collegial relationships within the IEBC, which were intensified by claims that some elements within it had been compromised to scuttle free and fair elections, a process that also involved the elimination of Msando. It is notable that the professional integrity of Msando was reified over the supposed incompetence of the then IEBC head of secretariat, Ezra Chiloba, whose conduct in the period before and soon after Msando’s death was generally considered to be suspect. As evident in these tweets:

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{D I K E M B E} & @Disembe - Aug 17, 2017 & \\
\hline
What disgusts me is that @ezraCHILOBA could still sing over the dead body of \#ChrisMsando, knowing so well he died for rigging to occur. 2 & \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{11} William Osoro, ‘Kenyans react to death of missing IEBC manager Chris Msando’, https://www.sde.co.ke/article/2001249857/kenyans-react-to-death-missing-of-iebc-manager-chris-msando%EF%BB%BF
(August 17, 2017, 8.56 pm); yet another wrote, "@EzraCHILOBA eulogising #ChrisMsando is like a bagpiper doing his thing. HYPOCRITES. #MsandoRequiem".

From the tweets, the outrage after Msando’s death was also directed at his colleagues at IEBC who were presumably implicated in his death because he was determined to prevent and resist election rigging. The tweets suggested that Msando’s colleagues were somehow willing to facilitate the rigging. The ubiquity of this belief was such that even Gado, a leading cartoonist affiliated to the Standard Media Group, captured the sentiments in a cartoon a year later.

![Figure 1: “Gado’s cartoon satirising IEBC’s attitude towards Msando’s death”](image)

Source: *Standard Newspapers*, (August 20, 2018)

As if to rebuke Kenyans for expecting that the death of Msando would be investigated and his killers punished, the cartoonist signalled a line in discourses around the context of the 2013 General Election that were said to have been rigged in favour of the Uhuru-Ruto ticket. While countering the opposition’s claims that the 2013 elections were rigged, the pro-Uhuru and Ruto politicians chided their rivals, counselling them to ‘accept and move on’. Following Msando’s death and KoT’s relentless agitations, the cartoon generally and the words ‘… move on’ in particular could well have been a call to silence, which some writers (Owuor, 2013) consider one of the ‘official languages’ of Kenya.

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The third attribute in this phase was marked by the involvement of leading politicians, especially from the opposition coalition NASA whose candidate in the presidential election, Odinga, posed the greatest challenge to Kenyatta’s re-election bid. Given that other opposition leaders – Musalia Mudavadi, Moses Wetang’ula and Musyoka – had secure support bases, their own commentaries on the murder were meant to appeal to these voting blocs and further alienate them from the ruling party, whose candidate, Kenyatta, had all along presented himself as a leader of all of Kenyans. As such, the death of Msando provided these political leaders with an opening to indulge in electoral politics of presidential contestations and necropolitics -- the power of the government to determine actively who lives and who dies, whether by commission or omission (Mbembe, 2003). This was the case among the opposition politicians who, while willing to concede that the government may not have killed Msando directly, also blamed the same government for failure to ensure that Msando was not killed.

The government, with its monopoly of legitimate violence, was considered (in)capable of assuring the lives of its citizens, especially one such as Msando who was playing a critical role in managing elections. This failure to protect the life of Msando is what provoked the ire of KoT and justified the creation and circulation of rumours about the government’s involvement in his death. The rumours thus circulated were an expression of public moral indignation and a desperate attempt by individual KoT to understand the unfolding events in their own way, given the absence of or suspicious nature of available information on Msando, his death, and reasons for the same. At the same time, the onslaught of condemnatory tweets from KoT and opposition politicians provoked counter reactions from some government agents and supporters of the Jubilee coalition of Uhuru and Ruto.

3.4.2: Narratives and their counters: Pro-government and opposition voices
It must be clarified that the popular KoT association of the government with Msando’s death was not just because of historical similarities with other unexplained deaths. Rather, it was also because of the conduct of some of the perceived power brokers within the Jubilee Party, and especially Moses Kuria, who was also the Member of Parliament for Gatundu South. It is critical to note that this is the same constituency that was at various times represented in Parliament by President Kenyatta, his father Jomo, and cousin Ngengi Muigai. In the confusion among Kenyans following the announcement that Msando was missing, Kuria
tweeted his own photograph taken while pointing at Msando’s car, and suggested that Msando was somewhere within Nairobi, “enjoying [a] sweet time with a woman.”

Figure 2: A tweet showing Moses Kuria next to Msando’s car hours after he was reported missing, but before his mutilated body was discovered.

This tweet, which initially excited pro-Jubilee supporters, soon provoked outrage when Msando’s body was discovered on the opposite end of town. Kuria then deleted the tweet and related posts in other social media platforms, including Facebook.¹³ Noteworthy, the antagonistic party politics of the day had underpinned Kuria’s tweet, in which he had already linked Msando to Odinga, who posed the greatest threat to the Uhuru-Ruto presidency. Therefore, given that at the time Odinga was a designated nemesis of the regime, Kuria’s impulsive linking him to Msando’s death, however futile the attempt, had the potential of being read as part of a rudimentary scheme to sway public opinion in favour of the incumbent president.

Dalziel (2013) suggests that “state sponsored rumours about its ‘enemies’ make the general public amenable to the state’s whims” in a manner similar to Althusser’s (1971) concept of interpellation. In his study of how ideology works, Althusser argued that dominant powers subtly use social institutions such as culture and schools to repeatedly impose certain ideas of good and bad, acceptable or unacceptable behaviour, or even preferences in such a way as to make individuals think that they make personal choices when in fact, those choices

were imposed upon them. In the context of my thesis, the Althusserian concept of interpellation worked out in animating political standpoints of both pro- and anti-government commentators. What appeared to be interlocutors’ personal choices on whether to accuse or defend the government for the death of Msando were actually positions that derived more from their geographic or ethnic positioning rather than objective, cerebral consideration of the facts as they were.

Regarding anti-government voices, the bigger question was how Kuria, a man with strong connections with State House and government generally, was the first person to locate Msando’s vehicle, long before the police did or even found the body. Some KoT concluded that Kuria must have had links with the National Intelligence Service, which had tipped him off regarding the incident: Albeyzo @Albert_Mwamburi tweeted:

![Twitter post](https://twitter.com/Albert_Mwamburi/status/852217518788785154)

But for the confirmation of Msando’s death, the rumour that Kuria had sparked by his post could have gained traction because, as Ellis wrote in the context of Togolese politics, there are what may be called “higher and lower forms of rumour which could be measured according to the closeness to power of one’s interlocutor.” It was also perhaps because of this spatial proximity between a controversial Jubilee Party operative and Msando’s car – what would ordinarily be part of police exhibit and crime scene – that equally senior opposition leaders found it easy to link the government with the killing. It was a strategy designed to up and maintain the national anger at Msando’s killing, and outrage at Kuria’s casual dismissal of Msando as a lecherous, irresponsible Odinga lackey. Kuria fell for the opposition’s scheme when he declared that he neither owed anyone an apology nor an explanation for the posts on Msando.14 Earlier, KoT had pushed for investigations into what

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Kuria knew about Msando’s disappearance and death. Some commentators called for Kuria’s arrest.\textsuperscript{15} Other posts included:

\begin{quote}
JANGIMA @Oukojohnj: “#RipMsando Moses Kuria must tell Kenyans how he accessed this vehicle and its location. #ArrestMosesKuria @JBoinnet @DPPS KE” (July 31, 2017, 3.03 pm)
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
@Orare @anjuhorare:

\begin{center}
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image1.png}
\end{center}

Mr O’moro @mrmoro:

\begin{center}
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image2.png}
\end{center}

But Kuria dismissed them, stoking more anger in the process. For the opposition leaders, commentary on the death was also meant to consolidate their voter base by using innuendo and insinuation to implicate Msando’s colleagues in his death.

An August 20 tweet by Philip Etale, a senior player in Odinga’s political party, the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), illustrates this point. For @EtalePhilip:

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}
By suggesting the oddity of the absence of IEBC staff at Msando’s funeral, Etale appealed to popular opinion (Ellis, 1989) of the time, while avoiding a literal accusation of Msando’s colleagues for involvement in his death. Although the tone appears neutral on the surface, lurking beneath it is the insinuation of Msando’s colleagues’ presumed knowledge of who killed him. The tweet drew on cultural codes for social interpretation of verbal tricks where, for instance, silence about a particular issue becomes the interlocutor’s most audible pronouncement on the same. Note that while @EtalePhilip does not outrightly state that Msando’s colleagues must have known something about his death, he references what he calls ‘tradition’, a vague system of socialisation that Etale and many other people can relate to, only that it is not definitive. Even within the freedoms that social media technologies afford users, there was room for the deployment of strategic silences, where innuendo is reified over outright accusations that may invite litigation for libel. Thus, there was a structural/semantic pattern in the tweets where some prominent contributors avoided frontal attacks on the system by directly linking the government or bureaucrats to the Msando murder in order to retain their contributions within the limits of the law.

Nonetheless, the same leaders exploited digital spaces to produce, savour, and relay rumours that served their immediate political agenda. For @EtalePhilip, it is possible that he knew that the absence of Msando’s colleagues at his funeral in the village was not their admission of culpability. In fact, there is little to suggest that such absence was completely irrational. In any case, political killings such as Tom Mboya’s in 1969 have witnessed notable absences of colleagues from the funerals (Ogot, 2003). It is inconceivable that Etale and other politicians who read mischief in this absence were unaware that people can choose to stay away from such politically-charged funerals; rather, Msando’s death could be further politicised for more capital at a time of intense electoral contestation. It was just another case of how the happenings outside the digital spaces influenced those within it, and were
in turn utilised by interested parties to push their agenda. Yet, again, Etale’s pitch is within the realm of verbal trickery, but more specifically what is called indirection (Searle, 1975) as a means of communication commonly applicable in the domain of linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics, but which resonates with my study. For Searle, “indirection refers to forms of conversation in which meaning relies on the active participation of audience in making sense […] out of an utterance ‘because what is said is separated from what is communicated’” (1975: 59. This dynamic, which is related to co-creation and cultural literacies that I discuss in Chapter 2, is what Etale counted on as he tweeted in this particular instance.

Perhaps Etale only raised the issue because the entire NASA leadership attended the burial ceremony, at which they accused the government of laxity and potential involvement in the death, while calling upon the same government “to conduct thorough investigations to expose and punish the killers.”  

16 For the NASA leadership, attending Msando’s funeral ceremony and making such pronouncements would appear to have been part of a well-choreographed social drama where they performed to the gallery of their local support base, national and international media, as a way of exerting pressure on the government to investigate the killing, and also to implicate the administration in the murder.

Arguably, the NASA team simply used Msando’s death and burial to paint President Kenyatta’s as a killer government. They did this by using innuendo, association with the anger and outrage following the killing, and physical presence within the vicinity of the cortege, all aimed at sending coded messages to Kenyans at large that as political leaders, they wanted justice for Msando. Thus, some of the tweets on Msando were accompanied by photographs and other graphic images that collectively reinforced the messages intended by their creators, such as Pall Jeff @paljeff who tweeted:

This was a closing of ranks that used semiotic strategy to push an agenda that was then gaining traction, suggesting that all other Kenyans were united against only two communities (the Kalenjin and Kikuyu) that felt entitled to the country’s political and other resources.

3.4.3: Rumour, silences and criticism
These developments align with how rumours mediate the relationship between the political class and their subjects in contemporary Kenya. For the latter, I find useful Toulabor’s (1994) theorisation of how satirical rumours in Togo used exclusivist codes and drew on relationships of trust and solidarity to comment on socio-political issues without provoking the wrath of Gnassingbe Eyadema’s intolerant government. In other words, rumours and gossip became valuable currency in negotiating and validating relationships of trust among a people who recognised the failings of the Eyadema government and its ability to turn violent. So, for the Togo experience, rumours became a vehicle for whispering criticism to the government without attracting violent backlashes.

The same scenario played out in post-colonial Kenya to varying degrees. What had begun as whispering debates on claims and counterclaims of exclusionary political order soon rose to become a national debate taking place in mainstream media (Gatu 2017; Goldsmith 2017;
Thus, right from the beginning, the seeming readiness among Kenyans to comment on sensitive issues coincided with caution that demarcated what could only be alluded to and not outrightly commented upon. However, it is clear that the strategic use of silence to speak truth to power became increasingly potent in the climates of cumulative outrage that followed political killings, reaching the peak with the Msando murder. This is because the constitutional reforms that culminated in the promulgation of the new 2010 Constitution of Kenya and the advent of smartphone-enabled social media cultures that made mass communication instantaneous rendered old forms of policing and silencing impossible. Therefore, the recent silences and corresponding articulations of views regarding the killing of Msando have been intuitive to individual commentators – providing for Althusserian interpellation – rather than overt government suffocation.

For this reason, the range of rumours that circulated around Msando had greater ontological value because they were neither constrained by undue policing nor underpinned by sheer anti-government sentimentality. Instead, the scoping of the rumours was mainly limited by the electoral politics of the time – and Msando’s role – within the larger context of ethnicity and party politics. In their commentaries, KoT tended to use symbolic and semiotic tactics to hint at what it was that they were actually saying, including ascribing culpability for some of the malpractices. For NASA leaders and their supporters, the politicisation of Msando’s death and insinuation of the possible involvement of government agents, or even colleagues at the electoral body, was not because they did not have access to truth. It was simply because in the obtaining situation, innuendo that tapped into the circulating rumours had a more pragmatic and urgent use. It was mainly to disparage the government and the IEBC for partisanship, and prepare their (opposition’s) supporters for the possibility of election rigging to favour the ruling party.

The whole social drama of KoT and the opposition simultaneously accusing the government and the IEBC was also meant to harp on earlier instances where election results had been tinkered with, as was the case in 2007 General Election where President Mwai Kibaki was said to have stolen Raila Odinga’s presidential victory, leading to the bloodshed of the post-election violence in 2008 (Kanyinga and Okello, 2008). Therefore, although the death of Msando and the immediate rumours surrounding potential accomplices were sufficient topics for rumour-mongering, the opposition actors used the same to awaken memories of
their perceived victory 10 years earlier, and to cast doubt on the impartiality of the IEBC in the electoral process and the chances of the government to accept defeat.

This last element was also meant for international audiences – especially through the diplomatic corps – rather than the local ones. In Kenya’s perennial electoral tensions, diplomats from European and North American countries have historically urged all-round respect for electoral outcomes. In this case of a widespread awareness that the opposition was credible and that Msando had repeatedly assured Kenyans of credible results transmission, there were good reasons to presume that whoever killed Msando – whether government or not – was fearful of free and fair elections. It was natural, therefore, to draw the attention of the international community to the murder that could alter the course of electoral results.

Given that the local population ‘knew’ the histories of killings and the central role that Msando was meant to play in the then forthcoming elections, who then, were the real audiences of NASA’s theatrics? I suggest that NASA’s repeated accusation of the government and its agents its assignation of culpability to them for the killing of Msando was meant to ensure that the international media, whose correspondents were in the country reporting the elections anyway, could pick it up and create greater awareness in international circles regarding the Kenyatta administration’s failure to secure the interests of institutions that could call him out. In plain terms, the opposition wanted to use narratives around Msando’s death to excavate earlier notions associated with both Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto as having played a key role in eliminating witnesses during their trial at the International Criminal Court at The Hague, where they were charged with bearing the greatest responsibility for the implosion in Kenya soon after the disputed presidential election in 2007. For the opposition leaders, it was all about hailing the sensibilities of their voters to histories of perceived electoral injustices, and to establish the government’s supposed conspiratorial links between the killing of Msando and a larger scheme that was to retain power by all means. In a way, this situation reflects what, elsewhere, Sunstein and Vermeule’s (2009) theorise as ‘conspiracy theories’.

Sunstein and Vermeule have argued that conspiracy theories arise either due to what they call, after Hardin (2002), ‘crippled epistemology’, that is, right or wrong beliefs that people form in spite of their rationality or lack of it, majorly because the believers in such conspiracy
theories have “a sharply limited number of (relevant) informational sources” (204), or through
rumours and speculation.

In Kenya, suspicion against official narratives and outright lack of verifiable news and
information have enabled the emergence and thriving of ‘conspiracy entrepreneurs’
(Sunstein 2009: 212) who read a scheme in virtually everything, and end up creating and
spreading conspiracy theories by way of rumours. Given that mainstream information is
suspect and the little there is usually manipulated anyway, people suffer from what Sunstein
refers to as ‘crippled epistemologies’, where “people know very few things, and what they
know is wrong” not because the people are irrational, but because whatever little they know
is more often than not reinforced by the little new information that they encounter. Therefore,
there were many tweets that revealed recurrent concerns with themes such as electoral
politics, ethnic identities and identifications, corruption and impunity, as well as notions of
integrity and the everyday life struggles of Kenyans. These are variously seen in tweets that
captured Kenyans’ awareness of their political economy. For instance, on August 19, 2017
@MutemiWaKiama tweeted:

Another example is @YWFKenya:

*Did you Know: 1) That Uhuru & Ruto were Suspects in the Death of 1,200+ Kenyans in 2007
2) That Italian Company #HackingTeam was used by GoK to snoop/hack on Kenyans...3) That High Court gave Orders on this Exercise 4) That Chris Msando died coz of ur Data #ResistHudumaNamba* (by YouthwithoutfutureKenya, May 14, 2019).
From these tweets, thematic patterns that emerge suggest that if Twitter succeeds in purveying rumours/gossip on deaths/killings, it does so because it uses factual data for propping purposes, as seen in YWFKenya’s awareness of court processes and the Executive’s uneasy relations with other arms of government. Ultimately, it is clear that rumours on killings have critical referential afterlives that are invoked during times of informational asymmetry; they also reflect deep historical awareness of institutions such as the judiciary, the executive, and international issues that touch on Kenya’s routine politics. Nevertheless, most of the issues reflected in the Msando tweets would converge at the fulcrum of Kenya’s electoral politics, as I show in the section that follows.

3.5: Msando’s death: Implications for the IEBC
So far, I have shown that although Kenya has had a long history of political killings and the centrality of rumours to debate such incidents, Msando’s death stands out because of his prominence in the 2017 General Election. Because of this, Msando rose to national political prominence after, rather than before, death. Therefore, Msando’s rise was occasioned by both the moment of his death – just around elections – and what was expected to be his role in the elections had he lived to see them. Exactly how rumours about Msando’s death impacted on people’s perception of IEBC and complicated the narrative trajectory of Kenya’s electoral politics calls for a critical evaluation.

It was not surprising that Msando’s disappearance and subsequent death were interpreted widely through political lenses that in turn reflected the dominant political persuasions of the moment. Most of the rumours implicated the government, largely by commission, although a few instances were of omission. According to some opposition supporters, the government
had failed to protect the lives of electoral officials.\textsuperscript{17} That the government was uneasy with the IEBC, which was also the subject of scathing attacks by KoT, demonstrated the vulnerability of institutions that enjoy independence anchored in constitutional provisions, including their senior staff who enjoy security of tenure. Aware of this, it was easy for all observers, both in the government and in the opposition, to alternate their attacks from IEBC to their political rivals. At stake was the reputations of the commentators on the one hand, and of the IEBC on the other.

Since 2010 when the current constitution was adopted, the IEBC is guaranteed decisional independence. This guarantee followed the disastrous performance of its predecessors – the Electoral Commission of Kenya (ECK) and the Interim Independent Electoral Commission (IIEC) – which were roundly accused of acquiescing to the whims of the political elite in power.\textsuperscript{18} With the contested outcome of the 2007 presidential election and the ignominious exit of the first IEBC team in 2015, the new Commission that conducted the 2017 elections was not only under scrutiny but was also an easy target for critics both from within the opposition and the government. This delicate position was entrenched by fears that the same Commission was particularly pliable to government pressure, hence the relentless attacks by the opposition, attacks that invited meticulous planning and assurances to the public that the Commission was determined to deliver free and fair elections.

This was the work of Msando and, although he was recruited for his technical expertise, his knowledge of the digital voter transmission mechanism – which he kept explaining to Kenyans via television talk shows – had somewhat won over some of the sceptics who believed that the Commission was only awaiting the final moment to endorse the will of the ruling party. So, the unspoken premise that informed some KoT’s repeated accusation of the IEBC and its senior staff was the Commission’s reputation of (some say deliberately) bungling elections. Ironically, the Supreme Court of Kenya would make a similar observation when nullifying Uhuru Kenyatta’s victory in 2017 – which also implied that the IEBC had within it morally bankrupt personnel who could well expose their colleagues to danger.


Similarly, the government had a reputation of involvement in electoral machinations, taking advantage of incumbency and government largesse to compromise institutions to its will.\textsuperscript{19} This was seen in the vociferous defence that the Uhuru Kenyatta government launched in favour of IEBC, which had been repeatedly accused by the opposition of being pro-government.\textsuperscript{20} True to form, electoral politics had exposed issues of individual and institutional reputation; the opposition castigating the institution charged with delivering credible elections, the government coming to the defence of that institution and thus raising questions of what interests it had in it.\textsuperscript{21} All this while, the IEBC was caught between attacks by the opposition and support from the regime, which, somehow eroded its credibility.

But even as the government was defending the IEBC, the same government was under attack from some activists on its role in extrajudicial killings.\textsuperscript{22} Yet, the deaths of Yebei and Makaburi, among others, had cast the government as a cannibal that feeds on its own offspring or, in the allegorical language of Ogude (2007), the ‘cat that ended up eating the homestead chicken.’ This awareness is what drove some of the vocal activists to outrightly accuse the government of killing Msando. For instance, Boniface Mwangi’s December 30, 2017 tweet, which I cited earlier in Chapter 2, listed Msando as among some of the victims of government-sponsored killings – with others such as Robert Ouko, Pio Gama Pinto, and Tom Mboya. In this particular tweet, Mwangi raises concerns about questions of credibility and authorisation of rumours on and of killings. It also highlights the issue of continuities and discontinuities of public discourses on killing and its victims, and demonstrates the capacity of rumours on a particular killing to excavate and re-present identities of earlier victims, some of them forgotten, such as the former activists Oscar King’ara and John Paul Oulo, who were killed in broad daylight near State House, Nairobi, and in whose deaths the government was implicated.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{22} Miriam Abraham, op. cit.
A notable aspect of Mwangi’s tweet is its introduction of continental, historical idiom of struggle against injustice, Aluta Continua, Portuguese for ‘the Struggle continues’, originally coined by Eduardo Mondlane and Samora Machel’s FRELIMO party in Mozambique, but popularised by South Africa’s Africa National Congress in its struggle against the Apartheid regime. But only a few members of KoT could be as brave as Mwangi, whose credentials as an activist have attracted international attention and support for his activities in entrenching civil liberties and holding the administration to some standards of accountability. This means that the international networks that Mwangi had cultivated accorded him some kind of ‘insurance’ against government retaliation, hence his decision to use his own identity – where other KoT members use monikers for self-preservation – to accuse the government of killing Msando.

Given @bonifacemwangi’s penchant for ‘shock art’ (Nyairo, 2016), he captures the extremes of emotional responses to cases of extrajudicial killings, which ultimately dramatises the aesthetics of affect, in this case national outrage. Therefore, @bonifacemwangi’s contribution would attain narrative authority over many others partly because of the tone of finality with which his tweet was cast, as well as because of his historical involvement in civil society activism. For @bonifacemwangi, tweeting to accuse the government of killing Msando was a continuation of his performance of social drama for local and international audiences, which pointed at the hierarchies of visibility and audibility among the KoT brigade. In all, Mwangi’s tweet and the rumours that they circulated demonstrated the fact that within KoT, power dynamics hold as much as anywhere else, and that these hierarchies show patterns of authorisation, credibility, and central nodes for building coherent activist discourses.

This also relates to Ogola’s (2015) observation that natural hierarchies emerge among commentators in virtual spaces, where certain individuals become more audible and thus form a fulcrum or nodal point around which virtual networks emerge. Another point regarding

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Mwangi’s tweet that I cite above relates to the subtexts that it gestures at. Whether this tweet signals an anxiety for a revolutionary zeal or not is unclear. What is evident, however, is the way commentators seem to draw on their knowledge of developments in other parts of the world. For instance, Cheti Rawlines @CRawlines tweeted on April 17, 2018:

![Tweet](image)

The phrase ‘give us a signal’ was associated with the fiery speech delivered by the Economic Freedom Fighters’ leader, Julius Malema, at the burial ceremony of Winnie Mandela, to bemoan what he portrayed as the rapacious betrayal and hypocrisy of the African National Congress leadership that had ostensibly persecuted her, only to flood her with accolades upon her death. For @CRawlines, it may well be that the phrase ‘give us a signal’ points at a personal awareness of transcontinental interconnectedness of political dynamics, or perhaps mere mimicry of political phraseology in a climate of endless circulation of fads. Whatever the case, @CRawlines in this tweet brings out the possibilities of regional identification which again suggests the political nature of rumours even when they are commenting on what is otherwise a localised matter.

All these tweets presume government complicity in Msando’s death. The tweets gained further currency when Akombe, a former commissioner at IEBC, later claimed that the commission’s then head of secretariat, Ezra Chiloba, had threatened her in a bid to stop her from testifying in Msando’s murder inquest (Ndung’u, 2020; Junior, 2020). Whatever else that these developments revealed – whether the suspected government agents were actually involved in the killing of Msando or not – it was clear that what was supposed to be a united electoral body was deeply divided and unable to speak with one voice at a time when their colleague had been murdered. These divisions within IEBC fuelled further waves of conspiracy theories that only served to undermine its credibility.
3.5.1: IEBC in the web of conspiracy theories

Underlying all these tweets are the workings of conspiracy theories, which are invoked by KoT to explain why, for instance, the government would kill Msando gruesomely, assuming it did. Accordingly, this was to access critical digital sources that were in the custody of Msando who, according to the rumour mills, was determined to ensure electoral integrity by barrning unauthorised access to and manipulation of data in the IEBC servers. Thus, Msando’s killing was specifically so that his thumb could be used to access this crucial data and at the same time silence him forever. On October 24, 2017, Stacey _@Nyandiko_ posted:

I wonder who is confident enough to have their fingerprints as IEBC password this time. #RIPMsando #KenyaElections

12:57 PM - Oct 24, 2017 - Twitter for iPhone

while on August 29, 2017, Lord Abraham Mutai @ItsMutai and Timothy Mutua, @TimothyMutua19, tweeted:

For Bisanjuherself, @bisanjuherself:
Hamza Mohamed @Hamza_Africa, roped in NASA leader Odinga in the conspiracies, perhaps to gain more traction among opposition supporters:

These allegations cast Msando as a latter-day legend who refused to be compromised and actually paid the ultimate price for professional integrity, while casting aspersions on his former colleagues at IEBC and the government. Thus, the rumours about Msando’s thumb being mutilated reflected the way rumour thrives on the melodramatic and the horrendous on the one hand, and on the other the role of rumours in myth-making in contemporary lore. Yet, the incredulity of these claims was not lost on the rumours’ creators and purveyors. The rumour mongers had the liberty to excite other members of KoT by churning out the most improbable, even bizarre, rumours in order to provoke responses. In an earlier study on rumours, James Ogude (1997) suggests that

*the power of rumour lies in the fact that each individual is free to choose what type of information to take or leave*, and also what to add to it to create a new text. Ultimately, language is manipulated to give rumour a specific angle or flavour and to generate other layers of meaning that one does not have to prove because rumour is inexhaustible – it has no beginning or end (my emphasis) (1997:82).

Ogude’s views here hint at the rhizomic nature of rumours surrounding the death of Msando. The observation that individuals ‘choose what type of information to take or leave’ applies to all information and not necessarily rumours. However, the presumption in such cases is that people make these decisions based on rational weighing of what may be sensible or not, founded or otherwise. But in the context of the rumours that surrounded Msando’s death, and the tweets that circulated in digital circuits, emotional impulses and political party affiliations played bigger roles in shaping these decisions, as opposed to calculated or rational decisions by the purveyors and consumers of those rumours. To the extent that these rumours have no identifiable beginning or end points, do not follow linear or
predictable pathways, they conform to Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) theorisation of the subversive nature of ‘unwanted’ information. Although Ogude (1997) does not mention these two scholars, they all concur on the indeterminacy of such informational flows as basic affirmations of subversive, expressive, and explanatory freedoms, which is precisely what the rumours surrounding Msando were.

These expressive and explanatory freedoms are invoked because beneath the seeming blame game by the opposition leaders, some government officials, and KoT in general is the awareness that some of the key institutions in Kenya have either been compromised or are simply lax. This awareness tends to highlight the need for institutional reform, suggesting that the regime of rumours does more than to spread informal or unverified information, and that they allow for commentators to champion a reform agenda. Indeed, reading the range of tweets within the study period suggests that among the recurrent concerns by commentators include a historical awareness of Kenya’s struggles with deepening institutional integrity of the judiciary, and allowing the same to spearhead the country’s struggle for good governance and accountability. Part of the political awareness that these rumours demonstrate is the extent to which political contestations threaten the fabric of nationhood, the darkest moment being the 2008 post-election violence.

The paradox of the government as a vicious entity and as a caring patron equally has a long history in Kenya specifically and Africa generally, where the government is configured on the basis of resource redistribution on an equitable basis. What this has done is to always split public opinion between those who criticise the government and those who praise it, depending on who between them had benefitted from the trappings of power. This narrative split followed the cartographies of ethnicity and geography in Kenya, where the Gikuyu-Kalenjin-Central-Rift Valley bloc were generally pro-government, and thus loath to spread the rumours of government involvement in the death of Msando. On the opposite end were the Luo-Luhya-Kamba-Western-lower eastern bloc that implicated the government in Msando’s death. Where the former category tended to support the regime of Uhuru Kenyatta uncritically, the latter was wont to criticise the same unreservedly – at least until March 9, 2018 when President Uhuru Kenyatta and Raila Odinga made peace and chose to work together. All these patterns and their shifts would be discernible in the discursive tenor among KoT, where themes of betrayal and exploitation dominated.
3.6: The Uhuru-Raila ‘handshake’ and perceptions of betrayal
On March 9, 2018, the media reported that President Uhuru Kenyatta and his adversary, Raila Odinga, had decided to work together for national unity and economic resurgence. Symbolised by what was later called the ‘handshake’, the two leaders were photographed on the steps of the President’s office in Nairobi – itself the symbol of state power – shaking hands and promising a new future for Kenya (Wanga, 2018). This move baffled many people, including friends and foes of the two leaders, and led to an endless suspicion that the two leaders were merely politicking, and that sooner rather than later, their political sparring would resume. Simply put, the ‘handshake’ was generally viewed as a hollow gesture.

Many people were apprehensive because just as the government under Uhuru Kenyatta could not be trusted, so was Odinga after the ‘handshake’, which many observers – including his supporters – construed as betrayal of a cause. In what appeared to be an extension of conspiracy theorisation of government and opposition party decisions, some doubts remained on the degree to which the same government could be trusted even when it had made gestures of accommodation for individuals and opposition leaders. For instance, Peter Munya, the Cabinet Secretary for Trade appointed Eva Buyu, Msando’s widow, to the Board of the Export Processing Zone Authority for a three-year period. KoT debated extensively whether Msando’s widow was justified to accept a government appointment, or whether her acceptance amounted to betrayal of his spirit. The question was whether she should take a sentimental perspective or pragmatic approach in making the decision. For example, Moses Odhiambo @mosestein opined that:

![Twitter exchange](image)

to which Lyf Holic Mzii @lyfholic replied:

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25 Gazette Notice, September 20, 2018
While these debates focused on Msando’s widow, they also hinted at the reasoning that informed the decision of the appointing authorities regarding how to assuage the public, appearing to atone for acts of omission or commission that led to the death of Msando, and perhaps indirectly acknowledged that whatever other reasons there may have been, Msando was killed for reasons related to his line of duty.

Considering the tone and substance of the tweets that debated the merits or demerits of Eva Buyu accepting a government appointment, the state machinery was intent on splitting opinion among Kenyans within and beyond Twitter. Her appointment was political to this extent because it temporarily shifted the focus of debate from the injustice of Msando’s killing to the existential and moral dilemma of whether or not to accept a government appointment so soon after the gory and inexplicable death of her husband. Commentators such as Moses Odhiambo, who were opposed to her taking up the appointment, based their objection on the timing. What all these debates highlight is the paradox of politicised deaths: the more they are political or politicised, the more they enhance the visibility of their kith and kin in the public sphere, where their own choices and freedoms are brought into question. In this context, the micro-narratives tend to be that after the public has expended its energies in decrying perceived government brutality and killings, immediate family members of the victims ‘owe’ the public a degree of solidarity, if not outright distancing from the government and its overtures.

3.6.1: The ‘handshake’: Strategic peacebuilding or betrayal?
Although the ‘handshake’ has somehow survived cynicism and (counter)accusations for three years now, questions still abound on whether or not the actual gesture was an act of betrayal by the two leaders. This was a common perspective among followers of the president, who felt that they had done so much to keep Odinga at bay, only for Kenyatta to embrace him and discard the footsoldiers who traversed the country to campaign against
the opposition leader. Yet, even for Raila, the possibility of warming up to the government was generally interpreted as betrayal of both living and dead supporters. The Kenyatta-Odinga entente was viewed by most of their respective supporters, but more so latter’s, as betrayal of the people and of the cause that they had staked their lives in support of. On May 10, 2019, @AlhajjAbdul replying to @TheODMParty wrote:

Is this the same party that sold its integrity to @JubileePartyK shamelessly and betrayed their supporters including Baby Pendo heartlessly or it’s the party that neglected justice for Chris Msando hypocritically? It’s embarrassing to be a member of @TheODMparty shame!

Here, Alhajj alludes to the months immediately after the 2017 General Election, when police violence targeted Odinga and ODM strongholds in parts of Nyanza, leading to the deaths of many people, including infants such as six-month-old Samantha Pendo who was killed by police in apparent crackdown on post-election troublemakers (Ojina, 2019).

If the opposition supporters felt that the ODM and other opposition outfits could have done more to pursue justice for Msando, it was the seeming ease with which the same opposition consorted with Kenyatta’s government only five months after the election and its attendant violence that provoked a sense of betrayal. The feeling that the government was responsible for the numerous senseless deaths, including Msando’s, is what generally sustained debates on Twitter, debates that were animated by themes of betrayal and abdication by the opposition, led by Odinga and his ODM party.

For instance, on January 7, 2019, Bishop of Hope, @NdegeSerikal, tweeted that “Raila Odinga has completely forgotten that his election victory was stolen … RIPMsando”; a tweet that captured the cynicism and resignation that common commentators had towards politicians and politics in all. Surprisingly, the pro-Uhuru members of KoT seemed to have been silent on all claims of betrayal, even though in other fora, they would express their disenchantment with the ‘handshake’, but not in the context of Msando’s death and the politics surrounding it.

These dynamics of electioneering, claims and counterclaims of betrayal, and the aftermath of the Kenyatta-Odinga truce, provided space for speculation and the spread of yet another set of rumours on the possibility that the newfound camaraderie had always been so, with shared political ideology, and that the two men merely pretended to be hostile to each other.
as a way of securing their selfish political ambitions. The disbelief following the ‘handshake’ attracted many other conspiracy theories, some of which touched on Odinga’s and Kenyatta’s shared suspicion of Ruto -- the deputy president and former co-accused at the ICC.\(^\text{26}\) Thus, what had all along been perceived as a genuine political contest was now being interpreted as a conspiracy between the two men against the rest of Kenyans. This feeling was further entrenched when it became clear that other actors in Kenya’s political terrain were also aggrieved by what they considered to be Uhuru and Raila’s betrayal of their own aspirations.\(^\text{27}\) What, therefore, began with the killing of one person spread to police cruelty concentrated in one region, and then a truce that was received with mixed feelings because it redirected commentators back to the question and role of ethnic identities and identifications. How these continue to be manifested in the digital sphere by KoT is the subject of the next section of this chapter.

3.7: Look back in anger: Ethnic identities and identifications in the post-handshake era

Underpinning all the tweets on Msando, their corresponding rumours, media reports and even different conspiracy theories are diverse forms of emotions: shock, horror, anger, malice, and so on. All these emotional states are packaged in a backward looking glance that affords commentators a view of history in what John Osborne (1956), in a somewhat different context, dubbed ‘looking back in anger.’ Over time, this phrase has – in literary circles – assumed a metaphorical significance as an omnibus term for all forms of discontent. I briefly explore how the tweets in their patterns allowed interlocutors to gain a clearer view of their political present by relating it to troubled pasts, acts that amounted to ‘looking back in anger.’

3.7.1: Repertoires of political and economic discontent

A critical role that rumours played in the case of Msando was to provide an opportunity for many interlocutors to draw on what Rehimi (2013), in a related context, terms ‘repertoires of discontent’.\(^\text{28}\) This sense of discontent would frame the aesthetics of affect, variously teasing


\(^{27}\) See Adonijah Nziwa, ‘Mudavadi: Uhuru, Raila handshake was born out of blackmail’, https://hivisasa.com/posts/20190262-mudavadi-uhuru-raila-handshake-was-born-out-of-blackmail

out anger, disgust, pain, disenchantment, and impunity. The default position among many KoT soon after Msando’s death was to reactivate the politics of ethnic identifications – based on the names and regions of origin where, for instance, to be from Central Kenya one would instantly be considered a Jubilee Party supporter and a NASA opponent. Therefore, one was expected to either blame the government for killing Msando and other ills, or absolve the government and its agents of such accusations. Msando had already been reclaimed in death as a Luo from western Kenya, and presumably an opposition supporter who was keen on delivering free and fair elections before he was brutally killed. Such an appropriation was completed when, during his burial ceremony, an entire opposition brigade turned up to condole with an aggrieved community while enlisting them further to the anti-government political standpoint.

But in the period after elections and renewed political camaraderie between Raila and Uhuru, Kenyans began to experience economic hardships that emerged from government’s efforts to impose order in the (in)formal sectors of the economy. In the run-up to the elections, the government had overlooked some of its policing duties, especially in downtown Nairobi and other urban areas. As such, the cities had been swarmed by informal traders, most of whom moved to the central business district where they traded their wares, sometimes without the requisite permits.

The period preceding elections had seen the economy enjoy higher capital flows, thanks to campaign monies that somehow readily circulated among low income earners. But after elections, this source dried up and the government moved to restore order in the small and micro enterprise sectors, such as public transport (matatu) and itinerant trading (hawking). The restorative efforts entailed attempts at regulating hawkers in the city, matatu and boda boda (vehicular and motor cycle public transport, respectively), increasing tax collection, and fighting corruption. Demolitions of illegal constructions also ensued.

Further, Odinga and his party were no longer vocal in their criticism of the government. Without the excitement of demonising Odinga or defending the government, there was little to distract Kenyans from the reality of their economic precarity, something that caused great anxiety and frustration. With all these, the political frustration that had dominated KoT’s pro-opposition discourses yielded to economic anxiety and disappointment by the hitherto pro-
government actors who, for some reason, blamed the ‘handshake’ for their plummeting economic fortunes.

Thus, if the Kenyatta-Odinga ‘handshake’ had reconfigured the political terrain of vitriol and hatred among the political class, it also altered the tone of conversations among KoT, through mockery and hardly concealed disdain for perceived ‘adversary’ communities. And while some commentators lamented the worsening economic situation, they were roundly mocked by others who blamed Uhuru-Ruto supporters for enabling the president and his deputy to mess up the economy. For example, Jessica Muliro, @JessicaMuliro, tweeted:

![Tweet By Jessica Muliro](https://twitter.com/JessicaMuliro/status/1023730212223197440)

The last bits of @JessicaMuliro’s tweet – #tanotena, #kumirakumira, #wembeniuleule, and #kazienendelee – were used to parody Jubilee Party’s campaign slogans and, by extension, mock the supporters who believed that voting for Odinga was bad for the economy and who, persuaded this way, believed that an Uhuru-Ruto victory was the panacea to Kenya’s economic challenges.29 Hence, the hashtags #tanotena, #kumirakumira, #wembeniuleule, and #kazienendelee had been used to whip ethnic and regional solidarities among the Kikuyu and Kalenjin voters, much to the chagrin of the Luo and other pro-opposition ethnicities. That is arguably why @JessicaMuliro taunted @AbalaKinyua @surambaya and 6 others who, from their tweets, were lamenting the economic meltdown after the 2017 elections.

For @JessicaMuliro, the issue was not that the government had let its people down; it was that a Kikuyu government had let its people down, and that those people were expected to

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endure the pain of their disillusionment quietly because they had enabled the very government with their votes.

Generally, these tweets address the theme of post-election disillusionment due to economic degeneration of the country under Uhuru’s watch. But more than that, the tweets also play on myths and stereotypes that are associated with the Kikuyu and the Luo of Kenya, which myths and stereotypes acquire high political currency during moments of political uncertainty, especially elections. Stereotypes, similar to rumours, gain their currency from an uncanny proximity to truth; they are not entirely true, nor are they totally false. It is the in-betweenness of ethnic, gender, and class stereotypes which fuels and sustains them. Stereotypes then become available for use in mythmaking. For instance, the myth that Kikuyus are better economic managers has circulated widely in Kenya’s public sphere right from the days of the struggle for multiparty democracy, when economic collapse in the later years of Moi’s rule was attributed to the exclusion of Kikuyu brains from economic policy formulation and implementation. Of course, this claim is as spurious as anything can possibly be; but in the context of electioneering politics and its attendant ethnicisation of campaigns, it acquires a potency that cannot be ignored. That is why, in a somewhat dismissive tone, Jessica Muliro’s tweet seems to demolish the myth of Kikuyu astuteness in economic management.

The idea of stereotypes and myths of economic astuteness, as resident in the Kikuyu leadership, has a long history, including in some scholarship. Ironically, these stereotypes get debunked in the fullness of time, and from the least expected of quarters. According to Dr Godwin Siundu, senior lecturer at the University of Nairobi, the greatest favour that the Uhuru Kenyatta regime did for Kenyans was to help debunk the myth that Kikuyus are better at managing the economy, and the other myth that electing wealthy people into public offices is good because they will have little incentive to steal public funds either directly or through their cronies. That Uhuru was both Kikuyu and wealthy demolished both presumptions; the economy is in the doldrums, while plunder of public resources is as much a hallmark of

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his administration as any other before it, much to the frustration of his detractors and his supporters as well.

For his diehard supporters especially, the Kenyatta presidency was hard-fought. In 2013, Kenyatta and Ruto ran for presidency in the shadow of crimes against humanity charges at the ICC. In 2017, their initial victory was nullified by the Supreme Court of Kenya on account of procedural irregularities that they may not have engineered, but which they benefited from. On both occasions, they rallied hard to ensure that their kith and kin turned up in large numbers to tilt the scales in their favour, hence slogans such as #kumirakumira and #tanotena.

In the repeat presidential election of October 26, 2017, the Kikuyu-Kalenjin ethnic solidarity that voters were called upon to extend to the Uhuru-Ruto pair was not just for numerical victory – after all, Odinga pulled out of the repeat election and so did the majority in his political backyard. It was also for necessary optics that would attempt to lend credibility to what was practically a sham election (because all serious contenders had pulled out, and Kenyatta was all but assured of victory anyway). Having repeatedly answered to the call of the tribe at all necessary times, one may sympathise with the sense of frustration that some of the Jubilee loyalists felt after the ‘handshake’ and, subsequently, the economic stasis. But not Jessica Muliro. As I have indicated above, @JessicaMuliro’s gripe with the presumably Kikuyu complainant was largely on the interface between the political regime of the day and the economic ill-fortunes that appeared to become the daily lot of itinerant traders, among them the Kikuyu.

Muliro’s tweet is a sweeping anti-Kikuyu rant that, in a case of self-reflexive irony, demonstrates the very same negative ethnic sensibility that it accuses Kikuyu voters of. By parodying what were considered Kikuyu mobilisation strategies and grammars – tano tena [Swahili for five again, meaning another term for Uhuru Kenyatta], and kumirakumira [Gikuyu for ‘let’s vote en masse’ etc.] – Muliro’s tweet brought to the surface a rampant disenchantment with government measures, such as the crackdown on unroadworthy public...
service vehicles in Kiambu – the perceived cradle of Kikuyu power – thus inviting ethnicised mockery from other, presumably, non-Kikuyu Kenyans. The fact that Muliro seems to excoriate the Kikuyu for their traditional voting patterns is what, perhaps, makes the sense of betrayal more intense. These demonstrate that Twitter allows for the creation, preservation, and circulation of rumours as important referent points for those who wish to revisit old issues. These dynamics are also enabled by a subterranean logic of cultural literacy, which mediates proficient communication between interlocutors of different ethnic and political identities among KoT.

3.8: Stereotypes and the narcissism of small things
One of the old issues that rumours on Twitter resuscitated was whether a particular ethnic group was better a overseer of economic development. If those presumed to be Kikuyu commentators felt betrayed because of dwindling economic fortunes owing to government imposition of law and order in the operations of small businesses, it was partly because within the circuits of common parlance and rumour on Twitter, there was a common ‘acceptance’ of the myth of Kikuyu industry on the one hand and, on the other, the equal association of the presidency with the right to benefit from economic opportunities available. This was the substance, tone and logic of debates surrounding the aftermath of the 2017 elections in which the Kenyatta government allegedly stifled economic opportunities for his supposedly industrious kinsmen and women. Yet, these discursive conversations on Twitter regarding the interface of political killings, elections and post-election disillusionment was not the first time that Kenyans had ‘debated’ the possible links between ethnic identities and the national economy.

Political economists David Himbara (1994) and Michael Chege (1998) discussed this issue with the Kenyan Indian business community at the heart of study. What is different, therefore, is the way KoT used ethnicity as a variable in explaining the cultural and the spiritual, rather than mere political attributes of perceived economic and political differences between tribal communities in the country. Thus, by relying on specificities of cultural signals, for instance, Muliro’s tweets recreate and circulate an old stereotype that has been used against the Luo people who, allegedly, do not practice male circumcision. In a society where masculine affirmation is often measured through unflinching encounter with the physical pain of circumcision, the supposed avoidance of circumcision is (mis)construed as
cowardice and therefore proof of unsuitability for leadership positions, especially the presidency.

Yet, as Atieno-Odhiambo (2002), following Sigmund Freud, has argued, the politics of circumcision, or lack of it, can also be interpreted as sheer narcissism of small differences. Odhiambo sees it as nothing more than selfish instrumentalisation of ethnicity in an otherwise political enterprise (Atieno-Odhiambo, 2002). Further, this narcissism of small differences was also played out by how some KoT revisited other communities’ understanding and dealing with unresolved deaths. For instance, in an October 2, 2018 tweet, Phil @Phyl_254 wrote:

![Twitter tweet by Phil @Phyl_254](image)

while in a September 10, 2017 tweet, Makokha Kevin, @ItsSossion, tweeted:

![Twitter tweet by Makokha Kelvin @ItsSossion](image)

A full unpacking of these tweets calls for what Eric Hirsch (1987) has termed ‘cultural literacy’, which means an observer’s ability to determine the contextual influences on the meaning of a particular utterance. According to Hirsch, a person who is literate in particular cultural contexts can make sense of a particular culture’s idioms and idiosyncrasies, references to past events and even culture-specific jokes and allusions (Hirsch, 1987). Applied to the context of the rumours about Msando appearing as a ghost in staff meetings at the IEBC, it gives the whole rumour the logic of superstition and further locates it among communities in western Kenya – where beliefs in witchcraft and other occultic powers are rampant – rather than, say, Central or the Rift Valley regions where such beliefs are
relatively rare. In other words, reading the rumours in these tweets calls for a degree of insiderism – meaning a historical awareness of Kenyan ethnic identities, identifications, and their corollaries – because the rumours achieve their political valence by referencing or signalling localised, cultural, and historical cues. The same insiderism and cultural literacy are what enable some Twitter commentators to string together names of people and places with few details because the authors of the tweets knew that they had a shared historical and socio-cultural knowledge about Kenya with their target audiences.

This economy of words and the use of semiotic and other cultural literacy cues enabled commentators to extend the range of issues that they could address in a single tweet, including excavating and spreading old rumours with Msando as a background trope. Thus, the fullness of the meanings of individual tweets were products of semantic co-creation and other strategies of circumventing structural and other limits associated with Twitter, notably the ability to create complete, self-contained narratives that, perhaps ironically, originated elsewhere. This resonates with Unsworth’s (2012) view that “[e]lectronic media are not simply changing the way we tell stories: they are changing the very nature of story, of what we understand (or do not understand) to be narratives” (n.p.). The point then is that the ultimate story is co-created through a value chain from the initiator of an idea, the retweeter, to the next reader, ad infinitum. This co-creation entails adding bits and pieces of relevant details, drawing on what one already knows, and generally linking what is outrightly said to what is intended.

That is how many KoT could make sense of the September 7, 2017 tweet by Gracie, @VitalisOduor2, who wondered:

![Vitalis Oduor @VitalisOduor2](https://twitter.com/VitalisOduor2/status/832796078564066305)

Was Msando buried with a torch? if so then it has gone off. things are thick at IEBC, #RIPMsando #ChebukatiMemoToChiloba

9:51 pm · 7 Sep 2017 · Twitter for Android

2 Retweets 2 Likes

This tweet referenced another earlier killing of Jacob Juma, a politician who was perceived to have been killed because of his hard-line criticism of senior members of government.
According to popular rumours, Juma was buried with a spotlight that had been switched on with the understanding that as soon as it went off, his killers would be punished by supernatural forces (Amalemba, 2017). Thus, @VitalisOduor2’s tweet not only refers the readers to another unresolved murder, but also identifies Msando with Jacob Juma’s cultural worldview of belief in supernatural powers where the dead can exact revenge on their killers.

Similarly, the same tweet pointed at possible, or presumed power struggles within IEBC, pitting Chiloba on the one hand, and Chairman Wafula Chebukati and his supporters, on the other. As I indicated earlier in this chapter, following the nullification of the presidential results of the August 2017 General Election, the IEBC came under scathing attack for bungling the poll. The most scathing of the accusations came from the Supreme Court that had, in its judgment, rebuked IEBC for its sloppy preparation for and transmission of results, the most important consideration in nullifying the results as unreliable.34 Given that IEBC had been roundly accused of botching the elections, the infighting – blame games and power struggles – intensified, reaching the peak when the Chairman sent an internal memorandum to the head of secretariat seeking answers to some of the pressing questions of the moment.35 All these were proof of a divided and uncoordinated electoral body.

In the ensuing confusion, both Msando and Chiloba were caught up in a mix of rumours and speculations that accorded Msando a larger-than-life image and significance in national conversations. If Msando was cast as the tragic hero, Chiloba became the villain in national debates, especially among pro-Raila supporters and many other commentators within the ranks of KoT.36 For instance, Ben@benalfoti, replying to @ezraCHILOBA

“Thank goodness you are gone. Let me pray you don’t get any job in government. You’re corrupted to the core. #RIPMsando #RIPMoraa #RIPBabyPendo. May you never know peace” (October 12, 2018, 9.08 pm)

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Masterblaster, @Wapolowahuni, replying to @ezraCHILOBA @kenyanpundit:

“The same despots that you helped rig are the same ones that will lead you to slaughter. You made your bed, pretending to run to Oxford will not help. You must pay #RIPMsando” (12th October 2018, 8.57 P.M.)

George Kopana, @georgeokoth24, replying to @ezraCHILOBA:

“See your life. After this Kenyans will lynch you alive ... We have not forgotten that Chris Msando’s car was parked at TRM by a tall black man in specs...#RIPMsando (October 12, 2018, 8.04 pm)

These tweets allude to the fatalities of post-election police violence – #RIPMoraa #RIPBabyPendo – and the imagined role of Chiloba in the genesis of such violence. As I have suggested, all these tweets, and others of the same tenor, blamed Chiloba for his supposed involvement in the killing of Msando. Yet, the fact that he was thus perceived could have been because of endless complaints by the opposition candidates to the effect that Chiloba was partisan in favour of the Jubilee Party, and the vociferous defence that some ruling party members mobilised for him during such attacks (Apollo, 2017). Thus, whether Chiloba was indeed partisan or not was not the issue; the point was that popular opinion among pro-opposition actors held that Chiloba was biased and thus incapable of conducting free and fair elections, a conclusion that cast him as a villain in the unfolding popular drama of rumour mongering on who killed Msando and why. Noteworthy, however,
is that the condemnation of Chiloba and the whole IEBC was not new; since 2007, electoral commissions and their heads have exited office ignominiously, sometimes at the instigation of the administration in power, as was the case with the Samuel Kivuitu-led Electoral Commission of Kenya.\textsuperscript{37} Other commissions have been haunted out of office by public demand, as was the case with the Isaack Hassan-led IEBC team in 2013.\textsuperscript{38}

3.9: Conclusion

Dalziel (2013) writes that while previously rumours used to work to fill in informational gaps, in contemporary times of the internet, “rumour now operates where there is a tremendous and uncontrollable proliferation of information claiming truth value” (99 – 100). Thus, ‘epistemic disarticulations’ (Musila, 2017: 692) emerge and “social truths that enjoy epistemic authority in many African societies” (ibid.). Accordingly,

Epistemic disarticulation [is usable] to emphasise that these disconnects [between different strands of rumour and gossip; between officialdom and common people] are less about ignorance, and more about inability to acknowledge multiple modes of knowing and their accompanying indices of credibility. In this regard, rumour as a genre scarred by credibility deficits offers an excellent illustration of the costs of epistemic disarticulation and narrow conceptions of what is credible… (2017: 693)

The fact that an explanation of any social phenomenon is required, and that such explanations are authorised by multiple and competing epistemic regimes, means that “opacities are created by a combination of uncritical embrace of received knowledge and cultural illiteracy in competing knowledge systems around which Africa/ns frame their worlds” (Musila 2017, 692). Musila’s argument here reminds us of Sunstein’s notion of ‘crippled epistemologies’; both theorise how rumours and gossip acquire and sustain auto-regeneration, or what Sunstein calls ‘self-sealing’ quality that makes rumours both credible, with internal meanings and sensible patterns, and acquire longer shelf-lives.


This chapter sought to review the tweets on Msando before and after his death with a view to teasing out the recurrent concerns or themes. I was guided by earlier scholarship, which suggests that analysing the tweets from a thematic perspective is an important way of determining the dominant thought patterns that constitute popular opinion among KoT. I have demonstrated that while the death of Msando itself was reason enough for KoT to engage in a long-drawn-out debate on possible causes of his killing, as well as potential culprits, the debates were stretched because Msando’s death precipitated a widespread concern over other issues perceived to be going wrong in the country. These include perceived failure of state institutions to carry out their mandate without provoking (un)founded suspicion, especially the recurrence of unresolved, political and politicised killings. I have further shown that the emergence popularity and significance of rumours in the context of Msando’s death sprang from a historical inadequacy of credible information on developments in the country, and specifically in the relationship between certain individuals and the government. Perhaps because of the amorphous and rhizomic nature of rumours, the substance of debate shifted back to issues that we would imagine have already been completely exhausted, such as ethnicity and violence, but which remain important for some commentators because they provide both the rationale for debate and the lenses through which subjects of debate can be scrutinised and understood.

For instance, ethnic suspicions, identities and identifications appeared to be a structuring device for many commentators whose interventions in referencing contemporary and historical issues could only be anchored on ethnic stereotypes – such as supposed communal ethos associated with Kikuyus or Luo and Luhya superstitious practices. That is why some KoT would comment on the supposed return of Msando from the dead just to torment his enemies within the IEBC. In other words, the thematic analysis of the tweets collected and their inferred meanings suggests that ethnicity as understood by some KoT is not just about political contestations, but also a means through which collective worldviews can be enlisted by those who seek to understand the inexplicable, and likely unresolved, killings. In an interesting way, such perspectives are what link my study to existing theories on rumours and national(ist) politics in Kenya (and Africa).

The substance, tone and tenor of the tweets during the period under study began with shock and horror, then followed anger and outrage, after which cynicism set in. Broadly, the tweets tended to change depending on whether the national political orientations of Uhuru Kenyatta
and Raila Odinga were more or less combative, or more or less conciliatory. Thus, soon after the elections, more tweets were clear that, first, Msando had been killed by some government officials and, second, that he had been killed because he was determined to deliver free and fair elections.

Some of the rumours on Msando reveal recurrent concerns that coincide with national(ist) socio-political and cultural patterns. Yet, the presentation of these rumours was not necessarily in the traditional mode because their valence and meaning-making depended to a large extent on the unique attributes of Twitter circuits as repositories and archives of these conversations. Similarly, the packaging of the rumours within the compacted, limited characters in the Twitter format meant that many commentators inadvertently or otherwise found innovative ways by which they could narrate their experiences through cultural literacy techniques of anthropological and regional-specific allusions, cryptic textualities, and other novelties without redacting their views. Therefore, in the next chapter, I discuss how conversations on and about Msando were (re)shaped, enhanced or undermined by the Twitter platform, especially how rumours by KoT reactivated, instrumentalised, and extended political cultures and ideologies of patriarchy and phallocracy.
Chapter Four: National(ist) Politics, Local(ised) Grammars: Retelling the Death of Msando in Lifunga, Siaya

4.1: Introduction

“[W]hen we look at its iconography, its administrative structures or its policies, the new postcolonial nation is a historically male constructed space, narrated into modern self-consciousness by male leaders, activists and writers, in which women are more often than not cast as symbols or totems, as the bearers of tradition” (Boehmer, 2005: 22).

This chapter examines the economies of oral and rural interpretations of Msando’s death. The chapter extends my analysis of the interfaces of rumour and gossip in social media platforms, particularly among KoT. My focus on KoT is because they participated in extended rumourous debates that either accused or absolved the government over the disappearance and eventual death of Msando and Ngumbu. The chapter shows that the commentaries among KoT reflected varying ideological standpoints, patterns of expression, and themes related to the deaths of Msando and Ngumbu. Thus, there exist different interpretations of Msando’s death, depending on one’s geographical and cultural origins, even when situated in the context of Kenya’s histories of politically sensitive killings and their relevance in electoral contests. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on how perspectives from a remote village yield specific nuances that may be lost on the distant, possibly elitist, views posted by social media commentators.

I deploy Fairclough’s (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis to interpret the pronouncements and silences that emerged from informal interviews with family, friends and neighbours of Msando in his Lifunga Village home. In drawing on the informative value of informal conversations as a method of collecting qualitative data, I was guided by Swain and Spire’s (2020) argument that informal conversations provide unique opportunities to add context and authenticity to already existing data. According to Swain and Spire, informal conversations are also useful in unlocking and expanding data on a phenomenon that would otherwise remain largely speculative. Therefore, I draw on their framework in an attempt to determine the extent to which Msando’s closest relatives and friends received his death in the context of the then looming elections, but outside the popular sentiments that were
circulating on social media platforms, including Twitter. In concurring with Swain and Spire, I was persuaded that Msando’s kin and neighbours were well placed to add unique cultural inflections to what was circulated by KoT.

Therefore, this chapter is informed by backstories related to the politics of unresolved killings in Kenya, generally, and, more specifically, how these informed the way Msando’s kin and neighbours interpreted his death. My assumption is that although such killings generally share in the universals of political interpretations, they create meanings specific to ethnic and cultural identities (Brinkmann, 2013). Furthermore, such narratives play into the dynamics of national(istic) politics of recognition and redistribution (Cohen & Atieno-Odhiambo, 2004), which are often packaged in rumours that oppose the mainstream narratives associated with the media and government pronouncements. Subsequently, the flow of rumours reflects the usability of knowledge in the context of cultural literacies (Musila, 2017). The concept of cultural literacies, which I theorised in the Introduction, is what allows a community of shared experiences to ascribe to one incident particular meanings from a wide repertoire of possible explanations. Such meanings are underpinned by local logics, and often preface collective ownership of a discursive or ideological position on the issue at hand, in this case Msando’s killing.

I argue that in Lifuunga and its neighbourhoods, Msando’s killing was not merely part of a plot to rig the 2017 General Election, as was widely accepted by KoT. Rather, the killing of Msando was part of a long pattern of eliminating political and intellectual elites from the community. To back this claim, my interlocutors cited a widespread consensus drawn from the wider Luo society regarding historical marginalisation of the community from mainstream government. Therefore, mourning Msando was for them also an occasion to express long-held political grievances.

One of these grievances related to the earlier tribulations of Raila Odinga as the longest serving political detainee, the predicament of his late father who was elbowed out of the Jomo Kenyatta government in 1966, and claims of the government rigging Odinga’s presidential electoral victories in 2007, 2013 and 2017. In all these cases, the underpinning logic was more of communal intuition rather than any forensic evidence. This speaks to Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo’s related argument that “significant sections of historical knowledge draw authority not from a status as truth but rather from the public investment of
authority through economies of interest and debate” (2004: 28). According to my respondents, these ‘economies of interest and debate’ historically interconnected with the violent elimination of Luo leaders in Kenya, besides the perceived systemic marginalisation of Luo Nyanza from national economic programmes. For those who hold this position, Luo Nyanza is thus marginalised presumably because of its association with ‘dissident’ or opposition politics (Okoth and Omenya, 2014).

For me, these ‘economies of interest and debate’ are what partly necessitated a corroborative examination of the nature and trajectory of rumours surrounding the killing and burial of Msando. The ‘economies of interest and debate’ variously relied on history, culture, and rudimentary forms of necropolitics. They were also cumulatively mobilised to buttress communal grievances following Msando’s death. As such, the sensibilities are worthy of a closer examination, also because Msando became a living-dead symbol of communal victimhood. My examination isolates possible meanings associated with rumours and place, as well as rumours and orality in order to explore the discursive difference between digital and ethnic communities’ perception of Msando’s death.

Weighed against the conventional interpretation of digital commentaries as essentially subversive, I also found the need to corroborate common themes and trajectories in digital spaces – largely associated with urban, middle class and politically conscious commentators – with their spoken variations that are common in rural locations. Since some rural inhabitants tend to be closely affiliated with their linguistic and cultural communities, they become more conscious of cultural idioms and their political usability, including in practicing ethno-nationalism. Therefore, rural populations generally demonstrate forms of cultural and historical consciousness that they communicate using idiomatic, proverbial and symbolic articulations of ethnic identifications with the dead. This is not to say that rural populations are more gullible compared to their urban counterparts. In fact, the former tend to be more innovative in expressing their circumspection about whatever persuasions that may come from politically influential centres. Part of the approaches that rural folks employ in this regard include forms of strategic acquiescence to the whims of the more resolute central authorities, something whose net effect is the deflection of interest and possible retaliation from the powers that be. An understanding of such dynamics necessarily entails unpacking meanings of both textual and extra-textual signifiers, including semiotics of space, tonal variations in speech, comportment of the interlocutors, rhetorical questions and choral
answers. In discursive terms, the underlying function of all these possibilities lies in how they can corroborate or subvert the dominant perspectives that circulate beyond the immediate geographical and socio-cultural contexts, including in digital social media spaces. In this regard, while the theory that Msando had been assassinated for political reasons was quite common in digital spaces, a visit to Lifunga was necessary to check the extent of circulation of the same theory. In other words, visiting Lifunga would ultimately allow me to corroborate the claims and counter-claims that were in doing the rounds elsewhere.

I consider the corroboration process as essentially entailing testing of emerging theories, for example Nyabola’s (2018) argument that the substance and positions that appear in digital spaces reflect or refract their variants in the analogue spheres. In corroborating such an argument, I confront some pertinent questions, such as: what were the common narratives that villagers from Lifunga invoked in understanding the death of Msando? To what extent did these villagers recognise, agree or disagree with the view that the government was somehow implicated in Msando’s death? And to what extent did these perceptions feed into electoral contests – at the presidential election level? Answers to these questions are also important because they offer counterfoils to the dominant impressions created by KoT. Such impressions include common themes and narrative trends in the digital spaces. Critically, this chapter seeks to answer these questions while drawing for theoretical nuance on gender and postcolonial discourses as hinted at by Boehmer’s views that I use for epigraph.

In terms of structure, this introductory section is followed by a brief biography of Lifunga, and then proceeds to analyse some of the critical responses from respondents drawn from the village. In this analysis, I also focus on the nature of collective conscientisation that occurs in situations where linguistic and cultural communities share grievances and triumphs. I do this to show how archetypal vehicles such as myths of origin blend with, or are instrumentalised by, the politics of expedience. I am persuaded that such an approach may reveal insights into how people think as individuals and as ethnic collectives. Ultimately, I hope to illuminate how tropes of loss and betrayal become usable props for a community faced with political despair arising from association with long term opposition politics.

4.2: Contextualising Lifunga village
Lifunga is located in Siaya County, formerly Siaya District. The county is mainly populated with Nilotic Luos (Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo, 1989) who are renowned in Kenya for
producing some of the most celebrated academics such as Bethwel A Ogot, Elisha Stephen Atieno-Odhiambo, James Ogude, George Magoha, Simeon Ominde, John Kokwaro, and Dismas Masolo. Siaya is also known as the home to musical artists including Musa Juma, Osito Kalle, Gabriel Omollo, John Peter Rachier and Juma Odundo; and politicians including Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, Raila Odinga and James Orengo, Grace Ogot, Argwings Kodhek, and Isaac Omolo Okero. The county is also home to lawyers Ambrose Rachier, PLO Lumumba, Otieno Amolo, and SM Otieno. Some, like Oki Ooko-Ombaka cut across academia, politics and law. Together with many others, these personalities have brought to the county a legacy of strident civic awareness in Kenya. However, it is a mixed legacy because although the political heavyweights from the county are household names nationally, the county is largely impoverished. This could be partly because of the national (not so) silent policy of economically marginalising regions that are perceived to be anti-government. It could as well be because of multiple geographical and cultural reasons that are not unique to the county (UNDP Kenya Report, 2018).

Siaya, as home to the Odingas, is also widely associated with opposition politics. This cuts across a continuum of political, cultural, and spiritual-religious variables. Yet, despite the hypervisibility of Siaya in national politics, the county is also associated with extreme poverty (British Council, 2019; UNDP Kenya Report, 2018), marginalisation of the youth, women, and children. All these have spawned challenges that contribute toward remolding the residents’ self-fashioning as advocates of justice on the one hand, and as victims of state marginalisation on the other. It is a relationship akin to a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Siaya has also produced a number of nationally respected technocrats. These include Prof Shem Migot-Adhola, who served as a member of a presidential ‘Dream-Team’ tasked turning around Kenya’s economy during the tail-end of the Structural Adjustment Programmes, Mr Martin Oduor-Otieno, the banker renowned for transforming the Kenya Commercial Bank from loss-making to the largest bank in East and Central Africa by assets, and then Msando. These technocrats have subconsciously carried different matrices of associations that can be related to the opposition politics of the region. Thus, the presence of such technocrats in political systems, such as the IEBC, where Msando worked as ICT Manager, may push some observers to presume the technocrats’ political inclinations. Indeed, many people assume that technocrats from particular ethnic communities – such as Msando of the Luo – are likely to be inclined to the position taken by the dominant political
class of their home villages, or counties. The logic in such ascriptions and associations is partly due to the established politics of patronage, with its corollary praxis of rent seeking manipulations (Franck and Rainer, 2012).

Msando is not the only technocrat whom the public generally associated with the political camp of their ethnic baron. Other examples include Davis Chirchir, who had previously worked as a commissioner in the IIEC, but was later appointed Cabinet Secretary for Energy and Petroleum in 2013 in the Kenyatta and Ruto administration (Nafasi, 2013). Chirchir is a Kalenjin from Ruto’s political base of the North Rift Valley. According to some members of the Opposition, Chirchir had played a crucial role in ‘rigging’ the 2013 election (Mwangi, 2019) and was allegedly implicated in corrupt dealings – which led to his dismissal from government in 2015 (Vidija, 2020).

Throughout, some Opposition politicians insisted that Chirchir had used his technical expertise to rig the 2013 election for Kenyatta and Ruto (Honan, 2015). Although Kenyatta and Ruto did not comment on the claims, they still appointed him to a senior role when they formed the campaign team for the 2017 General Election (Mwarua, 2017). Following this, Opposition leaders and their followers widely believed that Chirchir’s Kalenjin ethnicity made him likely to use his technical prowess to favour the government because Ruto was Chirchir’s co-ethnic. This could have been the reasoning behind the Jubilee Party mandarins when they rehired Chirchir – following his removal from the Cabinet – in the party secretariat a few months to the elections. Either way, there was a widespread acceptance that ethnic affiliation played a big part in speculating about one’s political party loyalty. To some extent, the same logic raised questions about whether such individuals could be trusted to advance the interests of a particular political camp.

Notably, some scholars have acknowledged the influence of ethnic loyalties (ethnicity) in public discourses in Kenya. For example, Lynch (2011) notes that the tendentious recourse to ethnicity to mobilise individual and group claims and grievances tends to work by a normalised routine of “othering” people because of ethnic differences. These dynamics are relevant to my study for many reasons. Primarily, I argue that it was for these reasons that the place of Msando as a Luo in the highly charged IEBC, and his newfound meanings in death, could be interpreted in the context of current and historical politics of ethnicity. Such interpretations, while predominant among KoT, also emerged in Lifunga. Here, my
respondents claimed Msando as a member of the Luo ethnicity and implicated him in the prevailing political sentiments.

While alive, Msando was famous as an ICT expert at the IEBC. Soon after his death, he became a subject of political contestations and entered the common lore of the Luo people. He became a tragic hero in the popular legends discussed in the marketplace, village, and peri-urban spaces. Such discussions focused largely on his famed prowess as an ICT expert, as a person immune to moral corruption, and one who was determined to deliver credible elections. For many of these responses, credibility of elections would be measured if Odinga won. Out of all these, more subsidiary questions arose. For example, how did Msando’s village mates perceive him? What were the dominant opinions about his death? How did this death fit in the then common views regarding the place of Luo Nyanza in Kenya’s political topography? And how did these views differ from, or cohere with those that dominated the digital spaces, and especially associated with KoT?

I answer these questions to amplify local perspectives on national debates. Filtering these views through the lenses of the Luo ethnic sensibilities of my respondents in Lifunga, the chapter thus shows how national and nationalist politics get infused in the dynamics of local appropriations of national political debates. Such appropriations neither affirm nor challenge digital and urban discourses that circulated on Twitter. As I note earlier, such debates on Twitter were also characterised by techniques of nominal distancing – through the use of monikers, for example. Thus, by illuminating perspectives from Lifunga, I disentangle local nuances from national, journalistic, academic, and political debates with their corresponding cultural, ideological, and lexical differences.

4.3: Local and national images of Msando

One of my objectives in this study was to interrogate how and how far rumours revealed the possible meanings of Msando’s death. My approach also entailed exploring the context of Kenya’s post-independence public cultures, which are mediated by rumours. I presumed that rumours serve as political and cultural texts that mediate public discourse on Kenya’s histories and politics. Hence, the theme of unresolved killings in post-independence Kenya has variously implicated variables such as ethnicity (Luo), regions (Nyanza and Nairobi) and media (digital, analogue or KoT and rumours). With this in mind, I sought the possible meanings of Msando’s death as contained in the rumours that circulated in the village. I suggest that rumours in Lifunga contained some subtle messages that could enrich Kenya’s
electoral histories generally and the 2017 elections particularly. Such nuances could come from various standpoints, including how unresolved killings fit in or depart from established national and nationalist debates, such as rumours on Msando. Others are themes of political and ethnic nationalism. I have earlier shown how Msando’s death was appropriated by politicians to mobilise ethnic sensibilities and boost their following. The politicians relied on conspiracy theories to inflame nationalistic sensibilities. For instance, some commentators (@TimothyMutua19 and @ItsMutai) -- cited in the last chapter -- stated that Msando’s thumb was critical in enabling the biometric processes involved in the presidential elections.

While focusing on the biometric uses of the thumb, local debates also drew on memories of the symbolism of fingers during the Moi (and KANU) regime that was dictatorial and marginalised the Luo community. Particularly, the reliance on flashing the single finger salute to show loyalty to KANU, and the V-sign as subversive, placed fingers at the centre of political discourses then (Muigai, 1993). Thus, the rumours about amputation of Msando’s thumb reawakened memories of times when fingers were critical indices of political debates in Kenya.

4.3.1 Rumours and political conversations in Kenya’s public sphere: Responses from Lifunga
Msando’s death and subsequent mourning provoked interesting questions regarding how the public sphere in Kenya works, and how it conforms or deviates from public spheres elsewhere. The idea of a public sphere has been theorised and found useful in understanding how European and American publics speak to each other and to the government (Warner, 2002). This version, however, has challenges of applicability in Kenya. Further, the association of vibrant public debate with a deeper democracy has been negated by Mouffe’s (2002) work. For example, Mouffe challenges the popular view that juridical and moral discourses are essential indicators of a mature democracy, saying they undermine the deepening of democracy because they tend to normalise and silence divergent opinions. Subsequently, ideological diversity is subordinated to a presumptively neutral and ideologically charged juridical mechanisms that impose artificial unanimity in public discourse. Mouffe’s ideas are useful in aligning the views expressed by KoT with those of Lifunga residents. In both categories, the audiences targeted by discursive contributions are different, as are the motives for contributions.
In going to Lifunga (and later Gachie) I sought to corroborate some of the dominant themes and narrative trends that emerged among KoT. These themes included the conspiracy theories that implicated the government and its supporters in the killing of Msando, claims that Msando could have been a victim of a crime of passion, and that he had been killed as part of a rigging plot that entailed killing him for his thumb. Therefore, I went to Lifunga with the same questions that I intended to answer in my whole study. The questions were: why was Msando killed? Did the respondents think that the government had done enough to investigate the killing? How did Msando’s death fit in the then unfolding national and local politics? I posed these questions to family members, neighbours and friends of Msando through informal conversations rather than structured or even semi-structured interviews. I preferred informal conversations for two reasons. One, my purpose for going to Lifunga (and Gachie) was mainly to verify data that I had already obtained by scraping the web (Twitter) and reading secondary sources (books, journal articles, and media reports). So, I did not expect new data from my interactions with my respondents in Lifunga. This led me to the second reason for relying on informal conversations, thus the need to establish trust with my respondents whom I found to be more open to informal chats rather than interviews. I had established that prior to my going, the neighbours and residents of Lifunga generally had been interviewed widely by journalists and investigative agencies to the extent that they felt some kind of ‘interview fatigue.’ This drove them towards rehashing choreographed answers that would have been unhelpful to my work. To circumvent this pitfall, I opted for informal conversations that would allow me to probe into the answers given and establish the deeper concerns and fears of the people in the villages. These nuanced responses would then reveal the actual thoughts about the person of Msando, the causes of his killing, and the meaning of his death in the context of local and national politics. However, this did not mean that I uncritically accepted or endorsed the responses that I obtained. Indeed, while answers to these questions were important to me, I was only interested in how they impacted on the discourse of rumours on the one hand, and what they hinted at in regard to the then spawning conspiracy theories and their usability in the tense national politics.

One of the respondents was Adero, who said: “I have known Chris all my life because we grew up together. I was among the first people in the village who received the news of his death.” Similarly, another respondent, Okoth, rated Msando’s achievements so highly that,
he had “wanted Msando to contest the position of Siaya Governor.” Many other respondents from Lifunga spoke favourably of Msando as a responsible family man who supported his extended family. My respondents also said that Msando was a virtuous person who could not be corrupted by the government to rig elections. Generally, Msando’s villagers viewed him in more or less the same way that KoT did, but for different reasons. The nuances from the village were clearly different in logic and substance from the polemics in digital spaces.

Clearly, there were other interpretative versions apart from what circulated in digital platforms. Although social media platforms such as Twitter appear dominant, other avenues of self and collective expression of political sentiments remain widespread in Kenya. Among these is the oral art that involves verbal rumours and conspiracy theories. Given the importance of ethnic identities in political mobilisation, it is arguable that what happens in social media spaces is generally an aberration of the analogue norms. Such expressions within and beyond social media platforms are influenced by political idioms, which rely on tribal vernaculars that underpin varying forms of political consciousness. This challenges Nyabola’s (2018) argument that the information and debates in social media are direct reflections of the same from analogue modes. Based on what I established in Lifunga, there may indeed be a link, but it is a tenuous link between the discursive dynamics among KoT – unruly, highly partisan, and sometimes *ad hominem* – versus oral rumours from Lifunga. For instance, in Lifunga, coherence and concurrence are easily achieved as compared to the debates on Twitter, perhaps because in the village there exist shared histories and perceptions of cultural sameness. Whether this is a process of ‘manufacturing consent’ (Herman & Chomsky, 1988) or imagining a community (Anderson, 1983) within the nation, the discourses that emerged from Lifunga disavowed the general belief among some scholars who privilege the antagonistic debates within social media spaces as characteristic of political awareness (de Zúñiga & Chen, 2019; Kaufmann and Jeandesboz, 2017; Franck and Rainer, 2012).

Throughout my fieldwork in Lifunga, I established that although most of them were relatively youthful, they nonetheless had clear memory of communal political grievances for which they blamed the government. They provided distinct nuances in local perspectives that

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40 ibid.
differed from what dominated contributions in social media platforms. Thus, conversation with residents of Lifunga was important in yielding local perspectives on Msando, who posthumously became a national modern legend. The youthful interlocutors were aware that Msando was only the latest of many leaders whose killing had galvanised Luo ethnic solidarities. They listed names such as Ambrose Ofafa, who was shot dead in 1953 (Ombuor, 2009), Tom Mboya in 1969, Robert Ouko in 1990 (Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo, 2004), Chrispin Mbai in 2003, and now Msando in 2017. However, in so doing, the interlocutors provincialised national figures in order to strengthen the narrative of anti-Luo persecution by different governments.

Granted, the symbolic appropriation and provincialisation of public figures such as Msando could be said of other victims of political killings from other parts of the country. Collectively, however, they reflect the dynamics of communal self-perception vis-a-vis national political contestations. These are usually reflected in the grammar of victimisation, as seen in my conversations with respondents in Lifunga and, earlier, in my literature review on necropolitics in Kenya. Across the spectrum, the moral and character shifts of the dead from village luminaries to national legends emerge out of the wide admiration of the leaders who are presumably killed by government functionaries. Thus, a uniform question to my interlocutors in Lifunga was: who killed Msando? Some of the people I spoke to were initially unwilling to discuss the issue. Adero, for example, stated, “I don’t want to speak about Msando. We have given interviews to many journalists who have been coming here, but nothing has changed.”41 For Adero, the earlier willingness to share his information with interviewers was because he presumed or expected that it would lead to identifying and punishing Msando’s killers. But the failure by the police to identify the killers caused disillusionment and reluctance to continue speaking about Msando. For Adero, therefore, the longer Msando’s killing remained unresolved, the more likely the state was involved. This feeling thus made it dangerous to continue speaking about Msando.

Adero’s sense of ‘danger’ is best understood in the context of local understanding of what Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo (2004) called the ‘risks of knowledge’ on such matters. While the writers conceived this phrase in their study of the Ouko murder, the surrounding narratives had parallels that were known to the people of Lifunga. For example, the fact that

41 ibid
Ouko’s killing had remained unresolved to date was because of the reluctance by the state machinery to pursue the matter and, second, the common pattern where most of those who knew something about Ouko’s mysterious disappearance and death themselves died under similarly mysterious circumstances (Minns, 2020; Oywa and Otieno, 2017). With these details well understood by people of Lifunga, therefore, it was unsurprising that some of the respondents became reluctant to speak their minds. They understood that they would be taking unnecessary risks. This was quite clear from another of my interlocutors called Ouma. When I spoke to him, Ouma was forthright that questions about Msando were no longer safe. Asked whether he thought Msando was killed in a love triangle, he responded: “That is a dangerous question! I hope you are not part of those who have been covering up Msando’s killers!”

A foreigner in Kenya may need some background information in order to make sense of Ouma’s retort. Ouma’s response drew on a narrative commonly associated with men who are mysteriously killed then reported to have been in the company of lovers – other than their wives – at the time of their death. For example, Msando reportedly spent his last few hours alive entertaining Ngumbu at a popular club in Nairobi (Nation Team, 2020), the same as Jacob Juma who was also mysteriously killed in 2016, hours after spending time with a young woman (Business Today, 2016). By associating dead men with women with whom they were intimately involved, the spinners of these narratives usually inject a sub-text of sexual innuendoes in the story to distract the public from the possibility of an assassination. Instead, the spinners of such narratives insinuated that the men had been victims of love triangles (Adama, 2016). But, as Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo (2004) suggest, this association of political killings with crimes of passion are forms of silencing the publics who would otherwise scrutinise the government’s inability or unwillingness to resolve the murders.

4.3.2: Citizen power and state control: Ambivalent perspectives
The theory of silencing makes sense in the context of Kenya’s political dynamics in which successive governments generally seek to control public debates on unresolved killings of prominent persons. For example, similar silencing was witnessed following the killings of Tom Mboya in 1969 and J.M. Kariuki in 1975 (Adama, 2016). When Mboya was killed, the
whole country was gripped by fear as the government threatened dire consequences to all ‘rumour-mongers.’ As Ogot (2003) writes in his autobiography, the general public suspected government involvement, something that was aggravated by the hardline stance that the government took regarding public commentaries on Mboya. A few months after Mboya was buried, Kenyatta went to Kisumu to officially launch a provincial hospital, where he met Oginga Odinga, a former vice-president who had resigned and joined the Opposition. At the function, Odinga accused the government of the wanton killing of ambitious politicians, and of marginalising regions perceived to be opposed to the president. A verbal exchange ensued between Kenyatta and Odinga. As matters got out of hand, the president’s security detail opened fire, killing over 50 members of the public who were Odinga’s supporters (Ochieng’, 2018).

Kenyatta banned Odinga’s political party, the Kenya Peoples Union (KPU), and placed him under house arrest -- without any trial. This effectively silenced Odinga, who was then the only person who could have demanded answers for the killing of Mboya. Kenyatta’s anxiety, which informed the banning of KPU and detention of Odinga, had been heightened by the fact that Mboya’s killing happened only four years after that of Pio Gama Pinto. A reputed leftist ideologue, Pinto was generally considered the intellectual powerhouse behind Odinga. The deaths of Pinto and Mboya had emboldened Odinga and embittered his supporters. Many of these expressed their outrage during Kenyatta’s aforementioned visit to Kisumu. They were, thus, collectively aggrieved by the banning of KPU and the subsequent detention of Odinga.

Six years later, in 1975, JM Kariuki would die under similar circumstances and, following similar patterns of politicising his death, the regime’s response was to use JM’s death as a warning to others who thought they could criticise Kenyatta’s government without attracting grim consequences. According to Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo, “[w]ith Kariuki’s elimination […] Kenyatta himself took responsibility, warning at a public rally in Nakuru, five days after the Kariuki murder, that even Satan himself was once an angel that had to be hurled down into the abyss of hell” (2004: 5). At the time that Kenyatta made this statement, Kenya was awash with rumours about senior state officials being implicated in JM Kariuki’s killing. Official information channels could neither effectively challenge nor repress these rumours. This was partly because the multiple rumours at the time somewhat shielded some individuals from state victimisation, mainly because of difficulties in tracing their originators.
This also happened in the case of Msando. The surrounding rumours became foggy but retained a potency that compelled some government agents to respond.

In early days of the Moi government, residents of areas perceived to be anti-establishment, such as Luo Nyanza in which Lifunga Village is found, were sandwiched between efforts by the government to silence them and the determination by some individuals to resist that silencing. Such resistance involved the creation and spread of rumours. I argue that for the respondents whom I spoke to, the reliance on rumours had a logical justification based on the region’s political experiences. The rumours comprised what Musila (2008) elsewhere calls ‘social memories’ and ‘popular wisdom’ that use signals and codes to reference histories, cultures, and politics that would otherwise be invisible to outsider observers. In speaking to the Lifunga neighbours and kin of Msando, I sought to benefit from these social memories and popular wisdom.

Specifically, while listening to my interlocutors in Lifunga, I was keen on decoding the meanings in lexical choices, para-textual and semiotic devices for communication, distancing irony, and inter-textual referencing to dominant pre-texts. These strategies, in my view, reflected the philosophical and cultural significations of the statements that my interlocutors made. Generally, the strategies reflected my interlocutors’ awareness of how electoral politics intersect with ethnicity and national histories that are punctuated by such unresolved killings as Msando’s. By linking Msando’s death to earlier killings, my interlocutors expressed shared sentiments of victimisation of the Luo community in post-independence Kenya.

From the Lifunga perspectives, the rumours surrounding Msando’s life and death could not occur outside the context of the Luo community’s perception of and relationship with the government. Thus, the conversations highlighted a marked difference between how KoT protested about government’s failure to protect Msando and how the Lifunga villagers lamented the death. While KoT focused more on the criminality of government oversight generally, Msando’s family and neighbours in Lifunga limited their concerns to how the killing extended communal history and undermined the future political prospects of the community. In other words, my conversations with respondents in Lifunga demonstrated a clear sense of communal self-reflexivity (Huckin, 2002).
Self-reflexivity, defined as a “text’s consciousness of its own status as a verbal product”, (Kao 1997: 59) becomes manifest when “the conventional nature of narrative and the gap that exists between verbal expression and the referent are made the subjects of the narrative” in a process “characterised by the Bakhtinian heteroglossia and inter-generic exchanges that make evident its convention” (Kao: 59). This self-reflexivity can be further nuanced by irony. This also complicates the emerging heteroglossia that allows individuals to reiterate what is already in the public domain while appearing to lend it profundity. This means that commentators can communicate a point by emphasising something that they cannot be punished for simply because it is common knowledge. This strategy of expressing outrage through uttering little nothings somewhat links the rumourous conversations in Lifunga to Bhabha’s concept of ambivalence in the process of nation narration. For Bhabha, there is need to “emphasise in that large and liminal image of the nation […] is a particular ambivalence that haunts the idea of the nation, the language of those who write of it and the lives of those who live it” (2004: 1).

The ambivalence in Kenya is when the government fabricates the narrative of national inclusivity while simultaneously actualising the necropolitical need to eliminate, or fail to stop the elimination of, some people. This is known even among ordinary citizens of any country. That is why Muga can say:

We all know Chris was killed by the state operatives. It was all to do with the 2017 presidential election. Those who kidnapped and tortured him to death were used by senior state officials who wanted him out of the way at the IEBC because he was going to stop the plans to rig the elections in favour of Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto. We are very bitter.43

This was already circulating in public and amounted to silencing because it was a fallacy appealing to consensus, hence the phrases “we all know” and “we are very bitter.” These phrases disperse responsibility for the allegations to the ethnic collective. By using cues such as “we all know”, complemented by the affective “we are very bitter” the interlocutor demonstrates how ideology works: by hailing the listeners into reflecting a common thought pattern without having to say it outrightly (Althusser, 1971).

43 Informal conversation, Lifunga, May 2018
According to Althusser, “ideology interpellates individuals as subjects”, meaning that individuals will pretend even unconsciously to conform to the whims of the dominant ideology. Applying the concept of interpellation to the conversations that I had with Lifunga residents, I established that despite the loud pronouncements by my interlocutors, their responses also concealed strategic silences. These silences spoke to the dynamics of domination and resistance, which also expressed doubt regarding the government’s willingness to probe the death of Msando and punish those involved. These comments also aligned with the government’s wishes to allow the concerned citizens to express their grief or outrage without escalating the crisis.

Hence, government agencies – if indeed they were culpable in the killing or in failure to unmask the killers – somewhat allowed verbal protests at the killing of Msando, but within limits. All of them – the government agents and my interlocutors – had been appropriately hailed into the dominant “ideology of order” (King, 2000). In addition, the silences – informed by the necessity for order – could also have been inspired by the presumption that the government knew what the commoners were thinking all along. This somehow appeared in the perceptions of the Assistant Chief of Lifunga Sub-Location, Henry Oduor Yore. Asked what his subjects were saying about Msando’s death, Yore said: “[M]ost of the ordinary people spoke openly about Mr Msando. They said he had been killed because of politics. They were saying he had been killed because of the elections that was looming at that time. They were also asking why his killers had not been found”44 (my emphasis). As the italics in this quote show, the responses are informed by a political awareness of the importance of ethnicity. This awareness is communicated through referencing silence. This lends credence to Lynch’s (2011; 2006) argument on the inevitability of ethnicity in public debates in Kenya. This was not only present in the views of many respondents; it was also common in the commentaries that dominated KoT. In the latter, ethnicity was enmeshed in the discourses through a signaling of the names of commentators, and in the general ideological trajectory that the specific commentators embraced. For Lynch, ethnic categories are social constructs, actually taken as cultural givens that are beyond question, and which shape people’s interpretation of externalities.

44 Informal conversation, Lifunga, May 2018
Therefore, Msando’s death was bound to be interpreted through ethnic lenses. Ironically, this absolves the investigation into the death because the script for response is known and time-bound. Arguably, while many Kenyans generally believed Msando’s assertions on television, that the IEBC was determined to ensure that elections would free and fair, this belief was stronger in the interlocutors I spoke to in Lifunga. For the interlocutors, this was solely based on the fact of shared ethnic identity. The interlocutors in Lifunga thought that Msando was killed because it was impractical to dismiss him from IEBC just a week to elections. This left his enemies with the only option of killing him.

Generally, perspectives from Lifunga lionised Msando, making him a tragic hero in the local imaginaries. This coincided with some of the sentiments expressed by KoT when national conversations had steered towards heroism. For instance, Dr Roselyne Akombe, @Roselyne Akombe:

Akombe raised the notion of ‘heroes’, *mashujaa*, and the historical struggle to control history. It was also about Msando’s death in the context of national memorialisation, its echoes of the struggle for independence and his role in its more contemporary versions.

In this way, mourning Msando and accusing the government of complicity in his death, politicising debates around his death and the rituals of burial, all spoke to the symbolic meanings of dead bodies in Kenya’s political imaginaries. This was especially so where the owners of these bodies were killed violently. Noteworthy also, localised rituals and narratives
of mourning Msando symbolised the Luo community’s reclamation of his body. As I observed in Lifunga, the mourning of Msando and the reflections long after his burial extended different chapters of the politics of bodies in Kenya’s political histories.

4.3.3: The politics of the body in mourning Msando
An important component of Kenya’s histories in highlighting popular politics, logics of regions and ethnicities relates to the state of the deceased’s body at the point of discovery. When found, Msando’s body had signs of torture (BBC, 2017). The implications of this commonly spill into the public because media reportage tended to dwell on the gory details of the injuries. Thus, the media introduced affect as a variable in reporting Msando’s killing. Even in Lifunga, my interlocutors were greatly disturbed by the state of Msando’s body when he was found. For example, Okinyi repeatedly said: “I heard [over] the radio and read in newspapers that he [Msando] was tortured before being killed. I saw on television news that his naked body was found in the bush [on] the outskirts of Nairobi, near Kikuyu town.” This suggests that the subsequent discussions of the circumstances surrounding the death usually entails narrating horror in a manner relatable to Mbembe (2003) who, following Foucault’s concept of bio-power, interrogates the tendency by the sovereign to exercise its power over the human body by deciding who lives and who dies, or who is left to live and who is allowed to die. Mbembe’s analysis applies to the Msando case, and indeed implicates the government, which may not have been actively involved in his death, but which allowed him to die in those circumstances. This is because had it decided that Msando were to live, the government would have taken adequate measures to assure his security. Okinyi’s last comments were both a challenge and a plea to “President Uhuru Kenyatta and opposition leader Raila Odinga to use their power and influence to arrest Msando’s killers.”

These sentiments were also rehashed by some youth from Lifunga. Coalescing under the Lifunga Youth Group, they particularly felt aggrieved by the death of Msando, whom they had associated with, both as a member of their ethnic Luo community, and as a neighbour. For the youth, Msando was a symbol of hope that the young people from the region could overcome poverty and perceived political marginalisation to attain positions of national importance and prominence. For these youth, therefore, a person who had grown up with them as an ordinary schoolmate and neighbour had risen to the national stage as an

45 ibid
46 ibid
embodiment of electoral integrity. That person had then died under unclear circumstances and, with his death, their hopes and aspirations had also fizzled out, precipitating outrage among them.

Another respondent, Ochieng, stated that “[w]e highly suspect that he [Msando] was killed by the government or those in government. I will repeat this everywhere I go because there is nothing the government can do to me”\(^{47}\) (added emphasis). Again, the italics in Ochieng’s pronouncements suggest a simultaneous interpellation of the other youth in his sentiments. The whole quote also signals a political culture of defiance and Opposition rhetoric that Luo Nyanza has historically been known for (Mueller, 1984), but which the region is currently shedding following the March 2018 détente between Raila Odinga – the Luo political leader – and President Uhuru Kenyatta (Oudia, 2019).

Therefore, Ochieng’s tough talk fits easily in the historical politics of defiance among the Luo. It can also be appreciated from the perspective of youth excitability that quite often stems from a general naiveté of how the government’s machinery may use violence to assert its sovereign will (Otondi, 2017). The irony in Ochieng’s declaration that “there is nothing the government can do to me” is threefold. One, it is that the person whose death he decries was senior in government. Second, that it is the same government that he suspects killed him and, third, that he imagines he is immune from whatever harm the government may wish to inflict on him. Thus, typical of youthful exuberance, Ochieng’ speaks from an emotional rather than logical perspective (Kimari, Melchiorre & Rasmussen, 2020). This was also evident in the comments by other youthful respondents.

4.4: Female voices, ethnic sensibilities: Gender perspectives in Lifunga

Generally, the female respondents in Lifunga echoed what their male counterparts said. For example, Adhiambo said: “Everyone knows that Msando was killed because he knew the secrets of how the Jubilee team wanted to rig the elections.”\(^{48}\) This is what the male respondents also felt, even with the reports that Msando’s body was found next to that of a young lady. Adhiambo added: “Msando’s killing had nothing to do with a love triangle.” The general disbelief and rejection of the love triangle hypothesis cut across gender. But this did not mean that the respondents had somewhat developed a more nuanced understanding of

\(^{47}\) ibid
\(^{48}\) ibid
how ethnic and gender stereotypes are used for political reasons. Rather, the rejection of
the love triangle hypothesis pointed to the more urgent rejection of official narratives by the
government. The government, through the police and other public servants, were perceived
as purveyors of political narratives in the guise of professional investigations.

As such, a complete understanding of this particular response calls for a localised sense of
cultural literacy without which the various narratives remain illegible because they are
misleadingly linear. This need is signaled by some of the minor differences discernible along
gender lines, where women – Akinyi and Adhiambo – appear more reserved and less
resolute in their views. For instance, Akinyi had to be prompted to speak, which she
preempted by disavowing politics in general, because she claimed to dislike it. Akinyi said
she knew Msando closely because “he was my brother-in-law and he loved us so much.”

Asked about whether she thought that the government was directly or otherwise involved in
Msando’s death, she simply said, “[w]e know he was killed.” Akinyi’s guarded responses
extended the paradoxical silences surrounding a potentially dangerous topic as death, and
also expressed cultural beliefs that women’s views are generally subordinated to those of
men (Caputi, 1989).

This hypothesis seems to affirm Fairclough’s (1995 [2013]) view that meanings of utterances
– apart from lexical choices and their semantic value – also derive from the broader cultural
contexts of their pronouncements. Regarding my Lifunga interlocutors, this idea further
brought to the surface Crenshaw’s (1994) analytical concept of intersectionality, where
different identities of a marginalised demographic overlap to worsen their predicament.
Initially conceptualised from the standpoint of critical race theory, intersectionality has since
been appropriated by gender and minority studies generally to analyse the different ways in
which competing identities – racial, gendered, class, and cultural geographies – determine
one’s access to opportunities or, inversely, signals the number and degree of obstacles that
one has to face up to on their different pathways as they pursue opportunity.

Although Crenshaw’s concept was fashioned in different spatial-temporal contexts, it
remains useful to this study precisely because it helps to explain the phallocentric nature of
the discussion on Msando’s death to the extent that his former schoolmates and neighbours

\[49\] *ibid*
appeared more knowledgeable and more aggrieved by his death than his female relations. This is not because they did not have independent opinions or answers to the questions that were addressed by the men. Nor were they any less emotionally devastated by the gruesome death of Msando. It was only that national(ist) politics remain in the outer domains of male dominance. Indeed, the silences and silencing of women in Lifunga was because Msando’s death was immediately situated in the political dynamics of the region and the nation. This made it a matter of patriarchal self-assertion as opposed to a routine cultural mourning of a loved one.

That this is the case can be seen in the historical gender struggles that have ensued over dead male bodies in Luo Nyanza, beginning with the historical contestation over the body of SM Otieno (Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo, 1989). Otieno was a leading criminal lawyer and his death provoked a long-drawn-out case from December 1986 to October 1987 when the court ruled in favour of the clan, a code word for affirming patriarchy over gender equity. The SM Otieno burial saga is a textbook example of how what would otherwise be a legally straightforward case of a death and a burial “becomes a springboard for discovery of values of a society” (van Dore, 1988: 330), in this case dramatising “the primacy for the Luo of the attachment to the homeland, to the location of the ‘placenta’, of the son to the father, of patrilineage as virtue” (Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo, 1989: 137).

From the death of SM Otieno to the present, discussions of matters of death and related rituals tend to be a men-only affair. This leads to a celebration of a customary regime that negates gender equality and even contemporary legal jurisprudence that celebrates equality of gender. Similarly, death and the mourning of prominent Luo men is a matter for the clan. This means that men are dominant. Indeed, women are generally excluded or merely allowed some passive space where their views hardly matter. This is why, I argue, the women in Lifunga, even those who had closer kinship ties with Msando, deferred to the whims of men, even when the men were total strangers or mere acquaintances of the deceased.

The masculinisation of the debates surrounding Msando’s death is also seen in the pattern of physical absenting and moral alienation of women, specifically Msando’s mother and widow, respectively. Although it was trite knowledge that Msando’s mother depended on him for upkeep, the overarching concerns among both male and female interlocutors
overlooked the feelings of his widow and of his mother. Even on the few occasions when they voiced their opinions, it tended to reflect a patriarchal logic. For instance, Anyango felt that “Msando’s wife was given a job by the government and we think this has made her forget about what happened [to her husband].”\textsuperscript{50} Adhiambo added that Msando’s “mother has been neglected. She is sick and no one, even the people at IEBC have never gone back to her home, yet Chris was their senior staff.”\textsuperscript{51} The last bit of Adhiambo’s views imply some of the conspiracy theories that were spun by some villagers to try and make sense of the chain of events that began with Msando’s disappearance, death and the discovery of his body. What Adhiambo had merely implied was then loudly professed by Okwaro, another Lifunga resident, who stated that “the IEBC officials and Jubilee leaders who failed to attend Msando’s burial have something to do with his killing. If they were innocent, they would not have feared attending the [Msando’s] burial ceremony.”\textsuperscript{52}

Okwaro, unlike Adhiambo, saw conspiracy among IEBC, and the power of occult-like witchcraft that makes the IEBC staff unwilling to visit Msando’s family. For Okwaro, the absence of the IEBC officials at the funeral stemmed from their fear that some unseen forces could harm them on behalf of Msando and his grieving family. Okwaro’s matter-of-fact tone is enabled by a presumption that there is widespread understanding of and belief in the existence and power of invisible, yet potent magical powers. This awareness, among the other respondents and presumably within the IEBC, also resonates with Geschiere’s argument in \textit{The Modernity of Witchcraft} (1997). He argues that contrary to the widespread presumption that witchcraft in Africa is a carryover from the pre-colonial world of occult animism and other forms of darkness, it is actually a more recent invention that many Africans used to negotiate their terms of engagement with modernity. Part of these challenges, for the Luo people of western Kenya, is the emergence of common law mechanisms of investigation and prosecution of suspects in matters such as murder, which had traditionally been controlled by taboos for prevention and elaborate restorative rituals to compensate aggrieved families or clans, and subsequent restoration of a cosmic balance.

The dimension of witchcraft as implied by Adhiambo and stated by Okwaro can be seen as an extension of conspiracy theories, which were also rampantly created, recreated and circulated among the communities surrounding Lifunga. Some scholars argue that there

\textsuperscript{50} ibid
\textsuperscript{51} ibid
\textsuperscript{52} ibid
exists a “link between societal crisis situations and belief in conspiracy theories”, and that “aversive feelings that people experience when in crisis — fear, uncertainty, and the feeling of being out of control — stimulate a motivation to make sense of the situation, increasing the likelihood of perceiving conspiracies in social situations” (van Prooijen, 2017: 323). The “fear, uncertainty, and the feeling of being out of control” among the respondents in Lifunga Village are what led to their outrage, and the tendency to (re)create and spread conspiracy theories.

For example, Ouko’s claim that “his [Msando’s] killers cannot be arrested because they are being protected by prominent government officials.” Or Auma’s view that Msando’s “killers have never been arrested but I know senior government officials, including President Uhuru Kenyatta and Raila Odinga, know them. I think [that] even some senior members of the media could be knowing what happened but cannot publish for fear they could be targeted.” Yet another conspiracy theory relates to news that Msando’s widow had been appointed to a senior government position, to which Adhiambo stated that “some people also say she never got the job and that the government was just playing public relations.” A more emotive conspiracy theory among residents of Lifunga was propounded by the Member of County Assembly (MCA) of Ukwala Ward, where Lifunga is located. Asked whether he agreed with the media reports that had circulated following Msando’s death, the MCA said: “I agreed with the media reports that he was killed because some people wanted the password to the elections server.” This was perhaps the only response from the villagers, which seemed to rehash a theory that had widely circulated in digital spaces. This suggested that some of the conspiracy theories in digital platforms had not travelled as fast into the analogue domains of rumour and hearsay.

Generally, the (fe)male respondents in Lifunga assumed a uniform position opposed to the government. Yet, their outlook to the government had paradoxes and contradictions. Specifically, the interlocutors’ displeasure was due to the recognition that the government has the infrastructural and technical resources to arrest and punish Msando’s killers. Given that the government was yet to do this, the Lifunga villagers saw it as a dereliction of duty that extended their fear that they were being ignored by the same government.

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53 ibid
54 ibid
55 ibid
4.5: The Raila factor in Lifunga’s perspectives

In my focus on Lifunga, I engaged in informal conversations with about 10 close family members of Msando and 28 neighbours. I also spoke to youth representatives of the Lifunga Youth Group, in order to obtain their views on common themes in the narratives on Msando’s death. A common thread in their perspectives was the person of Raila Odinga on the national political stage. I found out that part of the outrage that Msando’s killing provoked was because it was interpreted as undermining Odinga’s chances of winning the presidency. A question arises: how did the name and person of Raila Odinga influence Lifunga’s reception and interpretation of Msando’s death?

To answer this question, I begin by interrogating the complicated place of the government in Lifunga imaginaries, and the equally complicated place of Odinga in national and local politics. Without doubt, Odinga was the single most influential politician in Luo Nyanza generally and Lifunga particularly. Yet his political shift from die-hard opponent of the government when Msando died, to the March 2018 ‘handshake’ with President Kenyatta, somewhat put the Lifunga people in an awkward position because it complicated their narrative position regarding the murder. After the ‘handshake’, even Odinga himself kept off the Msando debate. Yet, his later silence was rarely mentioned. Only Ouma lamented that “political leaders like [Orange Democratic Movement] ODM leader Raila [Odinga] who attended the burial promised to push for the arrest of the killers but to date, nothing has happened.” 56

The recurrent mention of Odinga in the Msando conversations shows the extent to which his views shaped the politics of the region. It was indeed impossible to extricate Msando’s death from Odinga’s presidential ambition or, inversely, remove his failure to succeed Kenyatta in 2017 from Msando’s death. For the residents of Lifunga, the death of Msando was a precursor to the death of Odinga’s presidential aspirations, which is why they expected that at the very least, the Opposition leader would push for the arrest and prosecution of the killers. The major silence in the conversations is the hint that Msando would not have been killed had Odinga not been such a formidable candidate threatening Uhuru Kenyatta’s re-election.

Msando’s death, in and of itself, was not necessarily a significant grievance. As I have argued, the tragedy and relevance of Msando’s killing derived from earlier deaths in the region, deaths that lived in the memory of the people. Like their counterparts in social media, the people of Lifunga considered Msando to be among the prominent Luo leaders who had been killed in circumstances that implicated the government. As Owuor, one of my interlocutors, recounted the mood on the day Msando was buried:

The ordinary people, even the politicians who attended the funeral, were very bitter. Many were asking why the government had killed Msando. Some were asking why prominent Luos have been killed. They asked about who killed Tom Mboya (former Planning minister) and Robert Ouko (Foreign Affairs minister) and now Msando. Some of the mourners wanted to know what our politicians were doing to ensure Msando’s killers were brought to book.57

Owuor’s list of other prominent Luos allegedly killed by the government resembles that given by Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo (2004). It also shows Owuor’s sense of historical awareness as he indirectly extends the narrative of Luo persecution by successive regimes.

In imagining a Luo ethno-nation within the Kenyan polis, there has been a widespread narrative strand in which “Luo lore establishes the group as once elite and now in abject poverty, victim of a powerful and jealous Kikuyu enemy” (Morrison, 2007: 117). That the presidential contest was between Odinga, a Luo with formidable reform credentials, against Kenyatta, a Kikuyu son of former president who frustrated Odinga’s father into resigning as vice-president in 1966 and then detained him, had all the tale-tell marks of an ethnic duel that unfortunately led to Msando’s death, among other losses by the Luo. Yet, by invoking a history of unresolved killings – except the controversial jailing and execution of Nahashon Njenga Njoroge in the Mboya case (Branch, 2011; Hornsby, 2011) – Owuor and other interlocutors perpetuate the narrative of victimhood to mourn Msando. They also vent political frustration in a process of sublimation to accept the reality that Msando is dead and his killers may never be found. This fatalism was reflected in some of the tweets that

57 ibid.
appeared to invoke metaphysical curses upon the presumably male murderers of Msando. For example, on December 31, 2017, G Marete, @GakiiMarete, wrote

“May their wives, kids and generations to come know no peace. The Lord if Abraham hears the cry of the widow, the orphans and the grieving mother. #RIPMsando #LoggedOutForever”.

On the same plane, Mohamed Asmali, @Asmali77, tweeted:

“PAINFUL clip of Msando’s mother. Irrespective of your politics, she needs to be helped. She’s a mother & grandmother”

To which Mutethia Kiambi, @BonfaceMutethia, responded:

![Tweet by Ahmed Mohamed (Asmali)](image)

![Tweet by Mutethia Kiambi](image)

4.6: Conclusion

In this chapter, I focused on the dominant sentiments of Msando’s relatives and neighbours in Lifunga about his killing. Using a number of guiding questions, I probed into the collective psyche of his neighbours and family in order to determine how verbal rumours captured the dominant thinking in Msando’s home village. I have established that, if the aftermath of Msando’s death was a national outcry over assassinations as a political tool aimed at derailing democratic causes, in Lifunga it yielded a multilayered narrative of political and
gender subjectivities that defy linear or popular interpretations. In this sense, perspectives from Lifunga significantly deviated from their social media variants more in terms of the logics for particular standpoints and less from the grammars of anti-government accusations or tonalities of outrage. A notable measure of this deviation related to the reasons for the rejection of official narratives, among them the claim that Msando’s death could have arisen out of a crime of passion. Generally, my interlocutors saw through the crime of passion hypothesis a discursive trap laid by the government to evade accusations of involvement in Msando’s killing.

In this sense, Herman and Chomsky’s (1988) concept of ‘manufacturing consent’ could well have played out among the people of Lifunga. Msando’s neighbours and relatives had a historical consciousness and knowledge of the regime as a wily source of information with a history of involvement in killing annoying Kenyans. They roundly rejected what they considered to be spurious explanations for his killing. They instead maintained yet another collective position that the government of the day had, either by commission or omission, led to the killing of Msando. This position only became apparent to those who had localised knowledge of how political registers work to express culturally coded messages and locally relevant opinions. One of these opinions was that ‘the government killed him directly’, or ‘indirectly by proxy’.

I also show that such a positioning is anchored on the history of presidential elections in which Odinga contested. The Odinga factor in understanding the people’s responses to the death determined the perception of the political significance of Msando in the then unfolding political campaigns. It also determined the magnitude of the tragedy of his death. Again, concealed beneath the choral outrage over Msando’s death was the widespread fear that his physical killing was also the symbolic death of Odinga’s chances of becoming president after the 2017 General Election. To some of my interlocutors, there was a common perception that rigging out Odinga was a fait accompli, and the outrage following Msando’s killing was also the mourning of Odinga’s lost chances of being president. Therefore, the overt and covert logics of mourning Msando, besides determining which hypotheses for the killing were acceptable or otherwise, cohered with what Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo call ‘economies of interest and debate’ (2004: 28). Mourning in Lifunga was driven by the people’s interest in the ethnic identity of the deceased and his role in Odinga’s potential presidency, and not the mere death of Msando the person. This means then that the
villagers in Msando were largely creative in their interpretation of Msando’s death beyond the immediacy of his role in the IEBC and the impending elections of 2017. Instead, they locate the death of Msando in a longer history of recursive assassinations of Luo luminaries in the context of contestations for political power at the national level, in which the place of Raila Odinga is prime.

Therefore, related to this logic is the symbolism of Odinga himself in the political imaginaries of the Lifunga people, specifically, and the Luo generally. Hence, this chapter signals specific concerns of a community whose historical consciousness is underpinned by grief and grievances of exclusion from Kenya’s power sanctums. This systemic exclusion is viewed broadly among the Lifunga residents as something that only Odinga can remedy once, and if at all, he becomes president. Thus, unlike the commentators on KoT, who were somewhat more topical in their orientation, conversations in Lifunga were underpinned by a timeless narrative of perceived anti-Luo ethnic persecution, shared legacy of grief, suspicion of government and its agents, and near-universal desperation. In this mix, Msando was inserted as a tragic hero who could have enabled the ultimate ‘salvation’ of the community through free and fair elections from which Odinga would emerge victorious. Hence, Msando and Odinga became key figures in modern mythmaking processes in which the former was the agent determined to mediate the latter’s presidential victory, and the ultimate salvation of the Luo community from political marginalisation.

Ultimately, therefore, there existed significant differences in the perception of Msando’s death and afterlife in Kenya’s rural and digital public spheres. While the KoT brigade focused on the abhorrent killing of Msando as an elections officer, my interlocutors in Lifunga looked beyond the person of Msando and interpreted his death as having direct implications for Odinga’s presidential ambitions. In this regard, and perhaps paradoxically, the people of Lifunga mourned Msando more because of what they imagined would have been his role in enabling an Odinga presidency. The ambivalence among Lifunga residents extended to other variables, including ethnic and gender stereotypes as cultural texts, the dynamics of domination and resistance by the government and citizens, respectively. The next chapter focuses on Gachie Village where Carolyne Ngumbu, whose body was found next to Msando’s, came from. In doing this, I explore points of convergence and divergence of opinions between commentators at home and their equivalents within KoT.
Chapter Five: ‘The Oilskin of the House is not for Rubbing into the Skin of Strangers’: The Mourning of Carolyne Ngumbu in Kiambu

5.1: Introduction

[N]ationalism has typically sprung from masculinised memory, masculinised humiliation and masculinised hope [where] women are relegated to minor, often symbolic roles in nationalist movements and conflicts, either as icons of nationhood to be elevated and defended, or as the booty or spoils of war, to be denigrated and disgraced (Nagel, 1998: 244).

Using this epigraph as a springboard, this chapter focuses on the narrative strands that emerged from Kiambu, following the death of Ngumbu, who was killed alongside Msando. My key concern here is to determine the extent to which the field narratives I gathered from Kiambu, where Ngumbu was born and buried, cohered with, or departed from, their variants in the digital sphere. I focus on the responses of family, friends and neighbours, within the methodological framework of interviews and informal conversations. I explore how gender, ethnicity, geography, and history overdetermined the reception of and discourses on Ngumbu in the country at large and in Kiambu in particular.

Generally, Ngumbu’s death attracted relatively less outrage compared to Msando’s, going by the number of tweets by KoT, extent of coverage in the media, and absence of political figureheads at her burial. The hierarchisation of the two deaths was informed by a complex interplay of these variables to explain the normalisation of violence against ‘prestigeless’ women (Caputi, 1989: 437). Caputi argues that the perception of female bodies as readily dispensable is common, and derives from a default association of murdered females with morally abhorrent sexual entrepreneurship that somehow diminishes the weight of the tragedy that is their death. Caputi’s views suggest a feminist prism for reading the killings of women. However, the ‘dispensability’ of Ngumbu’s body was not primarily because she was a woman, but simply because she was an unfortunate witness to an abduction of a more important ‘target’, Msando. Even Msando’s killing was widely mourned because of the politically charged time of his killing and also because of the significant role that he would have played in transmitting presidential election results in the then bitterly fought contest.
between Uhuru Kenyatta and Raila Odinga. As I argue in the previous chapter, the mourning of Msando also took on a historical significance because of assassinations of Luo political elites in Kenya, among whom Msando could be counted. Therefore, the operating variable was ethnicity and political class rather than gender. This is why, by the same measure, positioning Ngumbu’s killing and subsequent mourning within feminist theoretical and analytical frameworks would miss the point. A more informative approach, which I opt for, is that which locates her within the dynamics of ethnicity and political power contestations in a country awash with necropolitics.

Ngumbu’s death was interpreted in the context of phallocratic grammars that dominated public debates in Kenya at the time. The idea of phallocracy relates to the ease with which certain debates that are sexually charged tend to be invoked when debating social relations between men and women. This also relates to the concept of nation and nationalist politics similar to that which overdetermined the debates around Ngumbu and Msando’s deaths. In this regard, Musila (2009: 39) argues that because the nation state emerged from contests of colonialist and Africanist masculinities, the entire political terrain in Kenya primarily constitutes ‘a phallocratic landscape’. Such a terrain necessitates “the configuration of the nation as the land/subjects/female and the state as the rulers/male” (2009: 40). This approach remains a dominant mode of analysis, centring “the phallus as the shorthand for power and the accompanying castration anxiety that haunts this power” (2009: 41).

Musila’s analysis, which I borrow, is partially based on the philosophies underpinning canonical standpoints in African literature that, she argues, constitute “the most fluent portraits of the intimate liaisons between power, the phallus and sex as core grammars of power in postcolonial Africa” (2009: 40) in general and Kenya in particular. For Musila, understanding Kenya’s political dynamics should entail an appreciation of certain tropes of masculinity, key among them the portrayal of the dominant male figure as the ‘heroic warrior-figure of nationalist liberation struggles’ (2009: 43). These struggles somewhat extend to the current times, when Msando’s death is seen as more tragic than Ngumbu’s.

5.2: Mourning Ngumbu in the shadows of national politics, debates on Kiambu and Kikuyu hegemony in Kenya
A better understanding of the practices and logics of gendered, political, historical and cultural implications of the differences in mourning Ngumbu requires a broad context of the
back-stories. These include critical variables in Kenya’s post-colonial realities, notably the roles of geography and ethnicity in framing national conversations. Therefore, I attempt to locate the death and debates on Ngumbu in the context of discourses on Kikuyu ethnic nationalism vis-a-vis the place of Kiambu in Kenya’s history and politics.

5.2.1: Locating Ngumbu in debates on Kiambu and Kikuyu hegemony in Kenya
Kiambu has occupied a chequered place in national debates. This has also implicated residents individually and in different collectives, such as ethnicity (Kahura, 2018) and gender (Cora, 1992). Kiambu’s dominance in national politics has led to the invention of different problematic referents, notably Kiambu Mafia that, from the days of Jomo Kenyatta, symbolised an ethnic political and economic elite that steered national politics towards broader Kikuyunisation, and which set the first terms of electoral contestations based on ethnicity (Kagwanja, 2006).

The significance of Kiambu in Kenyan politics derives from two different but related attributes. These attributes had a bearing on how the residents of Gachie received news of Ngumbu’s death. For many Kenyans, Kiambu is a metaphor for Kikuyu nationalism (Kahura, 2018) that is considered the worst form of tribalism (Kahura, 2019, Muriuki 1979). Second, Kiambu has, by virtue of its proximity to Nairobi – especially its peri-urban centres – attracted low-income earners of different ethnicities, most of whom are preoccupied with daily survival to the extent that traditional modes of income earning and social support networks are no longer tenable. Because of all these, Kiambu has been associated with a history of criminal violence, including femicide, (National Police Service, 2019; Henningsen and Jones, 2013; Mutahi & Ruteere, 2020).

Indeed, homicide in Kiambu has over time tended to numb affective responses to crime in the county, creating an anomalous normalcy around murders. The extent of this has been that when one dies at the hands of criminal elements, they become mere statistics to an everyday culture of death (ibid). This, in turn, becomes subordinated to the main business of the times for different socio-economic categories. For ordinary people, the business is daily subsistence through itinerant trade or employment on various terms, including sex work. For the political elite, the core concern is usually to maintain political presence at the top.
Karimi and Ochieng (1980) detail how a cabal of Kikuyu political and economic elite plotted to stop the then vice-president, Daniel arap Moi, from succeeding Jomo Kenyatta. In a series of political rallies across the Central and Rift Valley regions of Kenya, this cabal pushed what they called the ‘Change the Constitution Campaign’, arguing that the 90-day transition period after a president’s death during which the vice-president would serve as head of state while awaiting the election of a substantive president was long enough for one to impose themselves on the country (Branch, 2011; Hornsby, 2011). This cabal of nationalist Kikuyu politicians came to be known as the Kiambu Mafia (Kahura, 2018). The Kiambu Mafia was so determined to retain power that they would do anything, including killing.

This is the context in which Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo (2004) read the 1975 assassination of JM Kariuki. For Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo, Kariuki’s death was the work of Mount Kenya Mafia, which wanted to maintain the prevailing social order within the Kikuyu nation. Accordingly, although JM Kariuki was a prominent member of the Kikuyu nation, with Mau Mau credentials and was a former personal assistant to Jomo Kenyatta, the regime became increasingly uncomfortable with him:

> his campaign for the poor was seen as an apostasy and his murder was sanctioned by an inner core of Kenyatta’s Kikuyu political and police officials. JM was seen as a threat to *Kikuyu hegemony in Kenya*, not from without (as in the case of the Luo Mboya) but rather from within. The murder, brutal in ways presaging Ouko’s death, was read by some as a piece of *internal housekeeping within the Kenyatta state*, as a performative warning to anyone within who strayed too far from the circle (2004: 5, my emphasis).

It was partly in this context that the death of Ngumbu was received, filtered and interpreted through lenses of ethnicity, gender and her place of origin.

5.2.2: Mourning Ngumbu in a climate of stereotypes
The cultural consciousness that inspires ethnic solidarity among the Kikuyu (and other communities) relies on intuitive correlation and awareness of the speakable and the unspeakable (Haugerud, 1997; Kagwanja, 2003; Ogot, 1993; Ndunde, 2008; Kahura, 2019). This has been superimposed on aspects of everyday life among the Kikuyu, and entrenched in cultural lore through folk wisdom. Such vehicles include oral literature that is secondarily preserved in the early national(ist) literature, for instance Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *The River*
Between (1965). According to ancient Kikuyu wisdom, which Ngugi reproduces with approval, “the oilskin of the house is not for rubbing into the skin of strangers” (1965: 3). With this cultural awareness, I argue that the Kiambu people’s response to Ngumbu’s death was generally underpinned by a subconscious disapproval of her association with Msando, literally applying the ‘oilskin of the house to a stranger’.

This is not to suggest that there exits any homogeneity of moral standpoints among the villagers, but rather to acknowledge residual notions of puritanism as relates to sexual morality that touch on how women’s bodies get implicated in public, social and political discourses. Hence, if there was a perception that Ngumbu’s indulgence with Msando derived from or otherwise signaled her sexual availability, such a perception was neither the main nor the only one. It however assumed some artificial dominance because of what one may consider Kenyans’ general orientation towards voyeurism of heteronormative public displays of affection. In a city such as Nairobi where leisure is calibrated in real and imagined performances of romance, and where common perceptions that younger girls are not averse to instrumentalising their sexual appeal for economic or material opportunities, it is common to have such liaisons subjected to varying degrees of moral scrutiny besides other multivariate perspectives of meaning making in relation to the social interactions between men and women in public spaces.

At the core of all these dynamics is the message that contrary to the perception that ruralites offer simple or simplistic interpretations of unfolding social events, a keener probing into these interpretations do reveal complex and multilayered narratives that in turn point at nuanced engagements with such developments. In other words, although the shadow of national(ist) politics looms large over even the most minute or banal aspects of human interactions such as private conversations between men and women, the locals do not always latch onto politically correct interpretations. Nor are they easily fooled by what emerge as desired interpretations of such events and the more tragic ones such as Ngumbu’s killing. Instead, they have fashioned their own ways of communicating their disagreements with official narrative strands while remaining aware of what is politically expedient in the context national contestations that invoke ethnic sensibilities. In brief, they can nuance their responses to national narratives in a manner that is contingent to specific political moments. Thus, the locals in Kiambu may have opinions on the circumstances
surrounding the death of Ngumbu, but they choose to withhold some of these views from ‘outsiders’ because ‘the oilskin of the house is not for rubbing into the skin of strangers.’

These dynamics have previously attracted remarkable scholarly attention. Some of these scholars address related nuances in political discourse among the Kikuyu, especially when ‘outside’ elements have access to political power. For example, writing about the culture of local(ised) politics in Moi’s Kenya, Haugerud (1997) noted how rhetoric interfaces with political consciousness to determine the substance of public discourse. According to Haugerud, “[i]ndirect messages float between orators and hearers. Speakers manoeuvre within constraints on what is and is not publicly speakable. Listeners draw their own inferences, construct their own interpretations. Missteps on either side can be dangerous, even fatal. The possibilities for confusion, deception, ambiguity, and contradiction are endless” (1997: 2). Haugerud’s argument is useful in analysing responses by the Kiambu residents to questions surrounding Ngumbu’s death. During my conversations with neighbours and family of Ngumbu, ‘messages floated’ between my interlocutors and I. Their responses were engulfed in and inflected by a political awareness of ethnic polarities between the Kikuyu and Luo, especially at election time. This was also something that Ngumbu had presumably missed, lending credence to Haugerud’s conclusion on the possible fatal results of missteps. This awareness that ‘missteps on either side can be dangerous, even fatal’ also feeds into the culture of silence among residents of Kiambu, which silences were manifested through unnatural pauses, regurgitation of the common, and negation of most of what I said.

Other scholars have revisited the question of colonial violence from historical and anthropological standpoints. They show how the impact of colonial violence lingers on, as evidenced in the seeming readiness of a people to acquiesce to state violence while remaining silent about it. This could be partly responsible for the silences in Gachie, because it signalled earlier encounters with government violence that effectively imposed silence on the survivors. Bruce and Karim (2007) point out that violence is structured and adheres to a definite structure of being. This structure evolves from conception, execution, and existence among a people as part of their lived reality or history. Thus, violence is weaved by particular sociologies into existing variables such as gender, social norms, and culture in general. This way, violence becomes localised. As Bruce and Karim write:
At first eruption, violence is always experienced as unique. If given time and repetition, however, it becomes routine, part of the air, and one learns how to breathe without being asphyxiated. One no longer seeks to eliminate it, nor even understand it. Episodes of violence may flare up in different places, but each is contained in its local context where it risks becoming normal (2007: 5).

Anderson (2005) and Elkins (2005), whose studies of colonial brutality drew global attention to the excesses of colonial violence in Kenya, corroborated the historical, fictional, and factional narratives that had been advanced by insider scholars, including Ngugi (1964, 1967) and Kinyati (2008, 2010). And as Ngugi (2013, 2010) shows in his childhood memoirs, virtually the whole Kikuyu community retains residual fear and anxiety regarding the extent of state violence. This is so much so that, nearly 70 years after that systemic violence, the community is yet to recover from the traumas of collective punishment, something that informs the intuitive silences that greet political and potentially political deaths.

While acknowledging the impact of colonial violence, Otieno (2018) and Warah (2019) challenge the common view that attributes the Kikuyu political behaviour to colonial violence that left them deeply and collectively traumatised. Instead, they read the closing of ranks as a tactical positioning for political power and the economic opportunities that come with it. Thus, economic advantage that accrues from greater access to political power determines emergent narratives of what may or may not be loudly debated – including Ngumbu’s death.

5.2.3: Silences in mourning Ngumbu
The natural condition of a woman is to dwell in silence, to persevere mutely, and to communicate speechlessly. Silence becomes a woman. Silence is what a woman, in be-coming a woman, becomes. Silence is becoming in a woman because silence is the be-coming of a woman. A woman is silent. The presence of a woman is the presence of silence. Silence is a woman (Mwangi, 2013, n.p.)

Mwangi’s (2013) catchy, if somewhat polemical epigraph above, could well have prophesied the plight of Ngumbu who, although killed in the same circumstances as Msando, was not mourned publicly.
On the face of it, the silences in Kiambu could pass off as a depoliticised approach to making sense of a death, unlike in Siaya where commentators overemphasised the political links to Msando’s death. However, Gachie residents’ silences surrounding Ngumbu’s death could also be explained as part of the political agenda that feeds into a historical preoccupation with retaining political power among the Kikuyu generally and those of Kiambu particularly (Warah, 2018). I attempt, in the next section, to examine the silenced responses from Ngumbu’s family and neighbours through the lens of Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis (1995) and Caruth’s (1991) analytical tools of reading of collective trauma.

5.3: The ambivalence of knowing and not knowing: Voices from Kiambu
In Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History, Caruth (1991) laments about the complexities of writing or interrogating history from within. She suggests that unravelling the meaning of historical occurrences is often undermined by the unconscious and subconscious interaction between the observer of the historical development and its survivors. This leads to an ambivalence of simultaneously knowing and not knowing what it is in totality. This happens particularly when the historical development being observed or analysed relates to violence. Caruth uses Michael Herr’s views on the Vietnam War, which he saw as a people’s relationship with the violence that unfolded before their eyes. She borrows an epigraph from Herr’s assertion:

… it took the war to teach it, that you were as responsible for everything you saw as you were for everything you did. The problem was that you didn’t always know what you were seeing until later, maybe years later, that a lot of it never made it in at all, it just stayed stored there in your eyes (Herr, Cited in Caruth, 1991: 181).

Following the pattern I had established in studying responses from Lifunga, Msando’s home, I deployed the same conversational approach in Gachie to gain nuance and insights from neighbours and relatives of Ngumbu. Focusing on ten of Ngumbu’s close family members and 28 neighbours, I wanted to test the hypotheses that had dominated discourses by KoT and those that emerged in Lifunga against the stock themes in the versions already in public. Therefore, my interest was not so much in the empirical value of responses in Kiambu but rather in the possible nuances or slants in the answers that my interlocutors gave. For my research, therefore, an answer was not necessarily more or less credible depending on how often it was given. Rather, I focused on getting the discursive feel of the land. I determined
this against the critical aim of this thesis, which was to determine how rumours on political or politicised deaths enable public discourse in digital and analogue perspectives.

I was especially sensitive to the possibility that the grief that Ngumbu’s death generated hindered my interlocutors’ free expression. As such, I drew extra-textual cues from the conversations, as theorised by Fairclough (1995). Accordingly, verbal communications rely on facial expressions, gestures, pauses and silences, all of which contribute towards complementing or undermining what the interlocutor intends to communicate. In turn, these extra-textual complements derive from the reality that public discourse is usually regulated by social norms and spatial-temporal specificities, such as historical dynamics.

Thus, discourse is sustained by simultaneous processes of production, reproduction, and contestation of existing social relations and the interests that these relations engender. Therefore, to extract the full meaning of verbal and symbolic texts, Fairclough (1989) recommends a three-step analytical process that entails textual analysis (description), processing analysis (interpretation), and then social analysis (explanation). For my conversations with Ngumbu’s friends, neighbours and family, my key focus was on the third stage – which I employed cautiously – because of how the unspoken responses complemented the utterances from respondents as equally potent signifiers of textual meanings. Noteworthy, however, is that I acted judiciously since I recognised that social analysis does not presume an expressive transparency of the interlocutors. Indeed, social analysis also recognises that semiotic signals of meaning in social contexts largely depend on other variables, including distancing irony or stratégic use of understatements, all of which impact on the reception of intended meanings. In a sentence, I undertook the social analysis of the responses from Kiambu while looking out for the performative aspects of communication that could have over-emphasised or de-emphasised the intended message, thus distorting it.

5.3.1: Performance of power and the (un)mournability of Ngumbu

As I indicate earlier in this thesis, the death of Ngumbu was doubly enveloped in silence on account of gender, culture, her ethnic identity, and of her relatively lower ‘political value.’ These silences were manifest in social media platforms, mainstream media, and among the general public. Indeed, even my interlocutors’ responses to questions of how her death was received were laced with extra-verbal cues that contributed to the seeming silencing
process. Paradoxically, this also led to the semantic wholeness of the answers given. This turn of events occurred because many interlocutors gave non-committal responses – “I don’t know”. This strategic silencing was also manifested in the seemingly incredible suggestions by my interlocutors that they were not active users of social media, despite the close proximity of Kiambu to the Nairobi metropolis.

For example, 15 out of the 28 friends and neighbours of Ngumbu I spoke to said they were not on social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook. This implied that they did not follow the heated public debates that took place on these platforms. Thus, their views regarding the disappearance and death of Ngumbu and Msando had not been coloured by the partisanship that dominated social media debates, unless they picked these from their interactions with the other participants who had access to social media platforms. I was not interested in the truth-value of these claims, but rather in how dominant perceptions within the closed group of Ngumbu’s family and friends spoke to a historical and political awareness comparable to what was on social media and in Msando’s Lifunga village. I was keen to discern how individual and collective historical and political awareness shaped the responses given – through utterances and silences – and how these explain the cold reception of the news.

Writing in a somewhat related context, Lynch argues that understanding Kenya’s post-independence politics begins by appreciating the importance of “ethnicity as a discursive framework” (2011: 12). For Lynch, “the interconnectedness of identity, historical presentation, and moral relations ensures that ethnic narratives provide a discursive framework that helps shape popular perceptions of group status and thus evaluations of self-worth (cf. Horowitz, 2000) while also providing a moral and historical basis for a collective sense of social justice, claims, and rights” (2011: 8). Although Lynch writes this in regard to how the Kalenjin community rose to be a key political actor in Kenya, her arguments also apply to the Kikuyu people of Kiambu. This is because they were equally anxious about whether political power would slip through the hands of their kinsman to that of their Luo nemesis. This means that a play between history, culture (historical associations of oath-taking and customary gender hierarchies), and politics of ethnically inflected succession made it hard for Ngumbu’s neighbours and relatives to mourn her in the way that Msando was mourned by his people. As I indicated earlier, the emotional imperative to mourn a relative and neighbour was undercut by the political necessity to avoid ‘associating’
emotionally and ideologically with the Luo people of Msando. This, according to Kiruga (2018), is because

Over the decades, this Luo-Kikuyu rivalry has come to define Kenyan politics. In the current discussions on secession, draft maps carve out perceived spheres of influence. While the conflict is embodied by Raila Odinga and Uhuru Kenyatta, they are merely figureheads in a difference now so deeply rooted as to make its examination, and solution, difficult. Odinga is the face of the opposition, and his politics of Odingaism, inherited and perfected from his father, are loathed in central Kenya. Kenyatta is the face of an oppressive government, also inherited and perfected from his father, and is loathed in Nyanza and the coastal regions (Theafricareport.com, January 30, 2018).

The politics of ethnic loyalty between the Kikuyu and the Luo would not necessarily spill into private social relations. However, for Ngumbu and Msando, it did because of the time and role of Msando in the election contest between Kenyatta and Odinga. Thus, the reception of Ngumbu’s death in her village shows how national civic politics may intersect with other forms of political discourses, including the mix between ethnicity and necropolitics.

In “Necropolitics,” Mbembe (2003) argues that historically, governments determine who lives or dies. While nodding at the Foucauldian concept of ‘biopower’, Mbembe argues that for most regimes, there seems to be an understanding that to “exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power” (12). If this is true, then the deaths of Ngumbu and Msando were within the parameters of state (in)action. This is also how the people of Gachie intuitively understood Ngumbu’s death, hence their strategic silences that were meant to communicate their true feelings while insulating them from possible victimisation by government agents.

Elsewhere, Roumen (2018) argues that silence is neither the opposite of communication, nor can both exist separate from each. Indeed, the whole communication process deploys both direct (overt, loud, or pronounced methods) and indirect (silence) methods to relay one’s thoughts and feelings. In the case of the residents of Gachie, I established that the people were afraid or anxious especially in responding to questions that touched on the government and its agents. One such question was, “Why do you think neither the president nor his deputy, or even IEBC (Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission) officials
did not attend the funeral (of Msando and Ngumbu)?” Most of the respondents stated that they did not know, although a few offered more elaborate answers. They suggested, among other reasons, the busy schedule of government officials, the perception that the dead were pro-opposition individuals, and thus ideologically disconnected from the government. Another view was that Ngumbu and Msando were not ‘prominent enough’ to warrant presidential attendance at their funerals.

Although my interlocutors may not have been aware of the theoretical nuance of strategic silence as an effective and safe means of communication, or indeed of the (un)mournability of certain bodies, they nonetheless articulated the practical manifestation of these dynamics. Their contributions revealed how private memory works to constitute public histories that are subsequently communicated through words and silences. Further, in their overall reluctance to publicly share their views on the death and funeral rituals of Ngumbu, the interlocutors drawn from family and neighbours inserted themselves in the turbulent circuits of the cultural economy of emotions. They did all these by conversing in the context of contemporary electoral contestations, history of unresolved killings and a growing menace of highly publicised cases of femicide and patriarchy. The conversations generally fit into the dynamics of necropolitical double-deaths of female victims, and a determined erasure of their memories from the public spheres.

Writing in the context of America’s emerging culture of roadside memorials in which grieving families erect artefacts in honour of their departed kin or friends, Bednar views such gestures as symbolic statements on the wholesomeness of necropolitics. This hints at how government functionaries indulge “the performance of power to determine who legitimately can kill both persons and the memory of persons” (2013: 337). Following Bednar, I argue that the silences of my interlocutors in Gachie could not merely be explained by the respondents’ ignorance of the political nature of Ngumbu’s death. These silences signalled their awareness of how historical necropolitical dynamics have impacted aspects of their everyday lives. Notable among these are the sporadic killings such as Ngumbu’s. This was quite unlike what had happened in other platforms in which Ngumbu’s death had been discussed, notably the digital spheres occupied by KoT.

On Twitter, for example, the debates on Ngumbu had been advanced by presumably feminist and activist voices. A case in point is DD @Disembe who tweeted on April 12, 2019:
This commentator saw her absence in the debates as a result of patriarchal hierarchies of gender, or hyper-politicisation of debates in public discourse. The silences surrounding Ngumbu, within KoT, were basically informed by lack of information on the person, as well as the geographical and historical nuances that had framed her life. Although there was some silence among the respondents, this particular silence was more strategic. It was not necessarily an indicator of ignorance or indifference to the plight of the dead young woman and the emotional turmoil of her immediate family. Rather, the silences spoke to the need to manage information and emotion so as to divert the attention of the government away from the village.

This tactic of diverting the government’s gaze is partly a manifestation of strategic subversion that is usually associated with disempowered citizens. In this regard, some studies show that some ordinary people, comparable to the family and neighbours of Ngumbu, manipulate emotions such as humour, anger, angst, wrath, and malice, among others to deflect the power of government over them. This is usually symbolised by repressive agents and other apparatuses. Mbembe’s (2001) On the Postcolony, although using Cameroon for setting, applies to the rest of the continent in reflecting how, for instance, humourous commentaries by the masses conceal their aggression at and disdain for the government. That Mbembe’s analysis is relevant to Kenya (and Africa) is seen in the number of comparable studies (Mukhongo, 2020; Obadare, 2009; Marjolein’t, 2007), which show that commoners deploy safe emotional responses to massage the egos of the rulers while rebuking them.
I argue that the same template of emotions applies to Kenya where awareness of vicious necropolitics tends to mediate people’s responses to unresolved killings, such as Ngumbu’s. This is also where the government is suspected of complicity, as was the current case. The slight difference, however, is that where other scenarios provoke ambivalent laughter and jocular discourses, in the Ngumbu case we witness a stunned or strategic silence. Such silence nonetheless effectively communicates what the respondents actually feel, in this case intuitive awareness of official positions on the mournability of Ngumbu (and Msando).

5.3.2: Ngumbu and the ‘cult of domesticity’
Unlike the Lifunga case where respondents almost unanimously accused the government of (in)direct involvement in the deaths of Msando (and Ngumbu), in Gachie this was not entirely the case. Throughout my informal conversations with family, friends and neighbours of Ngumbu, I got the sense that the Kiambu residents were reluctant to implicate the government in the killings. Generally, some simply said, “I don’t know,” when asked, “Who do you think killed her (Ngumbu) and why?” Most of the people gave safe answers in what I considered to be the logic of self-preservation: “I don’t know, but I suspect the government was involved.” These non-committal answers suggested that the respondents wanted to distance themselves from the killings, despite their lingering suspicions. The self-preserving answer, “I don’t know, but I suspect the government was involved”, reflected an awareness of both the history of political/politicised killings and the government’s capacity for violence. My respondents were being cautious. This tentative implication of the government was also seen in the responses obtained from Ngumbu’s relatives. All the relatives that I spoke to indicated that Ngumbu had been killed for being at the wrong place at the wrong time. Accordingly, had she not been with Msando on the night he was abducted, she would be alive.

This observation is telling at two levels. First, the widespread view among Ngumbu’s relatives and neighbours that she was killed for political reasons was ironic. This is because it reinforced the common view elsewhere that Msando had been killed so as to enable the rigging of the elections – a position that the people of Gachie loudly distanced themselves from because of their support for the government in the election. This view was more pronounced in Lifunga and among KoT. Second, the common view among Ngumbu’s

58 Informal conversation, Gachie, June 2018
59 ibid
neighbours and family that she was collateral damage reflects how politics overdetermined the reception of her death in her home area.

There was a discernible uneasy relationship among the residents of Gachie in the ambivalence of their commentary on Ngumbu’s death. This was also seen in the fact that although the respondents were generally drawn from the vicinity of Ngumbu’s neighbourhood, most indicated that they did not attend her burial. Of the 28 friends and neighbours I spoke to, claimed they did not attend the funeral; only four (14%) did. Even those who attended the burial did so because of close personal relationships with her parents, and not necessarily because of the nature of Ngumbu’s death. This view was confirmed in my conversations with Ngumbu’s kin. Asked how neighbours treated them following the death of their daughter, they responded that while most were generally supportive, they were also suspicious of government surveillance and so they stayed away from the family home most of the time. “We are very sad with the way she died. Our friends and neighbours supported us, but they were also very careful because they did not want to be involved in the politics around her death”. Of the 10 family members that I spoke to, only two (20%) did not comment on the neighbours’ suspicion of government as the reason for avoiding the compound. This means that a majority of the relatives (80%) understood their neighbours’ behaviour in the context of a general suspicion of the government that, supposedly, would do anything to have its way. “We are one big family here. Carol’s parents are my in-laws. She was our daughter but the times did not allow us to mourn her the way we wanted,” said an elderly woman.

These findings also spoke to the nature of verbal discourses in and on matters of unexplained killings that often attract wild rumours. The sense of conspiracy, the necessity of relationships of trust, and amorphousness of the narrative strands are common. This is because what emerges from such inquiries are nothing more than fragments of narrative that, as White (2000) elsewhere argues, are neither entirely false nor absolutely true. In speaking to the respondents from Gachie, therefore, I had hoped to get a sense of their thoughts about the themes and discursive patterns that had dominated similar discussions among KoT. I was not keen on corroborating the claims. This is also why, methodologically, the conversations were not guided by structured or even semi-structured interview tools. I

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60 ibid
61 Ibid
sought subjective opinions, and framed questions appropriately. For example “Do you think Ngumbu was killed for political reasons?” and, “Do you think they [neighbours] still think about Ngumbu?” These questions were meant to encourage responses from a people that, I presumed, had been discussing the death of Ngumbu in hushed tones.

The questions thus designed yielded responses that highlighted the differences in perspectives from Lifunga and Gachie. The differences signal three critical points that may explain the seeming inclination towards killing the memory of Ngumbu, while keeping that of Msando alive. First is the role of national political figureheads in setting the tone of public mourning practices. As I show, Msando was appropriated by the opposition politicians in death to push a sectarian agenda that simultaneously corresponded with most of the ethnic political aspirations of the people of western Kenya. The agenda broadly aimed at dislodging Kenyatta from the presidency and replacing him with Odinga. And when Odinga and his team used Msando’s death to criticise the Kenyatta administration, they engaged in a different version of necropolitics that silenced their real and perceived political nemeses. This influenced how Ngumbu was mourned in Kiambu. Since Odinga and his team chose to weaponise Msando’s death to attack the government, the people of Kiambu and Ngumbu’s relatives could not use her body for the same agenda. Thus, many pro-Kenyatta and pro-government people, including most in Kiambu, avoided any association with the bodies of Msando and Ngumbu. This followed the logic that being seen at their funerals could be interpreted as indirect support for the opposition.

Secondly, the dynamics involving Ngumbu and Msando’s mourning patterns resonated with Fairclough’s (1989) argument that public discourse is usually animated by power contestations. Such contestations occasionally raise a critical element of riding on, exploiting, and then extending dominant moral economies. In turn, these economies derive their potency from existing social structures of masculinility, femininity, and heteronormativity. In patriarchal societies such as Kenya, men tend to be considered as more authoritative or credible commentators on public issues. In fact, issues affecting men tend to be considered more important compared to those of women. Thus, there emerged in Kenya’s public sphere a consensus that between Msando and Ngumbu, the former’s death was a greater loss to the country and the family. This was partly because of the prominent role that Msando played in the political rituals of campaigning and electioneering, and partly because he had been portrayed in public imaginaries as a responsible family man. According to this logic,
Ngumbu became morally exiled and shamed in death as a gold-digging young girl who distracted a responsible married man. And her family and neighbours could not fight to reclaim her dignity because it was more convenient to ignore rather than to confront the political and moral undertones surrounding her death.

This leads us to the third point, the seeming ‘dispensability’ of women’s bodies. Kenya’s culture of femicide can be traced back to 1980 when American soldier Frank Sundstrom killed a prostitute, Monica Njeri (Wafula, 2020). In a matter that attracted international attention (Ross, 1980) because the accused was fined a paltry 70 US dollars, race and class intersected with gender to mark the beginning of normalised, cavalier disposal of murdered women’s bodies. The 1988 murder of British tourist Julie Ward is perhaps the only case that attracted relentless media attention and pushed the government to act. Yet this was mainly because the deceased’s father, British hotelier John Ward, made it a diplomatic issue between Kenya and Britain, beaming the global media spotlight on the possibility of involvement of senior political figures in her murder.

Julie’s murder and the subsequent debates about it provoked a number of studies. One of these is Musila’s (2015) study whose theoretical postulations are applicable to Ngumbu. Musila (2015) argues that the plight of women who die in mysterious circumstances such as Ward – and thus Ngumbu – is that the horror of their killing is usually discursively shifted towards the patriarchal horror of their sexual decadence. This implies that such women somehow invited or otherwise deserved their unfortunate endings. Recently, this has been the plight of numerous women, some of whom were killed by their intimate partners (Mburu, 2019). Other earlier victims, including Mercy Keino (Murimi, 2015) and Careen Chepchumba (Ng’enoh, 2016), similarly had their morality questioned, having been cast as happy-go-lucky girls who used their feminine wiles to secure easy luxuries. And like Ngumbu who was last seen with a prominent man, Keino and Chepchumba were, respectively, accused of having illicit sexual liaisons with successful men; a prominent politician for Keino (Tanui, 2016) and a celebrity media personality for Chepchumba (Zainabu, 2016). The murders of these women remain unresolved to date, for reasons that are unclear.

My point here is that one strand of Kenya’s social histories entails a chronology of femicide cases, to which Ngumbu is simply another addition. As such, the seemingly universal silence and indifference about her death was partly informed by a tendency among actors in the
Kenyan public sphere to accept with fatalistic resignation the fact that many women victims are killed, and their deaths remain unresolved. The female victims are then projected in the public imaginaries as moral degenerates. This shows that, like other spheres of relational engagements in public, necropolitics is also a gendered dynamic in which gender prejudices are injected to complicate the narrative layers even further.

The public voyeurism that Kenyan victims of femicide such as Ngumbu are subjected to, somewhat reinforces Shatema Threadcraft’s (2017: 555) view that “Black women are subjected to disproportionate sexual assault, community violence, and public sexual aggression.” While Threadcraft makes this claim in the context of women’s precarity and the Black Lives Matter Movement in the United States, her argument applies in explaining the seeming diminution of Ngumbu’s death vis-a-vis that of Msando. Clearly, the gender dimension in Kenya’s necropolitical dynamics is a two-step femicide followed by erasure from public memory. This explains further the silences and non-committal answers I got from Ngumbu’s neighbours and relatives.

These dynamics also derive their logic from interfaces of civic and ethnic nationalism, a cultural anthropology of patriarchy, and a dominantly phallocratic tenor that animates public discourses on unexplained and unresolved deaths, especially of women. The essence of all these variables in explaining – or failing to explain – Ngumbu’s death falls in the now near-global gendered allocation of space. This relates to how women are generally assigned the limited and limiting domestic spaces where they are presumably useful and safe, while men are viewed as the rightful owners of the public domains (Rose and Blunt, 1994). Again, I draw on Threadcraft’s description of how logic works in alienating women’s autonomous and agentic selves, excusing their violation, and absolving the state from the duty of care that it owes women as humans. For Threadcraft:

The logic [of labelling all women who are killed as sex workers, prostitutes, or people of low moral barriers generally], drawing heavily on the gendered divisions between public and private and a notion that public space is properly male space, operated this way: a woman who was dead must have been in public, out of her proper place in private, for a woman in public is a public woman, a sex worker, and thus now properly embodied in the dead body she possessed, deserving her death, possessing a dead body indicted the subject as a sex worker — death was all the proof one needed of her transgressions.
into public space and sex work, and her death should not trouble women who are not sex workers, women who did not transgress, should not trouble properly private women (2017: 557).

Thus, the death of Ngumbu was problematic in part because she had transgressed into public space. Like their Euro-American ascendants who relished the use of women’s sexuality to create boundaries of (im)morality, the residents of Kiambu who passed judgement on Ngumbu’s choices were modern-day converts of what McClintock et al call the ‘cult of domesticity’. For McClintock, domesticity is “both a space (a geographic and architectural alignment) and a social relation to power. The cult of domesticity – far from being a universal fact of ‘nature’ – has an historical genealogy” (1995: 34, original emphasis). Thus, commentary on Ngumbu’s plight and choices preceding her death were layers in an existing ideology of relational power dynamics that jousted women into a tomb of the good (to be mourned/celebrated) and the bad (to be silenced and sanctioned even in death).

In addition, the spoken, the implied, and the unspoken commentaries somewhat reflected Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo’s (2004) view that where the state seeks to use dead bodies to assert its sovereignty, those who know something about the dead tend to use their information and knowledge strategically to deflect attention from themselves. I argue that the strategic silences that I discuss earlier in this chapter tended to shift the critical gaze from the political to the criminal to the moral. This explains why, in my conversations with the family and other relations of Ngumbu, they gave only provisional answers to the question on whether Ngumbu was killed for political reasons. Others totally denied prior knowledge of Ngumbu’s friendship with Msando, which was highly likely given that the association only became public after their naked bodies were found.

These responses captured the tension between the potential politicisation of her death and the seemingly inevitable castigation of her sexual morality. Ngumbu’s relations were thus caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, they could not come out strongly to condemn the political circumstances of her killing, because of their presumed pro-government inclination. On the other hand, they could not strongly dispute rampant allegations that she was involved in a sexual relationship with Msando because doing so would shift the spotlight to uncomfortable political and cultural conversations they were not prepared to have. Because
of this dilemma, the general public was inundated with suggestions that Ngumbu was not a morally upright person, and that her death was merely a tragic end for her lapse of judgement.

This was seen in responses to the follow-up question: “Do you think the allegations about her affair with Msando are true?” Some of them agreed to the possibility that Msando and Ngumbu had an illicit affair. One said, “She was in college in Nairobi and we don’t know what she was doing all the time”, to which another retorted, “We hear so many stories about young girls and rich men, but I don’t know if this was the case with Carol. Her parents are very strict.”62 From the conversations, I detected inferences that Ngumbu had somewhat invited death upon herself by hovering around a married man late into the night. “It was very shocking to hear that she was in the bar with a married man. What would a good girl be doing out that late?”.63 Another respondent said, added; “I have always warned these young girls about the dangers of Nairobi and rich men. It was very sad to lose such a young girl. Her parents are very good people.” While the respondents were quick to distance themselves from the city, its temptations and nightlife, they were quick to protect the dignity of Ngumbu’s parents, saying “they are strict”, “very good people”. This suggested that Ngumbu acted out of turn and her parents were not to blame for what befell her. In a way, mourning Ngumbu was an opportunity to reaffirm their social ties, while distancing themselves from the fatal adventures of their ‘prodigal’ daughter.

Some simply said, “I don’t know”, which meant that they could not outrightly absolve Ngumbu of the allegation. In other words, they considered the possibility that Ngumbu had an affair with Msando. Just about a third of the respondents outrightly rejected the suggestion she had an affair with Msando. For these participants, the whole allegation was part of government’s propaganda aimed at distracting the public from the deaths, and weakening the will to demand full investigation and prosecution of the culprits. One said, “That’s not true. They are looking for excuses not to arrest the people who killed them”. Another added, “I don’t believe them. They said the same thing everytime a big man is killed. We want to know why they killed our daughter.”64 Asked if they had taken up the matter with the police or their leaders, the respondents expressed morbid distrust of the government,

62 Informal conversation, Gachie, August 2018
63 ibid
64 ibid
but unlike their counterparts in Lifunga they did not want anything that would attract attention to themselves. “How can you ask the government to investigate itself,” one asked. “It’s a waste of time.”\(^6^5\)

5.3.3: Lies and secrets in coding ethnic loyalty
In this study, I did not examine the truth-value in the question of whether Ngumbu was in a sexual liaison with Msando or not. Instead, I was interested in how either possibility influenced how her death was interpreted in the public imagination, especially in her neighbourhood. I presumed that this approach would illuminate the subsequent concern of whether such perceptions also altered the tone of the outrage that her death caused. So the perceptions created by sexual involvement would somehow negate the right by the public to demand justice for the dead, while public acquittal would lay the foundation to hold the government accountable for her unresolved killing.

Yet, as Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo (2004) further argue, all speculations surrounding unresolved killings such as Ngumbu’s are usually framed within a potential investigative dead-end because the most important witness is the deceased. The presence of the deceased in narrative forms, Ngumbu in this case, is marked by a permanent and irreversible absence. The presence of a corpse is also the absence of the most important witness to a murder. This leaves the survivors with barely repressed horror and a general feeling that the state is unwilling to identify and punish the murderers. In my conversations with neighbours, friends and relatives of Ngumbu, I noted a lingering view that the government was not keen to identify the killers of Ngumbu and Msando. This view, however, neither began nor was more particular with Ngumbu and Msando. Instead, it has been a common response and perception regarding many unresolved killings in Kenya, including those of Ward (Musila, 2015) and Ouko (Cohen & Atieno-Odhiambo, 2004). Like Ward before her, Ngumbu’s killing made her a post-humous political figure, something she had not been in life.

Could Ngumbu’s relatively low ‘political value’ account for the silence from the state agents on investigations, and of the seeming unwillingness to pursue the killers? This was a common feeling in Gachie. In my conversations in Gachie, I repeatedly asked the question, \(^6^5\)ibid
“Do you feel enough has been done to solve her [Ngumbu’s] murder and bring the killers to justice?” Of 28 friends and neighbours I spoke to, four were non-committal, responding: “I don’t know”. Others were categorical that the government was not committed to conducting investigations. Some of the responses even accused the government of covering up the murder, either because it was implicated or because it wanted to perpetuate a political agenda. Some of the more assertive responses were: “No. I think the state watered down the investigations because they [sic] were involved”; “Zero. In fact I think the police deliberately covered up the matter”; “No. The investigations lacked goodwill”; “No. I think the government was involved and could not investigate itself” and, “It was a shoddy investigation.” Similarly, all her relatives that I spoke to thought that the government had not done enough to apprehend the killers.

These responses, coming from Kiambu whose residents have consistently voted for the current Kenyatta and Ruto government, reveal two curious points. One is that a people’s loyalty to the government of the day is never absolute; they still retain a remarkable apprehension seen in the fear or caution with which they view the government. This is an issue that has been theorised by Ogude (2007), who read DO Misiani’s protest music as politically conscious cultural texts, and Mutonya’s (2013) comparable work on the music of Kamaru. These scholars show the possibilities of governments cannibalising their own citizens. Applied to the Ngumbu case, it is clear that although the people of Kiambu were political supporters of the Kenyatta administration, they nonetheless remained suspicious of the same when it came to the death of Ngumbu. For them, the government that they supported was still suspect in how it investigated the killing of their daughter.

Second, the people’s understanding of Ngumbu’s (and Msando’s) death in the context of the inconclusive investigations was subconsciously informed by their understanding of earlier unresolved killings and how successive governments bungled investigations. Concerning Ngumbu, this awareness spawned an analytical dissonance among her family, friends, and neighbours. On the one hand, they were hesitant to directly link Ngumbu’s death to the electoral politics that framed the immediate time context of her death. And yet, they were almost unanimous in expressing their pessimism about the killers being found. This means that where the residents were asked directly whether they thought that Ngumbu had

66 ibid
been killed for political reasons, they opted to remain either non-committal ("I don’t know") or defensive of the government. However, the same family members, friends and neighbours still thought that the government through its agencies would not arrest and punish the killers.

This analytical dissonance was also manifested in how they received divergent opinions on various aspects touching on Ngumbu’s death. As I have so far argued, extensive public debate on the killings and subsequent politicisation of Msando and Ngumbu took place in the mainstream media, social media, and common parlance. The extent was so broad that the issues surrounding the deaths could arguably be known by everyone, regardless of whether one was politically inclined or not, an active discussant on social media or not, and whether one was for or against the government. In the debates, accusations against the government were rampant and almost everyone certainly knew of the deaths and the (counter)accusations that flew around. And yet, about a third of the people I spoke to in claimed that they had never heard of Ngumbu (and Msando) prior to the interview. This could only mean that they did not want to be seen to accuse the government that was hugely popular in that region. It was another illustration of strategic silence at play.

Even the other people who agreed that they knew Ngumbu and Msando before their deaths were also hesitant to concur with the discussions in social and mainstream media that accused the government. This was presumably because these debates seemed to be anti-government. A sample of the answers illustrates the point: “The social media too kept us updated but there was a lot of unverified information on these media” (my emphasis). Another said, “Everyone including media and social media was confused. Even the police themselves” (my emphasis). “The media did a bad job by presenting to us the government version. Social media had more details, however, unverified.” “The opinion was biased. There was concentration on politicians and not the victims. Social media was full of rumours but the media can be said to have moved professionally” (my emphasis).

These and other comments signalled how political ideology (a code word for ethnic loyalties in Kenya) filters through people’s analysis and interpretation of what could be a straightforward issue. From the italicised parts of the responses, one sees how

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67 Informal conversation, Gachie, June 2018
68 ibid
preconceptions influenced the interpretation of the issue at hand. Even where some people appear to be objective, this objectivity is more prominent if it corresponds with their subjective political inclinations. Inversely, where objectivity would threaten to or actually destabilise the respondents’ political persuasions, they more readily resort to silences expressed through, “I don’t know” answers. This reinforces Kenyan novelist Owuor’s (2014) assertion that after Mboya’s assassination, Kenya has three official languages: English, Kiswahili, and silence.

Related to this, White (2000) argues that “secrets and lies” – which the “I don’t know” responses hint at – “are not forms of withholding information but forms by which information is valorised” (11). The valorisation of information by Kiambu residents in regard to Ngumbu’s life and death derives from the history of the local people’s encounters with government violence in colonial and post-independence times. The violence created the need to forge and retain communal solidarity because, as White further notes, the processes of withholding information – or outrightly lying – are essential media through which “alliance and allegiance are constructed” (15). What should we make of the noncommittal answers by neighbours and relatives of Ngumbu? Their answers were basically lies, not in the Christian moral sense of cynical deception, but as deflections of attention from themselves for fear of victimisation.

Yet, the necessity of the lies was not limited to self-preservation for the individual interlocutor, or even the politically ideological persuasion that dominated the entire Kikuyu nation. Rather, it was the foundational agenda of remaining loyal to the social neighbourly networks of Ngumbu’s family that, going by the logic of ethnic solidarity, deserved their ‘protection by loyalty’. This is why the lies became necessary and appropriate for the respondents. It was a codeword to avoid the inconvenient conversations around her death, while re-affirming their loyalty to President Kenyatta and his government. Thus, the Gachie residents appropriated Ngumbu’s life and death, which they then used to solidify their kindred bonds, but in contrast with their Lifunga counterparts over Msando, in ways that did not necessarily make them appear anti-government.

5.4: Conclusion
I sought to gauge the reception of Ngumbu’s death and burial in her Gachie home, against the backdrop of Msando’s reception in Lifunga and the dominant perceptions on Twitter.
This was a necessary approach for two key reasons. First, I wanted to retrieve the image and narratives of Ngumbu from the din of national(ist) politics that had reified Msando and electoral politics. Second, I also wanted to authenticate or otherwise debunk the dominant notions that framed the debates among KoT. These debates were mainly interspersed with aspects of history, politics, and rumours as both the subjects and mediums for public discourse in Kenya. Therefore, this chapter's key motive was to use analogue voices to test for congruence with their digital variants, lest one presumes that KoT speak for everyone even in the villages.

The chapter has established that, unlike the confrontational and accusatory tones that dominated discourse on Ngumbu (and Msando) on social media, the Kiambu residents were generally hesitant to directly implicate the government. On the rare occasions that they did, they couched their views in provisional, non-committal grammar of “I don’t know.” Why would this be the case? I propose three possible explanations that derive from overlapping influences of history, national(ist) politics of ethnicity, and patriarchy. Another critical variable was the general provisionality of tone that dominated the formal attributes of rumour as the traditional mediums for social discourse in situations where communication between members is overdetermined by the necessity to maintain good relationships. All these dynamics, collectively, lead to a significantly inscrutable community of respondents. The inscrutability posed a challenge that goes back to the colonial days, especially in Kiambu, a place that was the epicentre of anticolonial struggles and which equally attracted extremes of colonial clampdown. The first explanation of these responses, therefore, is found in the history of Kenya and the role of Kiambu in the making of that history.

Indeed, Kiambu was historically a frontline region for colonial anarchy whose violence peaked during the State of Emergency that ran from late 1952 to 1960 (Anderson, 2005; Elkins, 2005). In the guise of fighting Mau Mau, the colonial regime profiled the Kikuyu community that was then subjected to all sorts of atrocious violence, including horrific killings similar to that of Ngumbu. As such, the collective memory of violence engendered forms of solidarity building that was mediated by silence to camouflage the true feelings of the aggrieved survivors. The post-independence regimes were similarly culpable of related killings of people from the region, most of which remained unresolved. This meant that the residents of Kiambu were familiar with the horror of senseless deaths, and the risks of speaking out loudly lest they provoke government retribution. In short, they were aware of
what Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo (2004) dubbed ‘the risks of knowledge’. Thus, they devised ways of camouflaging different forms of knowledge that may be dangerous, or even fatal. This partly explains why my interlocutors were hesitant to mount a frontal attack on the state.

My second explanation is about how Kenya’s politics of ethnic identities, and their (expected) corresponding political affiliations influence the sense of judgement that Ngumbu demonstrated. As a Kikuyu, spending time with a Luo amounted to a heresy against a political dogma that imposes upon people ideas of whom, in terms of tribe, one could relate to. As the Kenyatta-Odinga political duel was unfolding, the expected subterranean text entailed presumptions that Kikuyu speakers – including Ngumbu – would avoid the company of Luos, many of whom were perceived to be anti-government and anti-Kikuyu political hegemony. This idea somehow informed the views of my interlocutors. For them, giving answers that were so strongly against the government could be (mis)construed to be support for the Luos of Odinga, and it was a risk that many residents were not willing to take. In this, Ngumbu was doubly ‘Othered’ in death because of her ethnic background, and to a lesser degree because of her gender. The Othering process followed the practice of discursive silencing that was adjudged to be necessary given the strategic location of Kiambu as the microcosm of Kikuyu nationalism in Kenya’s political economy.

Last, the responses surrounding Ngumbu’s killing were inflected by different socio-cultural norms regarding gender socialisation and how this influenced popular interpretations of her death in the contexts of national history and the then looming presidential contest pitting a local, Uhuru Kenyatta, against an ‘outsider’, Raila Odinga. Relying on a mix of cartographies of space and presumed moral codes, some of my interlocutors appeared to endorse the view that Ngumbu could have been killed because she was involved in a love triangle with a married man. As I show earlier in this chapter, there was the unspoken feeling that had Ngumbu confined herself to the domestic space or among her fellow Kikuyus, she would not have been found with Msando and then killed. Ultimately, my interlocutors who held this view posthumously exiled Ngumbu from the spaces of right behaviour by women. They viewed her as a victim of her own negligence because she had rebelled against what McClintock (1995) calls ‘the cult of domesticity’. All these were somehow irrelevant when my interlocutors in Lifunga spoke about Msando, because he was a man from an ethnic category that has solid credentials in opposition politics. An outstanding question in this
regard relates to how the deaths of Ngumbu and Msando were received among the media and the police. Were these and related dynamics actively influential among these actors? I attempt to answer these and related questions in the next chapter.
Chapter Six: Views from the Beat: The Media and Investigative Agents

6.1: Introduction
In this chapter, I examine the perspectives of professionals who were involved in creating, augmenting, or negating the narratives that surrounded Msando and Ngumbu after their bodies were found. The responses obtained from among KoT, friends, neighbours and relatives of Ngumbu and Msando were all overtly communal and subjective (Sachs, 2016), which, though expected, nonetheless invited alternative views to ensure narrative clarity around the two deaths.

In order to do this, I had informal conversations with detectives and journalists who were somehow involved in the matter. The police were useful by virtue of their powers to investigate crime, while the journalists were also valuable because they reported and framed the contexts of national debates on the twin deaths. In writing this chapter, I was alive to the presumption that underling the contestations within Twitter and beyond was the unspoken quest for truth as understood by different actors, including family members who needed truth for psychological closure, investigation officers who needed to uncover truth for evidentiary reasons, and journalists to uphold their professional integrity (Sachs, 2016). All these variants suggest that truth is a multifaceted phenomenon, which reflects different hues depending on the position or standpoint that one assumes while looking at it. This is especially so in countries or communities with unresolved historical injustices where an incident can trigger troubling memories along sectarian lines. For instance, Sachs (2016), writing about his experience during South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, lamented that so little truth eventually filters into the public domain, because different people have different uses of truth. Sachs identified four types of truths that I find applicable to my current study. The first is microscopic truth, which one accesses by defining a field, determining different variables and measuring their interactions within a reasonable period of time. Such kind of truth eventually becomes useful in science and in law, because it acquires some empirical attributes that can be used to challenge or reinforce the norms.

The second type of truth, according to Sachs, is logical truth that can be inferred out of a proposition. This is what leads to drawing interpretative conclusions out of narration of facts
or issues at hand. Thirdly, Sachs identified experiential truth that involves analysis of experiences undergone by individuals either personally or as members of communities. As Sachs argues, many people are inclined to be persuaded by experiential truths, which they privilege over logical or microscopic versions of truth. Lastly is dialogical truth that amalgamates aspects of evidentiary, testimonial, experiential, and other versions.

Throughout my research, and especially when going to Lifunga (and Gachie), I was prepared to encounter individuals who embraced these different versions of truth depending on their backgrounds and reason for involvement in the emerging narratives on Msando. For example, the policemen who participated in investigations and the journalists had previous experiences in investigating killings and reporting about them, respectively. As such, they had a drift of how such procedures go. For the villagers, their previous experiences with unresolved killings, given the ethnic identities of earlier victims of political or politicised assassinations, could drive them to presume that the government was either implicated in the killings or disinterested in identifying the killers. The responses were therefore awash with subjective contestations of preconceived truths, most of which did not depart farther from rumours that circulated among KoT and in the villages. That is partly why it was necessary to balance the different voices in order to harness different forms of truths. Therefore, views from professionals give a basis to interpret, negate or affirm the rumours on Msando and Ngumbu. I recognise the dynamics of narrative contestations that involve widespread cynicism of mainstream narrative strands. This means that most of the commentators on the deaths and burials of Msando and Ngumbu were also aware of the historical complexities associated with unresolved killings in Kenya. Such include the widespread suspicion that some government agencies could be implicated in the killings and subsequent cover-ups with the aim of shaping public debates. By this, I am alluding to the tortured relationship and corresponding perceptions between successive governments and the general public in Kenya, something that I discussed exhaustively in the Introduction of this thesis.

Some scholars have mapped patterns of government versus public responses to unresolved killings, similar to those of Msando and Ngumbu, without necessarily suggesting a government-public binaries. For example, Musila’s (2015) study of Julie Ward’s killing argues that people are generally ambivalent towards official explanations of such deaths. The ambivalence allows them to listen to the official narratives while remaining suspicious
of the state’s involvement in the killings. This is why rumours implicating the government co-exist with other forms of (more) authoritative narrative strands such as pathologist reports, police records, and news sources. Because these documents are authored by professionals and are admissible in court and other proceedings, they become natural subjects of rumour. Therefore, it is necessary to broaden perspectives by critiquing emerging narrative patterns vis-a-vis the population categories in which both professional discourses and their rumourous variants are dominant. Particularly useful are views by the police, the investigating officers, and journalists who reported the deaths and then framed the debate in the media.

Therefore, in this section my objective is to temper the findings of the two chapters focusing on Lifunga (Msando’s home) and Gachie (Ngumbu’s home) with narrative perspectives from journalists, police, and other investigative agents. My objective is not necessarily to establish the truth value in the rumours that I studied – itself an impossible and even unnecessary task – but to discursively acknowledge that an important cohort within government bureaucracy and media practitioners similarly had their versions of the events surrounding Msando’s and Ngumbu’s deaths. This is necessary because it broadens the scope of discourse by providing a basis for researchers to interpret the specific rumours and the discourse of rumour generally. Incorporating professional voices in discussing the rumours helps to explain why some rumours, or aspects of those rumours, circulate more or less widely than others. It is also critical to include media reports since they are more likely to be cited by official records and other scholars. As Shaffer (2010) suggests, “Journalism is the first draft of history.” Therefore, triangulating the key themes that circulated among KoT with sentiments in Lifunga and in Gachie, is critical because it forms a basis for building more authoritative narratives for later reference.

On structure, this chapter converges with the previous two on the questions that I posed to my interlocutors. I used the same questions in the three chapters to elicit corroborative information whose value related to possibilities of nuancing rather than affirming or discounting the key themes and positions of earlier versions. The guiding questions in my conversations with interlocutors in the media and the investigative agencies included how the respondents learnt about the deaths, and their initial reactions to news of the disappearance of Msando and the subsequent discovery of his body (and that of Ngumbu). Follow-up questions inquired into the steps they took to establish the facts of the killings,
and how their reporting changed, if at all, as investigations progressed. I also asked my interlocutors if they could identify a definitive shift in the messaging surrounding the reportage and commentary on Msando and Ngumbu, and whether they had interviewed or written about their friends and families. I then asked the ultimate question of who, in their opinion, killed Msando and Ngumbu.

6.2: Breaking news: Journalists’ views on Msando and Ngumbu

This is the abnormal normality of the world of true crime. True crime is one of the popular genres of the pathological public sphere. It posits stranger intimacy and vicarious violation as models of sociality (Seltzer, 2008: 12).

Seltzer’s views here aptly capture the complexity of the images of Msando and Ngumbu as they appeared in the media. The portraits of the two varied depending on many factors. Variously, Msando and Ngumbu appeared in the media as victims of criminal and possibly political crime, as news items, as norms, and as reminders of pervasive crime in Kenya. All these perspectives hinted at different slants occasioned by different commentators, depending on their relationship with the government, the depth of their attachments to ethnic stereotypes, their social standing, and the actual physical location from which they aired their views.

Subsequently, the degree of emotional involvement in the narratives varied depending on whether the commentators aired their views in their professional capacity or not. For instance, unlike other commentators, journalists tended to be less invested emotionally in the stories that they published. They focused mainly on plain reportage and limited commentaries, possibly because their professional training requires them to uphold objectivity over subjectivity, empathy over sympathy when writing. Subsequently, the objectivity and empathy could be mistaken for ‘aloofness.’ Further, the seeming sense of aloofness could also be a product of the political economy of the media in Kenya, specifically when reporting on contentious national issues (Ogola 2018; Galava 2018 and 2020).

The political sensitivity around Msando and Ngumbu’s deaths could also be inferred from the responses of the 14 senior crime writers, investigative reporters and editors drawn from print, digital and broadcast platforms with whom I spoke. I have masked their identities because they spoke to me in confidence, and some of the comments they made adversely mentioned media houses, top editors and senior government officials and would attract
serious reprisals. Speaking to print, digital and broadcast journalists gave me the opportunity to sample responses from a wider pool of writers and editors who generate and curate content for different cadres of readers and audiences. This was important because the media is tiered and those at the top often set the agenda and tone of coverage, especially on contentious national issues (Galava 2018 and 2020). Interviewing a diverse team would shed insights into the logic of Kenyan journalism as well as identify (dis)continuities in the reportage on the two deaths, thus providing us with clearer frames to interpret the emergent narratives. From the conversations, it was evident that there was no order (no special focus from the outset) in the reportage, suggesting that to media houses the disappearance and deaths were treated like just another breaking story.

Asked how they reacted to the reports of Msando missing, all the six senior editors I spoke to echoed the same line: “I asked the news editor and crime desk to follow it up … it was not a big deal until when the bodies were found.” From a newsroom point of view, this meant there was no common position by media houses on how to cover the story, and each team scrambled for leads as they would on any other story. Some of these leads came from social media and other informal channels, perhaps explaining in part why the media narratives appeared to play catch-up to rumourous conversations and conspiracy theories in public spaces.

One editor noted, “I didn’t expect Msando would be found dead. I thought it was the usual case of a man ghosting his wife and friends. Given Msando’s critical role in the election I assumed that he, like the commissioners and other senior officers, was under police protection round the clock, especially not with memories of 2008 still raw”. Aside from the shock of Msando’s death, the reference to 2008 is telling because of the post-election violence that erupted after Mwai Kibaki was sworn into office for a second term amid claims that ODM leader Raila Odinga’s victory had been stolen. More than 1,000 people were killed, and more than 650,000 others displaced in the ensuing violence that only ended when the two protagonists formed a coalition government. For the editor, Kenyan elections are lightning rods awaiting a spark, and he expected that the government would have learnt from 2008 and secured individuals and processes around the elections to avoid violence. The fact that this did not happen could mean that the government was not taking the security

69 Informal conversation with Editors, Crime and Investigative Journalists, Nairobi, May 2019
70 ibid
of the elections seriously, that the lessons of 2008 had not been learnt, fears of election violence were exaggerated, or Msando was not important enough to warrant armed security. The illusion of security for senior people the editor alludes to and the cold reality of Msando’s body being found spoke to the suspicions in Lifunga and on Twitter that the government deliberately let Msando die.

I was keen to establish how the journalists first heard about the deaths of Msando and Ngumbu. One stated that, “I first learnt of Msando’s death from the WhatsApp platform and doubted it until it was flashed on formal media platforms, TV, radio and later newspapers.” Another indicated that: “The IEBC called a press conference and announced that he was missing. Then shortly after the police said his body had been found dumped in a small forest.” The two responses demonstrate the interconnectedness between different actors and platforms within the bigger media ecosystem and the hierarchisation of truth as a value in journalism. Thus, the first respondent would only believe the news when it was published in print or broadcast on radio and TV, suggesting that even among journalists WhatsApp and other social media platforms ranked low on trust and authenticity of news spread.

It is also clear that social media platforms operate in parallel flows with mainstream outlets such as television, radio and newspapers. At the same time, all these outlets become the first port of call by the IEBC who reported the disappearance of Msando. This intimates an inevitable mutuality of interest and operational symbiosis between bodies such as the IEBC on the one hand, and the media on the other. A broadcast reporter said, “I knew about Msando’s death from a police source I had cultivated within the force.” She had “first called the policemen in charge of the area where it was rumoured [Msando’s] body was found. They confirmed that indeed his body had been found.” This was echoed by a reporter from an online platform, who heard it “from a police source”. Two print writers stated that they read about the deaths on social media, after which they called their contacts in the police and the Directorate for Criminal Investigations (DCI) to confirm the rumours. These responses suggest that even before the killings of Msando and Ngumbu, there existed collaborative networks involving journalists and the police. These networks thrived on a ledger of trustworthy ‘sources’ from among the police, a relationship that could be inferred regarding other policing or investigative agencies. However, the relationship was not linear, one held together by absolute truths from the police on the one hand, and trusting journalists

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71 ibid
72 ibid
on the other. It was a courtship of convenience, with each party trying to use the other to meet their personal and professional goals.

As one reporter noted, “as investigations went on, I realised that not all that my sources within the force were telling me was true. There had been a few loose ends in their narrative so I started double-checking whatever they told me.” Another one stated that

[w]hen investigations stalled as soon as they had started, and police started to divert journalists to point them to a love triangle sort of line, it was clear it was a state-sanctioned murder [sic]. Pressure from government that stories on Msando were now national security confirmed this hypothesis since all other murders [sic] journalists are given a free hand to do their stuff [but not in Msando’s case]. Everything was fishy. What was the point of working on a story that was not going to be published or [would be] censored by top editors? This was echoed by an editor who said: “I asked my team to slow down after my bosses said they were under intense pressure from the government to stop speculating on the killers or motive. We had no choice but play ball.”

On his part, an investigative reporter said that “[t]he reporting changed from the initial narrative of love-gone-sour to murder as Msando’s importance to the electioneering process became clearer.” There are two salient points here. One, some government officials tried to control how Msando’s death and the emergent narratives were framed in the public. Related to this is the fact that some media owners quickly acquiesced to the government’s demands and the editors did not protest the apparent censorship. Asked to explain why he did not protest at the edict from his bosses, an editor said curtly, “I have learnt to live to fight another day”.

Four other editors alluded to this, but also pointed out that they found ways to walk around, in the words of one of them, the “listless bosses and the chopping board of the Interior Ministry”. Among other things, this shows there is a long genealogy of self-censorship in the media and lends credence to the claims on social media that the media was

73 Interview with Journalists, Nairobi, June 2019
74 ibid
75 ibid
76 ibid
77 ibid
compromised. Interestingly, while the government through the Ministry of Communication, and the Interior ministry sought to control the framing of Msando’s death, it did not provide an alternative narrative for the media to pursue. The framing of the alternative narrative was left to the media houses, thus intimating a long history of the media helping the government shape public perceptions on contentious issues (Musila, 2015; Galava, 2020). This explains the second point, which is why the police changed tack to counter the popular narratives on Msando and Ngumbu. Perhaps the journalists had been simply naïve to initially trust the detectives. Or the police had only manipulated this particular story and not the others.

Regardless, I was not interested in the depth or parity of the relationship between the two groups but the logics that framed their engagement. For the media practitioners, their initial presumption that their contacts within the police and investigative circles would always share accurate information was based on preconceived notions of shared interest. On the other hand, the distractions by the police and the investigating officers was proof of their own presumption that certain forms of knowledge could be shielded from the public, even in the era of social media. Noteworthy, however, was that the determination of how much information they could let go of or retain depended on their determination of how far they had gone with investigations. When they discovered that the cases were growing cold, they decided to limit the information flows to the general public. The journalists who relied on police for confirmation and tips were left with bits and pieces of information that they could not string into coherent stories to challenge the police counter-narratives. Their inability to investigate and report independently only succeeded in obliging the police and letting them have their way, and by this act of omission the media revealed their lack of investment and interest to pursue the matter any further. Through strategic management of information, in this case the state of investigation into the two deaths, the police managed to control the scope and tempo of reportage, while journalists were left jousting with strawmen.

Thus, when one said “I gave up on the police... and my editors also stopped pushing me too hard. I only filed a story when there was an update from the police boss or opposition MPs”78, it was not an epitaph of impotent resignation, but a tacit signaling at the entrenched posturing at good journalism in the newsrooms. The media continued running reports from the police, even when the writers and editors knew there was not much they were revealing.

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78 ibid
or whatever little there was had, to borrow from Herman and Chomsky (1988), been manufactured to manage expectations: public expectations of the police and of journalism itself. Thus, this was not rigorous journalism but a performance of power and powerlessness: the power to deceive/posture and the powerlessness to influence public discourse. I discuss this in detail in the following section.

6.2.1: Truth, knowledge and power

I borrow extensively from Foucault's (1972) analysis of power and knowledge, using the analysis to explore its manifestations and implications on societal norms in Kenya’s context. I suggest that Foucault’s ideas are critical in explaining the shifting narratives by the police and other investigative agencies, as well as the journalists’ intuition that their police contacts had begun deploying strategies of evasion. Foucault (1972) develops and theorises the concept of ‘power-knowledge.’ He argues that power corrupts truth so much so that it is impossible to contemplate truth outside of the dynamics of power. This twinning of politics and power is because, although power abhors normative or moral-laden versions of truth, power still recognises the importance of truth in creating compliant subjects to govern. For Foucault, “there is no pure knowledge apart from power, but knowledge also has real and irreducible importance for power” (Kelley, n.d.). This is especially so when trying to understand how Msando and Ngumbu were killed just around election time, and the bigger context of political and politically motivated killings associated with the government. More important for my study, Foucault’s arguments on the nexus between power and knowledge explain the intuitive asymmetry between the investigative agencies in their interactions with the journalists. While the police and investigating agencies knew exactly what to do with privileged information in terms of doling out only the necessary, the journalists did not.

Here, I acknowledge that Musila (2015) makes a somewhat related argument to mine. Musila draws her conclusions following her reading of how some agents within the Moi government used rumours to manage police investigations into the murder of Ward from 1989 when she died to about 1992 when her case went cold. Musila shows that media coverage overlooked possible obfuscation of critical details by the police and other investigative agencies, perhaps because of a significant surplus of trust that the journalists had in the police. The ‘working relationship’ between the media and the police in the Ward case ultimately created government-friendly versions of ‘truth.’ These versions cast Ward as a reckless and amorous young lady who had died because of her lapse in judgement of
dangerous situations, such as her decision to drive alone in the wild Maasai Mara Game Reserve.

At the same time, Musila’s findings also speak to my own regarding the role of posturing in altering the direction of narratives. Although Musila does not use the word posturing in her rebuke of government and investigative agencies, she clearly imputes a disconnect between the right noises that government made on the one hand, and its decided tinkering with investigations on the other. In making this point, Musila shows how the governments of Kenya and Britain, while demanding for action to trace Ward’s killers, nonetheless conspired to mislead investigators to secure their economic interests. In these, Ward’s death was instrumentalised to cut geopolitical deals between Britain and Kenya. This also relates to the Msando and Ngumbu case where the killings soon became easily understood – within police and investigation circles – as necessary developments whose investigations should not be at the expense of other developments in the country.

Despite all these, there was something else that Musila found to be critical, and which is relevant in the Msando and Ngumbu case. This was how easily the general public peeled back the government agencies’ deception, and rejected their ‘authoritative’ versions of truth, including forensic reports. The public embraced their own versions of truth (rumours) that were amorphous, inconclusive and often unattributable to any source. Thus, the general public knew of the laterality of truth-value. It was also a gut awareness of the possibility of conspiratorial (re)alignments that government agents could conjure up to manufacture consent (Herman and Chomsky, 1988). According to my interlocutors in the investigative agencies, senior government officials preferred the idea that Msando and Ngumbu had been killed by criminal rather than political gangs. These agents laboured to advance that theory in public. Asked whether their reportage and commentary on Ngumbu and Msando changed with time, an online reporter stated that:

> Our reporting changed because we had to constantly keep abreast of the fast developing story. We made sure we were on top of every development and updated the story as often as possible. I cannot say there was a shift of messaging: for our audience, the message was clear – a story with all the traditional makings of a conspiracy (my emphasis)\(^79\).

\(^79\) Informal conversation with Journalists, Nairobi, July 2020
Similarly, a print reporter also noted the shifts in the messaging when he said, “[y]es there has. From the initial thoughts of a love-related murder to the now accepted narrative of state-sponsored killing.” Thus, these journalists highlighted the view that journalists had to adapt their framing with time to respond to emerging indications that the government was not interested in unmasking Msando and Ngumbu’s killers. On this, a TV editor was more detailed when he noted that:

> The circumstances of the death of Msando were clouded by the thick political atmosphere that obtained at the time. There were clear doubts on the police version of the circumstances even amongst us. We have always doubted police version of events while at the same time balancing this with the fact they are the official sources of information on crimes. Given the highly technical expertise needed to contradict their version, forensics and all, we resorted to mere poking of holes into their narrative without confronting them with alternative facts. The death of Msando reinforced our resolve to always doubt the police version of events knowing that it is an integral part of the state and always has a good reason to be complicit.  

Answering the same question on whether there were changes in the reporting, a radio reporter simply stated that “[m]y reporting did not change. I maintained the same line that Msando’s death was a state sanctioned execution.” These responses suggest that truth is a value-based, double-faced artefact created and narrated by interested parties – drawing both on current interests and on historical awareness. This came out clearly when another reporter said “[t]here has been no change in messaging. The government has always steered away from trying to give a definitive motive for his murder.” These varying responses show that the self-appraisal of whether there were shifts in narration or not changed depending on the individual journalists. While some journalists communicated their apprehension of police sources, and demonstrated their own critical awareness of the possible slants by the investigative agencies, others felt that their framing of the Msando and Ngumbu debate did not change as time went by.

Important to note also is that rumour was used to subvert the government narrative and create other versions of truth. This is one way in which the persistence of rumours accords

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80 ibid
81 ibid
equal recognition of and respect for other versions of authority, including forensic reports, journalistic commentary, and rumours as equal conveyors of truths (Musila, 2015). This is what some interlocutors hinted at as having necessitated and justified the shift in messaging. For the journalists working for a fringe online publication, his doubts regarding the credibility of government sources reflected a general public suspicion of the official position. That was why another online writer said that: “we had to constantly keep abreast of the fast developing story.” Other journalists from leading print media houses still acknowledged the truth-value in the rumours and the possibilities of falsehoods in official government versions.

The differences in perspective also manifested in other questions. For example, when asked “[w]ho do you think killed Msando and Ngumbu?” the journalists gave different, provisional answers. One stated that “it is very easy to point fingers at the state, but at this point, I really do not know with certainty who killed him. A lot of things were going on at the time… The political stakes were too high … His death would benefit all political players in different ways. Anyone, from politicians to the police, to thugs could have killed him.” Another one stated that “[t]hey were killed by state operatives. I believe he [Msando] had got himself mixed up in one scandal or another” (my emphasis). A third journalist with over twenty years reporting crime said: “It’s politics. It’s deep state”, without elaborating.

A fourth was less committal: “[t]he government, the opposition, the ruling party or a scorned lover.” According to the latter, “[t]he political stakes were too high … his death would benefit all political players --- from politicians and the police to tenderpreneurs and thugs.” This response should also be read as the respondents’ commentary on the complexity of the crime. In one of the reporter’s view, Msando (and Ngumbu) were killed by “[t]he system. Msando was standing in the way of a rigging plot. He just couldn’t fit the round pegs. He was too square.” Another said: “I believe they were caught up in a highly divisive political process. As to the exact entity or person who killed them, I cannot tell. It would require quite a bit of work, including forensics to ascertain any belief that I may have. It was, however, quite clear from the circumstances and timing, that it was a politically motivated death.” To a veteran editor, it was simply “[s]tate. Election.” These varied answers, all of which are speculative, then lead me to ask the question of how exactly objective the journalists were.

82 ibid
83 Interview with Journalists, Nairobi, May 2019
84 ibid
85 ibid
in their analysis and reportage of circumstances surrounding the killings of Msando and Ngumbu. Were the responses mere reflections of ethnic nationalism? These questions are relevant, given that in Kenya, even presumably objective observers impulsively fall back on ethnic loyalties (Atieno-Odhiambo, 2002).

6.2.2 Your name betrays you: Kenya’s unruly publics
It is arguable that the journalists that I spoke to merely reframed responses already prevalent in their communities. Note that five from western Kenya, Lower Eastern and Coast regions, the stronghold of opposition leader Raila Odinga, hastened to implicate the state from a subjective point – “I believe”. Four from Mt Kenya and Rift Valley, where President Kenyatta enjoyed most support, evaded the question. They did not want to give a categorical answer. Individual reporters and editors could well have come into the brief with their ethnic and other persuasions. This shows the complexity of public discourse in Kenya where debates are underpinned by considerations other than consensus building or even pursuit of truth. This idea becomes clear when one considers Ekeh’s (1975) analysis of the nature of publics in Africa. Ekeh argues that there exist two publics in Africa, which publics derive from the colonialist legacy of dual publics within singular polities. For Ekeh, the two publics in each polity coexist because of a societal morality that dialectically mediates the engagement of private and public realms. I argue that the public sphere in Kenya is comparable to the Nigerian version that Ekeh theorises.

Such a public sphere is overdetermined and underwritten by preeminent logics of ethnicity, ethnic affiliations, and subsequent interpretations of public developments. In practice, those in positions of influence will be inclined to make decisions that favour their ethnic groups. Similarly, people from certain ethnic groups will intuitively affiliate with and endorse decisions made by their tribesmen and women in positions of influence. Lastly, the rest of the Kenyans will interpret administrative and other decisions through the prism of ethnicity, and read tribe as the underlying logic of most, if not all, decisions. All these dynamics collectively tend to predispose interlocutors towards echoing preconceived positions in public debates rather than projecting objective perspectives. Ultimately, what transpires in Kenya is what Karekwaivanane (2019) calls ‘unruly publics’.

I argue that for the journalists that I spoke to, external influence in their reportage emanated from their social or ethnic sensibilities, alongside trends in social media debates. For instance, when I asked them about how and how far social media influenced their reporting,
a print reporter stated that “[a]t first I relied on social media reports to retrace the last moments of Msando. After that however, social media was full of rumours and lies so I went back to old school reporting. Sourcing for information from well-grounded sources” (my emphasis). This response captures the complex relationship among the different players in the media industry. These complexities include the ironies of self-perception of the ‘mainstream’ media, and the prejudices associated with ‘rumours’ and ‘lies’. Responding to the same question, another reporter stated that he saw social media as an important and resourceful point of breaking news, but soon judged it to be “full of rumours and lies.” Yet, the implied uneasy relationship between mainstream and social media reflected an undeclared discursive contest about which space is more authoritative or credible. A TV editor responded curtly, “not much at all. You can’t trust them.”

On his part, a radio editor denied any influence from social media, while another merely stated that the social media flows were of immense influence on his reportage. One investigative reporter was a little more elaborate in stating that: “It [social media] provided crucial leads in the early days of the investigation. But as the queries continued, it also became fresh ground for distortion by government and its operatives.” For another, the social media outlets were important because they “[h]elped keep the subject alive and reminded journalists that the public needed answers.” These responses show a pattern where the interlocutors were apprehensive of both the official government sources as well as the dominant narratives within social media spaces such as KoT. This is an illustration of what one may call an epistemic tension between the rumourous texts and mainstream sources of information from government agencies.

The tension between ‘mainstream’ and ‘fringe’ media in their perception of social media sources was also seen in a digital editor’s wholehearted endorsement of social media as the source of breaking news and space for dissemination of commentary. By the time I spoke to him, he was heading one of the online publishers of a platform that identifies and amplifies topical, potentially salacious news. Asked how far the website drew on social media outlets, he was categorical that “[i]t played a huge role in our reporting. Being an online platform, we got most of our hits from social media. This was also our primary source of dissemination.” Compared with the print and radio journalists who simply denied any

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86 ibid
87 ibid
88 ibid
89 ibid
influence from social media, his answer suggested that even on matters of national interest, journalists demarcated and recreated their own spaces, ascribing greater authority to their respective versions of stories while dismissing others. Thus, the uncritical dismissal of social media as ‘full of rumours and lies’, and the claim that social media did not influence any reportage. All these are incredulous claims given that the persistence of rumours, as White (2000) argues, is because they are neither entirely false nor undesirable.

When asked about whether they trusted the government, the respondents gave totally different answers. One said, “[y]es I do. As long as you have good sources who trust you then their information is always good.” A reporter who had worked both in print and digital platforms said “not always”, while for another, “[s]ometimes. It depends on what is there for them.” Twelve journalists were more perceptive. “Trust? Show me the evidence and I will listen to you. Not now”, said one. To a senior print editor, “it’s all about interests, not trust”, and another “[y]ou cannot trust anyone as a source of information. Everyone has an agenda.” These responses capture the self-reflexive irony of Kenyan journalists. Even as mediators of public discourse, they acknowledge that they function from positions of competing interests. That may explain why the leading media outlets in Kenya have a long running working relationship with sources within government. In comparison, digital platforms lack such networks, and are thus more shrill in raising their objections or resistance to government sources so as to signal their presence to an audience long used to big media houses. Both approaches are interest-driven. However, the willingness to work with the government does not mean that print and broadcast journalists were entirely trusting. After all, the journalists still double-checked what their contacts told them, meaning they knew that there were no absolute truths regarding Msando and Ngumbu’s deaths.

This reiterates the complexity of debates on the deaths of Msando and Ngumbu, respectively. It also recreates doubt that dominated debates among KoT, and the mistrust of official narratives in Lifunga and Gachie villages. Arguably, while the presumption of objectivity informs readers’ perception of what mainstream journalism publishes, concerned journalists are also vulnerable to partisanship and uncertainty, institutional loyalties, and preconceived standpoints. This explains why journalists from ‘mainstream’ media could strategically work with government agents, while their colleagues in digital spaces (presumably marginal) mistrusted the government by default.
This inherent mistrust should also be understood differently. It reflects what Onyebadi and Oyedeji (2011), after Michael Ignatieff, describe as journalists’ role as ‘society’s moral witnesses’ and not self-immolating ‘objective’ bystanders. Accordingly, the journalists who reported Msando and Ngumbu’s deaths were aware that their work could provoke ordinary Kenyans. This is why in Kenya and Africa, the media was at some point accused of fanning ethnic and other sectarian violence (Onyebadi and Oyedeji, 2011). Media-aided ethnic violence began with elite’s use of media in launching and amplifying anti-colonial struggles. The media gave expressive space to the then emerging racial and ethnic elites to amplify the grievances of their ethnic and racial communities. This became prominent in the ensuing dialogism between the literate consumers of pro-African print journalism as contrasted with their illiterate but politically conscious kin. Hence, Frederiksen (2011) notes that even in colonial times, “[d]ebates in newspapers spilled over into the streets and villages, and circulated back to influence the cadence of newspaper writing.” This concurs with Glassman’s argument that such symbiotic relationships between the public parlance and journalistic reportage yielded a distinct state where “the political journalism of the time carries traces of many street corner arguments” (Glassman 2000: 399-400, qtd in Frederiksen, 162). Some of the ‘street corner arguments’ emerged from, or were inspired by, contributions of police and investigating officers. These often get to the scenes of crime first; they have professional training in investigations, and can access intimate information unlike the common publics.

And yet, some of the journalists subscribed to conspiracy theories, rumour-mongering, and outright speculation. A notably popular conspiracy theory was the view that even before Msando died, he had been coopted to work for the Jubilee Party’s re-election interests. The theory further held that Msando became vulnerable when he showed signs of double-crossing the two leading party coalitions – Jubilee and NASA. This version came from an investigative journalist who spoke to an intelligence officer who has since retired. Accordingly, Jubilee Party had approached Msando because, as a Luo, he would be less likely to be scrutinised by the Luo-dominated opposition. The assumption was Msando could indeed be used to infiltrate the opposition ranks while serving as ICT Manager at the IEBC. Msando had been detailed to work with some of the IEBC suppliers, some of them rumoured to be covert Jubilee Party supporters. According to the spy, all was well until Msando began granting television interviews where he spoke with conviction about not allowing rigging. Msando’s assurances to the country began alarming the government and Jubilee Party
functionaries when he was reported to be consorting with senior opposition leaders aligned to Raila Odinga. One of these leaders was a well-known ODM party ideologue. The Jubilee Party hawks, in panic, concluded that Msando had become a risky accomplice for them. The pro-Jubilee Party fixers decided that it was time Msando was edged out of IEBC. But since it was too close to elections, merely dismissing him was untenable. They decided that killing him was the last and only viable option.

Here I am not interested in the truth or falsehood of the journalist’s claims. Rather, I highlight them to show how this claim derived discursive authority from the retired intelligence officer’s standing as an experienced investigator. However, they must be understood as alternative discourses, which are not necessarily truer or less false than others that circulated on social media. In this, I am persuaded by Scott (1991), who argues that relying on experience in certain cases authorises uncertainty and forecloses more rigorous scrutiny that could otherwise yield more accurate or truthful information. Scott adds that citing experience in remembering and interpreting past encounters erroneously presupposes that experience is a transparent matter that one can decipher objectively, or that experience readily translates into meaning. But as Scott further argues in an interview conducted by Hesford and Diedrich (2014), experience is an exclusionary, amorphous, potentially subjective, vague, and not self-evident.

Indeed, Gossman persuasively argues that “evidence only counts as evidence and is only recognized as such in relation to a potential narrative, so that the narrative can be said to determine the evidence as much as the evidence determines the narrative” (Cited in Scott, 1991: 776). This shows how even ‘professional’ perspectives may be mere ‘street corner arguments’ (Glassman, 2000). That journalists embraced the intelligence officer’s version of the events surrounding Msando both in life and in death shows that even professionals were persuaded by the dominant rumourous strands. They then used conspiracy theories to understand the political situation.

6.3: Perspectives from investigative agencies

In the quest to corroborate my preliminary findings, I also held informal conversations with detectives who were involved in investigations from the moment Msando was reported missing. From the outset, the detectives were reluctant to engage in any structured interview and preferred, to quote one of them, to “speak from my mouth to your ears. No recording,
no phones, no pen and no paper. We will give you a notebook and pen”. Following Swain and Spire (2020) I engaged the detectives in informal conversations and obtained answers to different but related questions. The questions focused on the facts that the investigative agents established in the course of their duty, and how these either negated or reinforced popular views about the killing of Msando and Ngumbu. My overriding objective in interviewing the investigative agents was to test the veracity of the dominant ‘theories’ of the deaths. In other words, I sought to get the narrative versions of the investigating officers about the then popular conspiracy theories that were circulating in digital and physical spaces both in Lifunga and in Gachie villages.

In Lifunga and among KoT, a dominant conspiracy theory was that Msando was killed for refusing to compromise the transmission of the electoral result. Accordingly, Msando was apparently killed in order to amputate his thumb that could eventually be used to unlock the transmission system and tamper with the results. Another conspiracy theory was that Msando was a victim of a love triangle involving Ngumbu’s boyfriend. Without dismissing either of these conspiracy theories offhand, I sought perspectives of the detectives to determine which version was more ‘credible’ in their professional consideration, and how this undermined or enhanced the dominant themes in public debates.

6.3.1: Playing catch-up or cover-up?

Like the journalists, the investigation officers also found themselves distracted by some of the conspiracy theories that circulated about the killings of Msando and Ngumbu. I posed the same questions to them, seeking to establish how they navigated the extensive public interest in the killings while maintaining a sense of professional objectivity. Considering the sensitive nature of the killings, and the operational protocols within the police service where not everyone is permitted to speak to the media or to outsiders, it was necessary to protect the identities of my interlocutors within the investigation agencies and the police. Nonetheless, I verified the findings by repeating the same question to the eight respondents in order to establish the popularity of emerging themes, and to allow for corroboration of some of the sentiments raised. All the respondents from the investigation agency that I spoke to had been involved in the initial inquiries into Msando’s disappearance and the subsequent discovery of his body alongside that of Ngumbu.

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90 Informal conversation with detectives, November 2019
Among the first questions that I asked was: why Msando and Ngumbu were killed. The first respondent said they had three main ‘theories’ that provided useful leads for investigations. One, a scorned lover had plotted to have both killed; two, that Msando was killed in election-related schemes; and, three, that Msando could have been involved in underhand deals, one of which went sour and caused his killing. The same respondent added that: “politicians from across the political divide also came up with these theories and fed them to the public.”

The second police respondent concurred with the views of the first, but also added that “[w]e thought the deaths [were] a result of deal gone wrong and possibly a love triangle.” The third police respondent said almost the same thing, thus:

We felt that being an election year and the IEBC was at the centre of things, there was possibility that Chris could have been killed over the elections. Politicians from across the political divide also came up with these theories and fed them to the public. The team felt that there could have been a love triangle. We observed from communication that Chris and Carol were in a romantic relationship. It was also possible that someone in the family of Msando could have eliminated them.

This means that from the beginning, the investigative agencies followed the emergent conspiracy theories that dominated public debates within and beyond social media spaces. These conspiracy theories only varied in minor details, but interfaced on claims about a romantic relationship that could have exposed Msando to a crime of passion, and the political angle that suggested Msando had been killed in relation to the then looming elections. Arguably, there was a lapse in the sense that the investigating officers did not look further than the areas that were mentioned or hinted at in the debates. In other words, they followed – or worked in parallel to – the trajectory of rumours among KoT and in the physical spaces. This lapse among investigation agencies could have contributed to the general cynicism that the public had towards investigators. It could also explain the persuasive power of the specific rumours that circulated in public. These held sway among the common populations so much so that they disregarded the official narratives that emerged from government agents. Ironical, as well, was that these rumours appeared to shape perception

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91 Interview with detectives, Nairobi, November 2019
92 ibid
of even the investigative agencies that ought to have had better or more access to more authoritative sources of information.

I also asked the investigating officers why they believed the particular theories and whom they targeted for questioning. On why some theoretical standpoints were more persuasive than others, a respondent said: “[w]e analysed the relationship between the two [Msando and Ngumbu] and we concluded it was clandestine. A boyfriend of Carol could have wanted Chris dead. We also thought that Chris was engaged in some shady deal at the IEBC, this too could have resulted in their death.”

The fourth investigating officer had even more shocking explanations for why they settled on the theories. Accordingly,

[t]he investigations team observed a pattern in the communication between Carol and Chris. They spoke a lot on different times. Politicians made the claims of election rigging and social media reports too were a factor in coming up with the possible theories. We also held a meeting between the investigators and the bosses. It was an election year and the opposition made the claims that the IEBC boss was killed for election disputes. We also thought that someone in the family of Msando could have eliminated them. We learnt that Chris’s marriage was in trouble.

This suggests two things. One was the readiness of the police to embrace and run with the most persuasive of the emerging conspiracy theories and, two, that even the police themselves could have spun important conspiracy theories. The prevalence of these conspiracy theories among the investigating officers also became apparent when investigations into the deaths began in earnest. These responses also revealed critical information on why the investigative journalists and media players in general acted the way they did. According to one of the police respondents,

[t]hese are the places we felt as investigators we could find clues into the murders. The families were to tell us if either Carol or Chris had ever received any threats to the lives. IEBC too was to give us details of any assignment that Chris could have undertaken that could have put his life in danger.

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93 ibid
94 ibid
95 ibid
Another respondent said, “[t]he families were to tell us if they had any reasons why the two could have been killed. IEBC where Msando was killed [sic] would also have helped us with possible leads while NIS (National Intelligence Services) was to provide insider details.”

Evidently, investigators did not quite do more than casual inquiries into the rumours about the deaths, hence making rumours more credible even in their eyes, despite their status as trained investigators.

The officers also revealed that their seniors gave mixed signals on the direction of the investigation. Asked whether the government supported their work, one respondent said “Yes and no. When we were conducting the investigations, we realised that some of our colleagues in government were narrowing down the investigations and we knew all was not well.” This concern was important for two reasons. One, it validated claims by some opposition leaders, including Odinga, that the government knew the killers of Msando (and Ngumbu). That this was a plausible perspective became apparent in 2020, following the political rapprochement between President Kenyatta and opposition leader, Odinga. The ‘handshake’, as the rapprochement is commonly called in Kenya, alienated Deputy President William Ruto and his followers in senior levels of government (Gaitho, 2019). In a dramatic twist to the ‘handshake’, Moses Kuria, Oscar Sudi, and Kimani Ngunjiri – who are the opposition within for the Uhuru Kenyatta government – threatened to “reveal Msando’s killers” (Ndanyi, 2020). Yet, regardless of the truth-value or falsehood in these claims, the threat was another instance of the continued instrumentalisation of Msando’s death for political purposes – but this time the accusation came from within the ruling party ranks.

Although largely ignored by their political peers, Sudi and Ngunjiri also demonstrated the relationship between rumours, necropolitics, and assassinations in Kenya. White’s (2000) study of rumours in colonial Kenya showed the usability of secrets in national conversations. Secrets can, accordingly, be a basis for negotiating and leveraging unequal power relations and how people network and engineer socialities to achieve social and or fraternal bonding. In this case, Sudi and Ngunjiri’s threat to reveal the killers of Msando was both meant to excite other interlocutors – including activists and KoT – and hint at the prevalence of many unresolved issues in which the government was implicated.

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96 ibid
97 ibid
The detectives, the interviews also revealed how their bosses scuttled investigations citing ‘orders from above’. For example, one stated that: “[a]t some point during the investigations the technical team was asked to leave. Up to that point I believe the investigations were going on well.” Asked “why were the killers not found?” the same officer answered: “I am not sure but I heard that there was political interference. I concluded that the bosses knew something that they did not want the public to know.” 98 Yet another respondent said “[w]hen we were conducting the investigations we realised that some of our seniors were micromanaging the investigations and we knew all was not well.” The fourth official stated that: “we realised that some of our seniors did not want us to tackle certain issues.” The last respondent was even more blunt, saying “[t]he murder [sic] had a lot of political implications so we were advised by our seniors to go slow.” 99 This claim, if true, shows how supposedly independent and professional entities become coopted, cajoled or blocked by political interests to subvert professionalism. It also partly explains public suspicion of government explanations of the deaths of Msando and Ngumbu, and why the deaths may remain unresolved years later.

Why were Msando and Ngumbu killed? And why did bureaucrats frustrate investigations into the killings? For one of my respondents, “the killings had a link to national security. That is why investigations were compromised.” 100 While the nature of the ‘national security’ issues is difficult to discern from the answer, the phrase reinforces my argument that the government used proxies and appropriated Msando in death to suggest that his killing was for the good of Kenya. Whether this is true or not is beside the point. These responses also led to a follow-up question on whether the investigating agencies felt that the government had accorded them all the necessary support in the course of their investigation work.

According to one of the officers:

Yes and No. First we did a lot of questioning of people at the bar where the two are said to have been on the day they disappeared. ‘No’ because when the investigations got to a certain point we realized that there was no goodwill from the government and that the more we continued the more the hurdles we got. 101

98 ibid
99 ibid
100 ibid
101 Informal conversation with detectives, Nairobi, February 2020
Another one was more categorical about the paradoxes of incomplete or half-hearted support. On whether they received government support in their task, he simply answered “[y]es. When we were conducting the investigations we realised that some of our seniors did not want us to tackle certain issues and we knew all was not well.”

Pressed further to explain the level of interference ‘from above’, all the officers declined. This suggests three things. The first, that the officers were scared of reprisals. Second, the investigation was not worth the effort or personal risk. Third, it was business as usual: the officers were used to being stopped from probing certain contentious matters, and Msando and Ngumbu’s case was just the latest.

These answers somewhat suggested that the government through its agents saw this as an opportunity to play distractive necropolitics using the bodies of Msando and Ngumbu, respectively. Historically, different interest groups often appropriate dead bodies to communicate different ideological and political messages. Related to my study, Verdery (1999) argues that in post-socialist Europe, dead bodies were used as floating signifiers in climates of intense ideological contestations. Accordingly, “bodies have the advantage of concreteness that nonetheless transcends time, making the past immediately present […] their corporeality makes them important means of localizing a claim” (original italics, n.p.). From Verdery’s analysis, one can understand the various meanings that different groups attached to the death of Msando and Ngumbu. These deaths had particular meanings that aligned with the standpoints of diverse groups.

In Kenya during the political campaigns, it was not surprising that the NASA coalition was readily prepared to overplay the death of Msando for political mileage, while the ruling Jubilee coalition generally avoided any commentary on the deaths. This is because “the significance of corpses has less to do with their concreteness than with how people think about them. A dead body is meaningful not in itself but through culturally established relations to death and through the way a specific dead person’s importance is (variously) construed” (Verdery: n.p.). This explains the general silence surrounding Ngumbu. Although she was also killed alongside Msando, Ngumbu remained less spoken about because she was presumably of less significance to the politics then. Also, speaking about her would arouse dissonant politics around gender, cross-ethnic relationships, and the new imagined Kenya where ethnicity is not so important. At the same time, the spread of information on

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102 ibid
the two deaths also posed risks to those investigators who felt exposed to potential harm by those who wanted the whole saga to be quietly handled.

Arguably, therefore, the argument that Msando’s death had something to do with national security was alarmist and meant to persuade the public that killing him was a necessary sacrifice for stability. The meanings that the government officials attached to Msando’s body thus differed from those his relatives back in Siaya and KoT attached to it. Examined in the wider context of national politics and the then looming elections, therefore, Msando and Ngumbu’s bodies generated different meanings for different observers, depending on how close they were with officialdom. This means that bodies are capable of generating, containing, and communicating different meanings simultaneously, whether those meanings are complementary or even contradictory. This is possibly what also made the investigative agencies cautious as they dealt with Msando’s body.

That is why the investigating officers feared for their lives and decided that slowing down on the investigations was necessary for their safety. It was also ironical that, while the general public expected regular media coverage of the investigations into the deaths, the investigating officers felt that relentless media coverage jeopardised their work and risked their lives. One of the respondents was categorical that media coverage “was very harmful”, adding that “[s]ome of the information given endangered even the lives of the investigators.” The officer was suspicious of journalists specifically and the media generally. This suspicion was due to the troubled relationship between the media and successive governments in Kenya. One investigation officer said, “[w]e felt that a lot had been given away by the media. Some of the information was false and this polarised the investigations.” While the officer did not explain the specific false information he meant, his point was that Kenyans need not trust the media.

6.4: Conclusion: The tree that bends in a strong wind is never uprooted

Even among professionals such as journalists and the investigating agencies, there were many rumours surrounding the deaths of Msando and Ngumbu. One of these was that Msando’s death was linked to the 2017 General Election; second, that they were victims of crimes of passion from a scorned lover and, thirdly, that Msando could have been involved in an awry deal where the agrieved person then organised Msando’s killing. These rumours

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103 ibid
thus communicated the conspiracy theories that the people tried to use to explain the sudden death of a very instrumental actor in the then looming elections.

Thus, noting the pervasiveness and persuasiveness of these rumours, I sought to nuance dominant versions of the rumours in physical and digital spaces as encountered, confirmed or challenged by journalists and police investigators. I sought perspectives of journalists and investigative officers on two key issues. One was on how they understood the deaths of Msando and Ngumbu and, two, how their views challenged or reinforced the rumours then circulating in physical and digital platforms. In obtaining their perspectives, I held unstructured interviews and reviewed relevant literature, and journalistic commentaries on Msando and Ngumbu. In doing all these, my aim was to establish convergences and divergences of the perspectives of professionals and those of lay commentators.

I argue in this chapter that professional investigators and journalists reified rather than challenged the rumours in circulation. This was partly because there was no personal incentive to unearth the truth about the killings. For the journalists and detectives, the investigations and reporting were a risky and unavoidable duty and not a passionate search for truth surrounding the deaths. Therefore, the investigating officers merely reproduced partisan positions of politically powerful personalities in their respective ethnic communities. This was due to ‘the political lives of dead bodies’ (Verdery, 1999), which call for power play by officialdom and either resistance or acquiescence by their underlings, even where the latter also happen to be professionals or bureaucrats.

The surrender to the subjectivities of powerful forces was because of two important factors. One was the intuitive awareness of what the government really wanted or did not want in regard to investigations. This intuitive awareness draws on Ekeh’s (1975) argument that there exist two publics in African polities, both publics underpinned by a common morality – such as the political killing of Msando and Ngumbu. The dynamics animating these publics entail mutual suspicion between the political elite, and the conscientious common citizens. These are propelled by the logic of self-preservation where the actors instinctively know that should they go farther than the obvious, they may expose the political elite to ridicule or scandal, and thus attract consequences to themselves. Knowing, as Haugerud (1997) states, that careless talk can have severe consequences, the investigators and journalists thus postured to pursue the public interest while indeed complying with the often unspoken but very clear wishes of the ruling elite.
This chapter, therefore, shows that detectives and journalists deliberately echoed what was already in the public domain upon realising that the government was scuttling investigations. Following Ekeh’s argument, the professionals chose to compromise their professionalism in public so as to secure their private interests of family and life. Thus, the seeming ‘unprofessional’ abdication of duty by professionals was influenced by a historical consciousness of how similar cases have ended previously. Overall, there was a broad-based awareness that where the government is either unwilling or unable to pursue an investigative matter, it is safer to keep off. This awareness is further buttressed by the government’s own awareness of the future value of dead bodies for political leverage.

In this, the investigation agencies were aware of the historical directions taken by earlier politically sensitive yet unresolved killings, such as those of J.M. Kariuki and Robert Ouko, both of which I discussed in the Introduction. Regarding the death of Ouko, for instance, even though the Moi government legitimately and clearly disbanded the commission of inquiry into the killing of Robert Ouko, the subsequent government led by Mwai Kibaki launched another initiative as part of addressing historical injustices associated with the 1978-2002 Moi regime (KHRC, 2011). Therefore, both Moi and, later, Kibaki, used the body of Ouko for immediate and long term political gain.

A common denominator in all these is the filtering flow of rumours and conspiracy theories, as well as a general sense of caution by different actors involved in the narrative flows. Definitely, rumours keep certain historical deaths alive in the current psyche. The same rumours send clear and ominous messages to agents, professionals or bureaucrats, about the need for caution when investigating politically sensitive deaths. Thus, the killings, bungled or frustrated investigations, abdication of duty by various actors, and lack of commitment to arrest the culprits, all point to necropolitics.

Critically to my study, by posturing to the public interest while manifestly securing their personal interests, the journalists and detectives only succeeded in valourising the narratives in public domain, in this case the rumours about who killed Msando and why.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1: Rethinking rumours in the era of social media

How have rumours affected and been affected by the platforms and cultures of social media? In this thesis, I have grappled with this question in the context of ubiquitous appropriation of smartphone-enabled cultures on the one hand, and a burgeoning political practice of expressive freedoms, on the other. These freedoms and their manifestation within social media platforms derive from a growing consciousness of political and historical concerns that inform discursive points among different interlocutors. These interlocutors are drawn from different social classes, political party orientations, or even ethnic belonging. Depending on the political standing of the interlocutors, they have either demanded answers from government on the unresolved killings of Msando and Ngumbu or defended the government against accusations that it was involved in the deaths. Underpinning both perspectives are political continuities and discontinuities that reflect a deliberate recuperation of usable pasts in the process of creating a vibrant public sphere distinct from Euro-American parameters of discourse and the nature of such a sphere. At the core of these dynamics is the critical roles of rumourous narrative strands that flow in circuits of digital platforms, or in physical spaces that involve the spoken word. Notably, the rumours have been packaged, amplified and archived by digital technologies of social media connections that demolish barriers of class, geography, and rural-urban bifurcations that previously narrowed the scope of rumours to limited geographies and social clusters.

The current predominance of social media platforms and the expanded democracy that allows wider discursive practices have, however, impacted on the form and functions of rumours. Such changes have been witnessed in how far rumours can travel, how long they can remain stored, who engages in rumourous conversations, and for what reasons. These changes, among others, warrant a rethinking of the role of rumours in Kenya. Rumours have been a common feature in Kenya’s contemporary history known for ethnicity, claims and counterclaims of ethnic exclusion from powerful centres, highly volatile elections, and cyclic cases of unresolved political killings. These developments have provoked many rumours. They have also been debated and archived in public memory in digital and print formats, apart from the analogue forms of oral expressions that remain common, especially in rural areas.
These developments have widely implicated social media technologies and cultures in three critical discursive domains that are relevant in my current study. These are: one, the forms and extent of political and expressive freedoms as guaranteed in the current Constitution of Kenya; two, the vicious political contestations that are commonly framed around regional and ethnic boundaries and, three, the political significance of unresolved killings (assassinations to some) that punctuate narrative directions of Kenya’s post-colonial politics.

I have noted that the entrenchment of political freedoms in the Constitution of Kenya (2010) was both a cause and effect of greater uptake of technologies of communication. These technologies have interactive platforms that have over time variously birthed relatively more robust public debates on many issues of concern. Previously, these issues would be hushed up because of the repressive political dispensations associated with the Kenyatta and Moi dictatorships. Alternatively, they would only be debated among a small coterie of urban, politically conscious interlocutors. Although it is obvious that greater access to and use of social media platforms following the newfound freedoms has affected the way people speak to each other and to authority, it remains uncertain how such conversations are influenced or otherwise affected by the technologies, platforms and cultures of social media inventions such as the smartphone.

My study has shown that extensive use of social media technologies in creating and spreading rumours has accorded more epistemic capital and socio-political authority to rumours. This is due to a number of reasons. One is that, unlike the pre-digital technology days when rumours circulated within smaller clusters of socially trusted groupings, the current scenario is one of endless amorphousness, owing to the rhizomic endlessness in spread and depth of rumours. Second, partly because the same digital technologies related to social media have a class dimension to them, they have bestowed a middle-class touch on rumours. This has in turn impelled governments to take rumours more seriously, seen in how they necessitate more structured strategies of infiltration, cooptation by officialdom to counter or negate their persuasive powers.104 In other words, the technological changes have inflated the power and authority of rumours to the extent that government agencies find it unavoidable to infiltrate the processes that create and circulate rumours. These

104 Although the middle class is numerically negligible in terms of shaping electoral outcomes, they are nonetheless significant as thought-leaders who may mobilise the common subjects to rally behind a given cause. They can also reach international communities and diplomatic corps through their networks, and embarrass the government of the day. These are among the reasons governments take them seriously.
dynamics – besides the possibilities of non-linear validation of rumourous texts – imply that, when scrutinised closely, rumours can yield information regarding the government’s thinking especially on contentious issues of unresolved, political, or politicised killings such as those of Msando and Ngumbu.

The widespread use of social media platforms in rumourous conversations has also reoriented debates on politics, exclusionary electioneering, state impunity and necropolitics. Although these developments show growth in freedoms of expression and vibrant public debates, they also hint at potential dangers where social media platforms may undermine meaningful discourse by creating new spaces of intolerance. This is especially so when debates in social media platforms reactivate ethnic nationalism, sabre-rattling political rhetoric, and epistemic and symbolic violence against individuals and groups who are perceived to hold divergent reactionary or ‘revolutionary’ ideas. Within social media platforms, one also notices a general use of hate as the affective currency for political negotiation.

All these dynamics threaten the organic unity of Kenya. They also give government agencies reasons to claw back on freedoms of expression, impose more surveillance on debates in digital spaces generally, and control free speech in particular. In light of all these, my thesis probes the complexities of digital platforms in the context of rumours. The thesis shows how these technologies enable politically conscious amplification of public concerns to the extent of attracting official responses from government. Digital platforms, therefore, promise greater spread of information in the form of rumours. However, we must be cautious because such technologies and their corresponding cultures are not necessarily a panacea to the impediments to nation-formation. Problems such as ethnicity, state violence, and tribal mobilisation can actually manifest in digital spaces, and thus perpetuate marginalisation and exclusion of some ‘unwanted’ communities. These issues variously emerge in the six substantive chapters that I summarise.

7.2: Chapter contributions

I have sought to evaluate the impact of Twitter on rumours as enablers of public discourses. By critically engaging with earlier scholarship on rumours by researchers such as White (2000), Ogude (2007), Ogola (2009), Nyairo (2013) and Musila (2015), I focused on the digital rumours that spawned the public sphere around the initial disappearance and subsequent killings of Msando and Ngumbu in August 2017. I noted that while the deaths
of Msando and Ngumbu generated the immediate occasion and reason for rumours, the themes that predominated among rumours spoke to wider and more complex issues surrounding Kenya’s national(ist) status beyond elections, ethnic and social relations, and political histories.

Therefore, in the introductory chapter, I surveyed these issues by adhering to the structural rubrics of academic research. Specifically, I highlighted aspects of the background, a statement of the study problem and research questions, review of relevant literature, and methodology. Ultimately, the Introduction captures some of the most animated political debates that have dominated Kenya’s post-independence public sphere, and a fraction of the scholarly responses that such debates have provoked. Organised around the themes that I summarise earlier in this thesis, these debates animated rumours and offered a rationale for this scholarly project.

I grappled with the question of how, over time, rumours have changed in mediating public debate by and among various parties in Kenya’s emerging public spheres. Thus, in Chapter 2, I explore the structural and functional changes in rumours as creative, cultural, and political texts as co-created, packaged, and archived in digital social media platforms. Understood in the context of the socialising function of rumours, I demonstrate in Chapter 2 how the utilitarian function of rumours as ‘cultural vernaculars’ (Ogola, 2009) enable politically nuanced debates among interlocutors in virtual spaces. Such rumourous debates engender multiple perspectives on themes such as ethnicity, gender, inequality, and political intolerance.

However, the shifts enabled by rumours in the digital spaces is further complicated by the fact that the idea and form of rumours have also become altered. Specifically, rumours become more elastic, open to manipulations of co-creating, archival storage, and retrieval depending on the need. Most importantly, rumours become attributable to a single individual as the originator of a rumourous idea. This means that digital technologies and their interactive platforms have extended the versatility of rumours as part of social media, making them more tenacious and authoritative. This in turn has enhanced their capacity to disrupt political ideologies of and on power.

Nonetheless, the rumours in digital platforms are sometimes ambiguous, paradoxical, and contradictory. Aware of this, I dedicated my Chapter 3 to extensively interrogate the dark sides of rumours in digital platforms, particularly on Twitter. Although Kenyans currently
enjoy more freedom of expression owing to constitutional guarantees and deeper democratic cultures, freedom of expression faces a critical risk of secondary silencing. This is because of two critical impediments. One relates to recent memories of a violent government that monitors criticism. Most of my interlocutors still exercise self-censorship through silencing and regurgitation of banalities in discussing important issues. Beyond the bravado of anti-government rhetoric, therefore, are what one may call precautionary measures. Such include strategic use of masking techniques such as monikers, or of merely retweeting ideas that could have been originally tweeted by anyone. Ultimately, within digital spheres emerge certain influential persons who become thought leaders representing different ideological standpoints, usually mirroring the ethnic backgrounds of the interlocutors. This is paradoxical because it works against the emergence of a vibrant public sphere where ideas are fronted, debated, tested, and embraced or abandoned. Therefore, in Chapter 3, I demonstrate that there are limits to free speech that social media platforms and rumours enable. These constraints against freedoms of expression embody the paradoxes of free speech, while subtly critiquing the government’s seeming predisposition to intolerance of divergent views. Chapter 3 also demonstrates a widespread circumspection among social media users that the anonymity promised by the gadgets in use is not absolute. This is why they remain cautious in what they say even in digital forms.

Critical among my findings in this study is how cultural idioms, political contestations, and historical grievances influence the relatively recent theoretical preoccupation with necropolitics. I understand the general outrage that the killings of Msando and Ngumbu provoked as popular rebuke of the government for failing to protect human life, or for possible involvement in the killings. Furthermore, I also understand that Kenyans’ rampant emotional reaction to the killings pointed at a broader awareness of a human rights regime, particularly the right to life.

Rumours cannot only theorise in ways comparable to forensic science, but also connect with modes of meaning-making that are culturally specific. This is the point that I make in Chapters 4 and 5, respectively. I discovered that certain variables such as ethnocentric perceptions of insiders and outsiders within the country are at the centre of rumourous public debates. These concerns, accordingly, refuse to go away despite the strides made in embracing modern platforms of communication and professing greater cosmopolitan sensibilities. One would imagine that the politically conscious commentators that employ social media platforms to chastise the government would also mobilise ideological support
along cosmopolitan or more inclusive planes. This does not happen. Instead, the most conscientious and tech-savvy commentators also happen to be among the most virulent ethnic and male chauvinists adept at parochially slanting the debates in digital spaces. This suggests that western modernity in Kenya – if measured by the advances such as widespread use of smartphones – is only embraced when it fits in rather than deviates from traditional thought patterns and their logics. While such platforms may liberate their users from the proximity of state surveillance, they do not disengage most of the people from the stranglehold of ethnic and gender parochialism. This is why I suggest, in Chapters 4 and 5 that modern rumours are enablers of 'national(ist) politics and local(ised) grammars.'

In all these, a question emerges regarding the role of government agencies and other players who may be implicated in the narratives by virtue of their professional calling or government interests. I found this question useful in tempering my findings from the highly partisan commentators known as KoT, and those by analogue interlocutors in villages beyond Nairobi where Msando and Ngumbu were found killed. It is inconceivable that all the national debates that implicate social, ethnic or gendered categories somehow do not touch on or otherwise involve professional groups such as journalists and the police service. Since my entire study was triggered by killings that involved journalistic reportage and investigative agencies, it was necessary to seek the views of journalists and investigative agencies on the deaths of Msando and Ngumbu. As I show in Chapter 6, professional categories advance partisan interests even in performing their professional duties. Both the detectives and journalists postured to investigate rigorously and report objectively on the twin deaths to manage public expectations. This also reveals another point about the nature of institutions in post-colonial Kenya. Owing to the survivalist instincts of the media and the reactionary logic of investigative agencies, they tend to embrace official narratives that serve the interests of the prevailing political powers. Ultimately, the media and investigative agencies yield very little new information. This explains the endless power of rumours as among the most trusted sources of information for the curious.

7.3: The Last Word

This thesis contributes to knowledge by fronting three fundamental arguments. One, by showing how rumours as social media fit and function in digital media platforms, particularly Twitter. The study demonstrates how widespread practices of cultural appropriation and political expression extend the vistas of what could be misconstrued as a dated research
area. Admittedly, earlier scholars in Africa (Mbembe, 1992; Fontein, 2009) demonstrate how rumours and gossip survive and travel as political ‘weapons’, while showing that although the predominant terms of engagement involve relations of power where dominance and resistance are common logics, there are discernible overlaps that defy the simple binary oppositions. Indeed, the imbrications of political power contestations and cultural significations in the post-colonial African state yield, as these scholars have shown, a palimpsestic tapestry that reveals many coexistent political, cultural, and ideological narratives. Jodi Dean’s (2009) argument that political engagements and the dynamics that underpin them are necessarily divisive and complex somewhat manifests in the overlapping publics that one may find in Kenya and, by extension, Africa. This means that any study that relies on rumour as text or method must accept, *ab initio*, the reality that the outcome will be far more complicated than the linear cause-and-effect results.

This is why, as I show in the preceding chapters, the preoccupation with rumours as the weapon of the powerless against powerful political elites limits the scope of their knowledge value. Specifically, approaching rumours from the domination-resistance model renders invisible the cultural and historical underpinnings of their creativity, innovative appropriation of social media platforms and cultures of communication. This also has implications of overlooking the continuous co-creation of narrative as valuable parts of national(ist) debates. Therefore, the domination-resistance approach to studying rumours subsequently divests the individuals who create and consume rumours of their full agentic potential. This is because such an approach either casts rumourous commentators as fatalistic interlocutors in a threatening political environment, or as politically ill-informed individuals still stuck in the oral traditions of folkloristic ambiguities when expressing their collective political views. This is why my study eschewed the domination-resistance approach to studying rumours.

Second, my study notes that even more recent scholarship on the relationship between digital social media platforms and their links to greater expressive cultures still draw on the traditional beacons of rural/urban, powerful/powerless categories, and their corresponding associations. Such approaches problematically presume a powerlessness of the rural populations to whom they ascribe a permanent and exclusive orality, as opposed to the more politically conscious and inscriptive urban counterparts. One such scholar is Nyabola (2018), whose work on digital democracies spoke to both the subject and rationale of my
own intervention. A critical point in Nyabola’s work relates to the transformative potential of oral cultures and practices that are then transferred to digital circuits enabled by the smartphone. While this observation bears some truth, my own study finds that the process of transition from the oral or analogue social media cultures to their digital variants is neither linear nor direct. Instead, there are processes of creative manipulation and strategic cooptation of social media platforms in extending oral cultures such as rumourous conversations. The amalgamation of orality and digital rumours thus responds to historical and contemporary political considerations that affirm the agentic voices of different interlocutors across the rural/urban, analogue/digital planes. Ultimately, individual interlocutors get to rope in collective or communal awareness of historical and political developments – including electoral contestations, political and politicised killings, as well as the uses and abuses of ethnicity as the most important political currency in Kenya.

My study holds the view that contrary to Nyabola’s (2018) widely cited argument that what happens in analogue spaces is transposed to digital circuits and vice versa, the flow is more complicated than that. Indeed, there are many instances of disjuncture between the debates offline and online, all of which play out in an emerging public sphere that neither coheres with nor aspires to the tenets of public spheres in Euro-America as theorised by Eurocentric scholars (Warner, 2002; Mouffe, 2002). To the extent that most of the commentators in the villages were generally unaware of the debates raging on Twitter, and to the extent that the same respondents in the villages had different explanations for the same events, it is arguable that they drew on different logics from those of their counterparts in other villages and, without a doubt, different from those of KoT.

Third, this thesis argues that people generally embrace rumours that align with their preconceived political or ideological standpoints. In Kenya today, this is measured by the dominant political party or kingpin in a specific region. No amount of reason or amplification of an alternative idea would enhance that idea’s uptake in a region where it contradicts the preeminent political logic in terms of which party or leader to support or oppose. That was why in Lifunga Village for example, no one hesitated to accuse the government of having a hand in Msando’s death while, conversely, no one in Kiambu was particularly keen on blaming the government for Ngumbu’s death. The people of Lifunga mourned Msando not because he had died in the line of duty but because they interpreted his killing as the death of Raila Odinga’s presidential ambitions, and their hopes for political power. For the very
reasons, Ngumbu was muted for rebelling against her people by embracing the perceived architect of Kikuyu loss of power to their Luo nemesis.

Ultimately, I demonstrate that although rumours in verbal and digital formats appear to be local in origin and relevance, they have commonalities in structure and logic that accord them a continental, even global resonance. That this is the case can be seen in the extent of theorisation that rumours have attracted over time and space, especially focusing on the uses that different communities have for rumours. Not only do rumours fit in the moral and political economies of place and time, they also demonstrate a high degree of structural versatility and different forms of functionality as to attract and necessitate a broad-based view. In my thesis, the case study approach indeed suggests a wider phenomenon – thus, how dynamics of political killings provide talking points in informal spaces to the extent of disturbing the order of official narration, reversing the order of power relations, and generally creating local archives of global occurrences. By this, I mean the sense in which a singular death can be a subject of intense rumourous conversations in a political context that also signals nearly global incidences of assassinations.

The archiving process also brings into the equation another dimension of how technological inventions can spur social innovations, as seen in the new ways of packaging rumours in a manner that defeats traditional forms of government surveillance. The emerging necessity of officialdom to infiltrate social media spaces in order to track down the nature and flow of rumours in digital spaces poses a challenge to our traditional understanding of power relations in Africa and the world. This is because the match between technologies and socialities of rumours no longer adheres to the patterns of flow that earlier scholarship – which I extensively interrogate in earlier sections – shows. At the same time, these changes also offer grand opportunities for those who seek to probe further into the intellectual implications of the changes on communication technology, socialities of rumour, and the political discourses that are surfaced by such developments.
List of Interviewees

I held a total of 98 unstructured interviews/informal conversations in Nairobi, Siaya and Kiambu counties between May 2019 and March 2021. Below is a list of interviews, in ascending chronological order, divided by location and category of respondents. I used unstructured interviews due to the political undertones surrounding the deaths. I have intentionally not disclosed the names of the interviewees to protect them from reprisals from the government or employers due to the sensitive nature of the topic.

**Gachie**

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<th>Interviewee</th>
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<tr>
<td>Relatives of Carolyne Ngumbu</td>
<td>May 2018</td>
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<td>Neighbours and friends of Carolyne Ngumbu</td>
<td>June 2018</td>
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<td>Carolyne Ngumbu friends</td>
<td>June 2018</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neighbours</td>
<td>August 2020</td>
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<td>Gachie youths</td>
<td>January 2021</td>
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**Lifunga**

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<td>Neighbours and friends of Msando</td>
<td>May 2018</td>
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<td>Area Chief</td>
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<td>Lifunga youths and traders</td>
<td>May 2020</td>
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**Journalists**

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<td>June 2020</td>
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**Detectives**

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