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We need to expose people to books and authors – Kinyanjui Kombani

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 25, 2014 - 00:00 -- BY JAMES MURUA

Kinyanjui Kombani is a creative writer, banker, learning facilitator, award-winning entrepreneur and business mentor based in Nairobi. He spoke to James Murua on the sidelines of the Storymoja festival.

How did you get into writing?

I started off by doing comic books inspired by Frank Odoi and Paul Kelemba 'Maddo'. Maddo had a comic strip with a character called Miguel Sidi. That inspired me to start drawing comic books, with my own super hero called 'Jokie'. My comics were very popular in primary school, and earned me the nickname 'Jokin'.

I started prose writing in my second year of campus. I wrote two short stories for submission to a competition, and gave them to my lecturer Gachanja Kiai who told me to consider writing seriously. I wrote my 'The Last Villains of Molo' immediately after that.



UTHOR: Kinyanjui Kombani

You seem to wear many hats. Where do you get the time to do all these things while also being a family man?

It helps that I do not do all these things at the same time! One of the courses I did in my banking world is 'The Power of Focus'. It helped me understand that I could do much more by segregating my activities into Important and Urgent, Not Important but urgent, Important but not urgent, and not important but not urgent. For instance, when I am writing, I am able to shut out everything else, including social media, because I have thrown it to the 'Important but not urgent' box.

Then, banking does not conflict with my writing. It complements it. I have used a lot of the sales and relationship skills learnt from banking to promote my brand!

Your latest book *Den of Iniquities* came out this year. Please describe the process that you took getting the book from the concept to the shops.

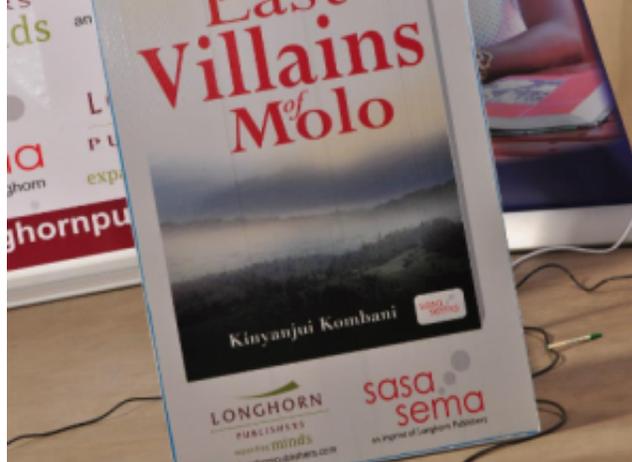
I have toyed with the story line in my head for more than five years. One of the things I was afraid of was how to approach Mungiki. I realised that I can create my own gang (Chama in my novel) and have the same effect. I started writing in 2012. Some of the parts of the book were actually written eight years ago!

Then we did a pre-order campaign just before the launch. The launch was done in April as a double-launch with Kap Kirwok's book 'The Heart is a Reluctant Nomad', at the Alliance Francaise in Nairobi.

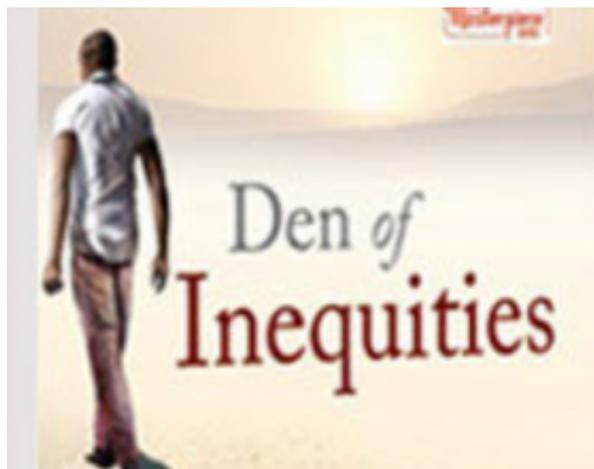
The book deals with crime in the less affluent parts of the city and criminal gangs many Kenyans are familiar with like Mungiki, Baghdad Boyz and Chinkororo. Aren't you worried that you would be targeted by these groups?

Initially I was worried. Then I decided to create my own illegal gang called 'Chama'. Some people have said it is the Mungiki, but I always shoot back that in my story I had Chama!

Then, I chose to stick with information that is already in the public domain. It is a fact that these gangs exist. And it is a fact that they have power struggles. It is also a fact that they are always constantly targeted by police and vice versa. There is no 'expose' at all. My story is based on events that are already in the public domain.



Last Villains of Molo



Den of Iniquities

You have been well known to use modern techniques to market your books to great effect. Why did you go this route, what methods have you used and how successful have you been in relation with your peers?

The average publisher has a slew of books to market and sell. This means that being published is not the end; it is the beginning. You have to work extra hard to ensure that your books sell. You have to be your own ambassador. The publisher, as well meaning as he/she is, has limited resources. Even if the publisher does a full page advert promoting your book, you have to convince someone to go to a bookshop and pick up a copy, especially because most people go to bookshops when buying text books for our children.

The tool I have used most is social media. Social media is a cheap (not free) way of letting people know what you are doing and when. My friends and I were able to create a buzz about 'Den of Inequities' way before it was released. By the time of the launch, we had sold more than 1,000 copies mostly via twitter.

Apart from Facebook and Twitter, I also use LinkedIn and Google Plus. I also send emails to my close connections whenever there is something I am doing.

What is the importance of festivals like the just concluded Storymoja Festival and the currently running Nairobi International Book Fair for authors like yourself?

These festivals are very important. First, they offer visibility for authors. They also provide a platform for authors to share their thoughts, inspirations and experiences with their readers.

Third, they offer networking and collaboration opportunities for authors. I had three sessions at Storymoja — A 'Readaloud' where my book 'Wangari Maathai Mother of Trees' was read out to hundreds of children, a discussion titled 'Writers of Fire!' with Ciku Kimeria, Alex Nderitu, Juliet Barnes and Janet Onyango, and a panel discussion on crime writing with Oduor Jagero, Dr Wandia Njoya and Prof Mike Kuria. I have made new friends and deepened relationships with old ones.

Also important is that you have people who have come ready to buy books!

What is the state of the literature business in Kenya? Is it as bleak as has been painted in some quarters or is there hope for those who are in it and those looking to get in?

Of course, the books business is not as advanced as emerged markets like US. We do not brand authors as they do in those markets, meaning the writers have to do a bit more. I think we just need to expose people to books and authors, and we will not complain about the reading culture. I got information that by 1pm on the ReadAloud day of Storymoja, more than 2,000 people had attended the festival. If the reading culture is that bad, I don't think people would invest in festivals like Storymoja, Kwani Litfest and the Book Fairs.

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Books, like any other products, must be sold! If EABL has to advertise their brands despite the fact that it is said we are a drinking nation, sembuse wewe?

You have been associated with a project called Creatives Academy. What is this project and what was the need for it? How was it received by the participants?

In 2012 we hosted the Authors Buffet, which was a day long event that allowed readers to mingle with their writers. What initially started as an event for two writers ended up being a 13-writer show. Following on the success of Authors Buffet, we partnered with Daystar University to host a 14-week Creatives Course, to help writers study the mechanics of writing from finding inspiration to branding yourself. The course facilitators were notable personalities like Ken Walibora, John Sibi-Okumu, Winnie Thuku-Craig, award-winning writers Ng'ang'a Mbugua, Kap Kirwok, Yvonne Awuor, branding expert Terryanne Chebet among others.

Which writers are you reading on the continent? Which Kenyan writers apart from yourself do you think are flying our flag high?

I am currently reading Ciku Kimeria's 'Of Goats and Poisoned Oranges' and Oduor Jagero's 'True Citizen'. Once I find out who stole my copy of 'Dust' by Yvonne Owuor I will resume reading. On a larger scale we can talk about Binyavanga (Wainaina) and Yvonne (Owuor). Other writers I think are making Kenya proud are Stanley Gazemba, Okwiri Oduor and Tony Mochama.

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