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# Peace Wanted Alive: An Artist's Response to Kenya's Post-Election Violence

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“ In this article I examine how the **chaos** of Kenya's PEV became the source of motivation for Solo 7's peace activism. For the artist, the term '**chaos**' was initially understood as a metaphor for the violence and destruction in the slum of Kibera (where Solo 7 resides), which upturned daily life as people knew it. The article will go on to argue that once this particular episode of **chaos** came to an end, other forms emerged – notably, an anxiety as to whether violence might reoccur, but also the uncertainty of surviving day to day in a precarious and highly unequal society. These multi-layered connotations of **chaos** created new subtexts for how Solo 7's peace slogans and activism were interpreted and used by both the artist and public. [...] And they are needed today more than ever. ”

In late December 2007, violence engulfed Kenya following the disputed result of the presidential election. For approximately two months the country descended into anarchic chaos as protests, riots and violence broke out nationwide. Conservative estimates suggest over 1,000 people were killed, 600,000 displaced, thousands of women raped and property widely destroyed. Kenya's post-election violence (PEV), as it has come to be termed, pushed the country towards the verge of civil war and “brought one of Africa's most promising democracies to the brink of state failure” (Kagwanja, 2009, p. 365).

In response to the PEV, artists were amongst civil society actors at the forefront of reconciliation efforts (Mboya and Ogana, 2009; Coombes 2014, pp. 171-174). It is claimed that through appealing to the consciousness of ordinary Kenyans with calls for coexistence and resistance to violence, artists “contained ethnic violence and prevented a potential spill over into genocide” (Mani, 2011, p. 113). The informal settlement of Kibera experienced some of the most ferocious violence in Kenya’s capital city Nairobi. It was where the artist Solomon Muyundo (going by the tag-name Solo 7) launched a single-handed campaign to bring peace to a fragmented society. Placing himself in the midst of this violent and hostile environment Solo 7 embarked on painting hundreds of simple and direct peace messages (in English and Kiswahili) on all manner of surfaces in public places. In Kenya’s subsequent general elections of 2013 and 2017, Solo 7 revived his campaign, in the knowledge that the spectre of violence was teetering on the horizon.<sup>1</sup>

In this article I examine how the chaos of Kenya’s PEV became the source of motivation for Solo 7’s peace activism. For the artist, the term ‘chaos’ was initially understood as a metaphor for the violence and destruction in the slum of Kibera (where Solo 7 resides), which upturned daily life as people knew it. The article will go on to argue that once this particular episode of chaos came to an end, other forms emerged – notably, an anxiety as to whether violence might reoccur, but also the uncertainty of surviving day to day in a precarious and highly unequal society. These multi-layered connotations of chaos created new subtexts for how Solo 7’s peace slogans and activism were interpreted and used by both the artist and public. Despite a decade having passed since the artist started painting his peace slogans in public spaces, I suggest they still hold relevance in society today.

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<sup>1</sup> Solomon Muyundo (Solo 7) passed away on 28 July 2020 at the age of 43. He was, and remains, a treasured public figure in Kibera. This article is dedicated to Solo 7 and his courageous use of art as a powerful tool for social change and his spirited activism when the country was in turmoil.

This article draws on doctoral research conducted in Nairobi (July 2016 to March 2018), which includes: formal and informal interviews with Solomon Muyundo, observation and documentation of Solo 7's work in Kibera during the 2017 election, informal interviews with the public in Kibera, and a critical reading of secondary sources. I begin the article by situating Solo 7's work in a wider socio-political context of Kenya.

A brief background to Kenya's post-election violence

Multiparty politics returned to Kenya in 1991, following internal and external pressure for democratisation; since then, presidential elections have been held regularly. Although the extent of the violence following Kenya's 2007 election was unprecedented, it is not uncommon. Collectively, the 1992 and 1997 election periods saw 3,000 lives lost and 300,000 displaced (Cheeseman, 2008, p. 170). In contrast, the 2002 election was decidedly freer and fairer, and substantially more peaceful (Anderson, 2003, p. 338). Kenya's authoritarian leader Daniel Arap Moi was constitutionally barred from running, bringing an end to his 24-year reign. The Kenya African National Union (KANU) party, which had been in power since independence, was defeated – representing Kenya's first democratic transfer of power. The inter-ethnic National Rainbow Coalition (NARC), led by Mwai Kibaki and Raila Odinga, were victorious with Kibaki taking position of president. This seismic shift in the way that elections and democracy played out in postcolonial Kenya instilled belief amongst Kenyans that political change through formal processes was feasible. According to a 2002 *Gallup* poll, Kenyans were the most optimistic people on earth. Five years later, just before the electorate headed back to the polls, Kenya was described as being “a haven of stability and prosperity” (Economist, 2007). Such a narrative would soon be shattered.

Contextualising Kenya's PEV is not within this article's scope, having been extensively discussed elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> That said, numerous scholars agree the underlying causes were multifaceted - comprising the legacy of colonialism, weak institutions, manipulation of ethnic identity, poverty and inequality, youth unemployment, a centralised presidency, historical grievances (particularly around issues of land), and the mobilisation of armed militias (Kagwanja, 2009; Kagwanja and Southall 2009; Mueller 2008). Yet, as the historian Daniel Branch suggests, many Kenyans seized upon ethnicity in an attempt to understand what had happened (2011, p. 275).

Kenya has an ethnically diverse society, comprising more than forty ethnic groups. While no single group forms a majority, some of the largest include the Kikuyu (17.2%), the Luhya (13.8%), the Kalenjin (12.7%), the Luo (10.5%), Kamba (10.1%), and others such as the Somali, Kisii, Mijikenda, Meru, Turkana, and the Maasai (RoK, 2009). Kenya's postcolonial leaders inherited and continued the instrumentalisation of ethnicity as the primary means of political mobilisation (Kagwanja, 2009). In explaining the implications of this, it is useful to draw upon John Lonsdale's concept of "political tribalism" (Lonsdale, 1994). This divisive practice equates to competition for state power and resources by the political class who claim to speak for their own ethnic group and appeal to these identities, rather than the nation state (Haugerud, 1995, p. 40). This amounts to pitting one community against the other, exploiting citizens' belief that having 'one of our own' in power provides them with access to scarce resources – giving meaning to the popular phrase "it's our turn to eat" (Wrong, 2009). Thus "political tribalism" becomes a vehicle for parties to get into power, whereby elites can facilitate the accumulation of wealth (Smedt, 2009, p. 584). However, this practice has dire consequences, evident in 2007 where ethnic

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<sup>2</sup> For example, see the special issue of the *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 2(2) (2008), titled "Election Fever: Kenya's Crisis".

dimensions to political parties “fuelled the flames of inter-ethnic violence” (Jacobs, 2011, p. 1).

The 2007 presidential election was a two-horse race between Kibaki (a Kikuyu) and Odinga (a Luo) – whose coalition in 2002 had since splintered. Their newly formed political parties forged strong ties to ethnic affiliation and were largely ideology-free. The incumbent President Kibaki led the Party of National Unity (PNU), which the Kikuyu ethnic group broadly backed. Odinga’s party, the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), ran on a rhetoric of “41 tribes against 1” – with the one being the Kikuyu (Kagwanja and Southall, 2009, pp. 265-267). As the tallying of votes got underway, Odinga took a healthy lead. As such, upon announcement of the result on 30 December, it shocked many to hear Kibaki had won by just over 200,000 ballots (taking 46% of votes against Odinga’s 44%). It appeared “Kibaki had fiddled” and well-grounded allegations of vote tampering meant the electorate were robbed of knowing the true outcome (Gibson and Long, 2009; Branch, 2011, p. 271). Almost immediately upon hearing the result, chaos erupted in Kibera, whose area MP was Raila Odinga.

Located a few kilometres from the centre of Nairobi, Kibera is regarded as one of the largest slums in Africa. Comprising a space of approximately 2.5 square kilometres, Kibera is divided into a number of ‘villages’<sup>3</sup> crammed with mud-walled and corrugated iron sheet shacks, housing anywhere between 170,000 to one million people.<sup>4</sup> Bordered by middle class estates, the slum itself is characterised by unplanned infrastructure, poverty, and successive governments largely ignoring it. Whilst most villages in Kibera contain members from all of Kenya’s ethnic

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<sup>3</sup> Kibera’s villages include Kianda, Soweto West, Raila, Gatwekera, Makina, Kisumu Ndogo, Kambi Muru, Kichinjio, Mashimoni, Laini Saba, Lindi, Soweto East and Silanga.

<sup>4</sup> Estimates for Kibera’s total population differ dramatically. The Government’s 2009 census suggest there are approximately 170,000 people living in the slum but this figure is contested. In 2008, the Map Kibera Project used sampling to produce an estimate of 235,000-270,000, which seems to be the most realistic estimate still today. The extraordinary figures that are closer to 1 million are often legitimized by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the media and some politicians.

groups, it is often one group who is dominant. Consequently, Kibera tends to be observed as a microcosm of Kenya. As elsewhere in the country, in Kibera, following the election result, aggressive confrontations broke out between supporters of ODM (infuriated by the result, believing vote tampering had occurred) and PNU supporters (who felt strongly that the result should be accepted). Domestic and international pressure resulted in a power sharing agreement between Kibaki and Odinga being signed on February 28, 2008, which brought an end to the violence and the beginning of a grand coalition government. However, by then nearly two months had passed. Attention now turns to this period, and in particular, the response of Solo 7 who placed himself in the midst of this chaos.

### Chaos erupts in Kibera

Son to a Luhya mother and a Kikuyu father, Solomon Muyundo grew up in Bungoma County, Western Kenya. In 2003 he moved to Kibera where he found work, completing ad-hoc jobs as a sign writer. Through this, he joined the art collective Maasai Mbili, founded in 2001 by Luo artists Otieno Gomba and Otieno Kota.<sup>5</sup> When violence engulfed, Kibera Maasai Mbili's two storey rented shack was attacked by angry ODM supporters (essentially because its landlord was a member of the Kikuyu community who possess the majority of rental properties in Kibera, thus wielding enormous economic power). Fortunately, the late Ashif Malamba (a Maasai Mbili member) persuaded them otherwise, but many were not as fortunate. Across Kibera, numerous properties were ransacked by mobs who overtook the slum.

Initially, Muyundo joined angry ODM followers in their demonstrations, painting their rallying slogan "No Raila, No Peace" on walls

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<sup>5</sup> The name Maasai Mbili means 'two Maasai' in Kiswahili. Initially Gomba and Kota (neither of whom are Maasai) would dress in a Maasai Shuka (a cotton plaid fabric) as a marketing tactic when selling novel hand-painted signs along Kibera Drive, hence the name. In 2003, the pair moved to a rented shack which became the Maasai Mbili Art-centre; serving as a studio cum gallery and a juncture for many creatives and artists in the area.

and buildings. His rationale for doing so was to protect his own life, implying his associated Kikuyu identity could have portrayed him as an adversary if he was to not join the demonstrations. This only lasted a few days and upon self-reflection, Muyundo decided instead to try for solutions to the ongoing violence. His thinking was partly shaped by noticing that structures publicising ODM loyalty were left largely undamaged by their rampaging supporters. In response, Muyundo collected charcoal and hastily scrawled ODM phrases on people's property regardless of their political orientation, saying: "when I came back I realised that no one had looted where I had written... this made me think that during this chaos, slogans could be used to change people's behaviour".<sup>6</sup>

In mid-January, 2008, ODM called on their supporters to take part in three days of mass action. This call escalated tensions, particularly so in Kibera between Odinga's substantial support base and others (notably PNU factions and the GSU – a paramilitary wing in the Kenya Police Service). Along with his peers from Maasai Mbili, Muyundo was alarmed at the amplification of violence and the ethnic aspect to this, recalling:

When people heard ODM's call, they came out in large numbers. But they did not come out peacefully. The mood changed. I was very much terrified. Raila's supporters started targeting the Kikuyu people. I am a Luyha and also a Kikuyu. I was scared and wondered if they could do any harm to me. Some were carrying crude weapons like stones, batons and machetes – anything that can be used to harm someone.

Other accounts describe the balkanisation of Kibera into zones only safe for particular ethnic groups (Barasa, 2011, p. 44). This was brutally enforced and resulted in the displacement of inhabitants. Armed and disillusioned youths set upon their neighbours; shops, makeshift kiosks and

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<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all quotations come from direct interviews between the author and artist, or residents of Kibera. Interviews in Kibera were conducted with the assistance of curator and artist Mbuthia Maina, and I am grateful for his support with some of the research, and as an invaluable interlocutor.



houses were looted; dozens of women and girls were raped; some men encountered forced genital mutilation (ICG, 2008; Smedt, 2009; Kihato, 2015). Checkpoints manned by thugs were set up and if your surname, or ID, distinguished you as a member of the wrong group you were in trouble.

The profound change in direction from a neighbourhood that had otherwise been fairly harmonious – whereby Luo, Kikuyu, and other ethnic groups had lived together peacefully for many years – to one of disorder, turbulence and violence, represented a rupture in ordinary life. Thus, the concept of chaos - from this point of view - can be understood as a metaphor for Kenya's PEV. Discontent with sitting by idly, members of Maasai Mbili convened and discussed the need to utilise their aptitude as artists to spread messages of peace. Taking this discussion quite literally Muyundo began painting the monochromatic message of 'Peace Wanted Alive' and its various iterations (Keep Peace Fellow Kenyans, Restore Peace, Keep Peace) across Kibera - signing each work off with his pseudonym 'Solo 7'.<sup>7</sup>

'Signs speak louder than our voices'

Executing his decipherable messages at a frenetic pace, Solo 7 utilised a method of overexposure in order to publicise his peace slogans, painting these hundreds of times on walls, bridges, roads, fences, shops, homes and businesses. This strategic approach draws parallels to the tactics of tagging as a form of political graffiti writing which has found vivacity across the globe. For the artist, the practice of tagging was an effective means of communicating with the masses because, he says, "signs speak louder than our voices". In the context of a fragmented society, however, any understanding of "our" quickly becomes substituted with the concept of "us" and "them". The tag "Solo 7" was able to sidestep this form of categorisation

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<sup>7</sup> Solomon Muyundo (whose names contain seven letters) came into this world on July 7, 1977, and was his parents' seventh born of nine children – hence his chosen tag name of "Solo[mon] 7".

because it rendered an effective ambiguity, owing to it being unidentifiable to any specific ethnic group or political affiliation – something which is not easily concealed in Kenya when the surname of someone is used. However, while it has been argued that constant exposure to short messages can be an instrument to help improve various forms of social break-up (Kuzwayo, 1998, p. 16), what effect did Solo 7's activism and mass canvassing of painted slogans have on a public experiencing it?



Figure 1: Examples of Solo 7's peace slogans written around Kibera © author

Solo 7's campaign aimed to introduce a dialogue of peace into the public sphere. One commonly used definition of peace comes from Johan Galtung (1967), who espoused that it is not just the absence of overt violence but also the absence of structural violence – in which social, economic, and political structures systemically limit human potential, preventing them from meeting their basic needs. Given the temporary impracticality of addressing the structural violence which fuelled chaos, Solo 7's messages of peace found pragmatic appeal in contributing to a reduction in explicit violence manifesting across Kibera. According to art historian Annie Coombes (2014, p. 172), the slogans had some success in that they functioned as gestures “admonishing people to stop and think before acting”. In discussion with Solo 7, he claims: “when I was painting, I noticed that people saw my signs and realised that peace was also important, some dropped their weapons and the public encouraged me to continue”. Interview responses from residents of Kibera also provide anecdotal evidence to claims that Solo 7's messages contributed to deepening the discourse of peace in Kibera. For example, a Kikuyu male *boda boda* (motorcycle taxi) rider, who was twenty-years-old at the time of the violence in 2008, stated “if someone was angry then the messages helped to bring the anger down”. One resident, a Luo mother of two (who in 2008 was in her mid-thirties), recalled “when you saw Solo 7's messages you yourself started thinking about peace”. On numerous occasions when I asked inhabitants of Kibera to recall what, if anything, Solo 7's peace messages meant to them during Kenya's PEV, I was told “they encouraged people to live with others in peace, no fighting, to take somebody in like they are your brother”. Whilst a minority of the slum dwellers I interviewed held reservations to Solo 7's peace slogans, most feedback from residents emphasised the affective qualities of Solo 7's activism. More so, across the villages in which interviews were conducted, the variances regarding how different genders, ethnicities and age groups perceived Solo

7's peace messages were minimal – suggesting that Solo 7's art-based approach to peace building largely cut through demographic categories.

It is difficult to gauge the true impact of Solo 7's activism, but the above accounts suggest his peace slogans may have induced people to resist violence and the temptation to give in to “political tribalism”. This can be further argued because of the fact that during Kenya's PEV, numerous individuals copied Solo 7's campaign and painted peace slogans across Kibera. Additionally, Solo 7 received the popular support of residents (from verbal encouragement to the supply of paints), which itself speaks volumes to their rejection of violence – also apparent from cases where Kikuyus fleeing from Kibera were safeguarded by their Luo neighbours and vice versa (Smedt, 2009, p. 591). It was not only those in Kibera, however, who came to know of, and experience Solo 7 and his peace slogans – as will now be discussed.



Figure 2: Solo 7's peace slogan in Kibera © author

Local and international media covered Solo 7's campaign and the exploits of Maasai Mbili's other artists – who had started an art project for children affected by the violence (Gazemba, 2008). In the campaigning period, print media's reporting was criticised for inciting divisions between groups in society, contributing to the violence (Gachigua, 2014). However, Solo 7 suggests that coverage of his activism at the height of the PEV amplified his message:

When the media wrote about me, I saw it as a message of hope. The messages of peace I wrote were spread across the whole country. If they [the wider public] saw hope coming from places where violence had occurred, they could be hopeful that peace would return to Kenya... At times the media escalated violence in some way... so it was important for me to have messages of peace in the media not just negative stories.

The visibility given to Solo 7 by the media expanded his portrayal as someone performing the role of a “good citizen” who prioritised unity, inter-ethnic cohesion and non-violence (Lynch, 2018). Additionally, media attention given to both Solo 7 and Maasai Mbili was significant to their peacebuilding efforts. These young male artists, of various ethnic identities (Kikuyu, Luo and Luhya), occupied the demographic of those recruited into violent gangs during Kenya's PEV – who at times were paid by political “Big Men” to fight their opponents (RoK, 2008). Thus, by publicly promoting a culture of non-violence within their community, which openly rejected “political tribalism”, these artists demonstrated that it was not ethnicity *per se* at the heart of this chaos but more its politicisation. Furthermore, Solo 7 and Maasai Mbili's members claim that their affirmative actions during Kenya's PEV led to the breaking down of negative stereotypes of artists held by the community, which in turn may have catalysed a shift in people's prejudicial views of “others”.

The chaos of Kenya's PEV triggered a reaction from Solo 7 in which he felt compelled to urgently, and indeed creatively, respond to the situation.

This profound experience had a long-lasting impression on Solo 7 which affected his engagement with art and activism. It is this which will now be examined, with a particular focus on Kenya's 2013 general election.

'Human beings need a constant reminder to do the right thing'

In the period following Kenya's PEV, Solo 7 became somewhat of a celebrity in Kibera, being regarded by many (locally and internationally) as sign writer turned peace activist. Even though his campaign of writing peace slogans ended, Solo 7's role as an ambassador for peace continued. The artist was briefly hired as community peace and reconciliation mediator for a local NGO. Additionally, Solo 7 and Maasai Mbili embarked on numerous art programmes promoting inter-ethnic harmony in Kibera. Internationally, photographs of Solo 7's peace activism were featured in exhibitions portraying global artistic strategies effective in combating violence. The artist also experimented with painting on canvas and creating mixed media sculptures, however this work received little patronage from the public or local galleries.

Reflecting on these diverse happenings, Solo 7 states, on one hand, that they provided a respite to the harsh realities of surviving day-to-day through signwriting. On the other, these experiences further instilled a belief that art practice can be a form of action that is socially engaged. Drawing on the last point, the 21st century has seen an increase in Kenyan artists moving outside the confines of their studios and institutional parameters in order to engage in creative forms of activism (Ombati, 2015; Halliday, 2018, 2019). Similarly, the past decade has witnessed an increase in artists from Kenya producing critically engaged socio-political artworks (Jager, 2011. p. 421; Ogonga, 2011). A considerable factor influencing these changes was a new idiom of political consciousness appearing after the PEV, which saw alternative discursive practices and sites for their expression forged (Ogola, 2011. pp. 132-133). Thus, the chaos of the PEV affected not only the trajectory

of Solo 7 but other artists too, which was partly revealed during Kenya's 2013 general election.

In the build-up to the 2013 election, the atmosphere was in many respects strikingly different to 2007. Not only were the recollections of what had occurred five years prior in peoples' minds, but several social and political transformations had occurred. Notably, the adoption of a new constitution, and its promise to reform the electoral bodies and the judiciary, helped to regain the confidence of the Kenyan people. That said, a number of underlying issues (such as security sector reforms, inequality, youth underemployment, and land injustices) had yet to be addressed, and intercommunal trust persisted (HRW, 2013). Writing of the situation leading up to the 2013 election, the Kenyan social and political commentator and cartoonist, Patrick Gathara expresses: "we thus saw our fellow Kenyans as potential machete-wielding savages just waiting for an excuse in the form of a disputed election. The fear, the terror, was palpable" (Gathara, 2015, p. 18). In this context the concept of chaos for Solo 7 was no longer a metaphor for the violent and destructive period of Kenya's PEV, but instead amounted to the acute uncertainty over the spectre of past violence reoccurring. Consequently, Solo 7 revived his peace campaign, emphasising: "I think human beings need a constant reminder to do the right thing".

In a lot of ways, Solo 7's 2013 campaign reflected the methods he utilised in 2007/8. What was noticeably different, however, was the artist's increase in painting slogans calling for justice. This was largely in response to the Government's failing to investigate PEV crimes, leaving many victims aggrieved (Amnesty, 2014; HRW, 2016). Additionally, whereas Solo 7's 2007/8 peace campaign stood out as being one of only a few artist responses at the time, in 2013 this was different. Across Kenya, a huge peace narrative emerged, driven by a breadth of actors including artists, musicians, celebrities, faith groups, politicians, business leaders, and civil society groups (Adebayo and Richards, 2015). These actors disseminated peace

messages through the medium of radio, television, music, art, community forums, SMS and social media (Benesch, 2014; Bowman and Bowman, 2016). Inevitably, Solo 7's campaign became wrapped up in this larger narrative and at times it was keenly exploited by others.



Figure 3: Solo 7's peace and justice slogan in Kibera © author

Large corporations with a vested interest in stability (as the uncertainty of violence threatened profits) undertook a mass of peace themed initiatives (Austin and Wennmann, 2017). *Coca-Cola* joined this bandwagon and co-opted the work of Solo 7 for their Kenya launch of the sugar-free soft drink *Coca-Cola Zero Zero*. Using the tagline 'it's possible',



*Coca-Cola Zero Zero's* marketing campaign suggested that just as peace is possible in Kenya so too was the taste of sugarless *Coca-Cola*. Images of Solo 7 and his peace slogans appeared in *Coca-Cola Zero Zero's* advertisements and he was remunerated \$500 for this; a significant amount considering the unpredictable and low incomes that characterise most households in Kibera, yet a paltry amount from a multi-national corporation.

Kenya's mainstream media was also caught up in the prevailing narrative, giving great emphasis to publishing amicable articles for the sake of preserving peace (Benequista, 2015). Journalists eagerly sought out Solo 7 to cover his story (and include images of his work) because it suited the nationwide peace campaign of framing "the good Kenyan citizen as one who protects and promotes stability, and who shies away from potentially divisive rhetoric and activities" (Lynch, 2018, p. 49). Each meeting Solo 7 had with journalists resulted in him receiving "something small" from them – or in other words monetary payment. These numerous encounters over the months leading up to the 4 March 2013 general election, provided the artist with a regular source of income. This meant Solo 7 could continue painting his messages because he was able to purchase the required materials. Additionally, and perhaps more significantly, it provided the artist with a means of survival. Paradoxically, then, the uncertainty created by the spectre of violence created an element of certainty for Solo 7; demand for the artist from *Coca-Cola* and journalists translated to a brief period of financial security, providing relief to the precariousness of hustling to make a living. That said, the co-option of Solo 7's work by others begs the question of what effect, if any, this might have had on its effectiveness as a critique to "political tribalism".

The 2013 election was characterised by the absence of mass violence, something attributed to the prioritisation of peace narratives over others in public life (Akpedonu, Lumsdaine and Sow, 2013). Solo 7's work is, in part, ascribed to this outcome. However, owing to peace becoming of such

importance, some commentators suggest this translated to a form of “propaganda” or “peaceocracy” in which political discourse was constrained, frank discussions suppressed, and dissent delegitimised (Maweu, 2017; Gustafsson, 2016; Lynch et al, 2019). It is because of these dynamics that the artist’s extended calls for justice were largely ineffective at steering conversations otherwise.

As has become apparent, whilst Solo 7’s continued activism in 2013 shared more-or-less the same methodology as in 2007/8, its effect on both the artist and public were at times different. This might, then, cause one to question whether the re-launch of Solo 7’s peace slogans in 2017 were able to still have an effect, or whether their capacity to do so had become exhausted.



Figure 4: Coca-Cola Zero's marketing advert featuring Solo 7

## Conclusion

Thus far, the persona of Solo 7 and his painted slogans have been interpreted as: a means to introduce a dialogue of peace and promote inter-ethnic harmony; a method to induce people to resist violence and reject “political tribalism”; a desired medium co-opted by corporate and media interests; and an avenue through which the artist can generate income. These various readings have also revealed the intertwined and multi-layered understandings of chaos – from the violence and destruction of Kenya’s PEV, the spectre of violence reoccurring, and the vast inequalities abound in Kenyan society. As a means of concluding this article, I reflect on the public’s reading of his slogans in 2017 and go on to suggest that they continue to be of relevance, and indeed needed, today as ever they were before.

It would be naïve to suggest that in the run up to Kenya’s 2017 general election, Solo 7 did not capitalise on the opportunity to engage with journalists, once more, for financial gain. However, that does not detract from the artist’s continued and earnest desire to be an agent of change and the responsibility he feels to defend citizens against chaos (whether actual, looming or perceived). Furthermore, whilst a small proportion of the dwellers in Kibera suggested Solo 7’s messages were superficial, the majority I spoke with endorsed the freshly painted slogans in 2017 which, like a decade earlier, declared “peace wanted alive” and its variations. I found quite resonant the words of one resident, who said that Solo 7’s slogans are “no longer just words. You see them everywhere and they stick in your mind. You carry them around with you and you take them home. They are pieces of advice for us all”. I found this response particularly significant because it evokes Solo 7’s painted sayings with the attributes of proverbs, in that they offer moral codes and are an expression of social values believed to be expected in society (Ibekwe, 1998, p. x). And it is for this reason I suggest Solo 7’s work in 2017 continued to be of relevance in the area of

peacebuilding. To explain this further, I draw on a quote from academic David Bloomfield:

Reflection on the past is as necessary as it is painful because a divided society can only build its shared future out of its divided past. It is not possible to forget the past and start completely fresh as if nothing had happened. Indeed, the motivation for building a future is precisely to ensure that the past does not return - and so a clear understanding of, and a coming to terms with, that past is the very best way to guarantee it will not come back to haunt a society. The past must be addressed in order to reach the future (Bloomfield, 2003, p. 15)

I argue it is this temporal nature, which Bloomfield speaks of, that is encapsulated in Solo 7's slogans. They (the slogans) cause one to recollect Kenya's traumatic 2007/8 PEV, but also allude to historical moments when the State has failed to protect its citizens. Simultaneously, they point to the more peaceful times gone by, but without ignoring the looming possibility that violence could reoccur (especially if injustices remain unaddressed). They are a voice of the present, but recognise how the past is infused in the yet to come desirable future for which peace is wanted alive.



Figure 5: Solo 7's peace slogan in Kibera, including a quote by Martin Luther King, Jr. © author

It is from this, one can conclude that in 2017, and indeed beyond, Solo 7's slogans – or perhaps better phrased, Solo 7's contemporary proverbs – continue to have resonance for many Kenyans. And they are needed today more than ever. This is largely because several of the underlying issues attributed to fuelling Kenya's PEV have yet to be tackled; but this has not created a cynical society. In fact, similar to 2002, the 2019 Global Optimism Outlook Survey found Kenyans to be one of the most optimistic people in the world. However, optimism is not enough to resolve the fact that Kenya's political leaders continue the practice of “political tribalism”. This is not to suggest that Solo 7's activism can be seen as a panacea. It does, however, illustrate how in spite of chaos, there are those who show an unease at remaining silent and want agency over their future, which might in turn inspire future generations to reject ethnic chauvinism for a more just and peaceful Kenya.

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