



NAVARRA CENTER
FOR **INTERNATIONAL**
DEVELOPMENT

IT'S OUR TURN TO EAT: THE STORY OF A KENYAN WHISTLE BLOWER

BOOK AUTHOR: MICHELA WRONG

BOOK REVIEW
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It's our turn to eat is much more than the story of John Githongo, a portly upper-class man in his mid-40s which dreamed of changing a country's history of sleaze, state-capturing and ethnic identification. Githongo's story is the personification of a change of mentality in a new generation of Kenyans which want to modernize its institutions and forget the times when your luck and wealth depended on if you shared ethnicity with the president.

'It's Our Turn To Eat: The Story of a Kenyan Whistleblower' is not only the story of a friend of author Michela Wrong, journalist and former Financial Times Kenya correspondent, who sought refuge in her London flat after seeing his plans fail. It is also a master class in Kenyan history and culture which the author explains in a easygoing manner for the general public and a also a deep criticism of the established foreign aid system. Wrong challenges foreign donors' aid-must-go-out policy. Knowing the existence of a grand-scale corruption by the political class, Western countries decided to continue funding their ally believing it would promote further economic growth, but blinding themselves on the harmful effects sleaze had on the redistribution on wealth, which ended up bursting on the 2007 elections as an ever-growing poor and divided society was tired of being ignored.

JOHN GITHONGO: THE DOOR OPENER

The book goes through the life of an idealistic man who accepts a position to change politics from the inside. Having worked at the newspaper Daily Nation and founded Transparency International Kenya, he was promised free hands to combat corruption, with direct access to president Mwai Kibaki. Starting with his resignation and exile, the book then traces back Githongo's life, personality and work.

It is the story of an upper-class idealistic and meticulous man. Born as son of one of the first Kenyan accountants, who even handled the accounts of founding father Jommo Kenyatta, he lived in a comfortable life where he shared school with sons of some of the most influential people in Kenya.

But most importantly, he was a Kikuyu. The Kikuyu is the largest ethnic group in Kenya and one of the most powerful since independence. Ethnicity in Kenya is a complicated topic to tackle and even explain. Rather than doing so, the author describes through the book through day to day examples of Githongo's life what being a Kikuyu means.

Wrong explains how everyone in the community therefore expected John to behave as one of them, to not betray the family, to obey the Mount Kenya Mafia. As a real version of Francis Ford Coppola's The Godfather, those in president Kibaki's cabinet not only expected him to go in line with them, but they gave it for sure. How would someone from our family betray us? But John was not prepared to obey and follow the old way of doing things.

A meticulous and thoughtful man, his Western education in the United Kingdom also helped him to develop a need for rightness, to act well and fight the sleaze and injustices that had taken down the previous KANU-PF government for first time from power. His devotion towards the president's figure made him fall prey of his own illusions. Incapable of accepting that Kibaki, an old, delicate and easily influenceable man, was atop the Anglo Leasing corruption scandal he started blaming those near him and it took him months

JOHN GITHONGO OPENED THE DOOR TO A NEW WAY OF DOING POLITICS IN KENYA

to accept the ones who appointed him to fight sleaze were doing the opposite, not only with Kibaki's knowledge but also his involvement.

It takes him more than a year to accept his failure in trying to change the way politics are done in Kenya from the inside. Then he starts to tape conversations to prove his cause, planning his next move. On 7 February 2005, two years after his appointment as Permanent Secretary for Governance and Ethics he goes to exile in London claiming he fears for his life. He then tries to change it from the outside, and a year later emerges as the biggest Kenyan whistleblower in recent history, leaking all the documents and taped conversations he had piled.

His actions indeed shake Kenyan politics, forcing the first ever resignations of ministers for corruption. However, as time passes by his actions faded away. Kibaki's government survived the crisis and there were no massive demonstrations demanding his resignation and an end to sleaze in State House, as Githongo wished and may have even expected. He even ends up being hated by many Kikuyus who believe he has abandoned his roots, his community, being a sell-out to foreign donors. His efforts as a whistleblower, however, do not end up being made for nothing. What Githongo does is open the door to a new reality, to a new possibility of doing politics in Kenya. A new way that must come from the ground, from an increasingly young



John Githongo, anti-sleaze activist.

population, but which will take time and not only one fighting, but a joint effort of many.

machinery with the most easy and old-fashioned way of stealing money—.

The book also criticizes how easy it is to steal without great consequences at the government of one of the most potent nations in Africa. In that sense, the author states something contradictory and peculiar. Wrong says the higher the quantity stolen, the less a normal Kenyan citizen reacts, arguing that an ordinary citizen loses the notion of how much money it is when talking about billions of shillings. This affirmation can be misleading, as the reader can understand that the author places the problem on the citizens' lack of conscience, culture and interest. Placing the blame on citizens' lack of knowledge on how to count money can be dangerous and make the reader feel second-class compared to an elite in which the politicians, John Githongo and the author itself are. However, I believe this is not Wrong's intention. The solution to generate a reaction in citizens is something she does very well with her readers in the book. Wrong shows, with the help of some of the main characters, how much do each AngloLeasing contract mean for a taxpayer. She does not by saying how much shillings it would mean per year per citizen, but rather helping herself from heartbreaking comparisons. For example, Anglo Leasing's 18 contracts mounted 56.3 billion shillings —\$751 million—, which was more than Kenya's total aid received in 2004 —\$521 million—, 37 times more than what the government allocated to water projects in arid lands and enough to supply every HIV-positive Kenyan with anti-retrovirals for a decade.

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CULTURE OF CORRUPTION

Githongo's story serves as the personal touch to portray a culture in government which has defined Kenyan politics since independence. But the most interesting thing is how it is told.

Wrong does not say the government was corrupt, she shows it to the reader proving it with the documents that Githongo got during his tenure inside State House. She brilliantly describes a system of 'eating' which amounts billions, describing the methods used —which combined complicated

Anglo Leasing, however, is not the only case that has happened in Kenya. Being the biggest together with the Goldenberg scandal, it is a way of acting, a culture of sleaze which politicians have embodied. In that sense Wrong's book is a criticism of how politicians lie to citizens to convince them to vote for them promising a needed change which never arrives. However, in Kenya she acknowledges that it is something taken for granted and even accepted. When your ethnic group is in power, it's your turn to benefit, but when it's not, you shut up and wait until it is your turn. This criticism, therefore, does not only stay in a political class incapable and unwilling to change the system and lead by example, but also on those citizens who accept, suffer and criticize this non-written rule, the abandonment of the state, only to then do the same when their fellows are in power.

A CRITICISM TO INACTION

Above all, this book criticizes inaction against sleaze. Inaction as the root of the problem, which drains Kenya's development and rots its society. Despite all, despite the 18 contracts, taping conversation with ministers of how they steal money from their citizens, nothing changes. A couple of facade changes in government are enough to silent a disturbingly complying international community and a society which does not need to be told by Githongo how things work, they knew from before.

First, Wrong criticizes the international aid community, with a special focus on the UK's Department for International Development, which ignores the corruption cases as if they had nothing to do with their money and continue pouring hundreds of millions of shillings into a government which, instead of using it for good, keeps it in their pockets. In this sense, Wrong criticizes the aid system in which employees and managers are rewarded for the amount of aid given, rather than tracking how that money has been used. In that sense, the author correctly positions donors as another needed piece to conform the sleaze puzzle.

Second, Wrong criticizes society's reaction to what Githongo shows. Kenyan citizens are placed in their faces with the most brutal evidence of how their government steals public money and despite having an initial reaction, the effect dilutes and their hope diminishes. People turn to their everyday lives and forget that millions have been stolen. Githongo, once a hero, ends up at best being considered a brave but idealistic man for some, but rather considered a national traitor for other Kenyans.

Finally, Wrong also criticizes Githongo itself. On one account she criticizes his personality, how difficult it seems to reach him for people who consider him a good friend and how he turns to himself in this case rather than asking for help of a reduced group of trustworthy colleagues. On the other, she disagrees with his too-well planned course of action, which makes him release documents from time to time, as small drops trying to fill a bathtub, losing the momentum it would've given him if he had opened completely the tap and let it inundate the public sphere.

All in all, Wrong acknowledges there is no one to blame but everyone at the same time for a case such as Anglo Leasing for not having further political and legal consequences for its perpetrators. It is a criticism of how easy it is to steal. A criticism of inaction.

FOR FUTURE READERS

It's Our Turn to Eat: The Story of a Kenyan Whistleblower is a book for people that are interested in Kenyan politics and its culture. It is a book which serves the cause for both students and professors, newcomers to Kenyan politics and experts on the field, researchers aiming to study on how ethnicity plays a role in Kenyan politics and corruption and those who just want to find a vibrant story that reads like a police novel, or even those interested in the life of a whistleblower, a real hero with real problems. A book for both curious and enthusiasts on Kenya.

IT'S OUR TURN TO EAT CRITICIZES INACTION AGAINST SLEAZE IN KENYA

AUTHOR

BRITISH JOURNALIST AUTHOR OF 4 BOOKS

MICHELA WRONG is a british journalist. Graduated in Philosophy and Social Sciences at Jesus College, Cambridge, she also has a diploma in journalism at Cardiff. She's worked as foreign correspondent starting in the 1980s at Reuters in Italy, France and Ivory Coast. After that she's worked in Africa as a freelance at Congo and Rwanda, covering the 1994 genocide for the BBC and Reuters, and finally four years in Kenya covering from Nairobi east, west and central

Africa for the Financial Times. *It's Our Turn to Eat: The Story of a Kenyan Whistleblower* is the third of four books she's written and was published in 2010. She published her first book *In the Footsteps of Kurtz* in the year 2000 about the Zaire dictator Mobutu Sese Seko and won a PEN prize for non-fiction for it.

Five years later she published *I Didn't Do It For You* on the Horn of Africa state of Eritrea. In 2010 she was awarded the James Cameron prize for journalism. In 2015 she adventured and published her first novel *Borderlines*, a thriller that focuses on a border dispute between two fictional states in the Horn of Africa and that has a female lawyer as a protagonist. Currently she publishes opinion pieces and book reviews on a wide range of media outlets and also is interviewed by the BBC, Reuters and Al Jazeera on his areas of knowledge●