Ode to Ochieng
By Muiru Ngugi

A journalism trainer recalls his first encounter with the genius of Kenya’s literary journalism and punditry.

While in college at the KIMC in the late 1980s, I visited the Nation newsroom as part of a class tour and saw columnist Philip Ochieng for the first time. The Nation offices were at that time located in the Old Nation house on Tom Mboya Street. This was an occasion for us, journalism students, to see the big names of Kenyan journalism at that time in their natural habitat.

We ogled at the stars: Joe KADHI, Managing Editor and author of Joe Kadhi Asks Why? Column; Wahome Mutahi, writer of the Whispers column, who, for some reason, we kept associating with the Masharubu column; John Nyamu, sports writer of considerable repute; Joseph Karimi, News Editor who had co-authored The Kenyatta Succession with Ochieng; and Njoroge Karuri, Photographer extraordinaire.

Ochieng, then Associate Editor, was also in the newsroom. It was a year or so before his surprise appointment by President Moi as Editor-in-Chief of the party newspaper, the Kenya Times. Of all the faces that we saw in the Nation newsroom that day, Ochieng’s stuck in my mind. He was wearing a pair of black slacks, a blue shirt with thin white strips. A rather long tie hung down to his zipper like a tease-ornament or was it a phallus symbol? His reading glasses lay on his chest, suspended by a thin ornamented rope hanging from around his neck. At one point, he put them on, stood up, peered at us from above his glasses, and I wondered why a man would put on his glasses in order to look from above them. He then proceeded to Kadhi’s cubicle with a sheaf of papers.

Although he did not say anything to us, his demeanor was intimidating. His pitch-black hair was cropped so that not a single strand of it was out of place. He was an austere man whose sight was reminiscent of the strict disciplinarian teacher whom I dreaded in high school. His writings, as well as rumors we had encountered about his no-nonsense character, cast a certain extrinsic mysticism around him. No one from our group spoke to him. Yet we left with a part of him indelibly imprinted in our minds.

How could that happen? What was the source of this spell? I have tried to grapple with this for a long time and I think I may have figured it out. But I will return to that later.

My next meeting with Ochieng was in 1989 when I felt threatened at my job at the Weekly Review and sought an appointment with him. I arrived at the Kingsway Building on University Way where the Kenya Times was based. I had noticed that Ochieng was poaching journalists from the other newspapers and giving them better pay. He had already poached the likes of Joe Odindo, and was showing off in his stable a strikingly
beautiful midget of a reporter by the name of Makena Ariitho. All of us male cub reporters in Nairobi newsrooms at that time could have joined KT to work for seven years without pay just to be within striking distance of this reporteress.

A KT reporter who was smoking near the entrance told me that editor was in; he showed me his brand new, official, Peugeot 505 to proof it. It was parked right next to the entrance of the building, which made me think the editor did not like waiting for his car to be fetched. As the guard let me in, he told me that the editor’s office was on the second floor. Once on second floor, I approached the door with not a little trepidation. I was going to see the giant himself, writer of powerful, closely argued editorials and front page commentaries, most of them cast in the mold of philosophy, others of LitCrit, not to mention the author of a language clinic column which chronicled how poorly we all wrote.

What was I going to tell him, now that the moment of reckoning had come? Supposing he called my boss, HBN, and told him I was attempting to defect? The door was not locked; apparently, an open-door policy was literary in effect. Inside lay the most clean maroon carpet I had ever seen. I man sat on a comfortable office chair, facing away from me and overlooking the University of Nairobi main campus, reading a newspaper. I did not knock; I just stood there, transfixed, worried, and tongue-tiered. Very slowly, I proceeded – backward. I left without speaking to him. Downstairs, the guard looked at me in a manner suggesting that that was the shortest visitation he had ever witnessed.

The next time I saw Ochieng was sometimes in 1992, when I attended the launching ceremony for Ochieng’s book, I Accuse the Press, at Nairobi’s Professional Center. Ochieng had invited his buddy, a law Professor at the University of Nairobi, who, after the obligatory nice speech of introduction, invited Ochieng to introduce his book. Ochieng was wearing a grey suit with a blue tie. A matching kerchief adorned his jacket a few inches above where I assumed his heart was. Gitau Warigi, my colleague who was going to do a review of the book, listened carefully. At the end, Ochieng invited questions from the audience. A handful of people asked a few questions, and Ochieng appeared rather disappointed at, perhaps, the quality of the questions.

Ochieng needs no introduction if you have been reading the Kenyan press. If you have not, here is a primer: Ochieng is the most cantankerous, provocative, most gratifyingly annoying journalist in Kenya today. There are many reasons why he rankles. To the proverbial semi-illiterate man on the streets of Nairobi, he annoys you because you cannot make head or tail from his writing owing to his style, which is too pedantic for journalism. His writings are often sprinkled with little used words and a kind of English that has seen better days. It is trite but true to say that he inverses the journalistic convention about writing to express, not to impress, and gets away with it, in a kind of positive literary impunity.

He offends also because he often appears like an equal opportunity offender. He
offsends Kikuyus and Luos alike, thus touching the third rail of Kenyan politics and survives to tell the tale. Both whites and blacks are game, whites often for their historical racism, and blacks for their seeming shortsightedness. He offends the West with attacks on imperialism, the East for its condescending attitude, and anyone in between for any number of reasons. He offends man, and may be even God, if man can be said to speak for God; he is a self-proclaimed atheist, a claim that he often makes to the chagrin of many a Christian. Yet we must acknowledge that this motivated skepticism, this tunnel vision rationalism, was the original objective of journalism – to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted, as Finley Peter Dunne would put it. The problem with journalism nowadays is that there are too many sacred cows, too many no-go areas.

He also writes in what one would call a Socratic style, asking numerous rhetorical questions to a mute audience, and then proceeds to answer them himself. Rhetorical questions are acceptable in oratory, but they hint at a condescending attitude if they are overused in writing, particularly in a single newspaper article, which is supposed to be answering questions, not asking them. While it could be argued that the reader is being nudged along, so could another point be made, namely that the reader is being assumed to be totally clueless. Consider the following: "In the first place, almost all governments and their envoys are often deeply ignorant of the objective interests of their peoples. Even when they know them, they care little. Our "representatives" abroad pursue only the most regimented interests of their heads of state. What of the UN? If you believe it really knows mankind's objective needs, then you can say a Kenyan working there is also helping real Kenyans to realize their aspirations. But does the UN know those interests? Even if it does, does it really work in sympathy with them? It is arguable."

To those of a Marxist persuasion, it is impossible to reconcile Ochieng's Marxism-inspired language and a palpable leftist ideology that pervades his writing, with his politics. Here is a man who once hobnobbed with conservative government figures and supported their politics yet his writing is crawling with liberal ideals. On this score, Ochieng is a realist, neither beholden to the West or to the East. He is ideologically closer to Jomo Kenyatta than he might think. Theirs is an ideology of pragmatism; a curious admixture of African nationalism and appreciation of prevailing global realities. This perhaps explain why he once served as Editor of the Kenya Times, the KANU mouthpiece when KANU was at its most arrogant and oppressive, and occasionally served as an intellectual Sepoy for the Moi regime. In 1992, it is reported, Ochieng helped KANU win the elections by editing the infamous KANU Briefs, which appeared as an insert in the KT.

He subsequently edited the short-lived Weekend Mail, which was distinguished for its pro-KANU orientation. In this role, Ochieng was a prominent member of the group that Michael Chege calls "Academic apparatchiks," defined as highly educated people who prostitute their intellect to the highest bidder, although one would be hard-pressed to
understanding the present learning more about Ochieng's past, as if the author's personal past is a prerequisite for Mkapa, a former Nyerere socialist, has embraced free-market economics, but we end up learning more about Ochieng's past, as if the author's personal past is a prerequisite for

justify “prostitution” on the part of Ochieng, given that he has no wealth to show for his efforts. It is safe to say that he was in it for the thrill of thumping it to foreign interventionists and their local collaborators who were hell bent on undermining the much-vaulted political stability without which Ochieng knows no country can ever progress. To the full-blooded KANU hawks, however, Ochieng was a suspect but a necessary consort. Although he worked for them, KANU politicians regarded him as a free reign chicken that could eat, and therefore contract, anything out there. And many are the times when he wrote things that infuriated his supposed political friends.

Currently, he is a columnist for the *Sunday Nation*. Every Sunday, he publishes a pedantic salvo on a topic of his choice, sometimes topical, at other times timeless. The criteria for selecting those timeless pieces that he pens are unclear; they appear to be those that Ochieng has a personal crusade for. Occasionally, he writes about Ngugi wa Thiong’o, his former classmate at Alliance High and evident nemesis. He obviously wishes Ngugi could engage him in a public debate over issues of language policy, culture, exile, the contribution of the Kenyan Diaspora in Kenyan affairs, and philosophy, but Ngugi never cares to respond, so that Ochieng often appears to be baying at the moon. It is as if he begrudges Ngugi of the fame the novelist has acquired and the enthusiastic following he enjoys around Africa and beyond.

Like William Safire, who wrote a column called “On Language” for the NYT for many years, Ochieng’s obsession with language is legendary. He continues to write his language clinic column, variously named “Mark My Word,” “Language Clinic” and the “Fifth Columnist” in which he showcases his immense knowledge of English grammar. The column explores grammar, origin of words and their peculiar usage in Kenya. He is clearly the William Safire of Kenya, but he is certainly not the resident conservative columnist at the Nation like Safire was at the *New York Times*.

Recently, I sent some students to interview him. He played hard to get. Clearly, he detests the limelight. Being on the other end of the journalistic spectrum clearly does not excite him. And neither is he known to be close to the political class. He has successfully eluded present-day aging conservative forces – not that they are looking for him - who would be his natural allies based purely on age, the same way he has eluded the young gallivanting liberals in the civil society and on social networking sites (not that they can stomach his independence).

At other times, Ochieng works hard to elevate himself to the level of a group of prominent personalities that he probably secretly admires. He reminds us, lest we forget (although we have never known), that he worked with Ben Mkapa, former president of Tanzania at the *Daily News* of Dar es Salaam. The article is supposed to be about how Mkapa, a former Nyerere socialist, has embraced free-market economics, but we end up reading more about Ochieng's past, as if the author's personal past is a prerequisite for understanding the present-day ideological orientation of a President who really doesn’t
have any choice but to kowtow to the bandwagon of Western neo-liberalism. If Ochieng himself cannot remain steadfast to originalist Marxist ideals, how can he expect others to? And is not a changing, dynamic spirit an admirable human trait?

These essays, in which Ochieng demolishes those of his age who have larger-than-life images, are ways of reinforcing his image. By writing them, Ochieng is setting an agenda for us to compare his intellect, his contribution, with those that we hold as the standard - the Ngugi's, Hillary Ng'wenos, the Ben Mkapas, the Yoweri Musevenis. Each one of them represents an image of who Ochieng would probably have liked to become but did not. What he does not realize is that he is a treasure in his own right. Historians of Kenyan journalistic thought will find it hard to ignore him. However, because Ochieng gives himself so little credit, he comes out in his essays as someone who blames his “retarded ambitions” on the readers; they do not read and are, therefore, incapable of appreciating his benign, penetrating perspectives. Ochieng would argue, as did Walter Lippmann, that "It requires wisdom to understand wisdom; the music is nothing if the audience is deaf."

I have a lot of respect for Ochieng. The other day, I discovered that one of my dissertations describes him as one of the most qualified journalists in Africa in terms of experience, but one who would never lead the Nation Group of Newspapers, which prefers sleek corporate and apolitical types who will not rock the boat or spring any surprises. As a result, the Nation survives with a guaranteed and loyal readership; but with a growth rate akin to that of sedimentary rocks.

My admiration for Ochieng emanates not from what he writes about or the views that he expresses, but from the fact that he writes, come rain or shine. He is a man who likes to write; if there was no journalism, Ochieng would probably invent it. In Making Waves, Nobel laurette Mario Vargas Llosa describes a writer as someone who carries within himself a beast "which feeds off all his acts, tortures him mercilessly and is only appeased, momentarily, in the act of creation." Some writers stop writing when their monetary condition improves or when they reach a certain age. Ochieng's beast has shown itself to be completely insatiable.

He continued to produce journalism in the 1960s and 1970s when it was difficult for professed leftists like him to get good jobs in the Kenyan press; he wrote for Kenyan newspapers when they eventually accepted him; he wrote for the big ones, and the small publications when the big ones were unavailable; when both the big ones and the small ones could not provide avenues for his writing, he started his own, which always floundered mercilessly on his poor management skills. When the option for work in the print media was not available, he wrote for trade publications, including airline magazines. While flying from Addis Ababa in the early 1990s, I opened a copy of the airline’s in-flight magazine, Msafiri, to find an article by Ochieng.

Ochieng has now consistently written for the Nation for over a decade. But this belies the fact the he used to change jobs constantly so much that the term “nomad” would
not be an inappropriate descriptor of the man. Throughout, however, Ochieng consistently represented the cumulative product of faith in oneself as a journalist, editor, and writer, regardless of recognizable personal limitations as a leader and manager. Considering the number of highly educated journalists in Kenya who are not half as experienced as Ochieng but who do not write at all, apparently because they regard writing as a debasing activity for a manager-journalist, I get the feeling that their talents must have been sacrificed by whoever makes journalists to constitute Ochieng into the energetic essayist that he is.

*A version of this article appeared in a souvenir issue of The Anvil, a publication of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Nairobi, in 2011.