

JOHN KEEN

A PROFILE IN COURAGE



**Sironka ole Masharen
and
Kamau Ngotho**

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In Loving Memory of John Keen

Chapter 1

Child of Two Worlds

In the changing social and economic life came forth a child of two worlds. After fourteen years search for racial identity opted for black, like my mother and grandmother. I would later contribute to the dynamics of Kenyan politics --- John Keen

John Keen was born on July 31, 1926, at Lomuruti (anglicised Rumuruti) in today's Laikipia County. He was a child of two races, his mother being African while his father was European. His mother, Sarah Tupa, was of Maasai origin, while George Albert Thomas was of English-German extraction.

Sarah's Maasai origin stems from the Isampurr (anglicised Samburu), a section of the Maasai who live in the Northern Rift Valley, geographically separated from the rest of the mainstream Maasai in the South.

The relationship between Keen's parents was a study of contrasts. The mother couldn't speak a single word of English or Kiswahili and lived as a squatter in the land of her ancestors. To the contrary, the father was of European pedigree, living on land seized from her ancestors.

Another contradiction is that, while a white man could marry a black woman at will, like Keen's father did, it was unthinkable of a white woman marrying a black man. It was

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a case of racial prejudice and blatant discrimination, which was deeply entrenched in the colonial ideology.

Unlike today when blacks and whites easily marry and live together, such marriages then were like mixing water and oil. Keen's mother and father didn't stay together for long.

First, there was a language barrier. Secondly, there was a clash of cultures. Like it was with most white men of the time, George Albert Thomas looked down on his wife because of her skin colour. To make matters graver, she was just a mere labourer! He regarded her as a servant born only to take orders from whites without questioning. But the wife came from a stock that could never submit to the authorities without question. She had inherited the fighting genes of her mother, Narongoito, and would pass them to Keen, who years later would often get into trouble for defying the authorities on matters of principle.

Keen's grandmother, Narongoito, had her roots among the Purko Maasai, having been married briefly, before she was forcefully separated from her husband. The family from where Keen was later adopted was that of Kipambi, hence Keen's often reference as Ole Kipambi. The Kipambi family was from the larger Lenkume, an extended family of Iitarrosero clan believed to have been assimilated from the Ilaikiapiak section of the Maasai, who were fought and defeated during the last civil wars (*iloikop*) at around 1875.

The Iitarrosero clan is divided into two sub-clans, the *ilmeponi* and *ile kinyaku* or *iltidirri*. The Kumomoru's

extended family, in which William ole Ntimama's family belongs, is also from this sub-clan, hence Keen and Ntimama were actually distant relatives.

The Laikipia-Purko Connection

The Keen family was, among others in the Laikipiak genealogy, adopted by the Purko, after their defeat by a combined force of other Maasai warriors. Keen's grandmother, Narongoito, originally belonged to the Ilaikipiak clan of the Maasai but was adapted and married by the Purko.

The Laikipia Maasai were the fiercest of the fighters, conquering and dominating the other Maasai sections. Prominent among those conquered were the Loogolala, Ing'uesi, Ilkoki and Iloosekelai sections, who ceased to exist as entities and only remained as families or clans of existing sections.

The actions of the Ilaikipiak Maasai created much anger, bitterness and hatred among other Maasai sections to a point that they hatched a formidable alliance, led by the Purko and assisted by the Ilkisonko section from the Southmost parts of Maasailand. The alliance succeeded in bringing down the Ilaikipiak once and for all.

The plot against the Ilaikipiak was executed under the direction of a great prophet (oloiboni, pl. iloibonokok) Mbatiany ole Supeet. Nearly all men from the Laikipia section were killed, while the women, children and cattle

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were seized. This aspect constitutes the war ethics of all Maasai, in which females, children, the old and the invalids are spared the annihilation.

That was how Maasai wars and raids helped to bolster the population during those years of migrations and settlements. In many cases, neighbouring communities found themselves enjoined in blood relationships due to these aspects of war and conquest. This happened not only among the Maasai, but also other African communities, including the neighbouring Kikuyu.

For instance, Kenya's first President, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, had Maasai roots because his grandmother, Nyokabi, was a Maasai captured by Kikuyu warriors when she was a girl. In fact, the name Nyokabi among Kikuyu points to Maasai ancestry.

John Keen's grandmother could not abandon the fighting spirit of her ancestors, the Laikipia Maasai. A story was told that she was never one to be trodden upon -- always picking up a fight with whoever ruffled her feathers -- of course including her husband. The Maasai are known not to tolerate women who fight men. As a result, a decision was made that she be sent back to wherever she came from -- the Laikipia plains.

That is how she ended up back to her roots, but this time, not among her ancestors who had either been killed or scattered to the four winds -- but as a squatter on a white-owned farm at Mutarrar, adjacent to Rumuruti. Keen's maternal ancestry is therefore, a combination of three Maasai sections dominated by the Ilaikipiak and Isampurr --and then

the Ilpurko who accepted Keen as their adopted son from maternal lineage (*olayioni le ntito* – meaning, son of a girl).

Descendants of the family lived (and still live) in the former Olepolos of Olorropil location, Mao division, of Narok County. The supposed Maasai grandfather of John Keen was Kipambi ole Lenkarbuali of Iitalala age-set. This was the father of Sankale ole Kipambi, who is said to have married Keen's mother in later years after she had left the *Mzungu*.

When the Maasai forced migrations started in 1912, after the just-concluded 1911 contentious land agreement, Lenkarbuali settled briefly at Siyiapei, before shifting to Murua at Melili in Narok North enroute to the present-day abode at Olepolos-Olorropil.

Narongoito's marriage didn't last long as she was chased away by her in-laws for fighting men, including her husband, with whom they had to be separated. She found herself a squatter on a white-man's farm at Mutarrar, near Rumuruti, in Laikipia. She had left the Purko empty-handed except for her baby-girl, Sarah Tupa.

It is at Mutarrar that George Albert Thomas discovered Sarah during a dancing festival organised for Africans working on European farms. Sarah was a beauty to behold as well as a great dancer --- a talent that caught the eye of her would-be suitor, leading to consumation of their short-lived marriage. Ever a fighter, Narongoito could not let the *mzungu* take away her daughter, Sarah, before paying the customary dowry of 12 cows.²

The Mama's Boy

Keen was Sarah Tupa's only child. The origin of the name "Keen" is not clear, even to Keen himself. It is not a typical Maasai name, although the Maasai do coin names from just about anything. At one point during the many interviews with Keen, he thought his European father might have adopted the name "Kenneth" after relocating to England from Germany. And since the abbreviation of "Kenneth" is Ken, the Maasai probably pronounced it "Keen". The mother and age-mates pronounced it K-e-e-ni, and because of his facial looks and a white father, people began to call him Keen – pronouncing it K-i-i-n. The name stuck.

Separation with Father

The father didn't stay long enough for the son to know him, hence Keen ended up as a mama's boy. Naturally, he would identify with her black ancestry. Single parenthood was not a common phenomenon among the Maasai, especially in those days, save for those forced into widowhood. Marriage was, and still is, supposed to be permanent, and so single parenthood on account of divorce was unheard of. Lack of a father-figure for a Maasai child was not only stressful psychologically, but also meant economic deprivation, as cattle ownership, the only means of livelihood among the Maasai, was bestowed on men and not women.

In this regard, John Keen was deprived of many privileges during his childhood. He knew what it meant to sleep hungry

and to be taunted by other children as “a boy of a woman” (*olayioni le nkitok!*).

It was painful, so to speak – and this might have attributed to Keen’s carefree and stoic behavior – which became helpful in his incessant struggle for equal rights and justice, irrespective of the inherent dangers. His skin colour did not help matters, either. In the entire vicinity, Keen was almost a subject of curiosity. Luckily, both Keen and his mother adopted a thrifty existence. They became nature-hardened.

Throughout, Sarah Tupa did her best to make sure her son had every comfort she could afford. For instance, he rarely had a single scratch on his body – including his feet. She also accorded him maximum protection against hostile environments – in terms of humans, animals and deprivation.

The hard lifestyles of Africans those days strengthened Keen such that in his old age, he was contented with a simple life-style. Money and material wealth didn’t excite him. Neither did the trappings of power. For instance, when he was an Assistant Minister in the Office of the President in the 1980s, he firmly refused to shift to a posh government residential house offered to him. Neither would he agree to walk around with armed bodyguards. He insisted on living the simple lifestyle he was used to, and only used government facilities when on official duties.

Growing up in the colonial era, Keen saw race discrimination in all spheres of life. It disgusted him and made him develop a great revulsion for colonial supremacy and other domineering forces. The act of his white father separating from his young mother, and watching whites

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mistreat blacks, led him to an early self-discovery. He discovered that, despite his light skin and English-sounding name, his roots were African. Specifically, he came to identify himself as a Maasai with Caucasian blood. He made a decision to connect with his mother's ancestry, the oppressed, black race. In his own words, Keen quips:

Not that I am a racist. I am an encapsulation of diverse cultures of the world, which manifest also in my children and grandchildren. Today my children are married across the continents. I have daughters and sons-in-law from all over the world – Africa, Europe, Middle East, Asia, America and Australia. Indeed, whenever we coverge for family functions or get-together, my homestead literally appears as a miniature United Nations General Assembly!

Keen has often given various examples of how products of mixed races rose to greatness with special mention to US 44th President Barrack Obama, who was of Kenyan/American parentage. Others he liked mentioning are former revolutionary Ghanaian President Jerry Rawlings, Liberia's first female President Ellen Sirleaf-Johnson, former US Secretary of State Collin Powell, slain black American civil rights and black consciousness activist Martin Luther King, jnr, to mention but a few.

But ironically, despite being a product of miscegenation, and having had many opportunities to marry white women, Keen had always preferred black women. In fact, he was married to four black women, who he loved equally and lived with them in the same homestead. He asserts that:

I am a fervent subscriber to the adage that black is beauty...and gold! but that has never made me discourage my children or

grandchildren from marrying or getting married wherever their hearts have taken them. The human spirit must be set free to scale the height of liberties engendered by the concept of universalism.

Remote Route

The name Rumuruti, where John Keen was born, had various origins. Among the Maasai, it comes from the word *amurut* meaning, to go ahead of. However, the European settlers in Laikipia had their own fashion, which is that Europeans used to refer to the road from the area to Maralal and beyond as the “Remote Route”, which Africans (Kikuyu) pronounced as “Rumu Ruti.” The whites, too, had a problem with the correct pronunciation of Kenyan towns.

Keen’s grandmother, Narongoito, lived in Rumuruti without any material wealth, except the girl she was nurturing – John Keen’s mother, Sarah Tupa. But many Africans were hardened by nature. Despite her predicament, Narongoito single-handedly raised her daughter while working at a white settler's farm in Rumuruti.

Berlin Conference and *Mzungu* Father

The presence of Keen’s father, George Albert Thomas, in Laikipia where he met Sarah could be traced to the Berlin Colonial Conference that partitioned Africa into European “spheres of influence.” The powerful German Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, had called a conference in 1884 to chart the way forward regarding colonies in Africa.

Although Germany was not interested in colonies at this point, pressure was mounting among groups of ambitious citizens who were worried that their country would be left behind in an important international venture. Germany wanted to avoid colonial ventures due to potential friction with other powers. This could jeopardise a cleverly-built system of alliances in Europe.

Germany had just emerged as a formidable power in Europe after inflicting a humiliating defeat on France and annexing two important provinces of Alsace and Lorraine, which were rich in coal and iron.

But a group of expansionists comprising businessmen and explorers quickly formed the German Colonial League. They were led by Karl Peters.³ In what looked like a serious colonial venture, in November 1884, the notorious Karl Peters, (considered to have been the “epitome of European imperialism at its most savage”), led a group of Germans to Zanzibar and into the interior where they “obtained” treaties allegedly signed by local African chiefs.⁴ On returning to Germany, Karl Peters was not welcomed by Bismarck. But with the support of influential groups, he succeeded in obtaining a charter to the German East African Company (GEACo), which was mandated to work in areas considered as German “areas of jurisdiction.”

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