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# [The Development of Public Relations in] Kenya

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## Kenya

Dane Kiambi

### Abstract

This chapter traces the practice of PR from pre-independence Kenya to the 21st century. It emerges that the practice of PR is closely tied to major national events and to social, cultural, political and economic forces. PR roles as understood by the pre-independence colonial government: keeping the public informed on government development projects, assessing public opinion and advising government, endearing government to Kenyans and building the awareness of Kenya abroad have continued to modern-day Kenya.

**Keywords:** colonial, independence, public administration, public information

Analysis of the history of public relations (PR) in Kenya must be based on major historical events that, positively or negatively, shaped the country. As will be shown, the status of PR in Kenya is closely tied to key events that took place mostly after Kenya attained independence from Britain in 1963. Much of this chapter is based on historical documents obtained from the Kenya National Archives and Documentation Service, scholarly articles and interviews with current practitioners.

Although it will focus on key events that took place from mid-20th century, specifically from 1963 onwards, there will be a brief discussion of PR practices during the years before independence. A review of key events in Kenya's history from independence to date, and a subsequent discussion of the role that PR played in these events, highlights the social, cultural and political forces that helped shape PR practice. The chapter begins with a discussion of PR and PR-like activity before independence in 1963.

## **PR in pre-independent Kenya**

Kenya became a British East Africa Protectorate in 1895 and was declared a colonial state in 1920 (Ochieng and Atieno-Odhiambo, 1995). The British colonialists recognized the importance of fostering good interpersonal communication and social relations with indigenous Kenyans, Indians and Arabs (Mbeke, 2009). Indigenous Kenyan communities practiced PR-like techniques during communal events. Local communities had their spokesperson, adviser and master of ceremony. Tactics such as song and dance were used to communicate an important message or to keep guests entertained during a gathering.

Songs and dances were used by the Agikuyu, one of the indigenous communities in Kenya, to express an emotion or message of goodwill towards others. Routledge and Routledge (1910, p. 111) state that “by song and dance they give expression to their emotions ... expresses general sentiments of amity on behalf of all in a song of high pitch.” Boys would fill gourds with small objects to form a rattle that communicated a particular message, and “inscribe on the gourd the story of their journeys” (Routledge and Routledge, 1910, p. 112).

Few dances could have been planned for amusement only. “Dances were an essential and significant part of many ceremonies, or, in the case of a dance such as the *kibaata* were organized either to assemble the people to hear some important pronouncement or as a preliminary to a raid on an enemy tribe” (Leakey, 1977, p. 392). The use of song and dance to assemble people was similar to a contemporary PR/presentation action of employing dancers to entertain guests before the official start of a ceremony.

Those appointed to speak at community gatherings were not only expected to be intelligent but eloquent. “Intelligence is much prized, and so is eloquence,” and upon eating a banana and beetle, a man “finds himself gifted with many words everyone hangs on his utterance, his arguments are overwhelming” (Routledge and Routledge, 1910, p. 206). (A beetle was thought to carry some “power of conviction” and the appointed speaker would insert the beetle in a banana and eat it after drying it in the sun.) The requirement by the indigenous Agikuyu people of Kenya that a speaker be intelligent and eloquent can be compared with some of the characteristics that present-day PR practitioners seek when selecting the appropriate speaker for an event.

Strict guidelines were put in place to deal with an individual or group that stole someone else's cattle. Cattle are still one of the most prized possessions particularly among members of the Maasai community. Wagner (1956, p. 104) discusses how Bantu communities went about compensating someone whose cattle had been stolen. "The payment of cattle in restitution aims primarily at restoring equilibrium in the 'assets' of the two persons involved. It is, that is to say, a compensation rather than a fine" (ibid., p. 104). Compensation is an accommodative crisis response strategy in modern-day image restoration efforts, and research recommends that it (compensation) be used in situations where there is a high attribution of crisis responsibility on the organization (Coombs, 2015).

At the height of the fight for independence in Kenya in the late 1940s and 1950s, relations between indigenous Kenyan communities and the colonial British administrators were at an all-time low. In 1944, the Kenyan African Union (KAU) was formed to champion the struggle for independence. In 1947, Jomo Kenyatta became the KAU leader (Furedi, 1989). The campaigners for Kenyan independence formed the Mau Mau group in 1952, and in the following year, Kenyatta was jailed for leading the Mau Mau movement. He was released from jail in 1959, and in 1961 he assumed the presidency of Kenya. In 1963, Kenya attained independence and became a republic in 1964 with Kenyatta as its first president.

Cautious not to intrude in local cultures mostly during the period when Kenyans started fighting for independence, the British relied on the "indirect rule" policy in which traditional rulers operated within an established British framework. The British framework recognized the importance of "good interpersonal relations ... maintenance of relationships and the importance of communication" between the British and traditional rulers known as chiefs (L'Etang and Muruli, 2004, p. 217).

The British used PR with a view to building mutual understanding between the white settlers and the local people. In a memorandum dated 1947, *Public Relations Work in the Colonies*, the Chief Secretary to the colonial government describes PR as "the art of establishing and maintaining within a community a spirit of fellowship and cooperation based on mutual understanding and trust" (Chief Secretary, 1947, p. 1).

Assuming the colonial government practiced PR as they defined it, it can be deduced that the British civil servants were aware of the importance of PR in helping build relationships with local communities.

Before venturing into the aims of PR in the colonies, the memorandum sought to distinguish between public relations, propaganda and publicity. While publicity was a “technique of presenting the activities of a government in or business organisation in a favourable light,” the memo presented a much broader role for the concept of PR since it entailed creating and maintaining relationships among community members based on mutual understanding (*ibid.*).

The aim of PR in the colonies, the memo states, was to “develop mutual understanding and trust among all sections of the community in each colony ... and to develop a closer association between the people of the Colony and the local government, so as to make the people accept the Government as “their” Government” (*ibid.*). The memo noted that “a positive public relations policy” was needed to persuade the locals to be responsible for their own affairs and to have them accept that the government was “their” government (*ibid.*).

Part of the proposed “positive public relations policy” would include the granting of a “new constitution, the development of a new system of local government and the appointment of local officers to senior posts” (*ibid.*). The proposal to give a new constitution, develop the local government and employ local people could be classified as proactive PR strategies that the British were using in order to develop a closer association with the locals.

The memo went on to urge senior colonial government officials against continued use of “autocratic control” on the local people. Instead of applying “autocratic control” techniques, the memo urged government officers to “accept and act on the idea of consultation” with the people one worked with (*ibid.*). Such consultation would entail the government officer discussing government plans with the local people before the plans are executed. Consulting the public on government initiatives would convince the locals that the responsibility for the initiative did not exclusively belong to the government but to them (the local people) as well.

PR, the memo continued, would also play a key role in enabling good race relations between white settlers and local people. Breaking down racial barriers would require mutual confidence between the government and the local people, where the latter “are not merely

passive co-operators in or critics of the Government's policy, but active partners taking a positive share in the formation of policy" (ibid.). To eradicate racial barriers, PR strategies must be sought and applied in order to arouse the interest and initiative of the local people, and evoke enthusiasm towards government projects.

Another key role for PR would be to inform "the government of trends in public opinion" (ibid., p. 2). The memo advocated the need for the PR officers to have access to police officers and district officers so as to accurately assess public opinion towards the government.

Regarding the qualifications of the head of the Public Relations Department, the memo stated that "he must have a sympathetic approach to the public, he must have feelings for the colonial people, and he must believe in the future of the Colony" (ibid.). In addition, he should be a person of some seniority, "with administrative ability, with a flair for publicity, and with a sincere and sympathetic approach to his work" (ibid.). Although the PR officer need not concern himself with policy formulation, he should be present when important policy matters are being discussed.

The analysis of the memorandum by the Chief Secretary to the colonial government identifies four key roles of PR in the colonial government: to assist the white settlers build mutual understanding and relationships with the locals; to persuade the locals to accept the local government as theirs; to advise the government on the state of public opinion; and to improve race relations with the locals.

The memorandum also demonstrates that the colonial government differentiated between propaganda, publicity and PR. It also emphasized that for relations between the locals and the white-dominated colonial government to improve, there must be proactive PR such as appointing locals to senior government positions, development of a new system of local government and a new constitution. The proposal for these three proactive strategies is indicative of the extent to which the British colonial officers were convinced that publicity without genuine concrete action by the colonial government would fail. The strategy to employ locals to senior government positions was, however, a dishonest ploy since the colonial settlers ruled indirectly through them.

A letter from an Acting Information Officer, based at the Kenya Information Office in Nairobi, responding to the memo states that the Department of Information had already adopted the proposed policy.

(It is not possible to decipher the Officer's name from his signature on archived correspondence.) The officer noted acceptance of PR's governmental definition, the need to build mutual understanding and trust among all the communities in the colonies, the need to consult the people before executing a policy, and the need to keep the government informed of every action taken by the colonial government (Acting Information Officer, 1947).

The response is notable for positioning PR's role as "assisting in the provision of mechanical services for mass education," arranging "frequent press conferences" which have "an opportunity for full and frank discussions" and supporting information distribution and publicity about the colony abroad (*ibid.*, p. 1). The unnamed officer countered prevailing local governmental views that the head of a PR department should be a trained journalist and implicitly agreed with the Chief Secretary's characteristics for the appointment. However, the work of information staff was not to break down racial barriers, as proposed in the Chief Secretary's memo (*ibid.*). It is apparent from this proposal and the civil servant's response that PR was understood as being more than information dissemination and publicity. This set the base for PR's future development and implementation in the latter days of colonial government and into the independence era in 15 years' time.

The next part of this chapter will focus on other major events that took place in Kenya after independence in 1963, discuss the role that PR played in them and consider whether PR strategies and practices, as understood and practiced by the colonial government, were inherited by the incoming nationalist government.

### **PR in post-independence Kenya**

Following independence in 1963 and the naming of Jomo Kenyatta as first president of Kenya, the country embarked on building the young nation. Kenyatta articulated the urgent need to fight what he referred to as the three enemies of development: ignorance, poverty and disease. An analysis of documents from the Kenya National Archives indicates that PR played pivotal roles such as building positive relationships between officials of the new government and the public, shaping the image of Kenya locally and abroad and repairing the image and reputation of the government following a crisis.



Upon the setting up of various government ministries and the appointment of ministers, top government officials corresponded on governance issues. The need for government PR was a topic put forward by the Ministry of Information, Broadcasting and Tourism. This is illustrated by contemporary communication between top government officials.

Shortly after independence in 1965, the permanent secretary/accounting officer to the Ministry of Information, Broadcasting and Tourism requested the senior press officer in the ministry to initiate plans to establish the Department of Public Relations in the ministry. In response, the senior press officer, P. L. Wangalwa, proposed a department which, he suggested, was manned by a “well trained officer in Public Relations” (1965, p. 1). That the Permanent Secretary asked the Press Officer to initiate the department further indicates that government officials differentiated between publicity and PR.

In a communication to fellow Permanent Secretaries, P. J. Gachathi, the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Information, Broadcasting and Tourism, wrote that, for the new government to maintain its overwhelming public support, “continuous attention must be paid to public relations. It is not enough for our policies to be correct. They must be seen to be correct” (1966, p. 1). Implicit in the statement was that PR was expected to take the important role of building relationships with the public. Gachathi also noted that “just as the financial and security indications of a line of policy are considered at an early stage and borne in mind throughout the operations, so also should the public relations side of any government activity be remembered” (ibid.).

The permanent secretary’s memo, *Government Public Relations: The Need for Public Relations*, also urges government ministries and departments to use PR officers to “provide quick and correct answers about his ministry’s policies and activities at all hours. He must be available for providing immediate information to counter false or misleading reports” (ibid., p. 3).

Besides using PR to cultivate good relations between the young government and the public and managing crises, the government of Kenya also relied on it to manage overseas image. A letter from the Kenyan Ambassador to Egypt, Ochieng Adala, urged the Ministry of Information to provide the embassy with PR material since “the demand for material, and particularly pictorial, on wild life, scenery, activities, etc., about Kenya is far too great over here” (1966, p. 1).



Building the awareness of Kenya among international publics was, as today, an important international PR strategy.

In 1969, two major events changed Kenya for the worse. On 5 July, the charismatic nationalist leader and Minister for Economic Planning and Development Tom Mboya was assassinated by an unknown assailant in downtown Nairobi, Kenya's capital city. The killing of Mboya, who hailed from the Luo community, was widely blamed on President Kenyatta and his government. The grapevine and the media insinuated that top government officials, mostly from President Kenyatta's Kikuyu community, had murdered Mboya because of his rising popularity and possible interest in the presidency. These allegations have never been proven.

Following Mboya's assassination, the resentment that had been building between members of his Luo community and the president's Kikuyu community became full-blown. Earlier in 1966, Kenya's first vice president Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, also a Luo, had resigned from Kenyatta's government following ideological differences with the president. Mboya's death was a catalyst that led most Luos to view themselves as threatened by the Kenyatta government.

Talk of members of different communities, particularly the Kikuyu, gathering secretly at night to take oath and pay their allegiance to their community and President Kenyatta surfaced in the media. The alleged oath-taking at Kenyatta's home at Gatundu in central Kenya widened the rift between the Kikuyu and Luo communities and was a prominent incident that led to the tribalism that continues to exist among Kenyan communities.

Following these two incidents, the government applied PR techniques to minimize their negative impact on government operations and image. P. L. Wangalwa, who was promoted from senior press officer to PR officer in the Ministry of Information, was advising the government on its responses. Five days after the Mboya assassination, Wangalwa wrote to his permanent secretary proposing ways to repair the damage on Kenya's reputation. He warned that "tribalism and other 'isms thrive on confusion and rumour and we must face squarely the crisis which the death has brought to Kenya" (Wangalwa, 1969a, p. 1). He suggested the preparation of a booklet with facts on Mboya's achievements, speeches and pictures which would be distributed to the public and media locally and abroad. His request was approved by the permanent secretary.

In response to the extensive rumors of oath taking and the emerging tribalism, Wangalwa proposed that President Kenyatta address the nation live on television and radio to clear his name over claims of oath-taking at his home. To further restore confidence in Kenyatta as the president of all Kenyans, Wangalwa proposed that the president undertake a “meet-the-people” tour across the country to dispel the rumors and convince fellow citizens that his government had their interests at heart.

In his memo *Presidential Public and Press Relations*, Wangalwa proposed that Kenyatta borrow a strategy from his Tanzanian and Ugandan counterparts, Julius Nyerere and Milton Obote, respectively, and make courtesy calls to the villages. Instead of addressing them, he should take questions from the crowd. In addition, he proposed that the President visit dissatisfied parts of the country such as those in Luo areas and spend “two to three weeks ... and receive disgruntled delegations led by area politicians” (Wangalwa, 1969b, p. 1). He claimed this strategy would help quell the anti-Kenyatta rumors.

In a letter addressed to the Permanent Secretary in the Office of the President, Attorney General, all Permanent Secretaries and provincial commissioners, the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Information noted that the “primary challenge to nationhood existed in the tribal, racial and even religious divisions of the society wrested from colonialism,” and called for coordinated use of government PR machinery to tackle these problems (Gachathi, 1968, p. 1). Exactly how the PR departments addressed religious and racial divisions is not clear because there were no archives to inspect on this issue. In addressing tribal divisions, though, Wangalwa’s strategy for the President to personally lead visits to disgruntled communities was heeded and Kenyatta travelled across the country.

Summarizing the role that PR played in immediate post-independent Kenya, it emerges that middle-rank officers in the new government were aware of the important roles that it could play in building a cohesive country devoid of tribal, religious and racial divisions. The analysis also shows that new government ensured each ministry had a PR officer. By 1968, five years after independence, virtually all the ministries had staff with clearly defined PR roles (ibid.). There was a clear understanding of the role of PR vis-a-vis that of the press office. PR’s role was to build mutual understanding between the government and the people, minimize the damage to government during crises

and promote a good image of Kenya abroad. The role of the press office was to provide publicity to activities being undertaken by government ministers.

Following Kenyatta's death in 1978, his Vice President Daniel Arap Moi was sworn in as president. Moi went on to rule Kenya for 24 years until he left power in 2002 following a constitutionally mandated two-term limit, a provision introduced in 1992 after the first multiparty general election. The next section addresses PR in Kenya during the Moi era. It goes on to discuss PR during the periods of the third President Mwai Kibaki and his successor, Uhuru Kenyatta.

### **PR in the post-Kenyatta era (1979–now)**

Upon coming to power, Moi promised to follow in the footsteps of his predecessor. Moi's 24 years in power have been described as a period when the country had little socio-economic and political progress. This was mainly because of the increase in tribalism, nepotism, stifling of political dissent, official corruption and unattractive environment for businesses (Steeves, 2006). From 1969, Kenya was a de facto one-party state until 1982 when the ruling party Kenya African National Union (KANU), under Moi, made itself the sole legal party in Kenya. Until the early 1990s, KANU party delegates reappointed Moi as president unopposed through acclamation in order to curb opposition (Wanyande, 1995). The kind of control witnessed in the political arena "extended to organizations within civil society such as mass media, women's organizations and ethnic welfare associations" (ibid., p. 57).

In 1991, a group of former Moi loyalists-turned-critics formed an opposition to agitate for multiparty democracy in the country. With his hold on power under threat, Moi responded ruthlessly with the police and other government functionaries detaining without trial, assaulting, maiming and assassinating his opponents (Ogolla, 2011). One of Kenya's worst corruption scandals was perpetrated in the early 1990s when President Moi was facing his first competitive presidential election. The country is estimated to have lost billions of shillings of public funds which were allegedly used to fund Moi's presidential campaign (Chege, 2008; Mwangi, 2008).

Moi's authoritarian government left little room for anyone holding a divergent opinion. To most businesses including the mass media, the

state assumed “the right to control and to expect unchallenged obedience” (Wanyande, 1995, p. 58). Authoritarianism “as it relates to the mass media ... lead(s) to distortion of information and in some cases, the deliberate disinformation of the public. It also aims at keeping the public ignorant” (ibid., p. 59).

The growth of PR during Moi’s regime was severely limited by his government’s obsession with controlling information for the public. Alfred Ng’ang’a, a leading PR practitioner, said Moi’s government “muzzled public information by channeling all government information via the Presidential Press Service (PPS)” (Ng’ang’a, personal communication, 2 June 2014). All dissemination of government news for the public was vetted by the PPS and relegated Public Relations Officers (PROs) in government ministries to the technical roles of gathering and writing news about government initiatives. The important role of deciding what would be broadcast or printed was bestowed on the head of PPS. “It was not possible for the public information officers in the ministries ... to decide what would be broadcast. In institutions like the military, it was unthinkable that there would be a spokesperson” (ibid.).

The need to censor public information had emerged during the Kenyatta presidency (Ogolla, 2011). “The formative years of Jomo Kenyatta’s presidency were briefly but broadly attended by national political goodwill, but this spirit waned following the regime’s alienation of potential adversaries” (ibid., p. 80). The fallout between Kenyatta and his former vice president Jaramogi Oginga, a Luo, led Kenyatta to create “a coercive state, where opposition was systematically crushed, often violently” (ibid.).

PR’s envisaged roles in the young country, such as keeping the public informed on government’s development projects and helping endear the government to the Kenyan people, were jeopardized by the stifling of public information. Upon coming to power in 1978, Moi deepened control of information.

Although Moi’s government monitored and distrusted journalists and PROs, a few determined private sector PR practitioners continued to promote the profession. In 1991, the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) held a professional development and educators’ conference in Nairobi (Opukah, 1992). Under the theme “The Pace of Change – Africa’s Public Relations Challenge,” it attracted practitioners and educators from around the globe.

The next section will discuss the status of PR during the government of Mwai Kibaki. President Kibaki, a well-known economist and anticorruption crusader, was elected in 2002 after beating Moi's chosen heir, Uhuru Kenyatta. Unlike Moi's presidency, Kibaki's tenure as president has been hailed as the time when Kenya recorded great socio-economic and political progress. Murithi Mutiga, a columnist with Kenya's *Sunday Nation* newspaper, observed: "On the economic front, he was a considerable success, and the huge middle class which has made Kenya one of the main places major multinationals want to set up shop on the continent is his legacy" (2014, p. 8).

Unlike Moi, Kibaki did not muzzle public information and was not suspicious of international companies wanting to do business in Kenya. During his presidency several international PR firms including Hill & Knowlton and Burson-Marsteller opened offices in Nairobi. Kibaki's government also created the position of government spokesperson and hired Dr. Alfred Mutua, a former communication professor. Mutua held a media briefing every week and more when a crisis that required the public be kept informed. His briefing sessions demonstrated a spokesperson that was free to provide information that the media wanted.

Public information officers in government ministries also were free to brief the media. For the first time, the military had three spokespersons who kept the public informed of any operations the military was carrying out in parts of the country and in Somalia where they were sent to combat al Shabab, the al-Qaeda linked terrorist group. Kibaki's government increased the use of external PR services to publicize government projects, notably national health care campaigns. During the constitutional referendum of 2005, the government had PR-led campaigns on important aspects of the new constitution. For political campaigns, Kibaki and his successor Uhuru Kenyatta separately hired PR advisers to manage the message strategy for their campaigns.

Alfred Ng'ang'a argues that PR's growth in Kenya is tied to the politics of the day: "Local PR practice has particularly evolved with the respective political transitions. These transitions have also tended to encourage economic growth which in turn fires demand for PR services" (Ng'ang'a, personal communication, 2 June 2014). Ng'ang'a credits the Kibaki administration for liberalizing Kenya's politics and the economy which in turn led to a thriving PR practice: "Before the 2002 Mwai

Kibaki electoral win PR services, now aptly named Public Information Services, within government were virtually nonexistent” (ibid.).

Following the liberalization of the economy by Kibaki’s government, some industries such as telecommunications, especially mobile phones, grew rapidly. Ng’ang’a, an account manager at Gina Din Corporate Communications and in charge of the Safaricom telecoms account, noted that “the entry of telecommunication firms in the early 2000 provided a previously unseen platform to harness PR services. From such humble beginnings, the demand for PR services has significantly grown both in the public and private sector” (ibid.).

### **Professionalization and education**

The Public Relations Society of Kenya (PRSK) was launched in 1971, and its membership has grown steadily. Like other national PR organizations, it has a secretariat and an executive committee elected by its members. It also established a code of conduct, which it regulates (PRSK, 2014). Another indication of PR continued growth is the increase in the number of colleges and universities offering degrees in PR. There are at least ten private and public colleges, and universities that offer majors in the subject.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has sketched the status of PR from the pre-independence Kenya to the first decade of the 21st century. PR’s evolution, it has been demonstrated, is closely tied to major national events and to social, cultural, political and economic forces. The struggle for independence provided an opportunity for the use of PR services by the white colonialists. The use of PR strategies and tactics to build better relationships between the colonialists and the local people, endear local people to the colonial government, engage with public opinion and improve race relations between the whites and other communities is a near complete match for the social and political roles of PR in modern-day Kenya. There appears to be a continuum of the roles of PR from preindependent times to the present time. Jomo Kenyatta’s government of 1962 inherited PR practices from the colonial



administration. Kenyatta's new administration initially followed the colonialists' model: relying on PR to endear Kenyans to it and see the government as theirs, assess public opinion and advise the government officials accordingly and publicize Kenya abroad.

Jomo Kenyatta's desire to consolidate power by silencing political dissent through intimidation, detention and assault was, however, the harbinger that led his government to abandon well-intentioned PR roles. Although there was a slump in the practice of governmental PR during the Moi government's 22 years in power, there were strategies and tactics used which were borrowed from the Kenyatta administration. Kenyatta and Moi, for example, used their visits across the country to show their closeness to the common person. However, Moi's omnipresence in the state media and tours across the country led to his regime becoming unpopular among a sizeable population of Kenyans. The cold reception that Moi received in many parts of the country showed that the public could differentiate between his publicity stunts and proactive PR strategies and tactics.

The practice of spending weekends in rural areas, using state media to endlessly broadcast the president's itinerary, and stifling public information for more politically correct material ended in 2002 when Mwai Kibaki took over. Instead, Kibaki focused on rebuilding institutions that had been run down by the Moi regime while also initiating new projects. Although he rarely traveled upcountry or appeared on state-run media, Kibaki left power with higher popularity and endorsement of his work by Kenyans. From this analysis, it is apparent that the roles of PR, as understood by the pre-independence colonial government, have continued in its practice, by the early Kenyatta and later Kibaki governments.

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