

# Drought in Kenya:

## Climatic, Economic and Socio-Political Factors




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**Global warming has dramatically aggravated drought in Kenya, yet Dr. Serigne T. Kandji explains that sustainable solutions could still be found -- provided there was a will.**

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**K**enya is a drought-prone country, primarily because of its peculiar eco-climatic conditions. Although dissected by the equator in its southern half, Kenya contains only a few pockets of high and regular rainfall (>2000mm). Arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs) cover 80% of the territory. In these areas, where annual rainfall varies from 200 to 500 mm, periodical droughts are part of the climate system.

Communities living in these ASALs have a good understanding of drought and have developed techniques to characterise major events. Research by the development organisation Oxfam reveals that the Turkana, a nomadic community in north-western Kenya, name droughts in relation to their impacts. Thus, the 1960 drought is remembered as “Namotor” or “bones exposed” because of the high number of

dead animals. Kimududu or “the plague that killed humans and livestock” occurred in 1970. Lopiari or “sweeping everything away” refers to the 1979/80 drought.

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### **Socio-Economic & Environmental Impacts**

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What is the impact of drought on these communities and on Kenyan society as a whole? How do the populations, the government and the international community respond to drought? What can Kenya expect for the future? These are a few questions I propose to discuss in this paper.

Drought is one of the hurdles that may prevent Kenya from achieving the millennium development goals (MDGs), especially those related to poverty eradication, attainment of food security

and promotion of environmental sustainability. In the last decade alone, four major food crises were declared in Kenya, all triggered by drought:

**Four Food Crises**

January 1997: the Kenyan Government declared a state of national disaster after a severe drought threatened the livelihoods of 2 million people.

December 2000: 4 million people were in need of food aid after Kenya was hit by its worst drought in 37 years.

2004: the long rains (March–June) failed and the subsequent crop failure left more than 2.3 million people in need of assistance.

December 2005: President Kibaki declared yet another “national catastrophe” in reference to the famine that affected 2.5 million in northern Kenya.

While geography and climate largely explain Kenya’s exposure to drought, the root cause of the country’s vulnerability is its dependence on rainfall for its economic and social development. Agriculture, the mainstay of the economy, is almost entirely rain-fed. Most water for human consumption and other uses is derived from rivers whose recharge depends on rainfall. Kenya’s per capita water availability is one of the lowest in Africa, and the situation is expected to get worse due to population growth and climate change. Access to clean water is already a problem in many areas of the country, including the capital, Nairobi. But perhaps of greater concern is the fact that the Kenyan economy “runs on hydropower”. The recent droughts have exposed the risk this entails. In 2000, when drastic power rationing was imposed, the Kenya Power and Lighting Company lost US \$20 million, the economy was paralysed, and the national GDP contracted by 0.3% – Kenya’s worst performance since independence in 1963.

The way climate-related disasters impact on people’s lives is highly differentiated across Kenyan society. The most vulnerable are the rural poor who depend on agriculture and livestock for their livelihood. One clear consequence of the recurrent droughts is the escalation of poverty and food insecurity among dryland

communities. This has set in motion a range of social problems, e.g. the dismantling of family ties, child abandonment and school drop-out (especially for girls), which have far-reaching implications for the country’s development. The negative impact of drought on the environment cannot be over-emphasised. Desertification and loss of biological diversity are some of the challenges of the 21st century, and Kenya is not spared by these phenomena.

For instance, pastoralists have traditionally relied on transhumance (strategic movement of livestock to manage pasture and water resources) and splitting of stock among relatives and friends in various places. They also introduce new animal species (for example goats for cows) and practice opportunistic cultivation to adapt to changes. Other options include small trade, handicraft and migration to more favourable areas and urban settlements. These individual initiatives,



Although unsustainable use of natural resources is widely accepted as the root cause of such problems, there is no doubt that drought plays an accelerating role in the processes of desertification and biodiversity loss. Only 2% of Kenya’s land is under closed canopy forest. Any further loss of forest cover would thus be a tragedy.

**A Losing Battle?**

Communities that live in risky environments such as drylands possess a rich repertoire of responses against climatic hazards. These can range from reducing food intake to gathering forest products (fruits, firewood, medicine, and honey), to burning charcoal and selling assets. Adaptation, on the other hand, is a long-term process that entails socio-economic and institutional adjustments to sustain livelihoods in a changing environ-



when backed by strong social networks of solidarity, have enabled dryland communities to absorb significant amount of shocks.

The crisis situation that is prevailing in northern Kenya suggests that these communities are now faced with a new set of challenges beyond what they can cope with. First, droughts are becoming more and more frequent, giving victims no time

to recover. Indeed, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predicts that Kenya's drylands will be even drier in the 21st century. Second, the ASAL population is increasing as a result of both natural growth and immigration from other areas. The latest census put this population at close to 10 million people, almost a third of the Kenyan population. This has two major consequences: 1) a higher number of people are being exposed to climatic risks; 2) increased competition for scarce resources exacerbates environmental degradation, which in turn increases the communities' vulnerability to drought. Added to which are the intertribal conflicts that are becoming more violent due to the proliferation of small arms in the Horn region and to the Kenyan government's failure to provide security for its ASAL citizens. The HIV/AIDS pandemic provides another important challenge. In addition to the hefty cost of treating the disease, the disappearance of the active members of households leaves behind the most vulnerable: children and the elderly.

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## What Went Wrong

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Drought is often viewed as an event rather than a process, which explains how the international community responds – distributing relief food to stricken communities. While nobody can dispute the benefits of doing this in emergency situations, widespread use of this response in drought management is highly debatable: not only does relief food tend to keep the receiving communities in a state of absolute dependency, but it also comes at a tremendous cost. During the 2000/2001 fiscal year, Kenya spent 140 million dollars on relief food. It is argued that with a quarter of this amount, the country could have put in place a much more effective and sustainable system to address long-term food insecurity in the ASALs.

This propensity of the Kenyan government and its development partners to emphasise relief instead of pursuing real development raises a few questions. Who benefits from the status quo? Are drought-affected communities mere pawns in a major conspiracy masterminded by the



global aid industry? These are burning issues that deserve a discussion of their own. Nevertheless, there is something quite disturbing in the apathy shown by the Kenyan leadership when it comes to tackling drought. The 2005 famine provides a vivid example of this. Following a bad rainy season, there was news, both from national and international sources, that a food crisis was in the making in northern Kenya. Yet the governmental priority was to organise a referendum for the adoption of a new constitution. After an inexplicably lengthy and costly campaign, the draft constitution was rejected by the population. By the time the referendum was over, two and half million people were in need of food aid. Still, it had to take a few casualties and compelling media reports for the Kenyan authorities to finally declare a national disaster. Once again (and until the next drought), a major humanitarian crisis was averted, thanks to the 'generosity' of the Kenyan population and the international aid fraternity. How long can this situation last?

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## The Future

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According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Kenya will suffer more intense and frequent droughts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This can jeopardise many of the country's development aspirations. For Kenya, the war against drought ought to be fought on several fronts. The most urgent step is to eradicate famine and malnutrition in the drylands, which is an

achievable goal, given the significant advances made in seasonal weather forecasting, remote sensing and early warning. A regional drought-monitoring centre was established in Nairobi in 1989. Together with the FAO and the WFP, the centre monitors the food situation in the Greater Horn of Africa and issues early warnings on pending crises. Yet these advisories need to be heeded by the government officials, and the necessary measures taken early enough. Then, Kenya needs to step up its efforts to make its economy more 'climate-proof', (diversification of energy sources and investment in irrigation). Third, the authorities should take bold steps to reduce the marginalisation of the drylands and incorporate them into mainstream social and economic systems. Empowering communities so as to enhance their adaptive capacity is the only sustainable way to help them face drought. Policies, even informed by effective science and technology, cannot do without traditional knowledge.

Providing ASALs with basic infrastructure – roads, water, education and health amenities – is paramount. This is both a humanitarian cause and a matter of equity and justice. The ASALs play a part in the Kenyan economy through tourism (most wildlife is found in these areas), livestock and mining. Is it not legitimate that part of the proceeds and royalties from these activities be re-invested to ease the suffering of the local populations? In 2004, the government drafted an ambitious programme in which it proposed to spend three billion dollars (or 10% of the government's annual revenue) on ASAL development over the next 10 years. The implementation of this programme could make significant inroads towards reducing the vulnerability of dryland communities. Of course, this cannot materialise unless a lasting solution is found to the insecurity issue, an effort that will require a sincere collaboration among all countries of the Greater Horn of Africa. ■

See also Resource File pp. 55-56

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# Due South: Ernest J. Gaines's House of Fiction

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**A witness to the history of African Americans, Ernest J. Gaines nonetheless acknowledges the legacy of Faulkner and European authors. Yet in his fiction, the remembrance of things past, far from being nostalgic, opens up prospects for renewed communal values in the Deep South, as Jean-Paul Rocchi explains.**

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## Luzana Native Son

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I wanted to smell that Louisiana sun, sit under the shade of one of those Louisiana oaks [...] I wanted to see on paper those Louisiana black children walking to school on cold days while yellow Louisiana buses passed them by [...] I wanted to see on paper the true reason why those black fathers left home [...] I wanted to hear those simple religious songs, those simple prayers – that true devotion [...] And I wanted to hear that Louisiana dialect – that combination of English, Creole, Cajun, Black [...] I wanted to read about the true

relationship between whites and blacks – about the people that I had known.”

In 1978, while pondering over his literary career in his essay “Miss Jane and I”, that is how Ernest J. Gaines described the ethos of his aesthetic project – the imperious impulse and the patient determination to transcribe the memory of a place and of a people. Gaines draws his main motifs and concerns from Louisiana, also spelt and pronounced *Luzana*. He was born there in 1933. From an early age, he grew up and worked on its plantations and fields. Today, he teaches in the same region while living and writing in San Francisco. His fiction is not only

suffused with the characteristic features of Louisiana, but also with its cultural diversity inherited from the blend of Creole, Cajun and African American people. The social transformation of the South caused by post-war modernization is another trait that permeates his work. However, what is even more extraordinary is the way in which Gaines expresses a passionate interest in the daily lives of people, a hallmark of his writings. The pleasure, pains and hopes experienced by blacks in the plight of American racism are all staples of his fiction. In spite of long-ingrained racial injustice, the search for regeneration and the struggle to maintain

a communal bond best expressed as brotherhood and literal or symbolic parenthood are also prevalent themes. From his underrated first novel, *Catherine Carmier* (1964), to his first collection of short stories *Bloodline* (1968) and *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), partly inspired by his aunt Augusteen Jefferson, to his more recent pieces *In My Father's House* (1978), *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983), and *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993), Gaines continues to bear witness to the history of African Americans and to tell their stories.

### Bridging Past and Present: the Writing of the [New] South

Much in the same way as William Faulkner did when he created the region of Yoknapatawpha, Gaines imagines the fictional Bayonne for harboring the intricate lives of his protagonists. The center of his literary universe, Bayonne, is delineated by the plantations, hamlets and estates that compose two small parishes.

Transcribing the uniqueness of south Louisiana, his fiction intertwines the destiny of the landowning upper class and the Cajun lower class – both whites of French descent – with that of blacks, Protestants supposedly of African strain only, and Creoles, Catholics said to be of mixed French and African descent. This combination of an ethno-racial topography with class division has Faulknerian overtones. In the novel *Of Love and Dust* (1967), one may perceive in the white plantation owner Marshall Hebert and his Cajun overseer Sidney Bonbon Gaines's revision of the aristocratic Sartorises and parvenu Snopeses.\* But unlike his prestigious literary counterpart's South, Gaines's is not frozen in the past. Nor is it tinged with the same nostalgia or *at fortiori* fuelled by the irrecoverable loss of southern Whites' glorious past, but rather stems from the need to preserve the family and communal values of the rural past as the south enters roaring modernity. In a more realistic vein than William Styron's description of wartime Norfolk, Gaines's picture of a post-War New South unveils the anatomy of the inescapable reality brought

forth by social and technological change, the development of mechanized farming, the transformation of southern cities into industrial centers inhabited by a still-growing black population. Just as urbanization and modernization alter the landscape of the South, modernity also endangers the cohesion of southern black people whose – in Gaines's eyes – traditional if not mythical unity, solidarity and shared responsibility consequently run the risk of dislocation. With its cohort of benevolent ancestors and folk heroes – whose epitome is a stoic icon of survival, Miss Jane Pittman – the Gainesian past is therefore the privileged path to moral guidance and spirituality, in so far as these ethics save not only the individual but also the entire community. A transitional space between the two, the black family along with its corollary topics of trans-generational bond and parenthood is quite logically among Gaines's favored themes, as testified by the collection of short stories *Bloodline* or *In My Father's House*. Depicting the evolution towards progress and urbanity of St Adrienne, a small town in the vicinity of Baton Rouge, the novel may be seen as the most exemplary piece of Gaines's treatment of modernity, as regards both the characters, whose different reactions to progress are each depicted, and Gaines's own stylistic evolution. Such a change reflects the influence of modernity in the aesthetic of his fiction. In earlier novels and stories, Gaines's style oscillated between a naturalism shrouded in a slow southern rhythm and an expressionistic prose that was fragmented and hectic at times. *Catherine Carmier* is an eloquent illustration of this stylistic hybridity: alternating a deliberately detached tone when broaching the topic of mechanization with broken phrases disrupting the narrative flow elsewhere in the novel. In addition to these stylistic variations translating the changing southern landscape, *In My Father's House* introduces a rupture in the narrative strategy in so far as the empathy prevailing in early pieces is now replaced by a clearly drawn separation between story and narrator. It is through an ironic lens, for instance, that the novel's main protagonist, Philip Martin, and his ideas on progress are commented upon. It





can be contended that as the South imposed its new features, it also altered Gaines's portrayal and writing of it.

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### **Gaines's Literary Fathers: The avowed and the unavowed**

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Beyond geography, William Faulkner's influence is also noticeable in Gaines's mastery of the art of dialogue and in the transcription of southern dialects. While he has also been inspired by Gertrude Stein's rhythms and Ernest Hemingway's writing of regional speech, Gaines mostly claims the literary influence of nineteenth-century Russian novelists whose works he

has admired since attending junior college in Vallejo, California. The chronicles written by Turgenev, Gogol, and Tolstoy linger over Gaines's segregated South, and while *Catherine Carmier* was inspired by one of Lightning Hopkins's blues songs, one recognizes Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* as well. In addition to nineteenth-century Russian novelists, Gaines cites Joyce and Hemingway as major influences, thus inscribing himself in an essentially white and European lineage of letters. In this respect, he does not depart from the typical attitude of his African American literary elders, best exemplified by Ralph Ellison, who cited Faulkner and Eliot as father figures or James Baldwin, who cited Henry James. In interviews, Gaines asserted that the conspicuous absence of twentieth-

century African American novelists such as Jean Toomer, Ralph Ellison or Richard Wright from his college curriculum was the main reason why they did not exert any noteworthy influence over his literary universe, and all the less so as regards Richard Wright, who concentrated on urban settings. Beyond this artistic and narcissistic posture, Gaines's writings may nonetheless be identified as the undeniable progeny of African American literature. Spanning a century of African American history, from emancipation and the Reconstruction era to the Civil Rights Movement of the sixties, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* pays vibrant tribute to some of the most striking figures in the pantheon of black letters. A revision of the slave narrative tradition epitomized by the



autobiographical accounts of the nineteenth-century writer and political leader Frederick Douglass, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* also offers a re-writing of W. E. B. DuBois's concept of double-consciousness – being at the same time an American and a Negro – as it describes the hardship and continuous fight of the black folk, whom DuBois, at the beginning of the twentieth century, saw as the backbone of the African American experience. The novel also alludes to Martin Luther King's speeches and political philosophy of resistance. Though often unavowed, examples of a black literary influence are therefore countless. But it is with the theme of manhood that black literary lineage clearly displays its potency.

**Father to Son,  
Brother to Brother  
— Searching for  
Black America's  
Regenerated Men**

A topos of African American literature, the exploration of black manhood is a central theme of Gaines's works. His masculinism should not be overshadowed by *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, his first-person narrative told by a woman who is first and foremost a mother figure midwifing the black community. Criticized for being ideologically dubious – as it silences the most violent aspects of the sixties black protest – the novel has also been pointed at by critics for its patriarchal vein, standing in contradistinction with works by authors such as Toni Morrison or Alice Walker, who do not fail to represent black women's interiority. Indeed, men's interiority seems to be much more Gaines's terrain as well as that of his fellow African American literary men. He shares, for example, with James Baldwin a concern for black brotherhood, in both the family and communal sense of the word. Like the contemporary African American author John Edgar Wideman, Gaines also deals with fatherhood, a theme often connected to the no-less-problematic question of race. In his 1983 novel *A Gathering of Old Men*, several elderly black men voice their

experience of racism and the alienation resulting from racial injustice, but also the subservience they sometimes showed. Partaking of a long tradition in African American letters of representing black men's marginality, absence or destruction, instead of focusing exclusively on racial and social exclusion, Gaines lays the emphasis on relationships between men, their solidarity and communality. In this same-gender community, the fate of young black men is of paramount importance, as testified by the collection of short stories *Bloodline* and the novel *Of Love and Dust*. The parallel with Richard Wright's own thematic interest for black youth is even more striking with *A Lesson before Dying*. In this text, which denounces the metaphorical castration of black men by American legal and social institutions, the 21-year-old Jefferson is the innocent bystander of a gun battle between two of his acquaintances and a white Cajun storeowner, Grope, who refuses to let them buy alcohol on credit. The only survivor of the fight, Jefferson is convicted of the storeowner's murder by a white jury. As a result of his white lawyer's poor defense based on the stereotypical argument that black men are culturally deprived beasts for whom savagery is natural – this state of innocence making them unable to weigh the consequences of their actions – like

Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Jefferson is sentenced to death. A reminder of numerous fictional episodes where the voice of black men is silenced, Jefferson's voicelessness is not however emblematic of Gaines's treatment of black masculinity. As the novel develops and intertwines the fates of different men, Gaines demonstrates less of an interest in the social and political parameters leading to the cyclical repetition of violence – a form of social determinism exemplified by Wright's character – than in the black men's capacity to re-build their selfhood. It is by means of giving space to their inner emotions and entering the regenerating realm of male bonding that they may become subjects again. This empathy for his gender is also Gaines's sense of the communal narrative – voicing black men's voice regained. ■

\* A very old, ubiquitous family names in Yoknapatawpha Country. The once-aristocratic Sartoris were slaveholders before the Civil War. The name is also often frequently used to refer to the family plantation.

As a class of people, the Snopeses are the antithesis of the highbrow society represented by Colonel Sartoris. Whereas Sartoris is refined and carries himself with Old World gentility, the Snopeses are crass, poor, and ill-mannered.

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Do you have a better quality?