

NAIROBI, KENYA · 5 JULY 1969

THE BIG MAN



The Assassination of Tom Mboya

TWO SHOTS. A SECRET HANGING. NO BIG MAN.

GRAHAM KASINDO

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“Why don’t you go after the big man?”

— Nahashon Isaac Njenga Njoroge, to police, 1969

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Prologue

GOVERNMENT ROAD, NAIROBI. SATURDAY, 5 JULY 1969. ABOUT 1.15 PM.

On a Saturday afternoon, the centre of Nairobi was quiet.

A white Mercedes-Benz, registration **KME 627**, was parked on Government Road outside **Chhani's Pharmacy**. Its owner had gone in to see the chemist, a family friend.

He came out alone. No bodyguards.

Men were waiting. One of them fired. Two bullets hit him in the chest.

An ambulance took him to Nairobi Hospital. The doctors tried. It was no good.

Tom Mboya, Minister for Economic Planning and Development, one of the most gifted politicians of his generation and, many believed, the next President of Kenya, was dead. He was thirty-eight, a month short of his thirty-ninth birthday.

Within days, the police had a man in custody. Within four months, he had been tried, convicted and hanged in secret before dawn.

But before he died, the prisoner asked the police a question that Kenya has never been able to answer.

"Why don't you go after the big man?"

To understand who the big man might have been, you have to go back to a sisal estate, and a boy who would become one of the most famous Africans in the world.

CHAPTER ONE

The Sisal Boy

Tom Mboya was born on **15 August 1930** at **Kilima Mbogo**, near Thika, in the heart of the White Highlands. His parents, **Leonardus Ndiege** and **Marcella Onyango**, were Luo, and they worked on a sisal estate.

He went to Catholic mission schools: St. Mary's Yala, then Holy Ghost College. He trained as a sanitary inspector.

In **1950**, he went to work for Nairobi City Council. Within months he had been elected president of the African staff association.

He was twenty. He had found his weapon: organisation.

CHAPTER TWO

The Unionist

During the Emergency, when the colonial government had banned almost every African political organisation, one kind of body could still speak: the trade unions.

Mboya made them speak.

From **1953**, he was Secretary General of the **Kenya Federation of Labour**. While Kenyatta sat in detention and the war went on in the forests, the young unionist became one of the most effective African voices in the colony.

In **1955**, he went to **Ruskin College, Oxford**. In **1956**, he was elected to the Legislative Council for Nairobi.

In **1958**, at twenty-eight, he was elected chairman of the **All-African Peoples' Conference** in Accra, convened by Kwame Nkrumah. Two years later, his face was on the cover of *TIME* magazine.

CHAPTER THREE

The Airlift

Mboya had a simple idea. Kenya would need educated people when it was free. America had universities. So he would send Kenyans to America.

From **1959**, working with the American-African Students Foundation, he organised what became known as the **Airlift**. Planeloads of East African students flew to American colleges on scholarships. From 1960, the Kennedy family's foundation helped pay for it. Hundreds of students went.

Among the young Kenyans who got to America through Mboya's scholarship network was a Luo student named **Barack Obama**. His son would one day be President of the United States.

At home, Mboya's reputation grew. So did the number of people who feared him.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Architect

At independence, Mboya was everywhere.

He was Secretary General of **KANU**. He led the Kenyan side at the Lancaster House constitutional talks in London. He helped design the national flag.

He served as **Minister of Labour**, then **Minister of Justice and Constitutional Affairs**, where he created the National Social Security Fund and the Industrial Court. From **December 1964**, he was **Minister of Economic Planning and Development**.

With his deputy, a young economist named **Mwai Kibaki**, he wrote **Sessional Paper No. 10 of 1965**, *African Socialism and its Application to Planning in Kenya*. It set Kenya's course as a market economy with a Western tilt.

In the argument between East and West that had ended the life of Pio Gama Pinto, Mboya was on the winning side.

He was also a Luo who stood at the centre of a government increasingly dominated by the President's inner circle. And Kenyatta was getting old.

Everyone could count.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Saturday

LAVINGTON, NAIROBI. 5 JULY 1969. MORNING.

Mboya left home without his bodyguards. He planned to go to a football match that afternoon: AFC Leopards against Gor Mahia.

He had breakfast at the **Panafric Hotel**. He went to his office at the Treasury.

At about a quarter past one, he drove into town and parked on Government Road. He went into Chhani's Pharmacy, run by a family friend, **Mohini Sehmi**.

The shots came as he stepped back out.

The news spread faster than the police could move. Crowds gathered at Nairobi Hospital. Police used batons to hold them back.

In the days that followed, riots broke out in Kenya's major towns. His requiem mass was held at the Holy Family Basilica.

He was buried on **Rusinga Island**, in Lake Victoria, the home of his people.

CHAPTER SIX

The Suspect

The police found their man fast.

Nahashon Isaac Njenga Njoroge was a former KANU youth winger. Accounts say he was arrested at his office. At his home, in Ofafa Jericho estate, police said they found the murder weapon.

Somewhere in those first days, he asked them the question.

“Why don’t you go after the big man?”

He never said who he meant.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Trial

HIGH COURT, NAIROBI. FROM 19 AUGUST 1969.

The trial was tightly controlled. Spectators were vetted and journalists' access was restricted.

Even basic facts are disputed. One account says Njenga pleaded guilty. Another says he denied pulling the trigger and told the court that Mboya had been his friend for years. The court records have since disappeared from the Kenya National Archives.

Barack Obama Sr. was among those who testified.

Njenga was convicted of the murder of Tom Mboya and sentenced to death.

Nobody else was ever charged.

CHAPTER EIGHT

3 a.m.

NAIROBI. 8 NOVEMBER 1969. 3 A.M.

Nahashon Njenga Njoroge was hanged.

It was done in secret. There was no announcement. News of the execution leaked out weeks later through unofficial channels. In December, *TIME* magazine ran the story under the headline *Unanswered Questions*.

Not everyone believed he was dead.

In **September 1970**, the MP for West Mugirango, **George Justus Morara**, claimed that Njenga had been seen alive in Lusaka, Zambia, drinking a cold beer in a bar. The story went nowhere.

Whatever the truth, the one man who might have named the big man never did.

CHAPTER NINE

Kisumu

KISUMU. SATURDAY, 25 OCTOBER 1969.

Kenyatta came to Luo country to open the new provincial hospital, built with Soviet money.

It was less than four months since Mboya's death, and the town was full of anger. Supporters of the opposition **Kenya People's Union**, Oginga Odinga's party, confronted KANU youth. According to one eyewitness, someone threw a stone at the main dais.

The presidential guard and police opened fire.

"It was like a horror movie," one survivor recalled. "Even senior police officials were shooting anybody on sight."

Estimates of the dead range from more than ten to more than fifty, with more killed along the highway as the motorcade left.

27–29 October. Odinga and other KPU officials were arrested.

30 October 1969. The KPU was banned as "dangerous to the good government of the Republic."

Kenya became, in practice, a one-party state.

In four months, the country had lost its most brilliant minister, hanged the only man convicted of killing him, shot down protesters in Kisumu, and outlawed the opposition.

CHAPTER TEN

The Old Man

In the years that followed, the questions never went away.

Kenyatta praised Mboya after his death: “Kenya’s independence would have been seriously compromised were it not for the courage and steadfastness of Tom Mboya.”

His vice president, **Daniel arap Moi**, described the killing in words that stuck: “monstrously conceived but brilliantly planned and carried out.”

Theories multiplied. The retired CIA counter-intelligence chief James Jesus Angleton suggested in 1976 that the Soviets were behind it. Others looked much closer to home, at the President’s inner circle. None of it was ever tested in a court.

2024. Fifty-five years later, a 92-year-old man named **Ndwiga Muruathika** told the *Daily Nation* that he had been one of the hitmen.

He was never charged. His claim has never been tested.

Epilogue

Pamela Mboya, who married Tom in 1962, raised their children and died in 2009.

On Government Road, now **Moi Avenue**, there is a statue of Tom Mboya. Victoria Street was renamed Tom Mboya Street. On Rusinga Island, a mausoleum holds his body.

The pharmacy, the Saturday, the white Mercedes, the two shots: all of that is known.

The name is not.

Before they hanged him, Nahashon Njenga Njoroge asked the police one question. More than half a century later, it's still the only real lead in the case.

Why don't you go after the big man?

Nobody ever did.

THE RECORD

VICTIM	Tom Mboya, Minister for Economic Planning and Development, 38
KILLED	5 July 1969, about 1.15 pm, outside Chhani's Pharmacy, Government Road, Nairobi
ACCUSED	Nahashon Isaac Njenga Njoroge, former KANU youth winger
TRIAL	High Court, Nairobi, from 19 August 1969; records later missing
EXECUTED	8 November 1969, 3 a.m., in secret
HIS QUESTION	"Why don't you go after the big man?"
AFTERMATH	Kisumu shootings, 25 Oct 1969; KPU banned, 30 Oct 1969
THE BIG MAN	Never identified

Nobody ever went after the big man.

A Note from the Author

If this story stayed with you, you can buy me a coffee. It keeps the research going and helps bring the next one to you.

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PAYBILL	522533
ACCOUNT	8129965
CLICK MTAA TECHNOLOGIES	

Asante sana.

— *Graham Kasindo*