

## Modern Man's Funeral

Maurice Sambili

Kenyatta University, Department of Literature, P.O. Box 20184-00100, Nairobi Kenya.  
Email: [mwichuli.maurice@ku.ac.ke](mailto:mwichuli.maurice@ku.ac.ke)

Mordy, as he had come to be known, stood by the large windowpanes of his fourth-floor office, watching the lunchtime traffic snarl up slowly while snaking its way towards Jamhuri lane and Furaha drive. These were the *de facto* exit routes to joining the main Taifa Street and possibly out of the Central Business District (CBD). It was funny that such a short break would cause so much activity and jam. Mordy preferred a power nap in the office as he disliked 'crowds' and the hustle during the lunch break.

"Mordy!" rang Janice's voice from the hallway through his open office door. "You don't like going for lunch because you know my lunch would be on you, right? Come, I'll buy you lunch today! Poverty is bad. I am sure you cannot afford it."

In response, Mordy laughed. Janice was a very a sharp lady working in the Accounts Office. She was known for being direct and had a liking for Mordy.

"Mordy, you are so stingy and weird," she said.

"I am not as stingy and weird as you believe. We are cut from a different material."

"Did all your money go to buying the material from which you are cut?"

This elicited a good-natured laugh from Mordy. He assured her he was used to air burgers and she was free to join him if she wished, but Janice was not the type of woman easily convinced. Instead, Mordy made her an offer to go to the most expensive restaurant for lunch on his tab. Although this was not something practical, it postponed Janice's tirade. As she stormed out, Mordy went and sat on his swiveling chair. He put his legs on the large table in his office, his eyes following Janice as she made her way towards the lifts. Suddenly, his mind took flight to when Janice nicknamed him Mordy, as he was now known in the office, not Baraka Mrambi.

Janice was such a character. She had noticed that Mordy was always objective, but disagreeable to subjective and biased ideas. Of particular mention was his treatment of women and his subordinates. He was respectful, yet firm as the occasion demanded. He had taste in dressing without necessarily being flamboyant. He always appeared to have money. At times, he drove big fuel guzzlers to work and people believed he lived in his own mansion. He had the appearance of a well-organized and focused man who hardly struggled to pay rent, unlike some of his peers who lived beyond their means. He was an enigma, yet open in a reserved way and this is why Janice nicknamed him 'modern man,' shortened to Mordy.

Mordy's face beamed at this recollection. He leaned back in his chair and rested his hands behind his head. He heard the sound of an ambulance siren, which reminded him of Brian, his office mate. Brian was always the first person to leave for lunch and the last to return, if it was not Friday for whence he found reason to stay away until Monday. Brian believed in the 'now.' This *now* was his mantra, a present to be lived to the fullest. For death was a guarantee, that was a given.

As the sound of the siren outside persisted, Mordy's thoughts drifted to his mortality. Strange as it may seem, he started to conjure up what would happen to him were he to die

unexpectedly. How would his funeral be, basing on what he had seen happen when ‘big shots’ died? Even the words ‘big shots’ felt funny and a bit slippery to his mind’s tongue. Suddenly, he recalled an incident where a former classmate used it to refer to him when he was about to ask him for money.

On hearing about my death, he mused, my wife will inform the elders, who will by then have gathered in my home on short notice, like flies to a carcass. They will refute any ‘suggestions’ on my ‘hurried’ interment plans. Perhaps, they may even claim they knew me so well ... that I was a senior person in society who should be well mourned. Two days would not be enough to mourn and bury me. All my relatives, even those from abroad, must be there for the final farewell, with the last one arriving possibly a week after my death.

The major dailies would be awash with my picture and obituaries. The best poets from the village of Ufulafu, where I have my ancestral roots, would take time to write the best poems. The elders, who would have taken over the funeral preparations, would demand that my wife releases the money from my savings for this occasion to be ‘successful’. She would then give it to them, saying that was all that was there. But, Naomi was no fool. She had already taken a ‘last respects’ cover. Whatever was to be demanded had to fall within the budget of this cover. I remembered our last conversation on the matter.

“Barry, I want us to take a last respect cover. I feel it would come in handy should anything happen to us or any of our family members,” Naomi said as she dove into the issue in a blunt tone. There had been no preamble or introduction to prepare me for the discussion.

“Heh! Don’t tell me you have a plan with my life,” I said jokingly. “I have not yet built my kingdom.”

“If by now you don’t have the kingdom,” Naomi said. “Then you may need this more. I would not want to start wondering where to start were the worst to happen to you, God forbid!”

“My Gal,” Barry said endearingly. He called her by a pet name he used to tame her mind. ‘It is taboo to talk about some things in our culture.’

“True, even in ours, but people still die even while attending some cultural events. What we need is some sense of reality,” Naomi noted.

From experience, I decided to save my breath. Whenever Naomi brought up such an important issue, she would have done all her due diligence. True to her nature, she was simply informing me of it. That she had already filled out relevant forms and even paid the required premiums. Thus, she took me through the possible ‘benefits’ of the ‘last respects’ cover and even encouraged me to write a will. The will would unfortunately take time and ultimately overtaken by events.

Many people will come to my town house to pay their respects. This would be a perfect excuse for the ‘investigators.’ Many ladies, whose overtures I rejected, would come to see what it is I had that made me so proud. They would walk around my compound and house just to compare the home and *the* man. They will gossip for some time. Even as some of my colleagues will start jostling for my now vacant position. Janice would start organizing the colleagues at work on how to pay their respects. Many will volunteer to accompany my body to my village for burial. Of course, their motives would be to check out from where I hailed and from what I was made. Some other colleagues will start observing Janice keenly in her mourning. They might even take time to scrutinize her son’s head seeking familiarity to me. Does he resemble me?

Meanwhile, in the village, it would be time for feasting. My last wishes for a simple occasion would have been ignored. People would want to eat and let eat. Some would complain that I had been mean to them in life. Naturally, it was their turn to eat. Those I had helped would truly mourn my passing as they would know better what I meant to them.

Some of my relatives would start grabbing whatever they could before the burial. Some of the elders would even don my suits at the funeral as they mourn a great son of theirs. The trees I had planted in the compound would be cut down to make firewood for the vigil. The mission, it would seem, would be to not leave anything that can be consumed or grabbed standing after the funeral. All the while, Naomi would be quiet in her mourning for the loss of the man for whom she had spent most of her adult life. Her silence would be a scheme to save her fighting energy for the real battle expected soon after my burial. My children would be aware of what was happening, but yet not sure of the real truth of the moment. A few of my relatives and friends would console her and be there for her. Some will try to keep an eye on the children to ensure they lacked nothing. The widow and the living must not be forgotten while escorting the dead.

On the material day, many mourners will flock my home. My present and former colleagues would gather in our homestead. Family would use the adjacent primary school for parking as there would be so many cars.

The eulogy would be read. Speeches would be given. Janice would speak on behalf of my colleagues. She would speak of how close our working relationship was. Some of my colleagues would exchange knowing glances. Others would move their heads closer in whisper as she makes her way to and from the dais. That my wife, Naomi, should not be fooled by the dress and ‘pretense’ Janice had and put up. They could be real partners in mourning as she represented her well in the office as a co-wife. Sooner or later, these rumors would reach Naomi’s ears, but the truth would be out eventually. That, Janice was one of my best friends at work.

The elder wearing my suit would rise and promise all manner of things to my wife. He would promise protection and provision should she need anything.

“Our son’s widow cannot suffer while we sit back and watch. Am I talking for the elders here?” He would ask to an uproar in positive response. All this time, the aim would be to place himself strategically in line with the right to inherit the widow.

Mordy smiled in the middle of his reverie and imagined. *“If they only knew who my Naomi is!”*

In the middle of his speech, the elder would suddenly go quiet as people at the front would rise to their feet. Momentarily, the funeral would be suspended. The noise from the mourners would announce the arrival of the area Member of Parliament. Apparently, he had been attracted by the large number of vehicles at the primary school. From his calculations, the vehicles represented a meeting of ‘serious’ people and a ready crowd for his campaign rally, it being an electioneering year. As he did not know me in my lifetime, he would have asked one of his PAs to get an idea of who I was and my name.

The maverick that he is, he would take the chance given to him by the elder to ‘mourn’ with the gathered people. He would not wait for his time because he has errands to run for the great people of Ufulafu. He would take the mic and talk about me. He would say he had lost a friend and possible mentee for this seat. That he would feel not strong enough to go on leading. He would pour vitriol on the current government. He would emphasize how the government had made it

difficult for him to better the lives of his constituents, denying him funds for his projects.

“All this is because we have always been in the opposition,” he would argue. “The last time I talked to Mrambi, he had assured me that he would be with me in this fight. I will kindly, therefore, ask you to honor his wishes. Help me finish what I had started in the last 5 years.” With these words, he would fall silent for a minute to strengthen his effort and hold back his tears on the loss of a *great friend*. He would sum up quickly and announce, to the cheers of the mourners, that he would set up a bursary in my honor. He would announce that he will send his PA with his small amount of 50,000 shillings to help mourn his friend. This is little as he had not ‘walked with money.’ He would hurriedly leave after hugging Naomi and consoling her long enough to have his picture taken. The picture would be posted on his social media handles with such a heading, ‘A Good Friend Is Known in Times of Mourning.’ Suffice to say, his leaving will go with the false promise of the money. It was an exit strategy from such a rich crowd. The elder would later resume and summarize what he wanted to pass across.

The choir would then play a hymn as they usher in the preacher of the day. He will read a verse and then go ahead to encourage the bereaved. The preacher will consistently heap praises on me and how I have been very supportive of the church. He will even comment on the brief presence of the MP as a sign that I was cut for great things, but God loved me more. Unbeknown to many, the power of the ‘envelope’ would be at work. I was not a member of that church. With my sudden death, a church had to be found to perform my last rites. Zebedayo, one of my many cousins, knew someone who talked to the Heavenly Realm Church. He even donated towards the project to build a new church whose fundraising was set for later that month. The preacher will come to the end of his sermon with a song that I presumably liked, a song from the Golden Bells, but in an African version accompanied by drums and clapping. He will give the direction regarding the procession to my final resting place. The cortege will be at the end of a colorful procession. All church members in the procession would be in white. No *madoadoa*—different colors—except for the immediate family who would be in black. I became an important member of the church in death and deserved a real colorful sendoff.

Just before the burial, a woman will come with a son who resembles me. She will cause a bit of drama and wave a birth certificate with my name allegedly on it. This would have been expected. No men in this community can be faithful to one woman. So, many would muse. This is the take of many who know something about the community. To forestall the drama, the elders and Naomi will get the lady aside and give her food. There are ways that food works in calming some things. All will wonder how Mordy would go for such a woman who could be easily calmed by food when he lived in the acme of sophistication, especially with city ladies. A song would be played by the choir as the situation is calmed further and to allow other possible cases to rise with their children. They would then be dealt with after the funeral.

The funeral would then go on smoothly. Most guests would leave after the meal. Some would have already forgotten about who it was they were burying. Some of my colleagues would come to shake my wife’s hand and console her. Others, in real sense, would be seeking to check if they are as soft as they look ... Or was I as stingy to her as I appeared to some people in the office. Mordy smiled at this thought.

The real war would begin after the funeral. The elders and my siblings would come to grab whatever was ‘their son’s.’ This is where the truth would dawn for many.

The woman who had claimed to be a mother to my son would be interrogated first. Janice,

who would have remained after my colleagues had left, would use her many connections to verify the authenticity of the child's birth certificate. In a matter of hours, the results would come back that the document is not authentic. In the meantime, Jackson, my childhood and best friend, would bring a copy of some document of a procedure that I underwent. A vasectomy report would be tabled. This would be a surprise to Naomi. For I had told her of the same and she had qualms with it. I still went ahead and had it done. This, however, did not give me a license to promiscuity. Though now, I would not have had anything to substantiate this assertion in light of the woman's accusation. The possible birth date of her child would have been after the procedure.

The woman would rise in shame and take her child away. On further enquiry, it would be established that the woman's scam was a ploy engineered by one of my disgruntled relatives to get a slice of my wealth, given to the woman as 'compensation.' The choice of child would be commended as he really resembled me, but she would be warned never to expose a child to such things again. For it could have an effect on his future relations.

The car and the house would be among the first targets by some of my people. They will have decided on who would take what. They will be surprised. Unbeknown to many, Naomi was all I had. I used to give her the money I earned and even took out loans for her. She had an entrepreneurial brain and a knack for growing money. She was better placed in handling cash and I did not mind. I was not intimidated. I always told her that if we ever went our separate ways, I would not fight her over the property. I loved her too much to subject her to such a treatment. This was part of what made me weird, I think. No sane man in my community would allow such.

Ufulafu men were kings in their homes and their words were decrees. Many preferred submissive women who would always agree to their demands should their opinions be sort after. It was unheard of for a man to be led by a woman or 'sat on.' This was the reason I often kept to myself. I did not see why that should always be the case. Many families had little to show for even after society suggested women had their place. True, some homes flourished with this arrangement, but many turned to graves because of the untapped potential of the women.

The houses would be in her name and those of our children. All the logbooks affirmed her as the owner of the vehicles. This is the beauty of the law. The truth is captured in very simple sentences and language. My relatives would curse and wonder what kind of powerful *juju* she could have used to control me in such a manner.

Naomi would refuse to be inherited; instead, she would concentrate on raising our children until they were of a reasonable age. The siren of the hearse that brought my body would be switched on. The people would start wondering what was happening.

"Mordy!" Brian vigorously shook Mordy out of his stupor. He jumped in horror. The sirens were real and even noisier. They were coming from Janice's office. The hallway was engulfed in smoke. It was apparent that it was not just her office that had billowing smoke.

"Run! Get out of here!" Brian barked his orders as he ran to other offices to rescue other people. Mordy neither knew the source nor the extent of the fire. He was not even sure of the time.

When he reached the fire assembly point, all his colleagues were gathered there. They appeared shaken and in fear. As they moved further away from the fire, they heard an explosion from Janice's office. There was an adjacent kitchenette to her office and that was where Brian had headed to see if there was anybody still trapped inside.

Mordy's knees gave in as he sank to the ground. Holding his head, he seemed oblivious to

all the commotion around him, Brian. Janice, ... The day Brian decided to get back early from his lunch happened to be the worst.

“Janice!” Mordy gave a hair-raising yell. In a moment’s rapture, he came to the reality that Janice could have been trapped inside when the explosion happened. It took him only a few seconds to notice that he was standing at the fire assembly spot, which was adjacent to Janice’s parking slot and her car was missing.