

# Wall Pop Art in **KENYA**

(1978-1980)



**BARTOLOMÉ LEAL**  
Text & Photographs

75 years





Between 1978 and 1980 I had the chance to work in Nairobi, Kenya, and during that time, I was able to take photographs of the local scene, as an amateur. The country was rapidly advancing in the process of building a national identity, and many changes were taking place.

Several ethnic groups lived in the Kenyan territory. The city was the place where people gathered to seek their livelihoods since colonial times; this was occurring not as an expression of a particular tribal group, but rather as the people of a new country. British power had generated the new reality of urban life. The city grew by way of the mingling of Kikuyu and Kamba from central Kenya; Luo and Luyia from the north; Swahili from the coast, and some Masai and Turkana, to mention only the main ethnic groups.

In this context, the need to transmit messages from sellers to potential buyers among the citizens —the wanainchi— of this new nation, in the form of publicity emerged. A visually stimulating publicity was needed, addressing people who spoke different languages and, in many cases, did not know how to read. That is why an important graphic expression was born in the streets of the emerging cities. An archaic form of publicity appeared, relying on drawings and painted messages, in a time before the development of the more modern patterns of advertisement.

This was the subject matter of my search for images and of the photos I took. The photographs shown here were taken between 1978 and 1980. Given the conditions of the places where the paintings were done and the techniques and/or materials used by the artists, plus the unavoidable progress in the cities, it is highly improbable that many of these gems of popular art exist today.

This is what I wish to preserve, humbly, for the present and future generations.

**Bartolomé Leal**  
25 November, 2021



75 years

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*in* KENYA  
(1978-1980)

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*To Andrea Matte-Baker for our long and fruitful friendship.*

*To Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o for an everlasting inspiration.*

## Wall Pop Art in Kenya (1978-1980)

Between 1978 and 1980, while working in Nairobi, Kenya, I had the opportunity of taking photographs of a popular art form, albeit as an amateur. During that period, at least three important events took place in Kenya: the visit of recently appointed Catholic Pope Jean Paul II; the passing away of Mzee Jomo Kenyatta (Kenya's "father of the nation"); as well as the overthrow, after a bloody revolt, of the dictatorship of Uganda's Idi Amin Dada. In my mind, I perceived these events as producing changes in the general mood of society: a widely held feeling that maturity as a nation was approaching for Kenya. This was also the period when Kenyan long-distance runners began to be

celebrated for their records in international sports competitions.

I had the impression that the country was rapidly advancing in the process of building a truly national identity. Several ethnic groups lived in the Kenyan territory, formerly called the East African Community (Kenya, Tanganyika and Uganda). The borders established by the colonial power had little significance. This was the case in many African countries up until that time. The *Swahili* from the coast were closer to people from Tanzania (Dar-Es Salaam and Zanzibar), and the *Luo* that occupied the Kenyan part of Lake Victoria were akin to a branch of the Ugandan kingdoms. In addition, the people from central Kenya —the *Kikuyu*, *Kamba*, *Kalenjin* and *Masai*— had existed for centuries in that area, quarreling for land, cattle and/or women. And the *Turkana* and *Galla* from the deserts of the north and northeast were almost considered people from another planet.

In any case, a free Kenya, after the Mau Mau rebellion and the traumatic liberation from the chains of colonial power, was trying to consolidate a common life of coexistence for those millions of people who had different

languages, traditions, production patterns, religious beliefs and, last but not least, forms of understanding and creating art. The dominant religions were aiming to unify the various groups under the name of Christ or Mahomet. Politicians created slogans in order to convince the citizens to accept the common project of creating a country. But above all, the explosion of the city as a new way of life was a major force in creating a new Kenyan patriotism. This process was of great interest to me.

The city was the place where people had gathered to seek their livelihoods since colonial times; this was occurring not as an expression of a particular tribal group but rather, as the people of a new country. British power had generated this phenomenon of urban life. Population movements to Nairobi transformed it from the previous two lines of tents that were erected in 1900 by the constructors of the railroad Mombasa-Uganda, to a new metropolitan settlement of nearly a million people. This was the situation when I arrived there in 1978. The city grew by way of the mingling of *Kikuyu* and *Kamba* from central Kenya; *Luo* and *Luyia* from the north; *Swahili* from the coast,

and some *Masai* and *Turkana*, to mention only the main ethnic groups. These people are extremely different in many ways... but similar in that they sought their livelihoods and the bettering of their life and welfare.

All this happened in parallel with the growth of the Asian community. Asians had migrated to Kenya to take part in trade and industrial activities, as well as professional services, banking, tourism and so forth. Some came from Pakistan or India, and others from the neighboring Uganda, after enduring expulsion by Idi Amin. A monetary economy was now prevalent in Kenya, far from the barter of rural life. For African Kenyans, trading and participating in the industrial sector, as well as crafts, tourism services, cooking and laundry, were some of the ways of inserting themselves in the urban economy. Add to this, preachers, prostitutes, drivers, gardeners, as well as politicians. In sum, an entire people that had moved from rural areas were contributing to all kinds of urban needs. This also, more and more, included professionals trained in the prestigious University of Nairobi.



*Messages from sellers to buyers*

In this context, the need to transmit messages from sellers to potential buyers in the form of publicity emerged, not only for the richer sectors, but for the *wanainchi*, the common citizens. A visually stimulating publicity was needed, addressing people who were not used to read. That is why an important graphic expression was born in the streets of the emerging cities; in passageways, alleys, passageways and walls all over the city. An archaic form of publicity appeared, relying on drawings and painted messages, in a time before the development of the more modern patterns of advertisement so common today.

Certain “ad optimism” is present in many of the paintings. Such optimism is testified by the humor present in most of the works. This humor sometimes becomes nonsensical. But mostly, and this is of interest, such absurdity is the result of the rather uneasy conditions of working on walls, ceilings, columns and other architectonic devices not always fit for art. The artists did their best, with good or bad taste, with high or low capacity, to accomplish their tasks under these constraints.

There are some slight differences between open street art and production for indoor places. Both types are for public use. In bars, restaurants, hair salons, hotels and so on, the intention was of course to attract clients. But in these inside spaces, there is also more liberty in the contents of the art production. Here we find more themes of popular customs, particularly those of the interface between rural and urban life. The lion hunt, the herding of cattle, the gatherings around the fire to listen to stories, the proximity to wild animals, witchcraft, the depiction of a man attempting to run away from a mob that was intent on stoning him, dancing, the sharing of a beer, and much more, are taken as decorations for walls and ceilings in public places, particularly bars.

*In search of a style*

Naturally this had nothing to do with the traditional painting, nor was it by any means at the vanguard of plastic art. Realism was the preferred style, understood in a very loose and free manner. It was not “serious” art, and was not preoccupied with individual expression. It was to a certain extent an anonymous and community-oriented activity.

However, one can identify some individual authors or workshops. It is predominantly a visual testimony that brings together needs, suffering, happiness and the everyday problems of people... And it is about values: to congregate rather than separate, and to integrate rather than protest.

There is not much else to say to contribute to building a theoretical framework for this kind of pictorial popular expression. The only aspect that is far from controversy is that there is nothing “tribal” in Kenyan wall paintings. It is impossible to recognize the characteristics that make the craftsmanship of *Masai*, *Giriama* or the *Swahili* from Lamu, for example, recognizable. In fact, this painting is a product of the melting pot of the original cultures under patterns that arise from the needs of economic and social exchanges of a purely urban type. However, the similarity of some schemes (photographic shops, hairdressing ads, political panels) show that artists tended to reproduce some common features, probably due to their proved success.

Which were the pictorial references of these wall paintings? First, the aesthetics of the comic strip is undoubtedly present:

naturalism, funniness, a two-dimensional point of view, flat and plain saturated colors, emphasis on details not always important, lack of awareness of “correct” proportions. Second, a deep awareness of the ephemeral character of the art predominates. It is assumed that the paintings could be replaced or destroyed according to the practical needs of the client. Third, a stunning absence of any feature of spiritualism is frequent, far from religion, magic or ideology of any kind. Again, there is nothing showing traditional tribal art; but nothing either of the western tradition of “beaux arts”.

### *The wall paintings*

Some additional words are necessary in order to clarify what is meant. This is not only “Bar Art”, and not only “Nairobi Bar Art”, as this label has been used to characterize these murals. Most of the photographs here were shot in Dagoretti, Malindi, Meru, Mombasa, Mtito Andei, Nairobi, Nakuru and Voi. The art of wall painting and decoration was at that time present in most towns of the country. That is why I prefer to speak of “Wall Pop Art” in Kenya. I have approached the subject with a very free use of Panofsky’s

concept of iconological analysis. In any case, these notes and the captions to the pictures are above all a salute full of admiration to those anonymous artists, who gave us so much pleasure. Their humble capacity to articulate an aesthetic creation with a simple purpose, frail means and little recognition.

Lastly, all the photographs shown here were taken between 1978 and 1980, with a manual Canon AT-1 camera equipped with a Vivitar short zoom 35-85 mm. I used film slides of 25, 50 or 64 ASA. Very amateur utensils, indeed. Given the conditions of the places where the paintings were done and the techniques and/or materials used by the artists, plus the unavoidable progress in the cities, it is highly improbable that many of these gems of popular art exist today.♦

**Wall Pop Art in Kenya**  
(1978-1980)

*Gallery of Pictures*



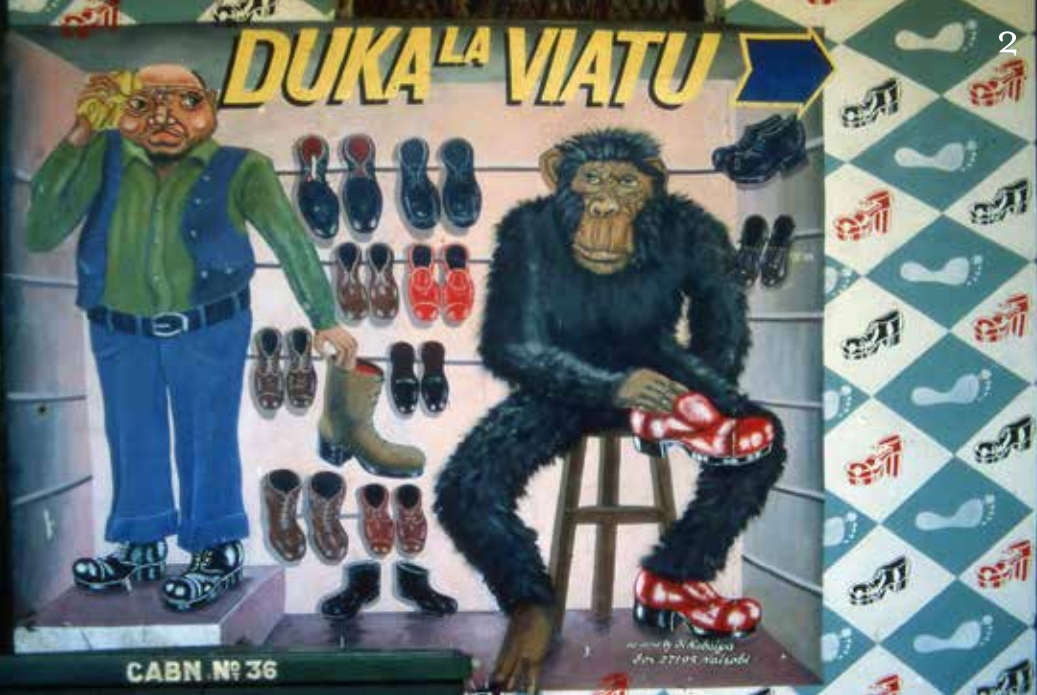
## Picture 1: A Corner Building

*River Road* is the name of a street in downtown Nairobi. It is a popular neighborhood where trading, restoration, boarding and lodging, coffee shops, retailing and other commercial activities spread. This street as well as some small lanes and minor roads do not belong to the typical tourist area of Nairobi, but to the area local people use to buy and sell and carry out commercial activities. *River Road* has also been considered dangerous for visitors. A novel: *Going Down River Road*, by Kenyan author Meja Mwangi has made it famous (or infamous).

The building shown in the picture is one of the Indian style structures common in this area. Most of these buildings were built during the 20's and 30's with the involvement of Asian builders. They normally have a shop or other kind of business on the main floor. The owners of the shop frequently live on the first and second floor, with their extended family. A lot of people go to *River Road* shopping or just strolling around. The street also has some of the most popular restaurants in the area, providing both food from the coast (kebabs and other kinds of Muslim dishes) as well as Indian food, in their meat eating and vegetarian. Worth mentioning in the first category are the Hadramut Hotel, and the other are the Nargis Kapuri Pan and the Supreme Restaurant.

A painting of a gorilla can be seen in Picture 1, hidden in the corridor. The columns, which support the balcony, are also painted with decorations.☺





Picture 2:  
**The Shoemaker and the Monkey**

DUKA LA VIATU. This means shoe shop in *Swahili*. The message is more or less the following: this artisan is so good that he feels able to make a pair of boots even for a huge feet gorilla like the one depicted. According to the style of such shoes, it is a male gorilla. In any case, it has been a hard job. That is why the shoemaker is sweating profusely and wiping the sweat from his brow. He shows an alternative to his client with an expressive air of hope.

This is a unique piece of comedy, full of love for details in composition and mood. It represents a joke by itself, a marvelous example of the capacity of Kenyans to make fun of themselves. The shoemaker might be a member of the *Kamba*, an important ethnic group in Kenya, credited as being excellent artisans in the metallurgy including lead objects and armaments. At the time when the picture was taken, most of the military and police were *Kamba*. However, his bald head could make him a *Kikuyu*, the predominant tribe in Nairobi, and the main source of a local bourgeoisie devoted to business and industry.

The gorilla looks happy (in his idiosyncratic way) as he is surrounded by several types of shoes and has succeeded in finding a model that fits his enormous feet. This picture could be the illustration for a popular *Kikuyu* proverb that states: *Njamba ndiriagwo niwira* (A hard job does not scare a tough man).<sup>5</sup>



Picture 3: **Decoration of the Shop**

The shoemaker is a master at his job and offers a variety of styles and colors. He is also a wise man and knows his responsibilities. In this sense his attitude is the response to a request that reflects this *Luyia* saying: Omukhongo sakhulira esyawo (Everybody has the right to ask for service). The artist, who is good at drawing, seems to have deliberately produced a sort of awkward presentation of the shoes to enforce the funny side of the painting. The artist is not anonymous. His signature as well as his P.O. Box in Nairobi is prominent on the wall for potential clients to see.

The detail shown in Picture 3 is however non-narrative. It is purely decorative as it is part of the near columns and the background of the main picture. Proportions and brightness of the product seem to be adequately served by the artist. He knows that publicity needs to win by being a knockout.☺



Picture 4: **Town Bar**

Painting on bar walls is one of the most important sources of inspiration and money for popular artists in Kenya. What predominates here is the free - if not wild deployment of colors, the transmission of welcoming messages, the humor (generally picaresque), the straightforwardness of physical representation of persons and objects... Perhaps there is much less care with psychological refinements. But it must be taken into account that what all this is about is to sell drinks to people.

The painting in Picture 4 is in a public market place in Rui Rui, a small town on the Mombasa-Nairobi highway. The town is regularly utilized as a stopover by passengers, particularly of trucks and buses. Apart from the bars providing refreshments, several services are offered, for example night clubs, boarding and lodging, hairdressing, shopping and so on. It is clear that in this case it is the specific decoration of the screen in front of the bar allows customers to notice the existence of a hidden message. The expression of the lady as well as her turgid protuberances, unsubtly suggested by her clothes, allows everybody to understand that the place is dedicated to encounters with ladies. It is not written nor announced, but the devil's tail growing upward from the letter R is a clear call to sin. This last means that paying for sex is also welcome... or perhaps offered in the place.

This is a nice example of one of the most remarkable characteristics of many wall paintings in Kenya: the pictorial transmission of subliminal messages. These are in all cases substitutes for the words (texts to be read), which are at the outset not understood by illiterate clients. The images also allow to the

capture of hidden meanings. In any case, it is evident that the pictorial representation allows for a deeper understanding of some particularly significant details in the process of communication. It must be said that this entire process is helped by the generous addition of humor, which is always a contribution of the artists themselves. Apart from the different beers that welcome the customer (*Karibuni*), a popular analgesic is offered both for adults and children (*Kwa Watoto*).<sup>2</sup>



### Picture 5: **Publicity for a Traditional Beer Brewing**

The process of migration from rural to urban areas reached very widespread levels in Kenya during the 70's. After the sometimes-bloody fight for independence from colonial rule, which took place in the former two decades, a strong development of urban areas began all over the nation. This meant the displacement of people in a way similar to the one experienced in other countries in Asia and Latin America.



If in economic terms such a process was marked by the search of better living conditions, at the cultural level it undoubtedly had traumatic consequences. In such a context, rural life was seen as a sort of lost paradise, where joy and peace predominated, among other idealized values. Such nostalgia for unsullied nature and the quietness of rural life is still present in the Kenyan collective imagination.

This painting is the publicity for an artisan beer, CHIBUKU. This kind of beer had in that time a very limited distribution in Kenya, a pattern similar for home brewing in other parts of the world. In any case, Kenya has always counted with a recognition of the good quality in the production of this beverage, and has been praised by critics and specialists.\* In this case the message in *Swahili* is: Kwa maisha marefu, kunywa CHIBUKU Beer (To enjoy a long life, drink CHIBUKU Beer) sums up the basic message. The message is pictorially strengthened by a couple of *Kikuyu* elders in traditional garments. They represent both the Arcadian values as well as the desire for a happy old

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\* See: Michael Jackson, *The World Guide to Beer*, Running Press, Philadelphia, 1977, pages 244-245

age in desirable company. It must be noted that the message is not written in *Kikuyu* but in *Swahili* in order to reach a wider market, i.e., other ethnic groups that are present in the urban life at Kenya.ð



Pictures 6, 7, 8 & 9:  
**“Horror Vacui” on the road**

Mtito Andei is a small village close to the middle of Mombasa-Nairobi highway. It offers a variety of services to the traveler, be they merchants or tourists. In the case of these pictures, the decoration is shared by several businesses, among them a bar. In the cover we can see the amazing image of a merman, possibly a touch of humor on the part of the painter. This could be explained by a common traffic on this highway: seafood and fish carried from the coast to the



cities of the interior. We can also see on the same wall, a family having their food, using a set of furniture awkwardly sketched with a very limited knowledge of proportions and perspective. We can also see that respect for the painted wall is far from being enforced by owners of the business.

In Picture 6 there is a decoration with scrolls and other elaborate decorations. These last, in a way similar to that used in the baroque style, occupies all spaces not covered by people. It does not seem that any particular representation is sought with such scrolls, even symbolic. The objective appears to be purely ornamental. In fact, these motives



are repeated in Picture 7, showing a screen in the lodging area; and also, the case in Picture 8, the bar, where we can see a couple dancing. This last two pictures display young people, which seem to be, both for the artist and the customer, a synonym of the joy of life. It is interesting to note the effort to solve some strictly pictorial problems. Thus, in Picture 8 the artist uses very few colors, possibly due to restrictions in the materials available. In any case, if we look at the scrolls, it is possible to guess that another hand has made some very rough retouches, apparently different from the one of the painters. Perhaps it is the same hand that made the advertisement of the bar

itself, that can be seen on the left side of the image.

It must be stressed that at that time Kenya was undergoing the influence of novel cultural patterns emerging in the West and were becoming global in their influence. Television, tourism, music, publicity, consumerism, were part of the new urban life. Fashions, as they concerned dancing and clothing, are visible in Picture 7 and Picture 8. A detail to note: the presence of kerosene lamps. This is a testimony of the problems of electric shortages that existed in Kenya during the 70's, due mainly to the sustained drought that ravaged the country.

Picture 9 is particularly remarkable because it shows a pictorial solution to decorate a hidden corner of a wall in the room occupied by the bar. Following the baroque concept of filling all spaces, an effort was made to reach that place with decorations. But in addition we can see a sort of evolution of the volutes to build up a weird face on the left, which introduces a disturbing malevolent presence in the far angle.

A purely art centered deduction could be made here. In most of the bars photographed there was an exterior painting that sent the



message that in the interior there were also some further paintings of the same artist or something similar. In other words, an esthetic appeal is made to the costumers. This is coherent with traditional African art, where most objects have a touch of creativity that blends utility and beauty, as a search for aesthetic pleasure in life.ð



Picture 10: **Door of a Bar**

Again, the screen is obligatory in premises where it is expected that what happens inside is not viewed by people passing by, particularly women and children, it is in fact the vehicle for hidden messages. In this case, apart from being a bar and a hotel, the place offers also services of *coiffure* and make-up. The hair being done and the spotted face of the feminine figure subtly suggests this last. But the factual evidence that the lady is half-naked somehow transforms this seemingly innocent offer into an amusing call to sin. Prostitution was at those times a



very widespread as a way of life for many women in the country, to which international tourism and transnational business provided numerous opportunities.

The elephant head on the left is the symbol of the Tusker Beer, one of the most consumed national brands. It could be interesting to point out that the elephant used as a model was not a common one, but a very famous real specimen called Ahmed, apparently the owner of a pair of huge tusks that amazed everybody. It is a famous story in the country and the company that produced Tusker Beer adopted it as a symbol.☺



### Pictures II, I2 & I3: Couples

This painting in a bar in the highway Mombasa-Nairobi (Picture 11) presents a landscape that is recurrent in art fashioned for tourists. It has been reproduced in a variety of countries and contexts, up to the point of its total degradation. However, in this particular case the iconography of the background is representative of the real panorama in the area of Mombasa and other places of the Indian Ocean in Kenya, particularly the beaches. The boat that is seen at the right is one of the typical *dhow*s used by artisan fishermen since ancient times. The



fact that it is operated with a pole instead of sails (only the poles are seen) testifies that the weather is mild, with no wind, ready for love and laziness in the quietness of the beach, as this young couple enjoys it. A couple of monkeys, in the background, playing in a palm tree, is also a common sight in the area. But it is also known that the behavior of these animals has been always a source of sexual education for the young. With this, the animals acquire a symbolic meaning and allow the artist to make a roguish joke.

Picture 12 shows a different couple, of mature age but not strictly old. Bald heads, particularly among the *Kikuyu*, represent



dignity, elegance and solvency. It is considered an attribute of politicians but also of intellectuals, very respected in Kenyan society at that time. Besides, the lady looks very well dressed and coiffed. She smiles seductively on as she chats with her companion. Note her magnificent and opulent plumpness. She proudly exhibits her jewels. The man drinks a pint of beer, a quantity that is obligatory according to the standards of Kenyan masculinity. It is probably a White Cap Beer. The lady is drinking a Tusker Export Beer, easily identifiable for the color and the type of the bottle. Both use glasses, which is another signal of refinement. It is important to observe

in this Picture 12 that there is an intelligent use of the word BAR (in capital letters) to serve as a support for the table and the chairs which, against the white background, give a great sense of harmony to this composition.

A culturally different version of the eternal subject of the flirt is given in Picture 13. The scene happens in a milk bar in Mombasa. Kenyan Muslims do not drink alcohol, but they are great consumers of strong coffee and sweet pastries. This young couple is enjoying both delicacies. However, their minds are removed from the mere act of eating and drinking. A charmingly erotic link flows between them. Concerning their outfits, not all Muslims from the coast employ the kind of turban worn by this gentleman: several variants of the Islam are current in the Kenyan society. It is possible that the proprietor of the place has influenced the election of the clothes. What is more interesting is the costume of the lady. In the coast of Kenya, the traditional *chador*, common among the Shiite women, has been reduced here to a coquette veil, normally black, which covers the head and falls to the back. As can be seen in this wall painting, well defined lines highlight the delicate curves of the young woman and her curly

hair is clearly detached (and not hidden) by the chador, called a *bui-bui* locally. There is also a hidden joke here, as the man is not savoring any pastry: his interest is obviously in succeeding to taste the sweetness of his young companion. There is a *Swahili* saying that states: *Simba mwenda kimya ndiye mla nyama* (The lion which moves silently is the one that eats the meat).<sup>ᵀ</sup>



Pictures 14, 15, 16 & 17:  
**Hairdressing**

Houses dedicated to the care of hair, including cutting, shampooing and *coiffure*, are among the ones that demand the most from graphic artists. This building in downtown Nairobi hosts one of those shops (Picture 14) and the staircase that takes people up the place marks the way (Picture 15).

Different hands and disperse qualities are evident in these drawings, possibly due to the job of an artistic workshop with a master helped by his assistants. In this line, the door



with the heads of Picture 16 is a small jewel of subtle feminine charm.

In any case, there is also service for gentlemen who wish to give the impression of being handsome, as this announcement of a *Duka ya Kinyozi* claims (Picture 17). A *Luyia* proverb, an ethnic group that





contributes with an important amount of urban proletariat in Nairobi, reflects this preoccupation for being good-looking: *Owasio akhulola khuyakhulanga* (A person will observe you before he invites you).<sup>9</sup>



## Pictures 18 & 19: **Photography Ateliers**

There is here a typical contradiction of naïf art shared by most wall pop-art painters in Kenya: the artist represents in a radically inconsequential manner the technical means that could help him to directly improve the quality of his own messages. In this case let us talk of photography. At the time when these images were captured, technical ways to use the best photographic support for publicity existed. These were available in most Kenyan cities. However, in the example



shown in Picture 18, the owners of a couple of shops in the town of Meru, near Mount Kenya, preferred the traditional way of a painting to promote their businesses. In both cases the machines are drastically distorted, even unrecognizable. What is impossible to misinterpret is the attitude of the photographer and the photographed. And in both cases the announcement illustrates two favorite kinds of pictures: marriages and children.

The example that follows, in Nairobi (Picture 19), demonstrates that the approach was not confined to small towns, and the preference for painted pictures was a cultural

pattern widely shared. All ways and means were accepted, including the most astonishing deformation of natural proportions like in this painting. Anyway, it is not possible to deny that some element of humor is also hidden under these sketches of photographic devices as strange as absurd machines. Perhaps magic to exorcize competition? A *Kikuyu* proverb says: *Ita cia maitho ititiraga* (The war of the eyes never comes to an end).<sup>5</sup>



### Picture 20: **Decorated House**

This beautiful house of the suburbs of Mombasa, close to the road that leads to the beaches of the south, to Zanzibar and Dar-es-Salaam, is an example of purely ornamental embellishment. The proprietor insisted in posing with his residence, declaring that he was very proud of its aesthetic qualities. He was aware that the precarious maintenance and the deterioration of the building meant a short life expectation for it. He could not say who the artist was, only mentioning that it is “somebody from around”.

Not only outside the house but also in the inner rooms there is a prodigious fantastic representation of flora and fauna of this part of the country. Almost all the walls have paintings and drawings, as well as on the ceilings. But the deterioration of the building was advanced and the destruction imminent. The man was a widower and felt very sick. He knew he would die soon, and was conscious that his sons, who allowed him to live there until the end of his days to depart to enjoy Mahomet's paradise, will demolish the house. He suffered from terminal elephantiasis, which deformed his legs and feet, hidden under his *kikoi*, the traditional robes of men in the coast.☺



Pictures 21, 22 & 23:  
**Fantastic Zoology**

This picture shows a detail of the former house. It is interesting to see the liberty deployed by the artist in drawing the animals. Any attempt at realism is absent here. He freely interprets the forms of the animals, keeping only some fundamental features, as for example, the horn of this impossible rhinoceros. It is interesting to also note the colors and tones chosen, looking for harmony with the neighboring vegetation. A charming solution in composition is manifest with





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those palms emerging from the windows, a response to the need to fill all the spaces available.

Being Kenya a sort of paradise of wildlife, the representations of lions, elephants, giraffes, rhinoceros or hyenas is very common in the art made for tourists. The naturalism of those paintings is the norm and fine art is increasingly absent. The paintings shown here are a rare example of a loose and unrestricted interpretation of some topical subjects of the tourist industry of images.



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However, domestic animal are also matter of funny or realistic interpretation by the artists, as those shown in Pictures 22 & 23.ð



## Pictures 24 & 25: **Butcheries**

Most Kenyan citizens know that the meat they buy in the butchery or the one served to them in the restaurant comes from specific animals. Plagues and maladies are hidden in certain beasts. Details of cutting are important. It is then important for them to identify as clearly as possible those animals. That is why the shops specialized in meat procure to respond to that cultural feature of the citizens. Anyway, the love for meat is reflected in this sample of *Masai* wisdom: *Menyanyukie esajati oloilelee katukul* (Even



a small piece of the cow's shank is worth something).

The decorator of this butchery in Nairobi (Picture 24) applies a sort of rude and down-to-earth realism, without leaving much space for artistic breakthroughs, although his technique in the use of oil painting allows him to reach a volumetric expression that is absent in other paintings of the neighborhood. At a butcher in the center of Mombasa (Picture 25), on the contrary, the artist preferred to explore the tenderness and beauty of the animals, at the same time putting emphasis on the conviviality of the Muslim and Christian cultures, as is testified by the customers in the painting.☺



### Picture 26: A touch of Surrealism

This is the publicity from a road transport and courier company from Mombasa, which offers services to other cities in the country. They try to communicate, with a rather complicated although direct semiotics, that they practically fly to accomplish their mission. In consequence, the fish will arrive adequately fresh to the table, no matter how far the client is. As the *Kikuyu* says: *Kiambi nda nikiö giakûra* (The food eaten first lasts longest in the stomach).

It must be said that such a Magritte like approach is far from being common in popular paintings, which prefers distortions in the context of strict realism. In this case the name of the company surely helped to understand the message and again, the humor makes up the rest of the meaning.☺



Picture 27: A touch of Walt Disney

The Mickey Mouse hairstyle, which caused a furore among Kenyan girls, serves as a support for the commerce of garments in a Nairobi shop. Maybe due to the influence

of the proprietor, most probably an Asian Kenyan citizen, the style of the painting is much more precise and functional.☺





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## Pictures 28, 29, 30, 31, 32 & 33: **Fashion**

Fashion is a particularly important concern among Kenyan citizens. Urban life demands it and the ancient tradition of elegance also has an influence. Gentlemen (Picture 28) seek formal attire to match their responsibilities or accomplishments. Young people want to be in tune with global trends in clothes and hairstyles (Pictures 29, 30 & 31). Little girls and also their moms know that presentation, including footwear, is fundamental (Pictures 32 & 33).





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It is good to follow the Masai proverb: *Tijina ilaanyuni, mijin ilaanyisho* (Be one of those who is waited for, not one of those who waits).<sup>3</sup>

**WE SELL *BABY CLOTHES* *BABY SUITS***

***GIRLS DRESSES BOYS SUITS***

**LADIES SUIT SKIRTS DRESSES**

***BABY BLANKETS TOWELS NAPPIES***

**LADIES BRA PANTY**

**STEP IN FOR MORE VARIETYS**





Never forget the importance of feet, as the Swahili use to say: *Mtembezi hula miguu yake* (A rolling stone gathers no moss).<sup>၁</sup>



Picture 34: **Bonus**

A bar in downtown Nairobi, where two peasants in traditional clothes are painted drinking their pombe (beer) from ox chops, an invitation to remember the happy days of rural life indoors.ð

## Sources of proverbs and sayings

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Bartolomé Leal, Nairobi, 1978.

BARTOLOMÉ LEAL is a Chilean writer who has expressed himself mostly in the mystery and noir genre. In 1994 he published his first novel -*The Lynching of Moses Orieyo: A Roman Noir set in Kenya*. It is here that his detective Tim Tutts made his first appearance. Since then, he has published novels, short stories and anthologies to complete about thirty books. Among his “African” novels *Blanca de Negro* (White Woman, Black Man, 2015) and *El martirio del reverendo* (The Martyrdom of the Reverend, 2016) stand out. Both novels have the detective Tim Tutts as the main character. He has published three Andean-themed crime novels, *Morir en La Paz* (Dying in La Paz, 2003), *En el Cusco el Rey* (In Cusco the King, 2007) and *La venganza del aparapita* (The Revenge of the Beggar, 2020). *Angeles en el Kosovo* (Angels in Kosovo, 2014) is a product of his experience in the Balkans wars. From his experiences in Haiti came the book of stories and legends *Historias del muñeco vudú* (Tales of the Voodoo Puppet, 2013). Other crime novels by Bartolomé Leal are *Memorias de un asesino en serie* (Memoirs of a Serial Killer, 2012) and *Femicidios a la carta* (Femicides on the Menu, 2019). His *noir* novel *Sombras en La Cresta* (Shadows in the Top) was a finalist in the International Competition “Fantoques”, Cuba, 2019. In 2021 his novel *Misterios de Quito* (The Mysteries of Quito), set in colonial times and starring the detective monk Hugo de Guajardo has been released.

*Wall Pop Art in Kenya (1978-1980)*

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