

# HARAMBEE NARRATIVES: A RHETORICAL FRAMING OF THE KENYAN TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

Collins Ogutu Miruka\*

## Abstract

This paper analyses discourse on trade unionism contained in the coverage of Labour Day (May 1) celebrations in one leading Kenyan daily national newspaper, *The East African Standard*, from 1966 to 2013. I assess slightly over forty articles qualitatively using rhetorical criticism. This is done by looking at topics addressed, characterizations of unions as well as major actors such as union leaders, workers, and political leaders. I chose rhetorical criticism of a news media corpus in order to explore how diverse power relations have been transformed into mechanisms that keep the Kenyan labour movement tolerable to the government of the day. The research identifies themes surfaced by and in the news coverage. The paper shows how diverse power relations are colonized and articulated into more general mechanisms that keeps the industrial population governable with minimal disruptions.

**Keywords:** Kenya, Trade Union Movement, Textual Analysis, Rhetorical Criticism, Political Discourse

\*Graduate School of Business & Government Leadership, North West University, Mafikeng Campus, South Africa

## 1 Introduction

Worldwide, unions are struggling with declining membership as well as influence thereby giving impetus to the union revival/revitalization witnessed in industrial relations discourses since the late 1990's. This debate was especially invigorated by the publication of John Kelly's *Rethinking Industrial Relations* of 1998 (see, for instance, Gahan & Pekarek 2013). For our purposes here, I would like to use framing analysis from a rhetorical perspective to try and understand the performance of Kenya's Central Organisation of Trade Unions (COTU) with regard to the union renewal/revitalization debate. Trade unions based in developing countries face additional challenges to those faced by their counterparts in the developed world as they have to contend with weak enforcement of employment rights and a huge informal sector workforce amongst other ills (see, for instance, Dibben 2010).

The working class public forms an important constituency that can be appropriately deployed in the incomplete task of nation-building in Kenya. Viewed from the trade union movement standpoint, the working class public offers three distinct possibilities for the 'nation-building' rhetoric in Kenya: it creates a space for the forging of a national political community; it is a tool for modernizing industry, the infra-structure, and agricultural production, and finally; it opens up space for the development of ethnic unity among the diverse communities through the construction of a national consciousness (see, Samper 1997: 32).

It is for this reason, amongst others, that I choose to look at the repertoires of action and narrative resources of the Kenyan trade union movement as represented by the sole umbrella trade union in the country with a membership of about one and a half million representing about a third of the overall workforce<sup>15</sup>. It is these repertoires of action and narrative resources that I refer to in the present study simply as 'harambee narratives.' *Harambee* is a Kiswahili word meaning 'pull together.' Kiswahili and English are the two official national languages of Kenya. The term harambee has been elevated to an ideographic term that emphasises communal cooperation and anchors it to the enterprise of state-building and general economic and social development.

In Kenya, the term harambee has become, since the last century, a national slogan, a motto on the national crest, and a rally cry for essentially all public and communal undertakings aimed at social and economic wellbeing. According to Mbithi and Rasmusson (1977: 14)<sup>16</sup>, the term is rooted in the traditions of Kenya's various ethnic communities and covers all forms of collective effort, community self-reliance and other forms of cooperative enterprises. Samper (1997: 33) sees the harambee movement as an instance of traditional communal practices that has been successfully re-contextualized in the process of

<sup>15</sup>See, <http://www.cotu-kenya.org/about> Accessed on 24 April 2014.

<sup>16</sup>This is often the most cited source and the earliest that I met in the literature although there are many other definitions proffered that essentially convey more or less the same meaning.

nation-building. This, in his opinion, is an example of how traditional elements can be deployed to bridge the past and the future.

In undertaking the present research, I would like to explain why trade unions in Kenya tend to be limited to salary and wage negotiations. I am intrigued by the inability of the Kenyan trade union movement to use their power within the distribution-exchange process to both strive for higher wages and better working conditions of their members and to fight for the improvement of the situation of all working people in the society. This role is referred to in the pertinent literature as Social Movement Unionism (see, Hirschohn 2007 for instance). For Reiss (2005: 36) unions espousing this approach 'are championing both the immediate and long-term interests of working people, both in the workplace and in society at large, and are partnering with other social movements on a broad platform of social and economic justice.'

I am looking at newspaper coverage of the speeches and statements of both union leaders and government functionaries in a bid to determine *what kinds of rhetoric were articulated publicly while negotiating 'listenership' on working class concerns?* As Willems (2012: 17) explains, the 'function of the public sphere is to mediate between civil society and the state and it provides a space for rational debate that ultimately will give rise to a consensus on public affairs.' More specifically, the study will seek to answer the following questions:

- 1) What themes are stressed in these speeches? And second,
- 2) How does the selected print press frame these themes?

The study is necessary since the Kenyan state may still be considered as 'weak' or 'failed' (see, for instance, Mueller 2011) and need every tool available to the society to transform herself into a viable thriving democracy. Robert Bates (2008: 2) defines 'state failure' as a two-step implosion of the state. In the first instance, he states, the state is transformed into an instrument of predation where leaders use political power to levy resources from the vulnerable members of society thereby deliberately failing to deploy the power of the state to enhance security but rather use the same power to secure their own selfish interests. Second, the state loses its monopoly over the means of coercion reducing political competition to groups bearing arms.

Many scholars have shown in great detail how 'virtual' or 'sham' Kenya's purported multi-party democracy works in practice (see, for instance, Branch 2011 & Mueller 2011). Mueller (2011: 101 - 102) shows convincingly the vulnerability of democracy in Kenya by explaining how Kenya's rising and entrepreneurial middle class has failed to effectively embrace the rule of law and strong institutions to guarantee working class interests. This failure is characterized by 'the proliferation of non-state violence, the emergence of possible "shadow states",

the personalization of power, a zero-sum view of winning infused by ethnicity, and the persistence of unreformed institutions.'

In summary, I will endeavor to address the problems explained above by employing frame theory to study the news coverage of trade unionism in Kenya over a period of 50 years. As I will explain in the next section, the notion of frame contestation offers ample space for investigating the dynamics of union strategic actions (see Gahan & Pekarek 2013 as well as Blyton and Jenkins 2013, for examples and justifications). Indeed, Gahan & Pekarek (2013: 768) suggest that any examination of framing needs 'to be conducted in the broader context of frame contests involving other social actors, as well as over more extended periods of time. This should provide opportunities to capture the contestation and evolution of framing activities. I am convinced that my chosen analytic tool of frame theory from a rhetorical perspective can be deployed in trade union studies. This approach is not only innovative, but is also effective in unearthing the central concerns of the study. I will now delve into framing analysis from a rhetorical perspective in some detail.

## 2 Rhetorical criticism

I will endeavor to answer the research questions by employing rhetorical criticism in interrogating the attendant challenges faced by the Kenyan trade union movement in the past fifty years. I propose to analyse discourse on trade unionism contained in the coverage of Labour Day (May 1) celebrations in one of the leading daily national newspapers, *The East African Standard*, from 1964 to 2013. *The East African Standard* also happens to be the oldest newspaper in Kenya. In total, I assess around fifty articles using close textual analysis. Close textual analysis will be carried out by looking at topics addressed, characterizations of unions as well as major actors (such as union leaders, workers, and political leaders), presuppositions of the writers, and trends in the discourse. I chose rhetorical criticism of a news media corpus in order to explore the role of framing in mobilizing and transforming narrative resources among the Kenyan working class public as well as to surface frame contestations and disputes.

The approach adopted in the present study will enable me to improve on meaning-centred approaches to communication studies such as symbolic analysis and thick description which have been criticized for being excessively subjective (see, for instance, Witten 1992: 19). As Witten (1992: 19) says, meaning-centred approaches are problematic since sense-making varies widely among people based on their circumstances, competence in the communicative code and so on. In line with these sentiments, I address the problematic concerns by opting to explore the context and form of the practices and discourse of the trade union movement in Kenya over a

considerable period of time. As Kuypers (2010: 308) observes, rhetorical framing offers the additional advantage of allowing practitioners to elevate descriptive notions of framing research into fully critical and interpretive undertakings.

From the discussions above, it becomes apparent that measuring or identifying latent frames can be a difficult task indeed since frames consist of tacit rather than overt conjectures. A frame, as a concept, does not translate directly into easy to measure indicators that are empirically observable. For this reason, I adopt a characterization of frames as actively adopted schema of interpretation thereby treating the choice of frames as a conscious process (see Entman, Matthes & Pellicano 2009: 177). Another scholar who treats frames as deliberately manufactured discursive cues is D'Angelo (2002: 873).

I have therefore decided to make the case here by employing and then theorizing what I conceptualize as a 'nation-building' frame (*harambee narratives*). I focus on the Kenyan trade union movement showing how her leadership, with the encouragement of the Kenyan government and a complicit press, have, over the years adopted this 'nation-building' worldview while seeking to construct collective identities to recruit and mobilize activists and supporters. I do this by analysing the reported speeches of both trade union leaders and government representatives during Labour Day celebrations for the past fifty years. By undertaking an in-depth analysis of the themes deployed in the speeches, I will try to show that the rhetorical strategies adopted by the speakers help make their messages meaningful while at the same time serve to delimit and disambiguate information in order to conform to the nation-building frame. In this manner, I am able to investigate how the texts exploit what Northrop Frye (1982 in Witten 1992: 20) terms "centripetal tendency": structures of information that turn in on themselves, close meaning down, licence or authorize a particular set of messages, [and] discourage plural readings.' To do so effectively, as Witten (*ibid*) advises, one must examine features in and among the narratives in the text that create a tight structural coherence.

By reading large amounts of data from the selected corpus, I should be able to interpretatively discover potential frames and related keywords as has been demonstrated by previous scholars such as Downs (2002) and Kuypers (2010). This onerous undertaking is especially useful since, as Kuypers (2010: 303) explains, the notion that frames may be made up of individually framed themes has yet to be fully dealt with in the extant literature. In Kuypers opinion (*Ibid* p. 304), rhetorical criticism allows researchers to move beyond content in order to interrogate the context of the rhetorical artefact. I will now proceed to deploy rhetorical criticism to the selected corpus covering the kinds of rhetoric that have been articulated publicly while negotiating

'listenership' on working class concerns in Kenya in the past fifty years or so.

### 3 Harambee narratives as applied rhetoric

In going through the selected corpus, it became apparent to me that what I theorise here as a development fame or harambee narratives have achieved purchase mainly through repetition as well as the rhetorical skills of the key players both from the government as well as from labour union representatives. It was amazing to learn how what appears at face value to be different speeches over a fifty year period by different people under diverse economic conditions all seem to converge on very few themes. So in conceptualizing the speeches as harambee narratives, I am thus compelled to show their generality, systematicity, homogeneity and relevant stakes. I believe that opening this realm of historical enquiry would enable me, as Rabinow (1984: 46) posits, to determine opportunities where change is possible and desirable and furthermore to characterise what form this change should take regarding the governance of the Kenyan industrial population.

I have often been intrigued by what I consider the wasted space of labour union leadership in the broader struggle for democracy and socio-economic well-being in Kenya. My concerns and frustrations stem from the apparent inability of Kenyan labour union leaders to rise to the occasion and free themselves from the strictures of pure bread and butter issues and workplace concerns to move on to the more comprehensive issues of not only decent work but also a progressive society based on justice and human rights of all members. While Labour Relations admittedly is a year-round activity, I privilege the Labour Day address as an exceptional case of rhetorical genre whereby both change and continuity is expected. As Lim (2002: 330) elaborates, principle genres of obligatory rhetoric are often powerfully constrained by custom and ritual. Yet, 'it might be argued that changes in rhetorical patterns should be expected even in these genres since rhetoric expresses politics, and politics is deliquescent and vicissitudinous.'

Labour Day orations in Kenya by the various leaders meet standard specifications of both epideictic and deliberative speech. By Aristotle's schema, the speeches are epideictic in the sense that they offer the speakers opportunity to either praise or blame in a public ceremony and thereby prescribe right behaviour so to speak. The speeches are equally deliberative by the fact that they 'function to establish the expediency of action taken in an effort to gain public support.' (Dow 1989: 296). Thus as Dow (1989) observes, epideictic rhetoric often serve to meet the needs of communal understanding while deliberative strategies are often employed to elicit policy approval.

In going through the speeches as reported by the selected press corpus, I was able to pick out four themes that continually emerged: unity; corporation; responsibility; and stability or peace. As Kuypers (2010: 306) advises, it is important to reiterate here that in rhetorical criticism, both themes and frames are discovered, not a priori, but via close textual analysis of the selected text thus I did not have to develop a coding scheme as would be required in a quantitative study. In the words of Kuypers (2010: 308):

The real strength of rhetorical framing studies is that they allow the researcher to move from a more descriptive notion of framing research to a fully critical and interpretive endeavour. Thus questions can easily move beyond what was said or what frame exists to how something was said or how something was framed.

As I will endeavour to show later in the essay, I realized in the course of the research that the harambee narratives frame or what might be easily recognized as a 'development' frame apparent in the speeches themselves as well as in the manner of reporting, is itself composed of the four themes named above each of which is also individually framed. Thus the contribution of this study is to interpret the context in which the themes are found without confusing the presence of themes as a confirmation of a particular frame. I also proceed further and show how the particular themes are actually framed both by the speakers as well as by the newspaper coverage of the same. I will start by looking at the unity theme in the next section.

### 3.1 Unity

Unity is one key ideograph that is both powerful and ubiquitous in everyday political discourse but even more so in emerging nation states that still need to forge an internal identity that majority of the citizens ascribe to. McGee (1980) in a seminal article, defines ideographs as 'one-term sums of an orientation, the species of "God" or "Ultimate" term that will be used to symbolize the line of argument the meanest sort of individual would pursue, if that individual had the dialectical skills of philosophers, as a defence of a personal stake in the commitment to the society.' (p. 7). It therefore does not take much imagination to see why the term unity in this case, would be very alluring to both the Kenyan workers and their leaders during Labour Day celebrations. Yet, what concerns us here is the social rather than the ethical functions of this particular vocabulary in the context of the study.

The call for unity has been used, some say dubiously, in the Kenyan socio-political context to fight against three tendencies that are of import to this research namely: ethnicity; class (as well as rural – urban divide); and neo-colonialism including racism. I would want to show how in each case, the term unity has been used to sabotage rather than support workers aspirations in the last fifty years or so. I start by

looking at the deployment of the term supposedly to fight ethnicity in the pursuit of good governance.

The Kenyatta administration, by many accounts, entrenched ethnicity not only by virtue of appointment to public offices but also in offering selective access to capital and in some instances even to higher education and specialist training. There are many detailed accounts showing these excesses including Branch (2011). The call for unity therefore would appear to be well-meaning at the surface but a closer scrutiny would reveal the calls as double-faced. For instance, a worker who has been a victim of ethnic favouritism or who is clearly aware of the lop-sided nature of political appointments to public offices is not likely to take such calls seriously at least at the national level.

Thus, while unity is called for as a tool for nation-building, among the industrial population, there is stack evidence of ethnic favouritism amongst the working public and therefore it is my contention that workers would be much more alive to this fact and the less scrupulous among them would be looking for ways of sub-national (ethnic) unity amongst their own ranks thereby easily defeating the purposes of worker unionism in the first place. It would thus be evident that existing cleavages and political practice makes it extremely difficult in the Kenyan case, for workers to genuinely accede to the calls of working class unity.

On this issue of ethnicity, there is a clear division of epideictic and deliberative strategies both from the workers' perspective as well as from union leadership and the political class. To elaborate, when a union leader speaks of unity, he or she (and indeed in the many cases I saw it was almost always a man) may be employing epideictic rhetoric in the sense that there is a need for communal understanding as a distinct industrial public. Therefore they need to unite. On the other hand, a government representative speaking at the same function whether a District Labour Officer or indeed the President himself, often takes to the podium with a deliberative rhetoric with intent to seek policy approval on Industrial and Labour Relations amongst other political concerns rather than be actively engaged in words meant to strengthen or revitalize unionism per se.

While verbatim reporting of the speeches captured the sentiments mentioned above, commentaries and additional reporting by journalists covering the Labour Day events as well as opinion pieces tended mostly to convey similar framing unquestioningly thus I not only found echoes of the theme of unity but also similar framing. The news media therefore also failed to offer a sphere for public deliberation that would go beyond the ideographic meaning of the term unity to further the aims of union revitalization and renewal with added focus on Social Movement Unionism.

On commentaries and opinion pieces, the theme of unity was mostly propagated as industrial peace with strikes mostly referred to as disruptions and grumbling. It appeared to me, that reporters and other

commentators seemed to interpret unity as the absence of class divisions. While this was not stated openly, the urge for unity and the attendant industrial peace was often presented as the ultimate desire for anyone aspiring for economic development. Reading through the various pieces, one finds little if any distinction being made between the workers and the capitalists as all are made to be working hard for development in the spirit of harambee.

Failing to make the distinction between workers and employers as if all are equal in the desire to achieve economic development with minimal disruptions becomes extremely problematic especially if one takes account of the fact that the fruits of this 'development' are often not shared equally. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) rankings by income Ginicoefficient consistently places Kenya near the bottom quarter of all nations surveyed.<sup>17</sup> It is therefore disingenuous to say the least, for commentators to highlight unity in this regard and underplay class interests. This is not to say that those pointing out class divisions are against development, indeed going by the UNDP statistics discussed previously, it is precisely those nations that are proactively managing such divides who are scoring well on the Human Development Index. Thus, it becomes apparent that this call for unity actually privileges the capitalist class rather than the working class and overall makes it worse for the nation as a whole in terms of sustainable development.

Going back to McGee (1980: 5) who observes:

An analysis of ideographic usages in political rhetoric, I believe, reveals interpenetrating systems or "structures" of public motives. Such structures appear to be "diachronic" and synchronic" patterns of political consciousness which have the capacity both to control "power" and to influence (if not determine) the shape and texture of each individual's "reality."

Thus, I observed that the use of the theme 'unity' was both diachronic and synchronic in the manner quoted above and in all instances, whether from government representatives or in the press coverage was employed to the detriment of trade union revitalization/ renewal.

Diachronically, public officials dealt on the theme of unity in order to remind workers how united they once were in the fight against colonialism which led to political independence. They were thus meant to believe that workplace hardships were to be endured heroically as it promotes 'freedom' and makes workers proud of their country. It is as if one were to say that 'this is what we fought for. What else do you want?' And indeed in many instances, those agitating for better working conditions were seen as saboteurs and malcontents or even worse, enemies of development.

Synchronically, workers were urged by cleverly designed speeches to see their current woes as only

temporary or as something affecting workers all over the world. We therefore read throughout the coverage of exhortations for workers to put in more effort and emulate the President who in all instances is characterised as the No. 1 worker, tireless, self-sacrificing and most benevolent. In the midst of such a campaign accompanied by the might of the state, labour union leaders could hardly be radical given the risk of be seen as anti-government and by extension against development. They are thus literally forced to cooperate.

### **3.2 Cooperation**

Cooperation is one other undying theme that one meets over and over again in the selected corpus. If one were to argue that the theme of unity is oppressive, then the cooperation theme is coercive. It is often framed in two main guises. Workers are often urged to cooperate with the government for the sake of development while employers are asked to cooperate with Labour officials for industrial peace. From the perspective of workers, when their representatives talk of cooperation, they would seem to be asking Labour officials to work with them in ensuring that labour laws are effectively implemented.

As I will proceed to show, cooperation seems to be a back-door manner of introducing the concept of participation but only in a more coercive manner and in ways which can only seem to hinder the revitalization and invigoration of workers' concerns. As Huang, Baptista&Galliers (2013: 113) recount, 'rhetoric is used with specific intent, often to negotiate, generate and reinforce consensus in situations of uncertainty and emerging possibilities.' At the very basic level, when authorities talk of cooperation in this scenario, one would imagine that there are labour friendly legislations in place that are effectively enforced thus all that is needed is awareness for workers to avoid mistreatment at work.

Yet the reality is much more complex in Kenyan industrial relations than conveyed by the preceding sentiments. Going back to the Huang, Baptista&Galliers (2013: 13) citation above, one has to determine why cooperation rhetoric is needed and in what ways it reinforces consensus and closes down emerging possibilities and uncertainties. For one, the corpus examined mentioned a number of instances where labour officials are suspected of collusion with unscrupulous employers.

On the part of labour leaders, especially before the onset of multi-party politics in Kenya, great care was needed in order to avoid rhetorical friction with the authorities. The corpus shows many instances where labour leaders were arrested or threatened with dire consequences for not towing the official line on labour relations. Caught between a rock and a hard place as they say, labour leaders therefore, I would like to think, chose the safer way of negotiating for listenership by harping on the 'softer' theme of

<sup>17</sup>See, <https://data.undp.org/dataset/Income-Gini-coefficient/36ku-rvj>

cooperation rather than demand consultation as a powerful stakeholder in their own right.

Thus, in my opinion, the labour leaders as well as news reporters often opted to couch their criticism in terms of praise and suggestions. Praise is thus employed to soften criticism rather than an acknowledgement of an ambient workplace climate. This 'praise' came in the form of let us work together. For an innocent observer, the call to work together (cooperate) would seem to be an acknowledgement of either side's goodwill. While not denying that it is impossible for both capital and labour to achieve progress without mutual accommodation and within prudent legislation and policies overseen by government, it would be disingenuous to assume that the state always put the interest of workers first.

The corpus examined is replete with warnings to workers from government officials including the head of state urging them to tighten belts and understand that 'hard work' pays. Workers are again and again warned against laziness, drunkenness, and unruly behaviour amongst other ills. It would seem, going by government rhetoric on these occasions, that the core problem facing the industrial population is worker discipline rather than poor pay, unfavourable working conditions and terms of employment not to mention other social ills pillaging the Kenyan working class.

Once laziness, drunkenness, lack of education and skills as well as other minor ills have been foregrounded as the major enemies of the working class, it therefore becomes much easier to beckon the unions to come and lend government a hand in promoting the interests of the working classes. In this manner, emerging possibilities and potential uncertainties are thus shut down at least for a while. These moves were often further sweetened by the ritual raising of minimum-wage every year at these celebrations with the announcement made either by the head of state or the cabinet minister in charge of labour affairs.

One thus can easily see the lure of cooperation from the government side and how effective it could be. However, the use of the term cooperation from labour leaders even if very intelligently packaged would still be problematic if only at the communicative level. As Hyland & Hyland (2001: 186) contend:

Following Holmes' (1988) characterisation of compliments, we view *praise* as an act which attributes credit to another for some characteristic, attribute, skill, etc., which is positively valued by the person giving feedback. It, therefore, suggests a more intense or detailed response than simple agreement. *Criticism* on the other hand, we define as "an expression of dissatisfaction or negative comment" on a text (Hyland, 2000a, p. 44).

There is the very real danger therefore, that the intended suggestions may be lost in the encomiums. So, where participation is called for, it is extremely

important that the correct wording is used if one's desire is true transformation for the good.

Participation is a key pillar of good governance (see, for instance, Miruka 2009). Effective participation requires two key tenets namely: control and power. Control realized by commanding appropriate resources whereas power in this instance is the ability to say no and be heard. Prior to the present day Kenyan constitution that was only promulgated in 2010, stakeholder consultation and public participation was not a legal requirement prior to the enactment of legislation and government policies. Thus, the then existing labour laws were generally a product of the government with minimal or no input from the grassroots and sometimes were literally rail-roaded onto the statute books due to pressure from donors and other international strategic partners such as the International Labour Organization (ILO).

Whereas in some instances one could argue that the labour unions could say no to particular legislation due to their ability to withhold effort, their ability to control the nature of legislation was often severely limited by human resource capacity knowledgeable enough and well conversant in policy grammar. We are therefore inundated throughout the corpus with calls for higher wages and barely with stuff that cuts to the root of sustainable and broad-impact policies that would entail human rights, minority protection, gender issues, child labour and so on. This monotony was also witnessed from the government side whose main mantra was centred on attracting foreign investment and economic growth almost to the exclusion of all else.

Thus, government would often call for better training to avoid industrial disputes, yet this training was often targeted at Labour Officials in the pertinent ministry rather than at organizers and managers of the unions. Again, calls both from the union representatives as well as by newspaper commentators for better training were often to improve work skills for greater employability or productivity rather than union organizing. It is therefore not surprising that since independence, there has only been one presently derelict school – Tom Mboya Labour College – that deals with the issues pertinent to labour union revitalization/ renewal.

In concluding this section, we can therefore see with some clarity why calls for cooperation were often misplaced. While there was room for cooperation, the discussions around this theme served to kill or undermine genuine efforts that would have seen greater participation of organized labour in Kenyan socio-economic development. Indeed the legacy of this wayward phenomenon is still with us today where the Kenyan labour movement seems to be a toothless organization concerning wider public affairs. While playing down participation, another key pillar of good governance, responsiveness, also suffered greatly. This brings us to the next theme, that of responsibility.

### 3.3 Responsibility

In the recent past for instance, it would rile some public affairs stakeholders to know that in the run-up to the adoption of the 2010 constitution, the Kenyan trade union movement were only consulted as part of civil society organizations. This contrasts sharply with experiences elsewhere in the globe where the labour unions always played a much bigger role during transitions from one political epoch to another. Whether as part of a major national party such as in the UK and South Africa, or by expressly constituting themselves as a purely political entity as in the case of Poland during the transition from socialism, strong labour unions rarely miss opportunities presented by democratic demands to play a pivotal role in the governance of a country as was witnessed in Kenya prior to the promulgation of the new constitution.

Many political observers of the Kenyan scene would agree for instance that ethnicity is a major risk for stability in the country. Yet, it is my contention, that labour unions offers one avenue for breaking unfavourable ethnic ties and untangling what Michael Schartzberg has characterized as a 'triple helix' of state, ethnicity, and capitalism at least in his readings of happenings in then Zaire<sup>18</sup> (Schartzberg 1988, see also Schartzberg's 1987 edited volume on Kenyan political economy). But before we proceed to analyse further COTU's failure in this regard, we need to clarify the role of leadership communication in such epideictic moments. According to Barret (2008: 5):

Leadership communication is the controlled, purposeful transfer of meaning by which leaders influence a single person, a group, an organization, or a community. Leadership communication uses the full range of communication skills and resources to overcome interferences and to create and deliver messages that guide, direct, motivate, or inspire others to action.

We therefore need to check whether the union leaders, as part of their repertoires of action and narrative resources, have effectively deployed leadership communication during labour day celebrations to tackle ethnicity given Schartzberg's (1988: 142) view that the state, like both class and ethnicity, is a 'fluid and contextual entity whose shape and internal configurations of power are constantly changing.'

Rather than address purely workplace concerns, evidence of which is galore in the corpus considered, one struggles to find a sustained rhetorical onslaught challenging other forms of state oppression as the government perpetually successfully dominates both business owners as well as employees in general. Thus, as Schartzberg (1988: 19) observes in the case of Zaire, what we see in the speeches is often more about the relations of power rather than the relations of production when considering issues of class. In a number of instances, we read of government warning

unscrupulous business people of dire consequences for infringements of one or the other pertinent policies and labour leaders mildly cheering without questioning state's role in oppressing workers and the society at large in one way or the other. And when labour retreats from engaging relations of production per se to a suspicious rhetoric pleading with authorities for favours then it becomes easy to see how trade unions supposed power atrophies.

We all know that control of state apparatus offers opportunities to extract resources. Thus, a vibrant labour movement should be in constant contestation for a bite of the pie so to speak. Such resources would include, for instances, ability to influence labour legislations and policies. When labour only seeks to join the debate after the fact, or at best, request that such and such a policy be implemented and often without their involvement, then it becomes apparent why the Kenyan labour movement seems to be moribund or ineffective at critical junctures. From the corpus, since independence for instance, we read of a number of occasions where labour leaders request government officials to consider turning the National Social Security Fund (NSSF) into a provident fund or asking for house allowance to be paid to married women or indeed any such pertinent goodies in relation to workers but we do not read of them asking to be involved in the drafting of such policies or indeed developing such frameworks and asking the government to adopt the same.

Given the developments above, the government seems to have taken appropriate cues and often went ahead to develop labour laws and policies without consulting the trade union movement. Such legislation, policies and other interventions are then often trumpeted at Labour Day celebrations as achievements of the state and labour leaders are then asked to be not only grateful but also to be *responsible* in ensuring the success of these rules. Thus we see a clever ruse by which a key pillar of good governance, *responsiveness* (see, for instance, Miruka 2009), is turned around to *responsibility*.

The usual riders of hard work, savings, skills development, farming as an alternative to formal employment in urban areas and the like are again and again thrown at the workers as solutions to their real and imagined complaints at all times leaving no room for union revitalization or renewal. The only times we read of union renewal or revitalization is when the government is urging the union leaders to unite and avoid factionalism. This is often more malevolent than it seems since often the government is on the side of whatever faction it considers less radical and would offer every assistance to the perceived docile group or out rightly sponsor a rebellion if the mainstream faction is considered out of kilter.

The corpus considered is replete with instances where the rhetoric of nationalism has been deployed to maintain political quiescence and social submission rather than the interests of labour. Added to this

<sup>18</sup>Now officially known as the Democratic Republic of Congo

unrelenting rhetoric, are sporadic reports of some labour union officials as well as employees of the Labour Department often caught colluding with unscrupulous employers to swindle workers in one way or the other. These happenings thus serve to lock both union operatives as well as government officials in the suspicious rhetoric of responsibility rather than trying to be responsive to workers' needs.

Equally sad to note is the fact that the journalists reporting or commenting on these Labour Day celebrations actually did not do any better in terms of framing the responsibility/ responsiveness theme thus legitimating Schartzbergs (1988: 69) observation that the state is actually a 'complicated congeries of only imperfectly controlled organizations and institutions, each motivated by different imperatives.' In the case of newspapers, one cannot rule out the fear that might have gripped any adventurous journalist given the threats of arrests, detention, trial and imprisonment. As Nyamnjoh (2005: 173) observes in the case of Cameroon but which closely resembles events in Kenya around the same time:

From December 1990 to July 1998, at least twenty-one major cases of arrest, detention, and in some cases trial, of journalists and newspaper proprietors can be documented. The most frequent allegation was that the journalist in question had brought into disrepute the president, a member of government or parliament, or another official or institution of state. Other cases have involved well-connected individuals who thought themselves victims of libel.

Indeed Gerard Loughran (2010) in his book, *Birth of a nation: the story of a newspaper in Kenya*, documents in details just such occurrences in Kenya. So, with a complicit press, and an ineffective trade union movement, we find ourselves in a situation where industrial relations are hemmed in by the dictates of what Odhiambo (1987: 191) conceptualized as the 'ideology of order.' It would seem as if not only the Kenyan administration, but also other public institutions in the country had imbibed this ideology inherited from the colonialists. The ideology envisions stability and peace, or more crudely, political order, as the most important requirement for socio-economic advancement rather than democracy per se.

### 3.4 Stability (Peace)

Having prioritised political stability and peace at the cost of deepening democracy, it therefore does not come as surprise that one could hardly ever find a major oration in these occasions that did not harangue listeners with the need for peace. Audiences were continually reminded of the fact that 'Kenya is an island of peace' in a region ravaged by war and conflict and that the state was responsible for the prevailing peace. Every effort must therefore be made to maintain this peace otherwise Kenya risked going

the way of neighbouring countries which were riven by internal conflicts and open rebellion save for Tanzania in the South. Nevertheless, the popular understanding was that Tanzania's peace never seemed to generate similar prosperity as witnessed in Kenya probably due to their pursuit of socialist policies that apparently discouraged hard work and individual prosperity.

So throughout the corpus and especially during the presidency of Daniel arap Moi and Jomo Kenyatta, unions were strongly warned to beware of socialism as it apparently promoted indolence and dependency but rather to continually strive for increased productivity as a sure way to material progress. This forebode ill for union revitalization in many ways as some of the surest ways to promote worker solidarity involve invoking collective active frames that would seem antithetical to liberal pretensions of the state at that time. The entire period was characterized by what Ki-Zerbo (2005: 82) saw as a big unwritten but very real political warning sign indicating 'Silence! We are developing!'

The domestic capitalist class have not fared any better in their ability to influence public policy either in their favour or for developmental purposes generally. As Mkandawire (2001: 301) neatly observes:

There were many historical reasons for the weakness of the African capitalist class *vis-a-vis* the state. For one, colonialism had suppressed the emergence of such a class so that, unlike the case in India, for instance, the national bourgeoisie played a marginal role in the liberation struggle and could easily be marginalized in policy-making. The absence of a group of large indigenous capitalists with sizeable capital, organizational resources and entrepreneurial skills, obviated the need for the new states to form an alliance with such classes for its development project.

Thus all potential critical players are emasculated and made to toe the line as they enjoy the fruits of peace and stability. To give as examples, budding local capitalists and national politicians such as Raila Odinga, Charles Njonjo, Nicholas Biwott and Kenneth Matiba were at one time or the other either enjoying great leverage in the running of their vast enterprises or on the receiving end of lethal state machinery employed against their commercial interests depending on the whims of the authorities. Whereas will all know that the absence of war and open strife does not automatically signal peace per se, politicians were nevertheless able to exploit the situation to subdue alternative or opposing voices that threatened the status quo. So, we find ourselves in a situation where workers are supposed to protect the existing 'peace' at the expense of say decent jobs, better working conditions, higher pay, non-discrimination, greater say at the workplace (consultation) and so on.

Thus, whereas we would not argue that peace and stability is unimportant, my concern here is with



the fact that we are settling for a less than optimal peace. At any rate, it is equally implausible to argue that a more revitalized and invigorated trade union movement would necessarily lead to a disruption of the existing peace or economic and political stability. Indeed there is every possibility that such a development could most probably lead to more development as measured by economic growth and social progress. This is so because, as Mkandawire (2011: 290) explains, a developmental state has both ideological and structural elements. The ideological element refers to the fact that such a state must maintain as its core mission the task of ensuring economic development elevating the quest to a hegemonic project enabling key actors in the nation to buy into the vision voluntarily. On the other hand, the structural element 'emphasizes *capacity* to implement economic policies sagaciously and effectively.'

Therefore the emphasis on peace is meant to shut down ideas which might very well question the development path adopted, its rate of success, as well as exploring alternatives as these would easily be seen as dissident voice out to cause trouble. The Kenyan trade union movement is thus faced with the task of developing their repertoire of collective action and narrative resources to counter the suspicions rhetoric that seem to frame them as rabble-rousers. When trade union representatives talk 'peace', this must stand for something over and above the absence of strikes or work shut-downs to include, for instance, sustainable development, gender mainstreaming, accommodation of people with disabilities in the workplace, social security and so on and so forth to force both business and government to also expand their vocabulary with regard to the theme of peace.

What needs to be explored further is how to maintain the desired industrial peace and stability without infringing on the rights of workers. Similarly, workers need to broaden their struggle tactics and rhetoric beyond the formidable threats of shut-downs and go-slows. The media similarly need to broaden their imagination while reporting and commentating on trade union activities to further entrench the message that industrial action does not have to be limited to strikes and pay issues only and that at the very worst, the withdrawal of labour does not have to be a violent or rather non-peaceful activity. The right to go on strikes is indeed a human right and it is not in any way proscribed by the constitution only that it should be managed to limit economic losses.

There is thus need to move away from the language of 'disruptions', 'fracas', and so on while describing industrial action as is presently evident in the corpus surveyed. An obvious example to falsify the 'absence of strikes as peace myth' would be to look at the results of the structural adjustment programs (SAPs) that Kenya undertook in the 1980s and 90s. Given that most of these changes were rammed down the throat of government from strategic development partners such as the Bretton Woods

Institutions (BWIs), they were often implemented suddenly and with very little grassroots consultation. What was amazing to me as I went through the corpus was often the lack of mention of SAPs either directly or indirectly by government representatives as well as union big wigs given their far reaching implications as well as great mostly negative impact later on.

Here and there in the corpus, there was mention of unfavourable international economic climate and general hardships globally, which was essentially an echo, of the reasons given by the BWIs for the implementation of austerity measures under the SAPs, but there was a complete lack of engagement with the programs per se. This is even more baffling given that in some instances, austerity measures required public job cuts (retrenchment in the civil service), removal of government subsidies, user fees for a range of government services including education and health and such other obviously economically threatening actions for the working class and society in general.

Yet, for keen observers, such as, I believe, government bureaucrats and union leadership, it should have been obvious that austerity measures would draw a big backlash that would inevitably threaten genuine peace and political stability as was already evident given university student riots and the rising clamour for pluralism. This would suggest to me that the peace and stability often talked about at these rallies was merely meant to provide an environment favourable to the perpetuation of personal authority of those in government as well as the continued tenure of union bosses. Such a stance is compatible with the short-term and opportunistic calls witnessed about peace and stability rather than a strategic engagement with issues that may threaten the long-time viability of the nation and well-being of citizens. Thus not only should union leaders adopt new vocabularies of persuasion, there is also a great need for a revitalized repertoire of action and other narrative resources.

#### **4 Conclusion**

In conclusion, we have looked at the various ways in which both the union as well as government representatives used leadership communication in a setting that the legendary Kenyan unionist and politician, Tom Mboya, might refer as 'festival occasion' (Ojwang 2009: 36) to negotiate 'listenership' on issues affecting the industrial population. I have also further proceeded to capture how the print press generally reported and framed themes emerging from these speeches. Of utmost importance to the study was to establish how the leadership communication of the key protagonists has influenced, over the years, the revitalization and renewal of the Kenyan labour movement.

The importance of having a vibrant union movement playing its rightful role cannot be gainsaid. It is self-evident that collective-bargaining and worker

rights generally are a key pillar of any robust democratic dispensation. As an example, one only need to look at the recent happenings in Marikana, located in the platinum mining belt of South Africa, to see the dangers of either malfunctioning unionism or inappropriate responses by state organs to bully unions and wild cat strikes. The Marikana case shook the world in 2012 first when striking workers killed two of their colleagues who were going to work in defiance of the strike and then some time later hacked to death two policemen who had been sent to the scene to maintain peace. A few days later, the conflict escalated to the point where police officers shot and killed thirty four workers at the site. A formal judicial investigation is still going on to determine the cause and what actually transpired in Marikana that led to the eventual shooting and killings at the site<sup>19</sup>. Nevertheless, it remains a grim example of what can happen when unionists, employers and the government fail to listen to one another.

It is also evident that labour unions offers an alternative space that could be exploited positively for the development of Kenya as a united democratic nation forging ahead in the pursuit of economic and social well-being. The challenge, as Ojwang (2009: 37) observes with regard to Kenyan intellectuals, is to go beyond epithets and slogans and explore new rhetoric that advances the welfare of not only the industrial populations but Kenyans at large by equally addressing fault lines that undermine our developmental aspirations.

The corpus examined highlighted a number of issues albeit with what I have now conceptualized here a 'development frame' or harambee narratives. Such issues included such diverse issues as racism in the workplace, foreign investment, rural-urban divide, farming, drunkenness, private savings, productivity, skills development, politics and so on in the guise of addressing labour union concerns. Indeed, at one extreme, during the 1966 Labour Day, address, President Kenyatta took the entire time to castigate remnants of the Mau Mau freedom fighters who had either refused to come off the forest or who were threatening to go back to the forest to fight for land. The whole rally was turned into an opportunity for the labour leaders to demonstrate their loyalty to Kenyatta and to reprimand anybody, in the words of the officials present, who thought that 'free things' would be available upon attaining political independence from Britain.

The article has attempted to point out these kinds of instances where Labour Day festivities have been invaded by suspicious rhetoric that does little to advance the cause of workers and indeed in many circumstances actually weaken the trade union movement by making it subservient to political interests. Leadership communication is of course

perverse and cannot be accurately evaluated by a single speech or in one instance. But one hopes that by looking at these speeches over the long-run, it gives a fair sense of the repertoires of action and narrative resources characterising the Kenyan labour movement and how the same can be improved to revitalize and renew the unions.

It was also evident by going through the corpus that the press, surprisingly, always swallowed whole the themes and framing of the speeches and all that was presented to the readers were mere echo of the rhetoric as presented by both union representatives and government leaders. Over the fifty years or so considered, there was no actual independent news framing as is presently recognized in the extant literature (see, for instance, Baresch, Hsu & Reese 2011 as well as D'Angelo & Kuypers 2010). It would seem as if, there is no capacity, within the local print press to independently discuss and analyse the happenings in the trade union movement rather than merely reporting happenings. In this way, would be opinion leaders and moderators on the country's Industrial Relations landscape are found to be wanting and newspaper managers need to address this lacuna.

Unless these issues are looked at critically, labour union leadership in Kenya would remain the preserve of aspiring politicians who see representing the workers as a springboard to political offices. Indeed this is an emerging trend in Kenya where national union leaders easily transit Solidarity building (COTU headquarters) to Parliament with ease. Examples include such former prominent trade union leaders as Tom Mboya, Clement Lubembe, James Denis Akumu, Jolly Joy Mugalla and Juma Boy. The confusion in Kenya is also evidenced by the fact that speeches and other reports emanating from the Ministry of Labour are often barely indistinguishable from those of the Ministry of Commerce or Trade and Industry with both almost always advancing the cause of investors many a times at the expense of workers.

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<sup>19</sup>See <http://marikana.mg.co.za/> for timelines on what happened on the few days leading to the massacre of the workers at the Marikana mine.

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