

THE YOUTH AND THE MODERN: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**MACHARIA MUNENE¹***United States International University, Africa, Kenya**Introduction*

Every generation has challenges that are specific to the youth and which look modern at the particular time and open up numerous opportunities. In each generation, some people are identified as “leaders” in one of two ways. First, there are those who stand out as “leaders” because they have natural attractions and emit authority despite themselves. Second, there are those who are created by people in authority in effort to groom and nurture potential leaders in particular areas. There are times when the effort to create leaders is successful in that hitherto unrecognized talent comes forth. It is also possible, however, to create disaster when the authorities impose the unfit on reluctant followers in the name of grooming leaders. The best scenario, for any place, is when those to be identified for nurturing are also natural. Once they mature, these can be very effective in delivering on expectations.

Leadership and Leaders

Leadership, as a concept, is the exercise of power and the ability to determine the direction that should be taken to preserve or advance interests. It is the quality and ability to make decisions and to give guidance to people or society in a particular direction. It can refer to individuals, institutions, and countries. In various societies, leadership is the application of power on people and the capacity to show those people what the path to follow in facing challenges is.

¹ In preparing this presentation, I benefitted a lot from the insights of two “experts.”

- First is a widely travelled Taxi-Transport operator at Kahawa Sukari named James Githugo. He drew my attention to the devastating effect on youth of a seemingly accepted “soft” drug called *mugùka* in Mbeere area of Embu.
- Second is a budding artist/musician, Chris Karanja Macharia. A *freshman* at USIU, Karanja explained to me the current youth lingo.

Leaders are individuals who have the quality and ability to make decisions for others to follow. Such individuals tend to emit authority to those around and to command trust and respect. The identified individual does not have to have written rules or laws for others to follow him. It is enough that he commands the trust and respect of the people in the belief that he cannot lead them astray. The people expect him to preserve and advance particular interests.

Nature and Nurture

One constant concern in discussing leadership is the question of whether it is natural and inherent or it is simply nurtured. The reality is that it is actually both, with emphasis being on nature as reinforced by nurture. Right from early age, some children exhibit distinct signs, and attributes, of natural leadership. They show confidence in new environments or take initiative to organize others by seeking out and engaging little age-mates. They tend to exercise authority over their *peers* who willingly listen to, and follow, them irrespective of the circumstances.

Those attributes symbolize potential leadership that can be used for good if it is properly guided and nurtured. The power in the hands of such youth, if it is not checked, can also be dangerous to both the person exercising it and to society. The nurturing part should ensure that an individual that has natural leadership qualities learns how to balance in order to produce the positive rather than the negative. This requires ability to use common sense, based on solid information. It is to be independent in weighing situations, and to be always conscious of what the issue at stake is.

Challenge of the Modern in Kenya

The ability to balance is critical in the second decade of the 21st Century as the youth struggle with the *modern*. The sense of the modern for the youth is different from the time when wearing bell-bottoms was “hip”. While being conversant with European football leagues, particularly the English premier league, cuts across recent Kenyan ages, knowledge of the local leagues is also catching up. This is positive development.

Depending on the times, however, the challenges appear monumental but the opportunities are also many.

In 2016, the “modern” youth receive pressure from both the international community and from forces within Kenya. They tend to be cable dominated and are expected to be savvy with the social media that keep on changing so much that keeping up is itself a challenge. Multiple channel television and radios, mobile telephones, whatsapp, twitter, facebook, and many other social interactive media are easily available. More than the keeping up, however, is the content of what is in those media. And most of the content is externally generated and, in some instances, is culturally destructive of the Kenyan youth.

It is in discussing social media and the youth that the question of who qualifies to be youth arises. This is because the meaning of the term “youth”, as Hannah Muthoni argues, is relative and covers varieties of ages in different settings. In some societies, for instance, the term youth is cultural rather than being based purely on biological age. In those societies, it often depends on when people go through prescribed cultural rituals and then they are considered to be youth. It also tends to cover people in their twenties who, in some places, are considered to be young adults. In various places, adulthood refers to the age at which young people are legally allowed to do different things that are often forbidden to children and this varies with culture. The previously forbidden activities include engaging in sexual activities, driving vehicles, buying alcohol and tobacco related items.

Although the official youth bracket in Kenya includes those between the ages of 15 and 35, the proper stress should *be on those below 25. Anyone above 25 belongs to a different bracket despite the feeling of being youth.* They, however, can be divided into three categories and each tends to exhibit its own peculiarities. These are the teenage, transition age, and mature youth brackets. There are, however, some people who culturally refuse to grow out of particular age brackets and therefore become perpetual mental youth.

Depending on the times, the challenges appear monumental and the opportunities are also many.

First is the category of teenagers, still in their adolescence and mostly in high schools. These are the *mayouth* (group of youth) who tend to engage in all sorts of social experiments within the confines of schools or homes. Some are mesmerized by new media gadgets and are in danger of aping bad behavior they see in the media, which include glorifying violence, using offensive language, and taking drugs. They are captivated by what they term *trending*, which simply means copying what they see in the latest social media fad. Because media *zinachocha mayouth* (mislead the youth), some youth become zombie-like even as they *jichocha* (brag). Those engaged in excessive television watching, for instance, tend to turn into *bongo lala* (sleepy brain), *danda* (dunderhead), and *duanzi* (stupid). The teenagers may be easy to manage because they are still in school and subject to following instructions but the other two categories become problematic.

Second are those between 20 and 25, those who tend to be in transition from teenage excitement into young adult expectations and assumptions of responsibility. Recently released from high school restrictions, college bound or in college, or at home looking for something to do, they are the most captive to *trending*. They tend to be carefree and often idealistic. They fall into two groups, those who go to colleges and those who miss the college. Many in colleges are full of idealism and some think that they are “revolutionaries” and try to use their university life to engage in social experiments. For others, it is time to reassess possible disappointments and to figure out how to become successful despite the disappointments.

The third category comprises those who are above 25 and in theory should be out of college making careers for themselves, and where possible plotting to increase populations in organized manner. Despite feeling *youth* these are in a different bracket of being adults and they are expected to behave accordingly. As they approach 35, many often have problems accepting that they are no longer *youth* and so tend to use those who

are slightly older as reference points to confirm that they are still youth. As they do that, they forget that the teenagers and those in the 20s look at them as *old*. The teenagers and those in the 20s then grumble when they see the mature get opportunities in the name of *youth*.

Irrespective of which youth bracket one is, there are challenges and opportunities. Among them is that some people culturally refuse to grow out of particular age brackets and therefore become perpetual mental youth. This happens particularly at the universities where there are permanent undergraduates that are irresponsible and do not act their biological ages. When that happens, some can be disconcerting to new students, those whose academic and biological ages tend to coincide. As a result, permanent undergraduates tend to *chocha* (mislead) their younger academic age-mates and influence them to think that it is *trendy* to be irresponsible. The phenomenon of permanent undergraduates is probably an indicator of weaknesses in universities where policies are not clear on “residence” and on completion. As a result, universities may need to re-examine policies on undergraduate timeframes.

Outside the universities and colleges, the challenges facing *mayouth* is to avoid being turned into *bongo lala* through indolence, disillusionment, and the visible influence of successful social misfits. The *mayouth* in this group become easy prey to manipulators who pretend to give hope and also promise glittering future. They succeed in creating belief that drug dealers do well financially and that they even have direct and indirect political power that is exercised through elected officials and those in high offices. This belief is devastating to all the youth.

What is more, some drugs seemingly acquire cultural acceptance as sources of income, such as *mugùka* (soft chewing drug similar to coca leaves) in Mbeere area of Embu, despite its debilitating effect on those associated with it. It is then distributed throughout the country with Githùrai and Eastleigh in Nairobi reportedly being major distribution centres. Those who chew *mugùka* reportedly hallucinate and imagine themselves in

another world as they *jichocho* (brag) and waste the day in animated debates on almost everything, especially on those issues in which they have little clue. Subsequently, those chewing the accepted drug like *mugùka* tend to turn into *bongo lala*, even when they are walking. Such type of youth loiter various places, particularly growing urban areas.

One of the challenges to youth leaders, who themselves should be in one the three categories of youth, is to awaken the *bongo lala* from social stupor and turn them into active, thinking, and productive citizens. Various regions and counties tend to have an excessive share of *bongo lala*, especially of the boy type, and end up producing socio-economic misfits. As a result, the leaders have problems figuring out what to do with them. At least, the PS Internal Security is taking appropriate steps to contain the creation of *bongo lala* who actually are threats to the survival of the community. The net effect of the increase in *bongo lala* is to retard the society, depopulate particular areas, and ultimately to under-develop the entire country. This should be a source of concern to the youthful leaders. If not, they will have no one to lead.

The presence of successful level headed, youthful, and active leaders can help to offset such negative images. In doing so, however, committed leaders should be ready to deal with the entrenched and powerful interests of *drug-preneurs*. These include *drug barons*, financing the activities, and the actual *drug peddlers* who distribute the drugs in the streets and villages. Some *drug-preneurs* are probably more powerful than the constituted authority and they show it to the youth. The impression that drug barons may be more powerful than constituted authority, therefore, turns the barons into objects of youthful admiration and is destructive to society and the country.

Besides becoming role models for the lost *youth*, those with natural talent for leadership and have also been empowered through nurturing can take initiative and not wait for things to come. This would imply willingness and readiness to try new ventures in effort to change existing stagnant routines of feeling hopeless and helpless. The thinking should be one of trying new ideas on how to get things done effectively and get visible positive results. It so happens that the people being led are very observant and they notice that

some of the leaders are not genuine. Having noticed that some leaders are not reliable, the strong among them tend to ditch such leaders. Many, however, end up in anguish over what to do. They have a choice to move away but it is not easy, given that circumstances vary. Distancing themselves from fake leaders, therefore, becomes one of the critical challenges to the modern youth.

The reality of the youth in anguish over who to follow as leader, calls for reassessment of how the youth are nurtured. There is therefore need for national strategy, mainly in schools, to empower the youth on how to tell the genuine from the fake in leadership. Sometimes, the problem is in the school and college management that might actually have the wrong leadership that is not tuned to the environment. This makes school and college officials particularly vulnerable to imposing “leaders” that pupils and students quickly identify as fake and then unofficially turn to “natural” leaders. The results are leadership disconnects within schools and colleges, which might explain regular disruptions. There is need for national strategy, mainly in schools, to empower the youth on how to tell the genuine from the fake in leadership.

Youthful leaders can help to identify likely signs of fakeness that all youth should know. This goes hand in hand with ability to tell signs of genuine leaders. Fake leaders, however, should be distinguished from those who are misguided. While misguided leaders tend to be ignorant and their ignorance can be cured through exposure and good guidance, fake leaders often know what they do and rarely have good intentions. They often want to keep their followers ignorant because ignorance is a tool for easy manipulation of people, and particularly the youth. The trick then is on separating the fake, which is destructive, from the real. And the purpose of real leadership is to offer and create opportunities for positive improvement in the well being of the community. And who can do this better than inquisitive and dynamic youth that are full of bubbling ideas that might need nurturing.

This calls for youth leaders to have “revolutionary” spirits that are aimed at enhancing positive values and socio-economic output. The youth should actually be demanding answers constantly and should be suggesting different ways of dealing with difficult problems that keep arising. The “revolutionary” spirit, however, does not mean engaging in unbecoming and destructive behavior. The opposite is the case for it calls for innovativeness, continuous analysis, and being curious about the new and how the changes affect the whole. In this, the relationship with the elders and the children or those who are younger than the leaders should be one of respect. Without respect, the leadership is lost and misguided.

The sense of respect is also for properly constituted authority unless the properness of that authority is in question. Even then, if there are questions, there is an orderly manner of handling issues. Throwing stones and using foul language is often counter-productive. Remember the elders have been there before, know something that the youth may not, and they may have perspectives that can guide the out of a jam. Similarly, the children are following the footsteps of youthful leaders who, in turn, should not give children reason to be disappointed. The disappointment would arise out of bad examples.

One of the tragedies of the Kenyan state is that it suffers from an excess of bad examples from adults who display immature behavior in public. The examples that leaders called politicians, in and out of parliament or county assemblies, encourage the youth to be unruly. They use foul language and throw “things” at each other in and out of parliament/county assemblies, disrupt people in their normal work in the name of demonstrations. They vow to paralyze institutions if they do not get their way. They do that shouting *Haki Yetu* (Our Rights), holding hands as they sing *Solidarity forever* and dancing to *Bado Mapambano* (Struggle goes on). Watching school children then try to emulate the bad examples set by their national and regional leaders. Is it a wonder that pupils have been burning schools?

Leaders need to mature up and they probably need new educational orientation in order to enable them to learn how to set good examples. This should be part of national

education, civic for adults and regular for school pupils. For schools in general, the stress on the purpose of education should be to enable individuals to look after themselves, as opposed to being hired, which means encouraging people to be innovative and to go out of their way to take charge.

The people who are best suited to take charge of evolving situations are the youth and the opportunities in the technological world keep rising. They are the modern, the digital, but being modern is not synonymous with stone throwing, bad mouthing, and lack of respect. If there is anything to throw, then it should be fresh and positive ideas and how to actualize them for the benefit of the community.

Throwing fresh ideas in language that show ability to think critically is evidence of socio-cultural and political maturity in a place, and it is mostly being modern. The modern, therefore, is an attitude thing that stresses use of common sense. It involves being receptive to evolving changes without losing the sense of values that identify Kenyans as being separate from other people. It is to bring positive developments and knowing where and when to apply what technology as a tool while not letting technology control every action. Should anyone put obstacles to the effecting of good ideas, then youth leaders have rights to complain and to raise issues on behalf of fellow youth. If the youth leaders are that clear on what is proper and behave accordingly, they become examples for others to emulate. The power of positive examples is thus immense and the youth should seize it. That is modern.