

Spreading the word. The public oral debate of the People's Parliament in Nairobi.

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The People's Parliament in Jeevanjee Gardens

A circle of men standing shoulder to shoulder in three layers surrounds a man seated at a stone in the cool shade of nicely trimmed bougainvillea trees. At the outer ring a few guys stand on their toes to get a better look at the seated man - "the speaker" - who leads the daily debates of the People's Parliament. Others waive their raised hands, adamantly shouting "*Mr. Speaker! Mr. Speaker!*" to be given the word and to have their opinion heard. Others break the line of speaking and burst out with their opinion and try to argue for their case before they are shut up by self acclaimed assistants to the speaker shouting "*Order! Order!*"

It is early February 2010 and the heated discussion concerns a priest who has used the forum of the People's Parliament for his religious preaching. The debate is critical for the People's Parliament as it brings up core issues concerning the ideological foundation of the Forum, namely the openness and inclusive character of the People's Parliament where ordinary Kenyans has a voice, and where everything from national to local politics and community issues can be discussed.

I'm leaning against a tree looking at the backs of the men, listening to their debate - a mix of Swahili and English - and observing the gestures and poses of the debaters, when a small man in an old suit pulls my sleeve. Josephat is a regular participant of the forum, and he wants to draw my attention to the recent circulation and sale of pamphlets and booklets describing activities and mobilisation strategies of the People's Parliament. But most importantly, he wants to discuss the written accounts of the history of the People's Parliament, because, as he tells me; it is not correct as a matter of fact he is himself in the process of writing the history. He shows me a bundle of papers, hand written pages tightly filled on both sides. He claims to present the true story of the People's Parliament. He promises to give me a copy of his writings later, but he can't give it to me right next to the other debating members, as some of them disagree with his version and have previously discussed the problems of self-appointed biographers of the forum.

I'm familiar with the booklets, I bought a copy the week before. Some of the members of the forum try to make a living of selling all kinds of political booklets and pamphlets on the streets, and last week they had gotten hold of a stack of old draft programme reports of the Mwakenya movement from 1987 they were selling alongside the People's Parliament's booklets. Before I leave the park to get a copy of the hand written history, the forum agrees on allowing the priest to participate in the daily debates but to disallow him preaching - preaching must take place elsewhere.

The two episodes – the debate about the priest and the writing of the forum’s history - address critical issues continuously being debated. In different ways they raise the questions, what is the People’s Parliament, where is it going, and who can define it? These questions relate to form, content and meaning, and ultimately to the power of words/texts.

Argument

In this paper I will argue that the internal contestations over the history and the public oral culture of the People’s Parliament (Bunge la Mwananchi) in Nairobi provides a privileged lens for observing and understanding political participation from below. The debates of the People’s Parliament reveal how the members’ commentaries, interpretations and arguments emerge as political actions that influence not only the forum itself, but the broader space of Kenyan politics, and thus opens up for alternative ways of inclusion and participation. In short, looking at the public debates and the meta-debates concerning the form and the actions of the People’s Parliament reveal continuities and transformations in the way political participation in Kenya emerge.

Political change and oral debate goes hand in hand for the People’s Parliament. This is evident for anyone who has paid a visit to the North-Eastern corner of Nairobi’s Jeevanjee Gardens and listened to the daily debates on Kenyan politics. The correlation between oratory practices and change is also emphasised in the Forum’s pamphlets explaining how to become a member and how to set up your own parliament, as “*all Kenyans who dreams of another Kenya*” are invited to become members and encouraged to “*Talk about the change you believe in...*” and to “*invite your contacts to informal discussion, dialogue or debate...*” (Bunge la Mwananchi 2010).

To acknowledge the inherent correspondence between oral practices and the will to political change, a central premise for this paper is the argument that speaking is a way of doing things with words (de Certeau 1988). Or to be more accurate, texts are forms of action. In Karin Barber’s notion of texts, this includes both oral and written texts, which allows me to investigate both the oral debates and the written pamphlets of the People’s parliament (Barber 2007: 4). For the People’s Parliament, words – in the forms of debate - are meant to last, in the sense that they are intended to change things politically. Thus they are meant to outlast the moment (Barber 2007: 2).

Brief background of the People’s parliament

Risking the danger of throwing myself into the midst of the heated debate about the history of the People’s Parliament, I find it necessary to outline a few characteristics of the forum and some highlights of its past before I proceed with the analysis of the oral practices. I have pieced together the highlights from conversations and interviews with members and from a number of written

accounts by members – and all seem to agree on the importance of the events but the contextualisation and framing is my choice and responsibility.

The first multiparty elections were held in 1992, and up through 1990's public debates slowly emerged in Nairobi, though a larger adoption of the newly won right to association was only gradually embraced (cf. Nasong'o 2007; 33). At the time, the public debates weren't really debates, it was rather engaged agitators speaking to the bypassing masses conveying their political messages to whoever wanted to listen. Especially the busy Kencom Bus terminal and the Agha Khan Walk are famous for hosting speakers. Despite the increased associational space speakers were often harassed by the police and they slowly withdrew to the more quiet space of Jeevanjee Gardens. Here, people used to gather at lunch time and after work to share newspapers and talk about recent events (Nyongesa 2010). The present forum can be seen as the organic merger of the street agitators, their followers and the people talking about the daily news. In the early days the forum was known as "Kikao" meaning sitting or gathering (Bunge la Mwananchi 2009).

The forum gained its present name (Bunge la Mwananchi – the People's Parliament) after the 2002 election that brought Mwai Kibaki into power and further increased the possibilities for public gathering, despite continued police interference and harassment (Bunge la Mwananchi 2010). The name was agreed in 2003 when the People's Parliament held their first mock elections. Colloquially the four benches under the bougainvillea trees is simply referred to as "*Bunge*" (Parliament). As I have argued elsewhere, the name itself and the holding of elections with transparent ballot boxes is a critical commentary on the general level of corruption and exclusion from politics in Kenya (cf. Kimari & Rasmussen 2010).

In the early days of the forum's existence, debates were broadcast locally on Citizen TV and Radio Samba (Bunge la Mwananchi 2009). This public interest in ordinary people's debates of local politics must be seen in the context of a hitherto oppressive regime that didn't allow for such gatherings. In such conditions, the mere gathering has extreme symbolic importance, as we have seen lately on a larger scale on the Tahir Square in Egypt. Until then, the most common form of public politics in Kenya was the "*baraza*" –which refers to state sanctioned outdoor public assemblies where the elite (politicians, bureaucrats, and chiefs) could present themselves to the people (Haugerud 1997: 2). The setup displays the hierarchy; the audience would be standing or sitting on the ground, while listening to the elite's messages delivered from a platform, but nevertheless with a chance of shouting questions or dissent at their leaders (Haugerud 1997: 3-4).

Today, the People's Parliament have taken charge of their own debates, but draw on the local tradition of coming together in small groups to talk about everyday issues. The aim, as it is often reiterated, is; "*to set the agenda for the politicians from under a tree*" (Kimari & Rasmussen 2010). This aim has grown out of the success as a vibrant public forum, and similarly, from the time of

celebrating the mere possibility of having somewhat undisturbed public debates the member's ambitions for the forum has grown in different directions. Not only has the People's Parliament grown out of Jeevanjee Gardens by setting up debating forums - so-called congresses - in other major towns like Nukuru, Mombasa and Kisumu, and in poor estates around Nairobi (Mathare, Kamukunji, and Huruma), individual members are also presenting themselves as affiliates to the People's Parliament when they participate in other public events. Furthermore, some of the more activist members are engaged in organising demonstrations and other grassroots events where they define the People's Parliament as a social movement.

The forum in Jeevanjee Gardens has always been open to all people, regardless of gender, ethnic and religious background or political party affiliation. In reality, the large majority of the members are male, and only few have formal affiliation with a political party. No formal membership of the forum is required it is based on participation and personal engagement. In addition, the forum is not formally registered as an organisation or a social movement, in order not to be forced to comply with rules and regulations guarding the established civil society. This way, the forum hopes to maintain an informality and fluidity that makes it less eligible for cooption and state infiltration. Non-registration gives the advantage of being able to move somewhat freely between inside and outside positions in relation to the state, but it also has the disadvantage of allowing individual people or factions to present collective aims and plans in the name of the People's Parliament without the consent of the forum (cf. Kimari & Rasmussen 2010). Despite the non-registration politics, one needs to register as voter prior to the presidential elections.

The elections themselves are a source of conflict to the forum. What started out as a mock event - in line with the recommendations of most recent revolutionary guidebooks (Sharp 2002 & CANVAS 2006) - today in many ways embody the same struggles for power as the real Presidential elections. Discontented candidates - sometimes former presidents - have refused to acknowledge defeat and one guy continues to publicly present himself as president of the People's Parliament. Another tried to set up his own alternative debating forum in a different corner of the park, but had to share the venue with loud speaking street preachers.

On various occasions, I'm told that the elections have become a farce. Many members say that the skilled speakers and influential members do not vie for president as they know they won't get elected because of internal factionalism. Therefore, it is said, there hasn't been a skilled president since the two first elections. Rumour has it that the strong factions agree on a compromise amongst the listed candidates - resulting in a president that actually only has limited backing, will not do any harm, and is less skilled as an orator. However, the 2010 elections, brought a woman to the seat, and though she is not so visible in the public debates she is skilled at mingling at the periphery and she has made an effort of bringing gender issue on the

agenda. Furthermore, she has proven strong in mobilising people for campaigns against increasing food prices and against perceived illegal arrests of campaigners.

“Spreading the word”, the title of the paper, refers to the People’s Parliament’s ambition of change through action, and more precisely through words as action. Spreading the word captures the essence of mobilisation for mass events and protests. Spreading the word means setting up debating forums (congresses) all over the country. Spreading the word means engaging in dialogue and debate, learning, teaching and informing others of the art of political argument and debating skills through practice. The foundation of the People’s Parliament was centred round this last point and from here grew the gradual engagement in mock events, protests, and activist activities.

The daily debates in Jeevanjee Gardens are still the central activity. However, as the brief outline of the forums background reveals, within the last couple of years there has been increased debate about how to make the debates inside the park have impact on society outside. Usually decisions on campaigns and activities aren’t taken in Jeevanjee gardens, but rather in tea saloons where smaller groups or factions of members meet to discuss and plan actions. It is also in a place like this over a cup of tea I get a first glimpse of a draft history of the People’s Parliament that will later turn into a magazine. In the final version of the magazine, it states that the People’s Parliament is both a *“Concept and an Organisation”* (Bunge la Mwananchi 2010), thus embracing both the concept of a public oral debating culture and an organisation engaged in more activist activities for societal change.

The debates and the speakers

In the following I will concentrate on the oral practices and present some of the members and accounts of the debates. The above contextualisation and introduction to some of the broader issues relating to the People’s Parliament form part of the backdrop for the ongoing debates at Jeevanjee Gardens. Through these snapshots of the debates I will try to unfold how political debate on grassroots level informs political participation.

Josephat

Like many of the regular members of the People’s Parliament Josephat is unemployed. He used to repair radios and other technical equipment, now while looking for a job he spend his time writing the history of the People’s Parliament and hopes to have it published. He is always well dressed, though his suit has seen better days. He is a patient man, and usually waits a long time to have his say in the debates as he quietly tries to attract the attention of the speaker. He was very engaged in the debates about the constitutional referendum in 2010, as he perceives a lot of the financial and institutional problems today as rooted in a historical and old-fashioned constitution.

He once lost his temper and got in a fierce argument – almost a fight - with one of the younger female members, as she, according to him, didn’t pay

him the respect he deserved as an elder. When their tempers were cooled down, their argument fuelled a debate at Bunge about traditions, customs, and gender, where the young woman argued that no one else claimed entitlement to special treatment and that the two didn't come from the same tribe so how could she know how to address him properly, not to mention the forum's emphasis on Kenyans rather than their ethnic background. The case not only illustrates how the themes for debate can arise out of the blue, it also shows how the debates reflect issues pertinent to ordinary Kenyans and take place in an everyday language.

Josephat - more notes on his writings

Former President of People's Parliament

At the last elections, a woman was elected, and the defeated president claimed he would now concentrate on building an orphanage in his village just outside Nairobi. Later during my fieldwork I see speaking to a crowd of workers at the City Market only a few blocks away from Jeevanjee Gardens, so it seems he has taken his political ambitions elsewhere. He has been arrested on several occasions for his activism. On Jamhuri Day in 2008 he managed to sneak past the security personnel and up on stage to shout his critique in the face of President Mwai Kibaki. Unfortunately he was severely beaten and hospitalised for this assault. He is an example of a president with more individual activist skills and bravery than oral and leadership skills.

Keli

Keli is in his early 30's, and completed secondary school. Besides the occasional odd job he lives from renting out a shack in one of Nairobi's slums. Usually he shares his salary with a couple of friends from Bunge, who likewise share their earnings with him. He seldom speaks at the forum, but he often makes room for others (his favoured speakers) by hissing on the crowd and encouraging them to listen. It is a relatively common practice, especially when the crowd is big – on such occasions skilled orators are often given prevalence to less trained speakers. Generally everybody can speak, but you are expected to perform at the big debates, otherwise you usually only get the word once before you are hissed at.

Keli is often circling the periphery of the debate talking to members about other issues, planning and organising meetings. He is respected for his engagement and his ability to mobilise people, fundraise, and make things happen. He is always well informed about public debates, hearings and other grassroots events.

Keli is part of a small group of members who usually meet in the evening when the park has closed. The group plans demonstrations, sets up congresses in other areas, and at some point they initiated the so-called "freedom train". The group boarded the commuter train carrying workers from the industrial area of Nairobi to the poor estates on the west side of the city after work, here they tried to engage the workers in political debate. The idea was to inform the workers of their rights and to equip them with oratory skills

through the daily practice of debate. After the first trips, the project stranded due to the group's lack of funds for tickets. In addition, Keli and the group are behind the magazine first presenting a written history of the People's Parliament.

Abok

Abok is in the late 20's. He recently started studying media and communication, but he is struggling to raise money for the fees. Prior to the 2002 elections, he campaigned for a political party to make some money, but with his growing personal ambition of pursuing a political career, he claims never to be willing to compromise his political conviction again. Abok is often invited to take the seat as the speaker leading the debates. Despite his relatively young age, he has proven himself as strong and engaged debater with the ability to listen to other's arguments as well.

I have visited the congress in Mathare slum with Abok who lives in the area. When I ask him, why he is going to Jeevanjee Gardens instead of just sticking around in his neighbourhood, he tells me that the composition of the area, and hence also of the forum, is less ethnically diverse than the forum in Jeevanjee Gardens. In addition, the debate takes place in an open shed on a street corner and can only house a limited number of people. These issues provide for a less vibrant debate compared to Jeevanjee. Furthermore, many members in Mathare do not get out of Mathare that often, so the insights and the level of the debate generally has a lower quality.

I once sat in on a private lecture given by a former Member of Parliament with Abok and two other members from the Peoples' Parliament. The former MP gave advice on how they could improve their political skills, and summed up by concluding that they have to "*graduate from Jeevanjee*" at some point if they were to pursue their dreams of venturing into formal politics. As we discussed after the lecture, it refers to the oratory and debating training members go through by participating in the People's Parliament, but it also means that they have to finish the training and do something else if they want to gain more influence.

On other occasions, members were quite provoked by similar statements, many, including Abok, would emphasise the importance of continuous training in order to stay sharp and alert when debating. Additionally, I have heard rumours of how some politicians occasionally send their secretaries to Bunge to listen in on the debates to know what is ticking at the grassroots. To the members, these rumours are often interpreted as a sign of the forum's importance and ability to bring critical issues to the surface. Furthermore, the story of a former regular who has become Mayer in small town outside Nairobi is also recounted endlessly. Despite the apparent reluctance from members in "*graduating*" from Jeevanjee Gardens, many acknowledge that something needs to happen outside the park - individually and collectively.

Lately Abok joined a small and newly formed party and became the political secretary, but he still finds time to participate in the debates. By analogy, it is the same that is at stake for Keli and his group. Several of them

are engaged in Human Rights activities for other civil society organisations, and they are active in planning their own events and actions, while writing the newsletters for Bunge, but they still go for the debates. Abok once stated, that sometimes they agree and then they work together, other times they disagree and then they do different things.

Wangui

Woman, lawyer

Very vocal

Samson

First president, resisting arrests – speaking up to authorities

Generally: info on the writing of history

Summary / Conclusion

The disagreements on the writing of the Peoples' Parliament's history is not only a question of who gets to write it and what is included. This is naturally important, as Josephat points to, as it concerns the fixing of words in time and condensing the previous debates in time (cf. Barber 2007: 3). But more than that, the writing of history also interprets and defines the forum in the present and the future, it means doing something to (acting on and acting for) the rest of the People's Parliament.

While writing down the history on the one hand fixes the words in time and defines what the People's Parliament is, on the other hand it opens up for interpretations

Words travel, they outlast the moment, they have a certain fluidity

Empowerment

Words are fluid, they are not fixed and can travel – spreading the word

Words are ideas (ideology), but they are also form (debate)

For the purposes of this paper, talking about writing the history and how to do it becomes self-referential, the members reflect upon their own actions and activities, and thus it has offered insights into how the forum is operating and how that positions them as politically active (cf. Barber 2007: 5). Therefore, focussing on how the members have debated and argued over issues concerning the forum's past and the importance of having public debates are not only commentaries on the society they aim to transform, it also becomes commentaries on their own attempts at transforming society through public debates.

This self-referencing in the debates on history writing and the form of debate points to the transformations the forum has gone through. What was once a victory - the freedom to come together and debate in public – today, no

longer holds the same symbolic value (despite occasional police harassment) and the question is whether people are satisfied with sending out words from the park or whether other measures need to be taken, to make sure that words come from different corners of the country and in different forms and shapes (more public fora and a variety of actions).

Throughout paper add comments on the People's Parliament's position in relation to state and society – maybe E. Isin “Ways of being political” – Citizenship, where they subject meets the state, the moment of becoming political.

Maybe add some comments on – “Publics”